

Establishing Threshold Levels of Exposure To Your Message

By Les Altenberg

A local retailer recently asked me what it would take to advertise his business on television. When informed of what a typical media schedule might cost, the retailer stated that he didn't understand the high cost, given the cable company's own promotion offering spots at \$9 a unit. The discussion reminded me of how often smaller advertisers are unaware when it comes to the intricacies of buying broadcast media. Many can be blinded by the promise of being on a high profile medium at little cost.

The truth of the matter is that when it comes to buying advertising time or space, there are basically two ways to waste money - - - spend too much or spend too little. Spending too much is the obvious manner in which dollars are misappropriated, but spending too little can be equally wasteful.

In order to determine the appropriate spending level, one needs to understand the concept of effective frequency. By effective frequency, we mean that threshold level of exposure necessary to generate awareness and/or motivate a target audience to action. This is to be distinguished from mere "frequency" which reflects the average number of message exposures the typical viewer will receive. For example, a media delivery analysis might indicate that a given campaign will reach 60% of a target market 5 times. But what does this really mean? In actuality, it means that a relatively small percentage of the target group is being exposed to many, many exposures (perhaps, ten or more in this scenario), while a large part of the audience is exposed to significantly less than the five times cited. What is the effect of this effort on the greater bulk of the

The answer comes in part through determining what percent of the target audience has been “effectively” exposed -- that is, what percent will see the spot the number of times necessary to generate awareness or move them to action. The critical part of this determination is ascertaining exactly how many exposures constitutes “effective.” This can be likened to the wife (or husband, for that matter) who asks the spouse to “take out the garbage.” The first time this request has no effect. The second time it incites only minimal awareness at best. It takes three or more repetitions of the same message to generate the required action from the hapless spouse.

As a general rule, research has indicated the “effective” level to fall within the 2+ to 5+ range of exposures over a four week period. Five exposures would be considered “high”, two or more exposures low. Exactly what constitutes an “effective” number of exposures is dependent on numerous variables related to the product/service, market condition and message components. Just some of these are:

- Whether the product/service is new or established
- The uniqueness of the product
- Complexity of the product
- Level of market competition
- Degree of advertising presence by competitors
- Uniqueness of the creative execution (i.e., TV spot)
- Message complexity
- Pre-existing knowledge of the company or product
- Importance of the product/service to the viewer

Answers to the above dictate a skew toward greater or lesser frequency requirements. For example, a “me-too” soap product that exists in a highly competitive category necessitates higher frequency considerations. Likewise, for a message which is fairly complex. In contrast, a very unique product may not need a great deal of exposure to its advertising message. The all new totally guaranteed cure for the common cold might be an example of this opposite extreme.

Having determined the effective frequency for a given product/service, appropriate schedules can be developed to maximize the reach (audience coverage) at this threshold level. If the reach is too low at your budget level, television may not be the best medium for your marketing program.

So before an advertiser is fascinated by a cable company’s promotion of a low cost per spot, it is important to evaluate how many spots will be needed to reach the audience effectively. Good media software can supply you with the answer – an answer that can only help the advertiser avoid the pitfalls of too much or too little.