

CHANNEL-SWITCHING A CHALLENGE TO TELEVISION ADVERTISERS

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A *DVERTISING* expenditure constitutes an important segment of the total promotional budget. The marketer uses a combination of various media to reach its target audience. Television is an important media for all advertisers because of its reach and popularity. It is available as an advertising medium to not only the big firms but is also affordable by small firms, which use it through the local cable network. It provides a high household penetration as well as the facility of using a combination of audio, and video.

This popularity has brought about an unprecedented growth in the number of channels; making it possible to reach niches of audiences. At the same time, the growing number of channels have further fragmented the audiences, thereby reducing the per channel audiences. The introduction of different channels has made television a “group of related but distinctly different media” (Thomas and Ronald, 1999). In addition to this, television rates are going up every year and technological innovations have placed greater control in the hands of the consumers, by providing them with remote control devices to facilitate the switching of channels with greater ease.

The practice of using remote control devices to switch channels in order to avoid watching commercials is referred to as ‘Zapping’. The emergence of 24-hour channels on cable networks has further provided the viewers with the facility to switch to different channels for latest news headlines or some music videos and resume watching the programs they started with. Such switching behavior of viewers has a negative impact on the efficiency of television advertising. It causes the ad ratings to fluctuate amongst the channels that are switched to as against those that are zapped. This in turn, makes it difficult to plan the buying of advertising time on television effectively.

However, in spite of the increasing costs of reaching the audiences, there appears to be no other medium that could be more efficient. The advertiser must, therefore, make all efforts to ensure that he is able to reach the target audiences.

Keywords: Channel Switching, Advertising Expenditure, Viewing Behavior, Television Advertising, Channel-Surfing.

Earlier Studies

A number of research studies in the United States have focused on describing the pattern and extent of channel-switching behavior (Kaplan, 1985), and profiling zapping-prone households (Heeter and Greenberg, 1985). Further, research has shown that even an incidental exposure to an ad increases the

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likelihood that a product shown in an ad will be included in the brands that would be considered while making a purchase decision (Stewart, Macinnis and Heckler, 1997).

Olney, Holbrook and Batra (1991), conducted a laboratory research and observed television-viewing behavior in a controlled environment. They varied factors influencing the switching-behavior, like the length of the commercial break, the type of break, etc., and found that the overall content of television commercials affects viewing time. It highlighted that the overall feelings a commercial induces increases the viewing time and the overall facts it communicates decreases viewing time.

Danaher (1995) studied the audience levels during commercial breaks by recalibrating the people meter to produce second-by-second ratings. The study found that television ratings drop during commercial breaks. This drop varies by program type and length, with movies being the biggest audience losers during advertising breaks while soaps barely change their ratings. Moreover, the study found that the characteristics of the commercial break, like the number of advertisements in the break and the length of the advertisements influence the ad break ratings. It also found that viewers appeared to sense the timing pattern of the ad breaks and this affected their ad avoidance behavior.

Lex van Meurs (1998) conducted a research study on the leakage and influx of viewers during commercial breaks in the Netherlands. It found that zapping during commercial breaks is motivated by functional needs. People stop watching commercials because either they have a reason to stop watching television altogether or because they wish to find out what is being shown on the other channels.

A study was, therefore, conducted to find out how many people actually viewed the advertisements when they appeared on television and how many of them zapped to avoid watching them.

Objective of the Study

The purpose of the study was to identify the viewing behavior for commercials on television programmes in terms of whether the respondents liked to watch advertisements on television during commercial breaks or liked to switch channels; what were the reasons for such a behavior and what possible remedies could be used to discourage channel-switching in order to improve the advertising effectiveness.

Methodology

Data Collection

A structured, non-disguised, questionnaire was used for personal interviews. In addition to the demographics, the respondents were asked to provide information on the following aspects:

1. Whether they liked to watch advertisements during serials?
2. Whether they changed channels whenever advertisements appeared?
3. Whether the advertisements helped them in choosing the brands they bought.
4. What type of advertisements did they like to watch-informative, humorous, emotional or jingles?
5. How frequently did they watch advertisements or surf channels- always, sometimes, rarely, or never?
6. When did they start surfing the channels-immediately when the advertisements appeared or after having watched them at least once?
7. Why did they surf on channels? Four possible reasons were indicated and the respondents were asked to rank them in the order of preference.
8. They were also asked to report on the frequency with which advertisements should be telecasted in a serial of thirty minutes and where should they be placed in a programme- in the beginning, in the middle or in the end?

