

When Does Greater Program Impact Lead to Greater Advertising Impact?

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Introduction

Previous research has shown that, on the average, only about 50% of the people in the room with a TV set on will watch an ad (which means that most advertisers' reach estimates are off by a factor of two). Such research also suggests major differences in such percentages across dayparts: the range extends from 43% to 58%, which implies tremendous advertising leverage if dayparts (and, by extension, programs) are selected to maximize such percentages. In short, programs *do* appear to differ in the degree to which program viewing carries over to the viewing of commercials embedded in them.

Cable networks have long claimed that their smaller, specialized audiences find cable programs more "involving," and that advertising works better in such narrowcasting environments, allegedly justifying higher CPMs. (I have before me an ad in *Advertising Age* in which one cable network claims that they bring people "high involvement TV," instead of "ho-hum TV, the kind you half watch while your eyes glaze over and your soda spills on the couch.") Is more "involving" programming really better for advertising commercials? Can cable advertising really claim that ads work better in its more compatible editorial environment? And, if yes, what kinds of ads are most effective in what kinds of program environments?

I develop in this chapter a theoretical framework in which such issues may be examined empirically, in the belief that the claim of cable networks to greater advertising effectiveness can only be supported when such em-

pirical studies are conducted. It is hoped that the ideas presented here will provide the impetus to such empirical research.

It is not as if there are no prior data to support the contention of the cable networks. Hoffman (1984) reports, for example, that "high impact" programs are, in fact, watched with fewer people indulging in competing activities and walking out of the room; which means that such high impact programs are watched with greater attention and longer look lengths. Thus, there do seem to be some data supporting the hypothesis that it is better to advertise in high impact programs, at least if you are the first commercial in a string.

However, not all the previous research on this topic is so unequivocal. Research on the relationship between the level of audience involvement in television programming (sometimes called program impact or interest) and the effectiveness of advertising placed in or around these programs is at least 30 years old. These studies have shown that such program/ad interactions exist and deserve both managerial and theoretical attention, because their effects have important implications for media placement methods (e.g., Siebert [1978] on Burke DAR consequences of program environment), and for our understanding of how television advertising works (both Stiener [1966] and Soldow and Principe [1981] use the "attitude to the interrupting ad" as a mediating variable for ad effectiveness in general).

Unfortunately, however, such research has shown that high involvement in program content affects commercial effectiveness both positively (through hypothesized "carryover" effects) and negatively (through hypothesized resentment against ads that "interrupt" involving programming), depending on the study. What is needed now is a systematic theoretical framework that resolves these conflicting results.

Recent research into the processing of advertising messages suggests that the inconsistent results of earlier studies are not only understandable but also should have been expected, because the effect of program involvement on commercial effectiveness should depend on a whole host of other factors—just as the ways in which advertising works in general depend on many factors (see, for example, Petty and Cacioppo [1979]). In the rest of this chapter, I begin the attempt to develop a theoretical framework for the experimental investigation of these "contingent effects" of program environment on advertising effectiveness.

Previous Research: Program "Involvement" and Ad Effectiveness

Since our concern is with the relationship between program involvement levels and ad effectiveness, we first must make clear what we mean by the terms "program involvement" and "ad effectiveness."

A review of previous definitions of "program involvement" used in the literature may be found in Television Audience Assessment (1984a): most researchers include both the "personal relevance" of the program and its "entertainment value." Television Audience Assessment itself includes, in "program involvement," both a program's (entertainment) "appeal" and its (intellectual and emotional) "impact." Recent research by Hoffman (1984) suggests that the latter "impact" should not be treated as unidimensional, but that its "emotional" and "cognitive" elements should be treated separately. For the moment, it should be noted merely that the research discussed below combines the entertainment, arousal, emotional depth, and intellectual and cognitive elements of a program in its degree of "involvement."

