

Why TV spot length matters

Charles Young, Ameritest, puts the case for longer spots, based on how our brains store memories, and the limited scope offered by 15 seconds

FOR DECADES TV advertisers have debated the pros and cons of different commercial lengths. This has been a debate fuelled mostly by rapidly rising media costs.

TV-spot evolution

In the 1950s, the standard TV spot was 60 seconds in length. Then media inflation hit and the 60-second spot was forced to contract. The 1970s saw the eventual dominance of 30-second TV ads. Quickly following its 30-second parent, we saw the birth of the 15-second spot. Even shorter films continue to emerge, as today's media mix supports anything a creative mind can imagine.

As advertising video has started to migrate from TV to the web, one economic variable that changes in the media plan is that it costs no more to place a 30-second video on the web than a 15-second video – or a seven-minute video. On the internet, creative considerations, not media purchasing power, become paramount in deciding how long a video to produce.

A generation ago, when major advertisers first began experimenting with 15-second commercials, much ad research was conducted to help manage the transition to this shorter form of advertising. At the time, the most widely used measure of advertising performance in the US was day-after-recall. A number of research companies pre-tested ads and reported that you could get roughly 75% of the recall with a 15-second ad that you could with a 30-second one.

This was rather remarkable. After all, why not half? Why three-quarters? With half the visual real estate, containing half the information, you'd expect to get half as much impact. If you can get three-fourths of the memorable impact with only half the film time, which costs roughly half as much in airtime, shorter commercials represent an extremely good buy.

Of course, agency creatives were quick to argue that not all brand stories can be told properly in 15 seconds – complex propositions or emotional ads that, like a piece of symphonic music, take time to

build involvement. In terms of film experiences, the 15-minute *Star Wars* would not have had as much impact on audiences as the original feature-length version. Nevertheless, based on published research on average commercial performance and simple economics, it's surprising that the default length of a TV commercial today is not 15 seconds.

Evaluating today's ads

The current worldwide leader in advertising research, Millward Brown, takes a different position from the older American research firms. It estimates ad breakthrough not with a day-after-recall score but with a derived measure of attention-getting power. Its position is that, based on ad quality or creative considerations alone, there is no difference in attention-getting power, on average, between a 30-second or 15-second commercial. In pre-testing, the same set of norms is used to evaluate the power of a 10-second ad as a 60-second commercial.

That is not to say that Millward Brown believes a short commercial will have the same impact in the marketplace on brand awareness as a longer one. The argument is economic, not psychological. In estimating the efficiency of a 30-second versus a 15-second ad, it uses a rule-of-thumb adjustment like this: 100 GRPs (gross rating points) purchased for a 15-second ad is equivalent to only 50 GRPs purchased for a 30-second commercial, because 15 seconds cost half as much as 30 seconds. In the absence of insights about how consumers engage with shorter versus longer ads, it is hard to say what insights or guidance Millward Brown's pre-testing experience would provide regarding the value of different video lengths on the web.

Our own research data suggest that there are psychological factors that come into play in designing ad films of different lengths – factors that are determined by the limitations of the cognitive processing powers of the human brain.

In other published studies, where we have been able to compare attention scores for identical sets of 30-second commercials tested by Unilever in both



pre-testing systems, we have found the Ameritest and Millward Brown breakthrough attention measures to be highly correlated – even though our approaches to measuring attention are quite different. We expose a test commercial in a clutter reel of control ads and ask the question, ‘Which of the commercials that you just saw did you find interesting?’ The percentage of respondents mentioning the test ad gives the measure of attention. Millward Brown does not use clutter reels, but, rather, simply exposes the ad by itself and collects rating statements on enjoyment, uniqueness, involvement, and so on, which are weighted together to calculate an attention score.

Commercial length

In the case of commercial length, the use of a clutter reel does make a difference in measuring attention – just as in the real-life setting of on-air recall testing. We find it necessary, like the older testing companies, to provide different norms for 60-second vs 30-second vs 15-second ads, and so on. (We use a similar clutter format for print testing and find it necessary to provide different norms for print ads of different length, such as one-page vs two-page ads.)

To explore the psychological reasons why longer commercials produce higher attention, we recently looked at a subset of commercials representing an important class of the duration problem: 15-second ads cut down from original 30-second executions. Presumably, unlike commercials conceived from the beginning to be 15s, these were ideas for which creatives intuitively felt a full 30 seconds were needed to tell the story, but that, due to the pressure of media budgets, were re-edited to 15-second lengths.

From our testing database from the past couple of years we identified 19 such pairs of :30s and :15s. This is a small but highly controlled sample of ads representing the same brands, the same communication strategies, the same creative concepts, and filmed by the same directors. Figure 1 shows the difference between the two commercial lengths.