9. What remedies did they suggest to the advertisers to deal with the problem of channel surfing. Seven possible remedies were proposed and they were asked to rank them in the order of preference.

The Sample

For this purpose, a sample of 200 people staying in Delhi was selected and the data was collected from them through personal interview with the help of a questionnaire. The data was obtained from 150 respondents giving a response rate of 75 percent. Sixteen responses were not included in the analysis since they were incomplete. This resulted in an effective sample of 134 respondents.

The sample of 134 respondents consisted of 46 males and 88 females. They were grouped into the following three age categories of 12- 20 years (77 viewers), 21-40 years (34 viewers), and above 40 years (15 viewers). Further, out of these 134 respondents, 35 (26percent) had completed school, 52 (39percent) were undergraduates, 35(26percent) were graduates, and 12 (9percent) possessed post graduate or professional qualifications.

Occupation-wise, the sample consisted of 78 students (58percent), 13 housewives (10percent), 17 respondents in service (13percent), 16 self-employed (12percent), and 10 professionals (7percent). Thus, the sample consisted of respondents possessing a variety of educational qualifications and belonging to diverse occupational groups.

Findings

The findings of the study are presented in the following paragraphs.

Viewer's Preference for Watching Advertisements

The respondents were asked whether they liked to see advertisements during the course of various television programmes. They were asked to choose between 'always', 'sometimes', 'rarely' and 'never'. The responses are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Viewers' Preference for Watching Advertisements

Frequency	Respondents	
	Number	Percentage
Always	18	13
Sometimes	49	37
Rarely	42	31
Never	25	19
Total	134	100

As shown by the Table, approximately 50 percent of the respondents liked to see advertisements while watching a television programme. Thus, the remaining fifty percent target audience was lost because they did not like to see advertisements during the course of the programme.

Channel-Switching on the Appearance of Advertisement

In order to find out what respondents did when an advertisement appeared on television during the course of watching a serial, they were specifically asked whether they changed channels when the advertisements appeared. Four options were provided and they were asked to specify whether they changed the channels always, sometimes, rarely or never. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Channel-Switching on Appearance of Advertisement

Frequency	Respondents	
	Number	Percent
Always	37	28
Sometimes	55	41
Rarely	25	19
Never	17	13
Total	134	100

As many as twenty eight percent respondents always changed channels and another forty one percent respondents changed them sometimes, nearly thirty two percent respondents reported that they rarely or never changed channels whenever the advertisements appeared.

Cross-check: In order to cross check their ad-viewing behavior, they were again asked after a few questions as to what they did when the advertisements appeared-did they view them or did they surf channels? The same four options of always, sometimes, rarely or never were provided. The results are presented in Table 3

Table 3: Cross-checking the Channel-Switching Pattern

Frequency	Like to see advertisements (Number)	Like to see advertisements (Percent)	Change channels (Number)	Change channels (Percent)
Always	14	10	37	28
Sometimes	55	41	61	45
Rarely	45	34	25	19
Never	20	15	11	8
Total	134	100	134	100

These results were similar to the ones found earlier except that more than 70 percent respondents agreed that they changed channels whenever the advertisements appeared during the course of watching serials. The findings indicate that a sizeable portion of the Television viewing audience is lost due to zapping or channel surfing. However, recent research has shown that incidental exposure to advertisements can have an effect on subsequent judgments (Chris and Warlop, 1993) regarding the evaluation of a brand.

Channel-Surfing Time

The respondents were asked as to when they started surfing channels the moment the advertisements appeared or after having watched the advertisements at least once. As many as 88 respondents (64percent) agreed that they surfed channels only after having watched the advertisements at least once and only 46 respondents (34percent) agreed that they simply changed channels once the advertisements appeared. This points out to the fact that while most of the respondents were exposed to the advertising messages at least once, the majority did not view them every time the advertisements appeared again and again.

