

the media strategist's perspective

'clutter': an industry myth revealed

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Attempts to gauge the frame of mind of the audience, and how this can vary depending on mood, place and time is challenging received wisdom about unsolicited content, or 'clutter'

Television is now a central part of our everyday lives and its effectiveness as a medium demands constant examination. Agencies need to convince their clients that their advertising is reaching the right people in the right place at the right time. Broadcasters need to maintain the health of their channels, and they need to encourage brand values, brand loyalty and longer viewing sessions. Central to both of these desires, is in what frame of mind 'unchosen' – or unsolicited – TV content like ad breaks are watched. Are they actively or passively viewed? Are we right to assume that, in the eyes of viewers, everything that isn't a programme is viewed negatively? Is it really as simple as the homogenous negative definition of 'clutter' that has gained currency in this area?

defining the parameters

Carat wanted to explore how the viewer perceives clutter – how it is assessed, and how it is described. A qualitative research study was designed in order to explore and deconstruct the factors contributing to the acceptance or rejection of breaks and/or clutter. All that falls between the end of one programme and the beginning of another can be classed as unsolicited content whether it is a programme promotion, a channel logo, a sponsorship credit or an ad. We designed the research to understand just how irritating or unwelcome this content is. Could breaks ever claim to fulfil those roles of positive relaxation

and entertainment that programmes perform? Are breaks observed in a benign state or are they even actively disliked?

The value of programme promotions has long been criticised and debated. Broadcasters have been criticised for scheduling them at the beginning and ends of breaks, thus keeping the highest-rating parts of the break for themselves. However, to highlight relevant programmes to viewers is a principle that withstands initial scrutiny and we hypothesised that this could apply particularly to multichannel viewers, who now make up over half the viewing population.

actual vs perceived behaviour and response

Project Vision was a two-stage qualitative research project that combined observation with direct consultation. Our initial observation stage allowed us to explore (in a one-off, peak-time situation) actual versus perceived behaviour, indicative recall levels, and consumer experiences and descriptive terminology. We focused both on TV generally and aspects of breaks particularly. Subsequent stages involving diary placement and group discussions (which included a sub-sample of participants from terrestrial-only households) built on our observed learnings. We used stimuli and qualitative techniques to assist respondents to

articulate their attitudes and behaviours. In total, twelve observation sessions and twelve group discussions were conducted.

The recruitment was carefully designed to draw out differences by region, method of reception, age, sex and household occupancy. We found that views on the subject of TV were broadly uniform. Individual opinions only tended to vary on some of the minutiae. Our sample noted many changes in the TV landscape in recent years, with the growth in channel choice dominating proceedings. There was also a perceived increase in the amount of advertising and in the proportion of poor quality advertising. Viewers were aware of the longer break length on non-terrestrial channels and were able to judge intuitively when to return to their programme.

growing propensity to flick

Perceived changes in the landscape were often believed to have had knock-on effects in behaviour. Viewers felt they were more likely to flick between channels these days. This was especially prevalent amongst males and those in multichannel households. With such a plethora of viewing options, people placed a greater reliance on recommendation, whether it was word-of-mouth or programme promotion. Printed programme guides tend to be avoided for anything beyond the

five terrestrial channels. Some viewers said they would use the full Electronic Programme Guide, but the most popular option was to use the smaller, letter-box version. The full-screen version – like non-terrestrial TV as a whole – was believed to be challenging to navigate. This last point begins to indicate the usefulness of programme promotions, a key finding from this research.

Few people admitted to watching an entire break from beginning to end. The arrival of a break is often a cue to pay attention to something else, switch channels or even leave the room. Viewers are likely to flick across channels and programmes and avoid breaks as much as possible. For some, the break was a chance to visit a default channel, perhaps for a news update. Others preferred to watch a music video. However, the extent to which breaks were avoided was overstated. This was evidenced by the high levels of recall and familiarity with some examples of TV advertising. Active remote control users were observed to still watch commercials. Participants discussed keeping an eye or an ear out for what was happening on screen, even if they had left the room or were looking at something else. Many viewers really did treat the break as a break – an opportunity to carry out chores or to prepare food or drink.

perceptions of the break

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Antipathy towards the contents of a break is not necessarily what makes people steer physically or mentally away from it. It is often down to the continued pursuit of other viewing options. The existence of breaks was generally accepted in a passive or neutral way as part of the TV landscape. There was also widespread recognition that they, and the advertising within them, serve a commercial purpose. The break was occasionally seen as an inappropriate interruption. Perhaps it clearly interrupted a dialogue or important part of a plot; maybe it was during an exciting sports event or occurred within a short programme, such as *The Simpsons* (which was often cited as lasting significantly longer on Sky One, due to the frequent and lengthy breaks).

Viewers' descriptions of the components of the break tended to focus on advertising and promotions, and they had to be prompted to discuss sponsorship and channel logos. Promotions – variously described as “advertising for the channel”; “advertising programmes”; “trailers”; “previews”; or “what’s coming up” – were described as helpful and convenient. They imparted relevant viewing suggestions and saved the need to flick by giving good reasons to stay with the channel. Promotional content gives something to the viewer, without demanding or appearing to expect anything in return. More than this, promotions were thought to provide variety, information and visual entertainment. The content is inoffensive and does not go in for the hard sell – in stark contrast to the criticism the sample levied at advertising.

The research did uncover some minor criticisms about promotions, though. Too much or too little notice for a programme

was unwelcome. The over-promotion of sister channels was also disliked, particularly by terrestrial-only viewers who could not view them. Unsophisticated and over-stated creative treatment could sometimes jar and excessive repetition was irritating. Channel logos and idents made little conscious impression on viewers and were an uncontroversial subject. During group exercises to design 'perfect' breaks, channel logos and idents were not removed for being superfluous or annoying. Instead, they were quietly inserted without comment or debate.

The opposite was true for advertising, where viewers were vocal and opinionated. Many viewers can be armchair critics of production values and creative work. This may in part be due to the fact that advertising is unsolicited viewing and must earn its place. Alternatively, perhaps viewers are generally willing to be entertained and often are, but become strongly disappointed when faced with repetitive, boring or low quality ads. Such

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advertising is perceived to be more of a feature of daytime TV and non-terrestrial channels. For the latter, longer break length reinforces the perceived proportion of good versus bad content within the break. Therefore it is the perceived balance of a break's positive and negative aspects that determines its acceptability.

TV rage



viewer reaction: 'TV rage'

This conclusion was borne out by the reactions to the stimulus advertising reels. One showed a highly cluttered break that included a majority of lower budget, lengthy, loud and repetitive creative (predominantly consumer credit advertisements). This prompted TV rage – a negative physical reaction from viewers – and reactions ranged from laughter to strong disapproval at some of the content. Another reel showed a heavily themed selection of advertising, focusing on beauty products and apparently aimed at a female audience. This prompted criticism from both male and female groups. For the men, this was due to the cumulative realisation that the content was not directly relevant to them. The women thought it didn't reflect other interests of theirs. So themed breaks can be enjoyed and tolerated as long as they do not exclude.

Viewers defined 'good advertising' by its ability to create a positive response, emotional or physical. This can be delivered via mystery, cleverness, humour, music or even cute aspects of content, and/or by carrying a relevant message. Poor quality or 'bad advertising' is defined in many ways, usually relative to the formulae followed. The predictable or the clichéd is particularly ridiculed and likely to