Nor is there much agreement on the one best measure of ad effectiveness: studies measure effects on ad recall, attitude towards the ad, attitude to the brand, and brand purchase intentions, as alternative measures of ad "effectiveness." As will become apparent, program effects often vary across these different measures.

Most studies using such definitions in investigating the effects of TV program involvement levels on advertising commercial effectiveness have found some effects (Barry [1962] is probably the only exception). They have differed, however, in the direction of the effects found: positive or negative.

One stream of studies has hypothesized, and sometimes found, a positive relationship between the level of program involvement and advertising commercial effectiveness. These studies argue for this effect in two related ways.

First, it is argued that programming that is more involving creates higher levels of intrinsic attention which carry over to the advertising commercials shown during those programs, as long as those commercials are themselves interesting (Krugman, 1983; Twyman, 1974; Clancy and Kweskin, 1971; Schwerin, 1960; Barclay, Doub, and McMurtrey 1965; Home Testing Institute, 1963; Smith, 1956).

Other studies add that more interesting programming causes fewer viewers to leave the room during the program or during commercial breaks, and that these viewers tend to engage in fewer distracting behaviors (such as reading or talking) while the programs and ads are on (Television Audience Assessment, 1983; Hoffman, 1984). The high frequency of such behaviors, and their impact on commercial effectiveness, has been documented repeatedly. A reduction in such distracting behaviors implies greater attention to the ads, leading to higher recall and/or persuasion (Nuttall, 1962; Smith, 1956; Eyes on Television, 1980; Twyman, 1974; Television Audience Assessment, 1984a and 1984b).

A second set of studies, however, argues that higher audience involvement in the television program will actually hurt advertising effectiveness.

Such studies argue that viewers who are more involved in such programs resent the commercials that come on and interrupt those programs, and thus dislike those commercials and, by implication, those brands advertised (Steiner, 1966; Kennedy, 1971; Schwerin, 1958; Soldow and Principe, 1981).

Both viewpoints are plausible, and both sets of results have been found (though the preponderance of evidence supports the first, "positive transfer" viewpoint). Clearly, some of this variance in results is attributable to differences in methodologies used in the different studies, and even to differences in the way "program involvement" is operationalized in any particular study.

However, not only do empirical results differ across studies, they often differ within studies as well: the direction of the relationship varies for the product category used in the ad (Yuspeh, 1979; Kennedy, 1971; Soldow and Principe, 1981), ad execution style (Kennedy, 1971), ad position within program (Soldow and Principe, 1981; Barclay et al., 1965), and effectiveness measure used (e.g., aided versus unaided recall: Kennedy, 1971; Murphy et al. 1979).

Clearly it seems likely, given such interactions, that the effect of program involvement level on advertising effectiveness is moderated by a variety of other factors. What is needed is a systematic delineation of what these factors are and how they interact, rather than post-hoc attempts to explain away inconsistencies from a monolithic "one type of transfer" view of how program involvement affects ad effectiveness. Below, an attempt is made to develop such a theoretical scheme, generating testable hypotheses.

Suggested Theoretical Framework

The starting point, based on the preponderance of research results just discussed, is that the basic direction of the relationship between program involvement and advertising effectiveness is positive. However, it is suggested that this relationship is moderated by, and is contingent on, a number of other factors.

In particular, I believe the relationship depends on (1) the viewer's motivational involvement with the specific product category featured in the ad, called "product category involvement," and (2) the execution style of the ad, whether affective or rational. Such interactions have appeared in much previous research, reviewed earlier. These interactions are of special interest because they appear to be crucial determinants of the "routes" through which advertising works, as specified in recent research on advertising information processing (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo, 1979).

Just as this recent research shows the route of advertising effectiveness to depend on the interaction of the execution style of the ad and the level of (cognitive) product category involvement, so also do I believe that the

type of ad execution and the *type* of program involvement (in addition to its level) are important variables in determining program/ad carryovers.