The marketer needs to therefore, reconsider whether repeating the same ad again and again during the

same programme is worthwhile or whether it is better to use the same ad on different channels to capture different audiences.

Reasons for Surfing the Channels

The respondents were asked to rank in order of preference the following possible reasons that prompted them to switch channels.

1. To watch two programs simultaneously.
2. Advertisements are boring and not interesting.
3. Duration of an advertisement is long.
4. Advertisements are not boring but are repetitive.

The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Some Possible Reasons for Surfing the Channels

Reasons/Preferences	1	2	3	4
To watch two programmes simultaneously	43 (32%)	20 (15%)	31 (23%)	40 (30%)
Advertisements are boring	23 (17%)	17 (12%)	33 (25%)	61 (46%)
Advertising duration is long	45 (33%)	51 (39%)	30 (22%)	08 (6%)
Advertisements are repetitive	26 (19%)	46 (34%)	41 (31%)	21 (16%)

As shown in the Table, there are two important reasons for surfing channels are firstly, that the respondents find that the advertising duration is too long; or the ad-break during the programme is long, secondly, there appears to be a clash in the timings of two popular programmes so that the audience wishes to watch two programmes simultaneously, thereby getting motivated to surfing channels rather than watching advertisements.

However, in spite of this, a large number of respondents feel that the advertisements are not boring. What appears to be more irksome is the repetitiveness of the advertisements, which discourages the respondents from watching them.

Influence of Advertisement on Brand Choice

The respondents were asked whether the advertisements helped them choose the brands they intended to buy. The findings revealed that 55 respondents (41 percent), reported that their brand choice was not influenced by the advertisements they saw, but a majority (59 percent) respondents agreed that the advertisements helped them decide on which brands they bought. The segment that is not influenced by the advertisements in their brand choice appears not to be influenced by the advertising effort of the marketer.

Frequency of Advertisements in a Serial

The respondents were also probed on their opinion on the frequency with which advertisements should appear in a 30- minute serial. A majority of the respondents (91 percent), agreed that the advertisements should appear only once or twice during the course of a serial. Only a small minority comprising 9percent of the respondents felt that the advertisements may be telecasted 3 or 4 times. Thus, the viewers do not favour frequent ad breaks and this is likely to cause channel switching.

Placement of Advertisements in a Programme

The respondents were asked to specify whether they preferred to see advertisements in the beginning, in the middle or in the end of the serials. The survey revealed that approximately 43 percent of the respondents preferred watching advertisements in the middle of the serial, another 34 percent preferred to watch them in the beginning and 22 percent preferred to watch them at the end. Thus, as many as 56 percent respondents felt that they would prefer to watch advertisements in the beginning or end and would not like to be disturbed during the telecast of the serial.

Measures to Prevent Channel-Surfing

A total of seven likely remedies to counter the zapping or channel surfing habit were suggested to the respondents who were asked to rank each in their order of preference. The seven action plans that were listed are:

- Telecasting the same ad simultaneously during the prime time on different channels.
- Making advertisements more attractive by having a good punch line.
- Avoiding too much repetition.
- Reducing the length of advertisements.
- Using celebrity endorsement more frequently.
- Adding entertainment value to the advertisement.
- Changing the ad themes and copy frequently.

The findings are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Possible Remedies for Preventing Channel Surfing

Remedies	1	2	3	Frequencies	4	5	6	7
1	17 (13%)	08 (6%)	14(10%)	10(8%)	14(10%)	27(20%)	44(33%)	
2	27(20%)	13(10%)	26(19%)	15(11%)	24(18%)	19(14%)	10(8%)	
3	31(23%)	31(23%)	16(12%)	24(18%)	18(13%)	07(5%)	07(5%)	
4	29(22%)	40(30%)	23(17%)	13(10%)	15(11%)	10(8%)	04(3%)	
5	07(5%)	11(8%)	12(5%)	14(10%)	21(16%)	44(33%)	25(19%)	
6	13(10%)	22(16%)	26(19%)	34(25%)	17(13%)	8(6%)	14(10%)	
7	10(8%)	09(7%)	17(13%)	24(18%)	26(19%)	19(14%)	29(22%)	

Key: Possible Remedies

1. Telecasting the same ad simultaneously during the prime time on different channels.
2. Making advertisements more attractive by having a good punch line.
3. Avoiding too much repetition.
4. Reducing the length of advertisements.
5. Using celebrity endorsement more frequently.
6. Adding entertainment value to the advertisement.
7. Changing the ad themes and copy frequently.