Confirming the findings of recall-testing companies, we find that the shorter ads have 80% of the attention-getting power of the longer versions, but there is no difference in brand linkage or motivation (see Figure 1).

What is attention?

To understand what is going on here, we need to think about what attention is. When we think of attention we think about the small fraction of perceptions, thoughts and feelings that we become conscious of – what we attend to – out of all the information, both from outside and inside our bodies, that is continuously received and processed by our brain, both above and below consciousness.

One way we think of how an audience watches ad films is that we think of viewers as consuming information. It’s a back-and-forth process. The consumer bites off a chunk of information, chews it, digests it to give it meaning, and then goes back for another bite.

What is important for capturing the attention of the conscious mind is not the raw content of the ad but the amount of meaning it contains. To continue our food metaphor, think of this as the nutritional content, not just the calories, in the film. In a clutter of competing ads, the consumer devotes more attention to the most meaningful ads. Meaning is, of course, in the eye of the beholder. The true test of the significance of the information in an ad is how much attention, either conscious or unconscious, the audience decides to allocate to it. Only the information in an ad that is important to the audience is transformed into thoughts and emotions that ultimately come together to form the meaningful memories that nourish brands.

The audience’s flow of attention

Diagnostically, we visualise the moment-by-moment information-processing curve of the audience with a Flow of Attention Graph®. Generally, this curve is wavelike in shape. While it is not actually an electrical brainwave, it can be thought of as a representation of one of

the hidden biorhythms of the engaged mind. We have shown repeatedly that there is a strong mathematical relationship between the number of peaks in an attention curve and the overall attention-getting power of the ad. Depending on the type of visual content of the peaks, the frequency of attention peaks is also predictive of day-after recall. In fact, the tempo of the peak moments in an attention curve is predictive of our internal perception of subjective time. The more peaks, the more information processing, and the viewer experiences the sensation that time flies by more quickly when watching more enjoyable works of film.

FIGURE 1

:15s are roughly 80% as effective as :30s in generating attention

	Attention	Brand linkage	Weighted motivation
Base size	(19)	(19)	(19)
:30 commercial	47.7	80.4	33.4
:15 commercial	39.5	84.7	32.6
:15 effectiveness	83%	105%	98%
Significance level	0.03	0.34	0.76

Note: The database consists of 19 ‘pure pairs’ for which the :15 is cut-down from the parent :30

FIGURE 2

:15 commercials have 3/4 as many peak branding moments as :30 commercials

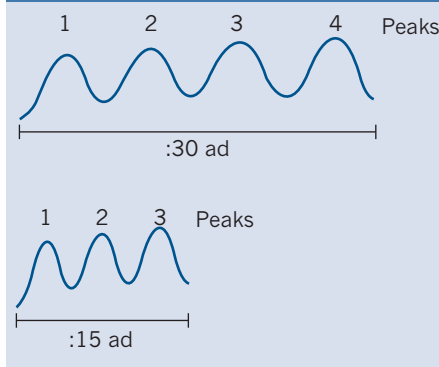


FIGURE 3

The four different image banks in the mind

1	Knowledge	3	Action
2	Emotion	4	Brand

This moment-by-moment analysis of film helps explain the psychological differences in the performance of films of varying lengths. The 30-second commercials we examined have, on average, four peak moments of audience attention. The 15-second versions have, on average, three peak moments. This ratio of three to four is consistent with the earlier findings of recall-testing companies and the 80% efficiency in attention-getting power that we found in our system.

To understand why commercials half as long contain three-quarters as many peak moments of attention, we might look at examples of 'directors' cuts' in the movies. When time is not a limiting factor, as in the DVD release of a movie, directors tend to add back a lot of content that was left on the cutting-room floor when a film was edited down to fit the parameters of the theatrical version. Under the discipline of creative constraints, these extra minutes of film are judged by the director to be of lesser importance in telling a story. Similarly, when a piece of commercial film needs to be tightened up, images that are less powerful in conveying the strategic idea, perhaps somewhat redundant, or that might cause viewer confusion and contribute to 'internal clutter', are ruthlessly eliminated. Good creatives intuitively understand what the most important moments in the film are – what the audience focuses on in the attention peaks – and will seek to retain these moments in the shorter film. Since attention to an ad as a whole is driven by the number of peak moments, one consequence of tighter creative focus is that the shorter ads tend to have more peaks per unit of time and therefore generate proportionately higher attention (see Figure 2).