To do this, we must show that program involvement is not unidimensional. Indeed, based on the work of Hoffman (1984), it does appear that program involvement (or program impact, as Hoffman calls it), is of two distinct kinds: cognitive and affective. A program that "touches your feelings" is of a different type than one which "you learn something from." Current conceptions and operationalizations of program impact combine these two different kinds: Television Audience Assessment Inc., for example, combines both the intellectual and emotional stimulation from a TV program into one composite "Program Impact" index (1984b). Hoffman's analysis, on the other hand, suggests that programs that are high on one kind of impact may not be high on another. Thus I believe these two kinds of impact should be modeled separately; the appropriateness of the kind of program impact, to the kind of commercial in question, may moderate the relationship observed.

Having argued for two types of ad executions (affective and rational, as theoretical extremes) and for two types of program impact, the crucial element in the theoretical scheme becomes the consistency between the two. It is suggested that, for the program impact-to-ad effectiveness link to exist, the *kind* of program impact (i.e., cognitive versus affective) must match the *kind* of creative execution style used in the commercial (rational versus emotional). That is, high program impact will carry over to ad execution effectiveness only if both the program and ad are similar in emotional/rational orientation.

This expectation is based on various streams of literature. There is, first, the literature on media environmental effects, which argues for such "congruence effects" (Stanton and Lowenhar, 1977; Horn and McEwen, 1977; Crane, 1964; Axelrod, 1963). Next, research in cognitive social psychology supports such reasoning (Isen et al., 1982; Bower and Cohen, 1982; see also Rapaport, 1961). Such research suggests that viewers watching an impactful program of high *affective* intensity may be differentially likely to notice, process, and favorably judge stimuli (ads) that rely on emotional appeals for their effectiveness.

Such viewers are unlikely to process deeply (i.e., in attribute terms) those ads relying instead on attribute superiority arguments; they will generate fewer cognitive responses, making the message less impactful (cf. Petty and Cacioppo, 1979). Conversely, viewers placed in a rational, thoughtful frame of mind through a high impact program of the cognitive variety will process rational ads in the attribute-intensive way that such ads are meant to be processed, increasing their effectiveness; but these viewers are likely to be resistant to emotional appeals.

However, it is expected that this differential transfer from program to ad effectiveness will occur only under certain levels of involvement with

the product category featured in the ad. When such motivational involvement is high, the viewer is expected to deeply process the brand attribute arguments presented in the ad regardless of the program environment. The expected interactions are not therefore expected to occur in such situations. In low motivational involvement (with the product category), however, the expected interactions are expected to occur, and such "type congruence" is expected to be important (cf. Isen et al., 1982). Such product class interactions were observed earlier by Yuspeh (1979), Soldow and Principe (1981), and Kennedy (1971), among others, though any interpretation of them in terms of "product class involvement" is obviously post-hoc in nature.

Finally, it is expected that these interactions will occur only for some measures of ad effectiveness and not for others, but—given inadequate theory—they will not be formalized as hypotheses here. The other theoretical speculations presented above are now formally expressed as testable hypotheses:

- H1. If program impact is high, type of impact being cognitive (rational), then attribute-intensive (rational) ads will perform better than affective ads for low product category involvement products.
- H2. If program impact is high, type of impact being affective (emotional), then emotional ads will perform better than rational ads for low product category involvement products.
- H3. If program impact is low, there will be no difference in ad effectiveness as a function of ad execution style/type of program impact, for both high (H3a) and low (H3b) involvement product categories.
- H4. If product category involvement is low, there will be no difference in ad effectiveness as a function of ad execution style/type of program impact, for both high (H4a) and low (H4b) program impact levels.

Conclusion

Given some testable hypotheses (and there could clearly be others), what is needed now is the step beyond research showing that TV programs differ in their "impact" levels. We now need research showing conclusively and unequivocally how such program impact translates into advertising effectiveness, under a variety of theoretically meaningful circumstances. Such research could be of great value not only to managers developing media plans but also to academics interested in increasing our understanding of how advertising works.