In order to find out the preferences for the various alternatives that were listed, the first three frequencies assigned to each alternative were totaled. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Possible Remedies for Preventing Channel-Switching: Cumulative Frequencies

Remedies*	Cumulative frequencies	Cumulative percentages
1	39	29
2	66	49
3	78	58
4	92	69
5	30	22
6	61	45
7	36	28

***Key: Possible Remedies**

1. Telecasting the same advertisement simultaneously during the prime time on different channels.
2. Making advertisements more attractive by having a good punch line.
3. Avoiding too much repetition.
4. Reducing the length of advertisements.
5. Using celebrity endorsement more frequently.
6. Adding entertainment value to the advertisement.
7. Changing the ad themes and copy frequently.

As shown in the table, the three most important remedies suggested for reducing zapping of commercials on television are: reducing the advertising length, avoiding repetition and making advertisements more attractive.

Type of Advertisement Liked

The respondents were questioned on the type of advertisements they liked, that is, they were asked to choose among humorous, informative, jingles and emotional advertisements. The findings reveal that 86 respondents (64percent) liked to watch humorous advertisements and 55 (41percent) respondents liked to view informative advertisements; another 34 respondents liked jingles and only 27 (20percent) respondents liked emotional advertisements. Therefore, it appears that people see advertisements either to add to entertainment or to get information. The advertisers should incorporate entertainment value in order to attract the audiences towards watching the ad.

Influence of Age, Gender and Education

In order to further investigate the strength of relationship of the findings to the demographic variables of age, sex, and education, correlation coefficients were computed. These are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Influence of Age, Gender and Education

Variables	Age	Gender	Education
Like to see advertisements	0.136	-0.079	0.086
Surf channels	-0.067	0.059	0.007
Advertisements help to decide	-0.085	-0.109	-0.094
Informative advertisements	0.305*	-0.099	0.240*
Humorous advertisements	-0.202*	0.036	-0.103
Jingles	-0.027	0.136	-0.142
Emotional advertisements	-0.046	-0.089	0.063

* Correlations significant at 0.01 level.

As shown in the Table, the ad viewing behavior in terms of viewing advertisements and surfing channels does not appear to be significantly correlated with age, or gender or education. This implies that people like to see advertisements or surf channels without belonging to any specific age group, or gender or educational qualifications.

However, preference for informative advertisements is significantly and positively correlated with age and education; and preference for humorous advertisements is significantly and negatively correlated with age. It is evident from the above that as people grow older they are likely to watch advertisements for information rather than entertainment. The younger age groups, however, display the opposite liking; they appear to view advertisements for entertainment rather than information. Similarly, the better educated seem to watch advertisements for information.

Conclusion

The study provides important insight into the viewers' ad viewing behavior. It shows that channel-switching is a habit, which is common to people of all age groups irrespective of their gender, education level and occupation. The viewers are not likely to see advertisements that appear repeatedly on the same channel. The advertiser, therefore, needs to telecast the advertisements on different channels during the same time-slot rather than spend on repeating the advertisements on the same thirty - minute programme, three to four times. Furthermore, if the duration of the ad break is long, people are likely to switch to other channels. These findings support the research conducted by Lex van Meurs .

If two or more popular programmes are telecasted on different channels during the same time slot, it is likely to result in a waste of advertising effort as the advertisements appearing in either of the programmes are likely to be ignored.

If the viewers are to be dissuaded from zapping, the advertisers must reduce the advertising length, avoid repetition and make the advertisements more attractive. Moreover, a majority of the viewers watch advertisements either for entertainment or to obtain information. The entertainment value of the ad is significant for the younger age group and the information value is more important for the more educated and elderly audience.

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