

SO YOU CAN COMMUNICATE WITH THEM BUT HOW MANY OF THEM ARE THERE?

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Introduction

At the UK Media Research Group conference held in November 2004 in Madrid, out of the 25 papers presented, well over half were not about media research at all. The winning paper, entitled “Influencing Consumer Decisions” was a hypothesis dealing in psychological terms with the process of decision-making, contrasting the “social cognition approach” with the “behavioural decision theory approach” but quite how it helped a busy media planner select an optimum schedule from a large number of candidate media was not explained. Furthermore, the keynote speaker, the chief executive of a very large media services company, complained that “media research currencies are ‘commoditising’ (*sic*) media” and pleaded for “a world without trading currencies” and “media research that focuses on communication effectiveness”. He finished by suggesting that the name of the Media Research Group, that has been providing a forum for discussion of media research issues for 40 years, should be changed to the “Communication Research Group”. While the formation of a separate group to discuss communication research might indeed be of interest, communication research is not the same as media research and it is alarming to find that the CEO of a large media services company either thinks that it is or thinks that quantitative media research is not important at all.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that a clear distinction must be drawn between (a) ascertaining the size of the audience to a publication and (b) estimating the ability of a given advertisement in that publication to communicate effectively. The research techniques needed to evaluate these two factors are very different and any attempt to measure “communication effectiveness” while ignoring the size of the potential audience will give a dangerously misleading estimate of the value of the medium in generating sales.

“Media Research” and “Creative Research”

In the old days, by which I mean about 46 years ago when I first joined the advertising industry in 1959, the distinction was very clear. We had “media research” which attempted to measure the exposure of people to media and “creative research” which tried to find better ways of communicating a given message to the target audience. Specialists in both fields worked very hard to try to improve their skills. The creative research people did “copy-testing” which measured people’s attitudes to or knowledge of a product before and after being exposed to different copylines or creative treatments to see which were most effective in communicating the advertising message or changing perceptions. There were even clever studies that measured readers’ eye movements to trace where exactly their eyes were looking on the page. The creative people had a wealth of experience and well-tryed guidelines to help them decide on type styles, font sizes, and all the other elements that contributed to communicating the advertising message to the reader in the most effective and attention-grabbing way.

Similarly, in the media department, we had a clear idea of the aim of media planning, which was to reach the maximum number of the right people, the right number of times, as economically as possible. We were told who the “right people” were, at least in terms of sex, age and social grade. So we knew whether we were trying to reach young up-market women or old down-market men. We were also briefed as to how many times each member of the target audience should ideally be exposed to the advertising. Simple advertising messages such as “Prices halved until the end of the month” probably meant that people had to be exposed to the advertising only once or twice before they got the general idea and the media brief was therefore to try to reach as many of the potential target audience as possible within the budget. On the other hand, convincing people of the many technical advantages of particular motor-car tyres could necessitate repeated exposures to get the message across and the media brief would be to try to ensure that each member of the target audience was exposed to the advertising several times, on a reasonably regular basis, over the life of the campaign.

A little history

To help us in fulfilling the media task, we of course sought as much information as possible. To help us in print planning we had, you may be delighted to hear, a National Readership Survey, but it was not quite as extensive as the NRS we know and love today. In 1964, it measured the readership of 10 national daily newspapers, two London Evenings, 10 national Sunday newspapers, 23 general weekly and monthly magazines, and 37 women’s magazines, a total of 82 publications. 40 years later, the NRS covers 12 national dailies, 14 regional newspapers, 10 national Sundays, 41 newspaper supplements, 95 general magazines and 80 women’s magazines, a grand total of 252 publications.

You may be surprised by the fact that in 1964, the NRS provided only average issue readership figures, with no information about frequency of reading to allow the estimation of readership accumulation. So the NRS told us that we could reach 8% of the population with one insertion in the Daily Telegraph but we had no way of calculating how many more people could be reached with subsequent issues. I remember the arguments at the time that any attempt to provide such data would “overload the questionnaire” and it was not until 1968, following pressure from agency media planners, that frequency of reading data were added to the NRS. And you may be interested to hear that, in 1964, there was already concern about the survey response rate, which at that time was 80.3%.

