

“If I had a hammer...”

...or, why online frequency planning is like nailing jelly to a wall

by Stephen White, Chairman, EMM International

In 1963, an American folk trio called Peter, Paul and Mary defined the communication strategy of their era. *“If I had a hammer”, they sang, “I’d hammer in the morning... I’d hammer in the evening... all over this land!”*

And indeed, back in the Mad Men era of TV mass-marketing, everything was pretty much that simple. The consumer was assumed to be like a block of wood. The advertising (and it was almost always a 30” TV commercial, of course) was a great big nail. The job of the agency media department was to hammer the nail into the wood.

Hammering away

How many times did the hammer have to hit the nail for the campaign to “work”? Two hammer blows? One? Three? The debate has continued for half a century. Over the years, EMM has contributed a series of analytical answers to the so-called question of Effective Frequency on television, as the pages of Admap will attest; (see *bibliography at end*). We were at pains to point out that different communication tasks indicated different frequency levels.

Anyway, things change, and even the most plausible ad planning formulas get overtaken by market shifts. With the onset of online advertising, the frequency issue has become exponentially more complicated.

As the old saw has it, to a hammer every problem looks like a nail. This problem, however, is no longer about hammers or nails, but something entirely different: how brand communication actually works in the internet age.

Nailing the problem

Communication frequency planning and control theories were developed in a world of mass-media, in which the audience faced narrow choices, and their media consumption was essentially passive. The narrow range of media options – back then there were very few TV channels – gave yesterday’s marketers a reasonable chance of keeping control of planning issues like effective frequency. You just hit the nail the “right” number of times, and sat back assuming the message had been driven home.

But it really isn’t about banging in a nail any more. Now we also have to deal with user-driven media online. Now, media planners have to take additional account of an almost limitless range of internet contact points that consumers may choose to consult, in parallel with their exposure to mainstream media.

Online works differently from TV campaigns, which are designed to “push” things. The best online advertising can hope for is a “pull” effect, stimulating consumer

interest in particular product offerings in a sector on which he/she is already seeking information.

Attention factors

The principle behind ad campaigns on TV is rather like Q's admonishment of 007 in the James Bond movies, i.e.: "Now pay attention". In the case of online, it's more "What are you looking for?"

The difference is one of function, and it is turning the whole concept of effective frequency planning on its head. The frequency with which consumers consult a given brand or service website is determined by themselves, not by a media planner somewhere. Consumers will go to a site exactly as often as they feel they need to satisfy their information requirement or curiosity, no more and no less, and in their own time. At the point that site visitors feel over-exposed, they will tune out any excess according to their own fluid rules and timetables. In that respect, online advertising is a little like multi-vitamins, on which it is apparently almost impossible to overdose. Once the body has absorbed all the vitamins it needs, any surplus is naturally eliminated through the digestive system.

A balanced diet

Indeed, the onset of online has helped to iron out an inherent problem of television advertising, the fact that some TV viewers will always get over-exposed to a campaign, while others barely register it at all. The internet has proven to be an unexpectedly valuable antidote to "heavy-TV-viewing disease", the automatic bias of a conventional media audience delivery to the heaviest users of television, who in many cases are the brand's least promising prospects. Because the two media's audience profiles and usage patterns are different, any extra frequency of exposure to internet messages will disproportionately favor that part of the target audience that only gets reached twice or less on TV. Conversely, fewer online messages will be wasted on already heavily exposed tube-addicts.

It is already clear, then, that adding online media to a television campaign can re-balance exposure patterns, ensuring that light or infrequent TV viewers get the brand message through another conduit. But is there a potential problem of over-exposure? The concern is not only one of wasted messages, but also the possibility of overkill, pestering the audience to the point that the campaign's overall effect turns from positive to negative.

Together but different

That thinking equates online advertising with its televisual equivalent, which would be a mistake. Online advertising is not a monolithic, homogeneous whole. Online encompasses at least four different advertising types, each with a different set of communication functions:

- Display ads, i.e. banners, MPUs (mid-page units) and embedded messaging such as videos
- Click-through tags, taking the user from their current page view to the advertiser's website or a prepared message
- Search ads, where user actions in seeking out specific content trigger the appearance of "relevant" messages or links from an advertiser

- Social and viral, which encourage consumers to propagate and endorse brand messages. Success in social media depends on “giving consumers something to say” about the brand (and it needs to be positive).

TV campaigns can irritate audiences with over-exposure. With online advertising, the supposed negatives can include obtrusiveness, annoying formats, delay in delivering requested content, unwanted “mouse rollover” functions, or video and sound (especially at high volumes); plus irrelevance, triviality and bad taste, however defined.

A self-selecting audience

Admittedly, there is a danger of antagonizing the consumer online. But message intrusiveness online is not necessarily a negative. The explosion in online video and sound formats indicates that sound and motion tend to attract site visitors, rather than repel them. Perceived value is positively correlated with the relevance, informativeness and often the entertainment value of the message.

With online, the audience self-selects, and implicitly signals that it is “in the market” for the advertised brand. People only visit a website or initiate a web search when they are somehow seeking a product, or information about a product. So what actually constitutes “pestering” or otherwise annoying the consumer? ***It would seem that message frequency per se is not the problem where online is concerned.*** Indeed, message repetition comes up only occasionally in internet-users’ lists of complaints.

How much? And what of?

