Switching during commercial breaks
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5 Results: switching behaviour assessed

The aim of the SPOT study was to establish the amount of switching that occurs during television advertising, and determine the factors responsible for it. This chapter deals with determining the amount of switching that occurs during commercial breaks. In section 5.1 and 5.2, the distributions of switching away from and switching in to commercial breaks are examined. The relationship between these two measures of switching, and their use in determining the net number of viewers per break, are discussed in section 5.3. Because of the complexity in defining switching, the question of how much switching takes place during commercial breaks cannot be easily or directly answered. Nonetheless, an attempt is made to provide an answer in the fourth section of this chapter. The level of switching found in this study is also compared with the results of other studies reported in the literature.

5.1 Decrease in ratings

In this study, the decrease in audience ratings is defined as the relative loss of GRPs during a commercial break within the group of viewers that had been watching the channel in question two minutes prior to the start of the break (see appendix 3). Within that group, an average loss of 28.6% was found for the 12,278 commercial breaks registered during the research period. This means that, for example, if two minutes before the beginning of a break the audience rating was 5%, a two minute break would have achieved 10 GRPs within the original group of viewers if no one switched away. However, because the average loss per break was 28.6% of GRPs due to viewers switching away, the break in this example would have lost 2.9 GRPs of its potential of 10 GRPs, retaining 7.1 GRPs.

While the average decrease in audience rating is 28.6%, there is a wide spread of values among all of the breaks; the standard deviation (the average variation from the average) is 18.6%. The proportional distribution of the decreases in audience rating for all 12,278 breaks is shown in figure 6.

From this chart, it can be seen that there are considerable differences between breaks in the amount of decrease. Some 18% showed a decrease of 10% or less; for these breaks audience loss as a result of switching away is very small. In 1% of
the 12,278 breaks, the decrease was greater than 75%, meaning that less than a quarter of the viewers\(^4\) remained watching.

In addition to the decrease and the increase in audience ratings, a number of supplementary switching measurements have been calculated. The first of these is the decrease in viewers, a relative measure of the number of persons that switched away during the break. It is defined as the number of persons in the group of viewers watching the channel two minutes before the start of the break, who were not watching that channel in the first minute following the end of that break. A second switching measurement is the rate of decrease, which indicates the point in a break at which the greatest loss of viewers as a result of switching occurred. A rate of 0.5 means that the relative loss of GRPs (the decrease in audience ratings) is equal to half of the decrease in viewers, for example, because all viewers who switched away did so halfway through the break. A rate of 1.0 means that viewers who switched away did so at the beginning of the break. The average rate of decrease for all breaks in the study is 0.88. The proportional distribution of the rate of decrease shown in figure 7 indicates that the majority of viewers who switched away from a break did so at the beginning of the break or just before the start of the break, in the last two minutes of the previous programme.

In 2.8% of the 12,278 breaks, the rate of decrease is zero. In these instances, either no one was watching the channel in the two minutes before the break in question, or no one switched away during the break. The rate was greater than 1.0 in 14% of the breaks, meaning that the decrease in audience ratings was greater than

\(^4\) In discussing the two measures of switching in this chapter, the terms loss and gain of viewers are used for convenience. However, what is meant is the loss or gain of GRPs: the audience ratings achieved and lost during the break, within the group of viewers who were watching the channel two minutes before the start of the break.
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the decrease in viewers. This may seem odd at first glance, but can occur, for example, when a substantial portion of the viewers who switched away during the break return before the end of the break. The calculation of the decrease in audience ratings, the principle measure of switching away during commercial breaks, takes into account the loss of ratings during commercial breaks that results from the switching behaviour of these returning viewers.

Figure 7 Proportional distribution of the rate of decrease

5.2 Increase in ratings

The increase in audience ratings is the relative gain in GRPs achieved during a commercial break as a result of new viewers switching in. This group is defined as the group of viewers who were watching the channel one minute following the end of a break, but who had not been watching in the minute before the start of the break. The average increase in audience ratings for all the breaks is 7.1%.