We calculated the reach and frequency of press schedules by using average issue readership figures and readership duplication figures, as input parameters to the various formulae that we used in those days to calculate net schedule coverage. There were the Agostini, Metheringham, Sainsbury and several other formulae but they all demanded a serious amount of arithmetic and one of the main functions of agency media research departments was to do the calculations for the media planners. It is hardly necessary to point out that we had no computers then, but even calculating machines were scarce. When I joined FCB in 1961, we did the arithmetic using slide rules or log tables. There was only one calculating machine in the department and that was a mechanical one where you had to turn the handle seven times to multiply by seven. We then got an electric machine but it was still mechanical, not electronic; it was just that the electric motor saved the user from having to turn the handle.

The age of primitive manual calculation did not last for ever because the NRS released the survey in the form of 17,600 punched cards. The cards could be sorted by means of a counter-sorter and the holes could be counted to provide schedule coverage figures. The only problem was when the machine mangled a card, which it did frequently and a substitute had to be punched manually. The real breakthrough came with the introduction of computers and after that, life became a great deal easier.

Universal availability of media research

Of course, media research improved enormously over the years, in response to the demand by media planners for information to enable them to maximise coverage of their target audiences at the right frequency as economically as possible. So readership surveys provided frequency of reading data to permit estimates of readership accumulation. We had page traffic and "reading and noting" studies so that we could estimate the probability of those picking up a magazine or newspaper actually reading the client's advertisement. In other words, we modified the aim of achieving "opportunities-to-see" to maximising the number of those in the target audience receiving an impact from the advertisement. Additional data and development of more sophisticated computer software enabled media planners to take the time factor into account and control more accurately not only how many times but also when a reader would be exposed to an advertisement.

One of the consequences of universally available industry-standard media research data and computer systems is that it has become more difficult for media planners to demonstrate their superiority over their competitors. I remember one year a long time ago, when there were nasty gaps in the NRS data because many magazines did not appear for several weeks as a result of a printers' strike, that all the largest London advertising agencies developed their own solutions to simulate the missing data and gave presentations to their clients to demonstrate how clever they were. Nowadays, if such an event were to occur, there would be little likelihood of individual advertising agencies amending any industry data. Instead, there would be vociferous calls for Roger Pratt and NRS Limited to take some action. This cry can now be perceived as the main artery running through the heart of the media research industry: "Aorta do something!" But advertising agencies are always keen to take some action to ensure that they stand out from the crowd. So they tend to commission research, often using focus groups that are pleasingly inexpensive because they involve very few respondents, that can be used as the basis for presentations with titles like "Beyond OTS" or "Probing for profit".

Focus groups

I do not know how many of you have ever been asked to be a member of a focus group. I was once called in off the street in the lunch hour to take part in some research for a wine company. There were about eight of us. We were given sandwiches and then a very earnest young man produced an empty wine bottle, without a label, and asked us all to express our immediate feelings about it. In an effort to break the embarrassed silence that followed, he turned to me and asked if there was anything that, at first glance, I disliked about the bottle. I was rather taken by surprise but I said, "Well, it's empty!" He said that was true, but leaving that point aside, how did I feel about the shape? "The shape?" I said. "Yes, the shape," he said. "If it were a person, do you think it would be friendly or aggressive?" Fortunately, I was saved from having to answer by a kind-faced middle-aged woman sitting next to me who said to the young man, in a very patient and soothing tone, "But it's a bottle!" The thought crossed my mind that I had been trapped into one of those television programmes that put members of the public in bewildering situations for the amusement of the audience. But I could see no cameras, just half a dozen earnest researchers desperately writing notes. I remember wondering at the time how much the client had paid for this research study and exactly what use could possibly be made of it.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research seems to be becoming increasingly popular. Studies, (usually carried out on a very small scale), purport to show the affinity of certain members of the public to various products or media. Some consumers are identified as being "adventurous" or "traditional" or "radical" or "assertive" and are therefore presumed to be more likely to buy soothing Snibbo or whatever wondrous product is the subject of the research. The problem about this approach is that there are two possibilities. If the likely clients can be identified from their demographic characteristics, they can be treated as the target audience in the media brief and the media planners can use their skills to reach them. But if they cannot easily be identified except by a long and detailed questionnaire comprising complex psycho-graphic questions, then it will be impossible to know how many of them there are or which media will be most effective at reaching them. The target market, to form part of the media planning brief, has to be defined in demographic terms as a surrogate, that permits estimates of media exposure but which may not correctly reflect the psychological characteristics determined by the research, thus negating the cost of carrying it out.