Nominating “effective” frequencies of two or three on TV was intuitively appealing, since it assumes a threshold that a new ad must break through to get noticed. However, in a fragmented and fluid multi-media world, that kind of assumption is looking less and less reliable. In a recent US survey, media planners turned out to apply radically different priorities when planning online, compared to the metrics they used for planning broadcast television.

Specifically, ***the only measures that seemed equally important in planning both offline and online media were schedule cost and cost-per-thousand.*** On TV, two-thirds to three-quarters of US media directors were using reach, frequency, effective reach and effective frequency in planning campaigns. Yet only half that number were applying the same measures to their internet media planning. Indeed, in online planning, three-quarters were not even bothering to track gross rating points (GRPs), an indispensable ingredient in any reach and frequency calculation.

Agencies’ main preoccupations in online planning were unique visitor levels, visit duration, gross page views, ad impressions and click-through rates. In other words reach, frequency and frequency distribution were mostly not even coming onto planners’ radar when constructing their online media plans. A whole different set of planning rules has been applied to online.

The difference comes down to some thorny media research issues. Counting web page visits and online ad hits is not as straightforward as it sounds.

Research problems

In the early phase of internet advertising, planners were fixated on the idea that online advertising could in some way be infallibly self-measuring. Early encounters

with branded ads online were often succeeding in getting users to click on the ad and “click through” to the advertiser’s website, or a fuller message. The earliest online advertisers were thrilled to find that they appeared to be benefiting from a Click-Through-Rate (CTR) of up to 5% or even 10%. It turns out, however, that it was a novelty factor. As more and more advertisers crowded online, CTR typically fell to very small fractions of 1%, a level at which attribution becomes a problem, and even measurement itself begins to look fundamentally unreliable. (Coincidentally coupon-response tracking starts at 1%).

It is not only CTR that turns out to be unmeasurably small. Search, now the largest component of internet advertising, is still too small to register in most marketing mix audience research models capable of projecting multi-media reach and frequency. Search advertising online is nonetheless becoming the cornerstone of the online communication channel.

Beware the cookie monster

The trouble is, it is notoriously difficult to track.

One big reason for this is the cookie problem. Cookies are small text “user tracking files” dropped onto users’ computer hard drives when they visit a website. Hitherto this was mostly happening without the internet-user’s knowledge, and many users still do not know that they are there and steadily growing more numerous on their system. Cookie files provide advertisers and site owners with anonymous but detailed data on the user’s web-browsing footprints, habits, tastes and interests, providing a signal to marketers that they can serve up further online communications relevant to the user’s lifestyle.

The empty cookie-jar

Cookies have been the advertiser’s surest way of ensuring that their messages are placed in front of the appropriate audience (demographic and psychographic), and in the context of product sectors they have a natural interest in, such as automotive, sportswear or consumer electronics.

However, there is a growing problem. Net reach in online media is consistently mis-read due to the growing incidence of cookie deletion by individual internet users.

Deletion of cookies works directly against the tracking and documentation of campaign reach and frequency performance in online display advertising.

A 2009 study suggested that 30 per cent of US internet users were deleting their cookies up to several times every month. Some users are doing it daily. After cookie deletion, repeat visits by the same person to a given site are all treated as “new unique visitors”. At an individual tracking level, this problem can lead to multiple cookie placements for the same individual visitor to the same site in a month, just on one computer. With individuals being counted as “new visitors” many times over, the result is grossly exaggerated site and page or unit reach figures, sometimes looking like double or triple the actual reality. If reach is that inaccurate, what credence can we give to frequency figures?

The problem is set to get measurably worse as internet sites come into compliance with new EU regulations (May 2012), requiring that internet site visitors be asked for “informed consent” before cookies can be planted on their computer systems. It will take a year or so to implement the new regulation, but consumer rejection and

deletion of cookies are bound to increase. Online reach and frequency figures based on cookie tracking will increasingly become meaningless.

Online frequency is good

In the absence of hard research, media strategy decisions need to be anchored by common sense. Self-evidently, consumers do not make a brand-purchase decision based on one or two exposures to an ad campaign. The process requires frequency build-up, and increasingly that build-up will be achieved through mixing media, typically TV plus internet.

Numerous studies have shown that the combined effect of the two media is more powerful than either one in isolation. Neither TV nor internet advertising makes its fullest contribution in isolation. The two media work synergistically. Each contributes to the other's capability of achieving ad campaign objectives.

One overall conclusion for online advertising planning is becoming clear. The overwhelming argument is for more online frequency, not less. ***Frequency, for lack of a better word, is good.***

Getting it right

The media planner's job is to ensure that visitors have every chance of connecting with the brand message during each relevant site visit they choose to make. ***Frequency of exposure online is no longer something which the advertiser really controls.*** It is determined by individual consumers' behavior and their appetite for information. This points the planner towards more frequency, not less, as far as it's affordable. If consumers encounter too many repetitions of the message in terms of their requirement for information or background in their product search, they will simply tune out the messages they do not want or need.

Five pointers

1. Plan TV and online separately...
2. ...make sure you strike a balance when using these powerful media together to ensure synergy between them.
3. Secure adequate frequency on TV as always...
4. ...and worry less about it online. (Not everything is a nail).
5. Just make sure your online frequency, whatever it might be, is effectively supplementing your TV effort and that your creative is up to multiple frequency exposure.

To summarize, if I had a hammer... well, I wouldn't waste my time nailing jelly to the wall online. I'd brush up on my internet dialogue skills instead, and make sure my creative message was available on the screen to meet my target audience whenever they choose to visit.

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Bibliography of related EMM articles:

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