Recall scores

It is also interesting to note why recall scores, which are generally uncorrelated with attention scores, produce the same efficiency ratios for shorter pieces of ad film. Unlike attention scores, recall scores are only driven by the presence of semantic information in the attention peaks, not by emotional content. By semantic content, we mean product-related content, such as visualisations of functional product features and benefits, product-in-use shots, product demos, packaging or visuals containing the brand name. Since recall testing measures semantic learning, recall scores are driven by content that literally teaches us something – factual information or concepts that can be stored in the rational part of the brain. Recall testing does not measure the emotional 'information' content of an ad – and it is just this type of information that gets squeezed out when ads are shortened. Not

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surprisingly, in shortened versions of ads clients insist on retaining rational product content at the expense of emotional, aesthetic content. The relatively strong performance of 15-second ads on recall tests confirms this.

Longer is better

Despite the pressure of ad budgets to produce shorter commercials, the average advertiser today would still much rather create a 30-second than a 15-second commercial. Why do we think longer ads are better?

The stock creative answer is that you need more time to tell a complete brand story. Intuitively this feels right, but it does not really explain why more time is needed. For that question we need a deeper understanding of how memories are created in the brain and how different kinds of memories work together to create brand presence in the mind.

We have all had the experience of being with someone physically who is not mentally or emotionally present: 'Where are you?' we ask a friend who is lost in thought. Or, you're walking down the street and the person with you is talking on her cellphone, connected to someone hundreds of miles away and not with you. Or, you might be presenting to someone busy checking emails on their BlackBerry. Their attention is divided between you and someone else. In this age of multi-tasking, it's useful to realise that awareness can be fractionalised – but we all know that communication is most effective when one person is wholly present to the other.

When a brand is wholly present to the consumer we mean that all the different parts of the brain that might contribute, on a conscious or unconscious level, to a purchase decision have been touched by advertising. The traditional approach to thinking of brand-name awareness or top-of-mind awareness as an essential precursor to sales is too thin a construct, too one-dimensional an approach to thinking about how advertising does its work. Like recall testing, awareness metrics probe only the semantic contents of the mind.

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Memory

The grandfather of modern memory research, Endel Tulving, described three different memory systems in his book *The Elements of Episodic Memory*: (1) semantic memory, where you store facts, concepts and language; (2) episodic memory, where you store emotions and autobiographical memories; and (3) procedural or somatic memory, where you store learned behaviours, like how to tie your shoelaces, drive a car or play a violin, and the physical sensations of bodily movement and the five senses.

In marketing terms these three types of memory might be thought of simply as knowledge memories, emotion memories and action memories. For example, if I want to understand the meaning of different images from a bread commercial I might find that a package shot with a

super of how many vitamins it contains communicates the factual idea of 'healthy' (knowledge memory); an image of mum taking a hot loaf out of the oven conveys the emotional idea of serving 'love' (emotion memory); and a close-up of fingers tearing a crusty piece from the loaf allows us to virtually feel how 'fresh' it is (action memory).

For advertising, a fourth type of memory is needed: an image that identifies the brand and serves as a 'tag' for the other memorable images in the commercial, so that they can all be filed away for future retrieval as your brand's portfolio of memories.

This set of four keys is needed to unlock all the doors of brand perceptions: one brand identifier image plus an image for each of the brain's three memory systems. Advertising ideas and images that

enter all the memory systems of the brain make a brand real to us. Thus, when we imagine a brand in our mind's eye in this multi-dimensional way it becomes wholly 'present'.

Conclusion

As we have seen, 30-second commercials are just the right length to deliver, on average, four peak brand-building moments. Comparably, 15-second commercials deliver a less complete story, touching on only three. Since every commercial, regardless of length, must contain a brand identifier, this means that even good 15-second commercials tend to leave out one of the three memory types, falling short on either knowledge, emotion or action imagery.

A simple way to think about this is to imagine that the job of advertising is to make image deposits in the different memory banks of the mind (see Figure 3). To build brand presence, each new campaign needs to deposit a memorable image in the knowledge bank, another in the emotion bank and a third in the action bank. And each commercial needs to be tagged with a brand identifier.

To keep a brand wholly present in the mind, these image accounts need to be kept roughly in balance over time. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways – by constructing a good 30-second commercial with the four different types of brand memories, or by rotating a set of 15-second ads that complement each other. The decision on which approach to use should be made not only on economic but on creative considerations.

On the internet, where these economic considerations do not apply, much remains to be learned about the most effective length of web video. Creatives must learn to strike the appropriate balance between the short attention span of the audience and the need to create four-dimensional brand memories. Like the dreams of the Velveteen Rabbit, the goal is to make the brand real, or wholly present, in the mind of the consumer. ■



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