Return on Investment

Another very fashionable term, that can be found in almost every advertising agency presentation nowadays, is “Return on Investment”, usually abbreviated to “ROI” which sounds more trendy and dynamic. But ROI is just a highfalutin term for a concept that has been an essential component of advertising since the beginning, except that it used to be called cost-per-thousand. Every medium must be evaluated by taking into account its cost and the number of members of the target market that it is likely to reach. Of course, the media units and the target audience will vary but the concept of cost-per-thousand is the same, whether one is evaluating the male audience to a 30-second TV commercial or the number of up-market women, aged 15-34, reached by a half-page advertisement in magazines. But unless one knows the price of each medium and the size of the audience each is likely to reach, then it is impossible to make any rational decision as to the relative value of any of them.

Direct Response advertising

At one stage in my career, I was working for a company whose sales depended on direct response advertising. We were selling financial products such as income bonds and tax-avoidance schemes and we made heavy use of advertisements every weekend in up-market newspapers. Because each client could be monitored from the very first contact, which was achieved by their completing and returning a coupon from each advertisement, we were able to evaluate very accurately the performance of each medium and each copy approach. The advantages from a media-planning and buying viewpoint were immediate and dramatic. Because we could calculate the cost-per-reply from each newspaper, we were able to demonstrate to newspaper owners beyond any doubt that the only way some of them could get on next week’s schedule would be to halve their advertising rate in order to bring their cost-per-reply down to a level comparable with their competitors. And that is exactly what they did. We also found that the readers of some newspapers seemed to be compulsive coupon-clippers but who never went on to spend much money. So we could evaluate media not only in terms of cost-per-reply but also in terms of cost-per-conversion. Even better than that, we could track how much the clients eventually spent on our products, giving us for each newspaper, and for each advertisement, the cost per pound of revenue generated. That was a real measure of ROI.

We captured the replies on a daily basis and, as a result, were even able to forecast, with a remarkable degree of accuracy after a few days, how many replies and how much revenue we were likely to end up with from each advertisement. We could also of course evaluate the value of different sizes and positions in newspapers to enable us to decide whether it was worth having a full page rather than a half-page advertisement or whether we should go on the left-hand or right-hand pages or the front or the back of the paper or whether it was worth paying extra to be facing editorial pages. Better still, we could combine the results of advertising in several newspapers to evaluate the effect of different copylines or different creative approaches. We could even see the effect of the changes in the general economic climate on the behaviour of the clients. Advertisements that had appealed successfully to acquisitiveness, e.g. “Are you getting enough interest on your hard-earned savings?” suddenly ceased to be effective, while other approaches playing on fear, e.g. “Is inflation eating away your nest-egg?” or “Will the tax man take away everything you have worked for?” became much more effective. In the end, the battle with the miners, the three-day week, the fall of the Stock Exchange Index through its previous low point, the collapse of the Heath Government, and the election of a Labour administration brought everything to a nasty end. The new Government announced in the Spring that Estate Duty legislation would be significantly amended in the Autumn but they gave no indication as to what the changes would be. That was rather like telling people that a police car will follow them all the way up the motorway and at the end they will say what the speed limit was. In those circumstances, nobody wants to drive and that is exactly what happened. Financial planning was virtually brought to a sudden end and, in the absence of business, the company ceased to trade independently.

