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Ad Position Really Makes a Difference

Starcom-ABC Family Study Proves Placement Does Matter

By Jon Lafayette

A unique piece of research conducted by media buying agency Starcom and ABC Family shows that it really does matter where a commercial appears in a program.

By buying up all of the ad time in two airings of the same show on the Disney-owned cable network, Starcom was able to place the same commercials in different positions, study the resulting viewership and poll viewers on their reaction to the ads.

The agency found that placement accounts for significant differences not only in how many people see the commercial, but how much they like the ad and respond to it.

Where ads run has become a more important concern to advertisers as they seek to get the most for their advertising dollars. This year, TV advertising time is based on the Nielsen Co.'s new average commercial ratings, but some buyers and clients are looking at more detailed research.

Starcom Senior VP and Director of Research Analysis and Activation Sam Armando said that while there are many theories about the most effective way to place advertising within a show or a commercial break, "This research removed all the obstacles and painted a clearer picture."

In some cases, the research confirmed what the agency had already guessed. In others, "It opened our eyes to other things to test more," he said.

Nine Starcom clients participated in the test, including Walgreen's, Kellogg, Allstate and PetSmart. As part of their upfront deal, those clients bought all the commercial time in "Twas the Night Before Christmas" when it appeared at 7 p.m. on Dec. 5 and at 1 p.m. on Dec. 8 during the network's high-rated 25 Days of Christmas promotion. The two telecasts drew approximately the same rating.

By arraying the ads differently in each telecast, Starcom and ABC Family were able to gauge the effect of the placement using data from Nielsen, second-by-second viewership data from TNS Media Research and viewer reaction gathered by E-Poll.

For one thing, the test found that the later in the program a spot aired, the more viewers were engaged, which was not a surprise.

The test also found that when a commercial appeared in the first spot in a break (called the A position), in addition to drawing a bigger audience than when it appeared elsewhere in a pod, it scored higher likeability with viewers.

But the research also showed that when the first commercial aired after a network promo, the likeability advantage evaporated.

Barry Stoddard, VP for ad sales research at ABC Family, agreed with the findings.

"We acknowledge that in the C3 world, leading with a commercial gives all of the commercials in a pod a better chance."

ABC Family has been giving advertisers more spots in the A position, cutting down on the number of promos that run there, he said.

Overall, the research into recall and likeability was favorable for the network.

"With those that were exposed to the advertising, we saw the brand consideration and purchase intent metrics go up," Mr. Stoddard said.

The research also found that within the animated show, the animated commercials did a better job holding viewers and were better recalled. Holiday-themed ads also scored well within the holiday programming.

Mr. Armando said more testing would be needed to see how much stock to put into the "contextual relevance" of the ads to the show, to see whether it was better to put serious ads in dramas and funny ads in comedies.

Mr. Armando declined to provide specific data, but said the placement of ads could account for as much as a 10% difference in recall, likeability and other measures of commercial effectiveness.

"We think it's meaningful," Mr. Armando said.

Starcom will use this knowledge as it negotiates ad buys going forward, said Chris Boothe, president of activation for the agency.

ABC Family also is working on a proprietary piece of research in this area that might be a part of the network's upfront presentations in the spring, Mr. Stoddard said.

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