Switching during commercial breaks
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Summary

In 1994, a number of opinion polls in the Netherlands reported a marked increase in irritation with television advertising. Viewers claimed that they switched away more and more often during advertising. In 1995, STER and IP, working together in the Foundation for the Promotion and Optimisation of Television Advertising (SPOT), decided to research the extent of switching during television advertising to determine the causes of this behaviour and the possibilities of limiting the loss of viewers from switching. This research was set up in close consultation with independent media experts and representatives of advertisers, advertising agencies and media agencies and carried out by Intomart. This dissertation “Switching during commercial breaks” is based on the SPOT research.

Earlier analyses of the data from the Continu KijkOnderzoek (CKO), the continuous television audience research in the Netherlands, in which individual viewing behaviour is electronically registered, had indicated that much less switching occurred during commercial breaks than the responses of those interviewed in the opinion polls would indicate. Apparently viewers’ estimates of their own switching were strongly influenced by social desirability. This study of switching behaviour was based on data and results from the CKO, including the standard set of respondents’ background characteristics. Constraints in the planning phase of the research meant that it was not possible to expand the set of background characteristics with data on respondents’ attitudes towards television advertising and other issues specifically related to the research.

The study included all of the 12,278 commercial breaks broadcast on the five major Dutch television channels (Netherlands 1, 2, and 3, RTL4 and RTL5) in the period from January through April 1995. Two different forms of switching behaviour during breaks were defined: the loss of audience ratings as a result of switching away and the gain in audience ratings as a result of switching in. It was found that an average of 28.6% of viewers (from the group of viewers that were watching the channel in question two minutes before the start of the break) switched away during the break, while an average of 7.1% of the viewers (from the group of viewers watching the channel in question one minute after the end of the break) switched in as new viewers.

The sum of the number of viewers for all commercial breaks can be expressed as the sum of the percentage of viewers of all advertising minutes (Gross Rating Points or GRPs). Of the total advertising GRPs, 89% were the result of viewers who did not switch away, but continued watching during the commercial break.
New viewers switching in produced 7% of the GRPs. It is clear that even a slight reduction in the number of people switching away can result in a large gain; if no one switched away, 36% more GRPs would be achieved.

The principle aim of this study was to determine the factors that cause and influence the two forms of switching behaviour. For each commercial break, a total of 225 explanatory variables were formulated based on a large number of relevant characteristics of the break, programming on the channel on which the break is broadcast and on the other channels opposite the break, viewer characteristics, product types advertised in the commercials during the break and the number of times commercials had been previously broadcast (overload).

From the analysis, it appears that the least amount of switching away occurred in breaks with the following characteristics, listed in order of the size of the effect:

- centre break;
- break after programmes for children and youth;
- a high market share (relative number of viewers) for the channel during the break;
- a high audience rating (absolute number of viewers) for the channel during the break;
- high number of viewers per television set (social viewing).

The following five factors were primarily responsible for switching away:

- high audience rating for other channels during the break;
- a difference in age in the audience of the programmes before and after the break;
- break broadcast in the late evening (22.00-24.00 hrs.);
- break placed after a long programme;
- a long break.

A large increase in audience ratings occurred during breaks with the following five characteristics:

- a difference in age in the audience of the programmes before and after the break;
- a large number of viewers for advertising broadcast during the break on channels opposite the break;
- a long break;
- break placed before news programme;
- end breaks (a break placed between two different programmes).

No direct effect was found for product type or campaign overload. Viewers may have been irritated with commercials for specific types of products or with commercials that are repeated again and again, but these commercials did not drive them away from a break. This study refutes the myth that viewers always switch away in large numbers during ads for certain products, such as feminine hygiene products. However, this result should not be seen as a licence to repeatedly broadcast the irritating commercials over and over. While viewers did not switch away directly when confronted with these sorts of commercials, the possibility that such commercials will produce a more general and indirect form of advertising avoid-
ance cannot be dismissed. However, this issue is beyond the scope of this study.

It was found that switching during commercial breaks was influenced by programming. Programmes are the reason for watching television, and viewers are not easily driven off by a commercial break, regardless of the kinds of commercials included in the break. When viewers switch away, they do so primarily at the start of the break or even before the break has begun. The majority of breaks occur at the end of programmes and that is the moment for many viewers to switch the television off or to switch channels to see what is being broadcast on other channels, without regard to the content of the break from which they are switching away.

On the basis of this study, a number of practical recommendations are made for channels and their sales houses. Among other measures, the decrease in audience ratings during commercial breaks can be limited by placing breaks as soon after the end of programmes as possible and, on the commercial channels, by placing more advertising in programme-interrupting breaks rather than in breaks between two different programmes. It is also recommended that the age profiles for adjacent programmes be better co-ordinated, shorter programmes be broadcast and commercial breaks be shortened, although these last three measures will not only reduce the decrease in audience ratings, they will reduce the increase in audience ratings from viewers switching in as well.

Because of the fragmentation and segmentation of the television audience, the nature of television as an advertising medium has changed considerably for advertisers and media planners. Advertising on television produces an increasingly lower reach for the same number of advertising block, but it does offer media planners more opportunities through greater target group selectivity. In order to take advantage of these opportunities, however, a better understanding of the switching behaviour of viewers is necessary. Planning for television as an advertising medium is made difficult by the increase in switching during commercial breaks. On the basis of the findings in this study, advertisers and their media agencies should be able to select zap-proof breaks or make better predictions of switching during commercial breaks, enabling them to make more efficient use of television to reach the desired target groups.

The value of this study is not limited to the practical commercial concerns discussed above. For those to whom the television audience is more than a consumer or target group and who are interested in their selection and reception of media messages, this research can be used as a study of the motivation of the switching and selection behaviour of “the” Dutch television viewer. With the remote control as a navigational tool, viewers actively search for the most appropriate channel. For viewers, the decision to continue watching advertising or switch away is not dependent on the content of the commercial break. It is determined by the programming on offer: the programmes preceding and following the break on the
same channel, as well as the programming on other channels during the break. When they choose not to switch, they put up with the commercials in the break. Generally speaking, viewers are not passive beings who zap at random during commercial breaks. Their switching behaviour can largely be explained by the programmes on offer.