The distribution of the increase in audience ratings is shown in figure 8. It should be noted that a large number of breaks showed no increase in audience ratings. The increase in audience ratings is zero in 17.8% of the 12,278 breaks, which means that these breaks received no new viewers who watched up to and including the first minute following the end of the break. These breaks were mainly ones that interrupted programmes and that had low audience ratings. Half of the breaks showed an increase of 5% or more, while a quarter showed an increase of 10% or more.

An increase in audience ratings of 7.1% compensates, in part, for the decrease in audience ratings (28.6%) resulting from the loss of viewers during commercial breaks. The relationship between these two results is discussed in the next section.
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5.3 The net effect of switching on the break ratings

The net effect of switching on audience ratings for commercial breaks can be determined by comparing the measures of switching. The net loss of viewers during commercial breaks can be approximately determined by subtracting the increase in audience ratings (7.1%) from the decrease in audience ratings (28.6%), resulting in a net loss of 21.5%\(^*\). In principle, however, this method of determining the net effect of switching on the audience rating of commercial breaks is flawed, because the bases for calculating the percentages of the decrease in audience ratings (the number of viewers in the second minute before the start of a break) and the increase in audience ratings (the number of viewers in the first minute after a break) are not the same.

Moreover, this calculation does not provide a complete picture of the net effect from switching. In this study, the definition of switching only takes into account a decrease in audience ratings as a result of viewers switching away (including those who switch back again), and an increase in audience ratings as a result of new viewers switching in. In addition to these, however, a third form of switching behaviour can affect the audience ratings of commercial breaks. This refers to viewers who were not watching a channel in the second minute before the start of the break and in the first minute following the end of a break, but who switched into a break and then switched away between these two moments. These hit and run viewers fall outside the definitions of both the decrease in audience ratings and the

\(^*\) The estimated net loss of 21.5% is more or less in agreement with the unweighted block factor (see section 2.4.4) of 78% in the first quarter of 1995 (NL123 and RTL45). However, the net results of the two switching measures and the block factor are not directly comparable. The block factor is calculated as the decrease in audience ratings during advertising in relation to the programmes preceding and following the break. The decrease in audience ratings and increase in audience ratings are calculated on the basis of the second minute before the break and the first minute following the break, respectively.
increase in audience ratings, and form a separate third factor that should be taken into account in determining the net effect of switching on the audience ratings of commercial breaks. It is not necessary to calculate the effect of this behaviour separately per break; it can be derived from the information available. In table 7, the effect of hit and run viewers on audience ratings for commercial breaks is calculated on the basis of the total registered advertising GRPs. The results of this calculation are illustrated in graphic form in figure 9.

Table 7 The effect of switching behaviour: registered and potential GRPs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>GRPs (rating x minutes)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rating 2nd minute before the break</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rating 1st minute after the break</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rating of the break</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial minutes</td>
<td>32,506</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRPs (rating x minutes)</td>
<td>104,019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Decrease in ratings 28.6%
Increase in ratings 7.1%

Registered GRPs 104,019 100.0%
a. Stayers: no switching 92,837 89.3%
b. New viewers: switching in 7,616 7.3%
c. Hit and run viewers: switching in and out 3,566 3.4%

Potential GRPs (registered + lost potential) 141,206 135.8%
Potential GRPs lost by decrease in ratings 37,187 -35.8%
GRPs from increase in ratings 7,616 7.3%
GRPs from switching in and out 3,566 3.4%
Net effect of switching on potential GRPs 26,005 -25.0%

Explanation of table 7
In the research period from January through April 1995, there were a total of 32,506 minutes of advertising broadcast on the five channels NL123 and RTL45. With an average break audience rating of 3.2%, this resulted in a total of 104,019 GRPs (target group 6+). The GRPs were the product of three kinds of viewing behaviour:

a. \textit{Stayers}: people who were watching a channel two minutes before the start of a break and were still watching at the end of the break (including people who switched away during the break but returned to the channel before the end of the break).

b. \textit{New viewers}: people who were not watching a channel two minutes before the
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start of a break, but did watch at least one minute of the break and were still watching the same channel during the first minute following the end of the break.

c. **Hit and run viewers:** people who were not watching a channel two minutes before the start of a break and were not watching in the first minute following the end of the break, but who did watch some portion of the break.