However, the point of this story is that, with all our ability to analyse the value of different media and different creative approaches, we never detected even one instance of there being any interaction between the two. We could evaluate the response to be obtained from one newspaper compared with another, or the relative effect of full page and half page advertisements but the results applied to all copy treatments. Similarly we found that some creative approaches worked better than others and the relative effectiveness changed in response to changes in the economic climate but we never found a single case of the same advertisement working significantly better in one newspaper than another. Some newspapers were better value or more effective than others. Some creative approaches worked better than others. But we never detected one instance of a particular combination of media and creative treatment having an unusually successful (or surprisingly disappointing) effect.

The roles of advertising specialists

So that led me to believe that we had been right all along. The media department should do what they can to reach the maximum number of the right people, the right number of times and as economically as possible. If research can refine and improve the definition of the target market for the product or determine how many times they should receive an impact to communicate the advertising message, then so much the better but the aim will always be to reach the targets as economically as possible. Having achieved that, then the media department must trust the creative people to put the very best advertisement possible in front of the audience so that the advertising message sells the product. Similarly, the creative department must use all their skills of persuasion and communication to produce the best advertisement possible, trusting the media department to ensure that their precious creative efforts are exposed to the maximum number of prospects it is possible to achieve with the advertising budget. The media planner and the copywriter should be like a surgeon and an anaesthetist. The surgeon trusts the anaesthetist to get the patient off to sleep and to keep him unconscious until the operation is over. The anaesthetist, having got the patient peacefully off to sleep with every chance of bringing him round later, trusts the surgeon not to stick a scalpel through his heart or unintentionally slice off something vital. Mutual trust, with each specialist concentrating on using his own skills to the best of his ability, provides the best outcome.

Quantitative research is vital

Perhaps I ought to make one thing clear. Anybody has the right to earn a living any way he or she likes so long as it is legal. So, if any creative researcher can feed his starving family by persuading an advertiser to spend money asking members of the public whether they feel bottles are friendly or aggressive, then, as far I am concerned, that advertiser is the researcher's lawful prey. Whether such studies are of any value is of course another matter. But for anybody, let alone the chief executive of a media services company, to plead for "a world without trading currencies", is misguided to the point of imbecility. Unless a media planner has a reliable estimate of how many of those in his target can be reached by a given medium, it is impossible to decide how much it is worth paying for the advertising or have any idea as to the volume of sales that could be generated as a result. Without a currency, there can be no trading.

So let me end with a plea for the continued availability of quantitative print media research, which can of course be used in conjunction with research into communications effectiveness that can be carried out separately. It is vital that the advertising industry should continue to establish and maintain media currencies in order that informed media buying and selling can take place. For print advertising, that means the provision of readership figures to permit the accurate estimation of the reach and frequency of print schedules.

The Worldwide Readership Research Symposia

It is only fitting to draw attention to the important role that the Readership Research Symposia have played over the past 24 years in tackling the many difficulties inherent in readership research and working towards unbiased and reliable methodologies to measure press advertising opportunities. I feel honoured to be a member of a small and dwindling group of people who are fortunate enough to have attended every one of the twelve Worldwide Readership Research Symposia, starting with that first glorious gathering in New Orleans, twenty-four years ago. I say fortunate because the Symposia have unquestionably been the most valuable (and possibly the **only** valuable) media conferences to have been held in the last three decades. We may not have solved every problem yet, as is illustrated by the continued use of the recent-reading method that cannot distinguish between "publishing interval reading occasions" and "average issue readership", or in other words between frequency and coverage. That is due to the phenomenon known as "model bias", which is now the most generally-used term to describe the distortion, caused by "replication" inherent in the recent-reading methodology that over-estimates the "readership" of some magazines (particularly monthly magazines) but has little effect on other publications such as national newspapers. But at least we are aware of the problem and our meetings have provided the opportunity for the discussion of such matters by enthusiasts and experts from all over the world.

The Worldwide Readership Research Symposia have provided the forum for the presentation of many excellent papers and the stimulus for much valuable work. We have benefited from a wealth of information and experience and, as a result, readership research worldwide has improved significantly, to provide more accurate and valuable measurement of the effectiveness of the print medium. The advertising industry has derived enormous benefit from the dedication and the scholarship generated by our proceedings. Long may the Symposia continue to flourish!