Calculating the registered GRPs

a. Of the total of 104,019 GRPs, 28.6% were lost as a result of the decrease in audience ratings. The remaining 71.4% of audience ratings retained from the group of **stayers** yields $71.4\% \times 32,506 \times 4.0\% = 92,837$ GRPs.

b. Of the total GRPs, 7.1% are due to the increase in audience ratings. The group of **new viewers** yields $7.1\% \times 32,506 \times 3.3\% = 7,616$ GRPs.

c. If 92,837 GRPs of the total of 104,019 GRPs are as a result of **stayers** (89.3% of the total), and 7,616 as a result of **new viewers** (7.3% of the total), there remain 3,566 GRPs that could only be the result of **hit and run viewers** (3.4% of the total).

Calculating the potential GRPs

The potential GRPs can serve as a basis for calculating the net effect of switching. The potential GRPs are the sum total of:

1. all registered GRPs including new viewers (104,019 GRPs), plus
2. lost GRPs that would have been registered if no one had switched away $(28.6\% \times 32,506 \times 4.0\% = 37,187$ GRPs, 35.8% of the total of registered GRPs).
3. The net effect of the switching behaviour on the total number of registered GRP is thus $7.3\% + 3.4\% - 35.8\% = -25.0\%$.

The following conclusions can be drawn from table 7 and figure 9:

- 89% of advertising GRPs were a result of viewers who do not switch, but continued watching through the entire break\(^45\);
- the gain as a result of new viewers switching in to the break was 7% of the total of advertising GRPs;
- 36% more advertising GRPs would have been achieved if there had been no switching away;
- if no switching had occurred during commercial breaks, 25% more GRPs would have been achieved.

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\(^{45}\) Given the definition of decrease in audience ratings, it should be noted that the 89% of advertising GRPs are not only the result of viewers who do not switch but watch the entire break, but also of viewers who briefly switch away but then switch back before the end of the break.
The majority of new viewers continued to watch the entire break up to and including the first minute after the break; only 3% of new viewers switched away before the end of the break. The group of viewers who switched in and then out of breaks was small and their influence on advertising ratings was almost negligible. In chapters 6 and 7, it will be assumed, for the sake of convenience, that a comparison of the decrease and the increase in audience ratings is sufficient to determine the net effect of switching on the audience ratings of commercial breaks.

5.4 Interpretation

The studies of switching behaviour during commercial breaks previously discussed have limited themselves to the net effect of switching on the number of viewers. In these studies switching referred only to switching away; none of these studies distinguished the positive effect of switching in on the number of viewers of commercial breaks\(^{46}\). This study has shown that 7% of advertising GRPs were the result of switching in (see section 5.3), indicating that switching in is also an important aspect of switching behaviour during commercial breaks.

More switching away than switching in occurred for most commercial breaks.

\(^{46}\) With the exception of a qualitative study by Aitchison (1985).
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Against an average increase in audience ratings of 7% there was an average decrease in ratings of 29%. The resulting net loss of 22% is only an average, however. Both the decrease and increase in ratings exhibited a wide distribution and there were considerable differences between breaks in the effect of switching behaviour on audience ratings. In the following chapter, the factors responsible for the levels of switching away and switching in during these breaks are discussed. In section 5.1, the conclusion was drawn that most viewers switch away at the beginning of a commercial break or even just before the start of a break. The next chapter examines whether this is an indication that switching away is not the result of characteristics of the break itself but reflects a general aversion to advertising, or whether this behaviour is influenced by other factors such as channel programming.

The findings discussed in this chapter indicate the importance of a better understanding of the background of switching behaviour. If switching away can in some way be limited and switching in maintained or even increased, this can lead to a large increase in advertising GRPs.