

Does anyone still pay attention to ads and commercials?

Part one: The situation—how audience attention has changed.



Remember when audiences paid rapt attention to commercials?

Neither do we, but we have it on good authority that somewhere in the distant mists of history – from the golden age of radio in the 1930s to the early era of TV in the 1950s – they did.

In 1935 families would gather around a radio – which was then a wooden box almost the size of a refrigerator – and listen intently to "Major Bowes and His Original Amateur Hour." They listened just as intently to the commercials for Chase and Sanborn coffee.

That unflagging concentration carried over into the early television era. In the 1950s, families would gather around the new big, wooden box mesmerized by "The Original Amateur Hour" in its TV reincarnation with Ted Mack as host. And no one's fascination with the fuzzy picture and scratchy sound wavered as a pack of Old Gold cigarettes danced across the screen.

In those thrilling days of yesteryear the audience's attention was a given. Everyone tuned into a show would hear every word of a radio commercial and watch every single one of the sixty seconds that made up TV spots back then.

Sounds like marketing heaven, doesn't it? All the ad agency had to do was decide what appeal would be most persuasive to the captive – and captivated – audience, then deliver it in a form that would be remembered days later, when

audience members walked into a store and became purchasers.

By the 1960s, television was less of a novelty. Families still ate things called "TV dinners" on little folding tables called "TV trays" in front of that big wooden box in the living room. By then, however, the novelty had begun to wear off. The flickering image was no longer as hypnotic as it used to be.

Creative teams poured over Burke day-after recall data for attention-grabbing tricks to keep viewers riveted to the set for the crucial first three seconds of a spot, the little sliver of time in which audience members chose between watching the commercial, taking a bio-break or making a run to the refrigerator.

Two of the most venerable of those tricks:

- Want to hook men? Open with a shot of a dog barking. (Yes, the Burke data showed that a dog got more male attention than a hottie. Of course the amount of hotness permitted on TV back then was pretty minimal.)

- Want to hook women? Open with a shot of a baby gurgling or crying.

It's not that simple any more.

In those early days of broadcast, the marketing communications environment was like a clan sitting around a campfire as a bard told a story. Everyone concentrated on every word and gesture from "Once upon a time..." through "...and they lived happily ever after."

Over time that bard-by-flickering-firelight paradigm evolved into something more like a three-ring circus. Now there's so much going on that no one can see it all. Audience members' attention flits from the elephants to the trapeze to the clowns to the popcorn they're holding, then back to the elephants. But by then the pachyderms have been replaced with bareback riders.

Confused? If not, you're not paying attention. Here are some of the factors marketing communicators have to face today

Massive media proliferation. In the 1930s, marketing communications media consisted of radio, newspaper, magazines, outdoor, direct mail, point-of-purchase and direct sales. Plus an occasional guy in a sandwich board handing out leaflets.

We've still got all of those (except, maybe, the sandwich board). And we've added television (and seen it expand from three broadcast networks to hundreds over the air and on cable), web ads on literally millions of sites, search in all its manifestations, mobile, social networking sites, text messaging, e-mail, product placement, video screens in elevators and taxis, cinema, buzz, word-of-mouth campaign, guerilla marketing and more.

Much more.

Now we have ads on eggshells, subway turnstiles, take-out food cartons, the trays used to hold our stuff as we pass through the screening sensors at airport security, dry cleaning bags and the paper

liners on examination tables in pediatricians' offices. There are ads in public restroom stalls, and according to *The New York Times*, U.S. Airways is even selling ad space on air sickness bags.

Message mega proliferation. In 1997 David Shenk's book, *Data Smog*, reported that the average American was bombarded by 3,000 advertising messages every day. Just ten years later – last year – a Yankelovich study showed that the onslaught had grown to 5,000 daily messages.

TV commercial breaks have grown from a single sixty-second spot on a sponsor-owned show to clusters of eight or more thirty-second spots with a few fifteen- and ten-second promos thrown in. And two-second cwickies are now available on CW network.

Media multi-tasking. People aren't just audiences anymore. They consume media while they're doing other things.

The family isn't sitting in the living room glued to the tube, the set is on in the kitchen while someone's cooking dinner and other household members drift in and out of the room.

Increasingly, people use another medium simultaneously while they watch TV. A Peanut Labs survey of Gen Y media use found that 57% use the internet while watching TV, and 10% read while the set is on.

Radio isn't appointment media, it's background noise in the office, while listeners are online. Or it's turned on in the car during the morning commute. So while the driver hears a radio commercial, she or he is simultaneously seeing a billboard message and – hopefully – noticing that the light has turned red.

Outdoor? Billboards don't get undivided attention. Their viewers have their radios on or are reading the morning paper as they drive to work.

Online? People watch TV, listen to radio, read and drive while on line. Increasingly through sites like Hulu, that bring TV to a window on their screens so

they can catch up on 30 Rock while web surfing.

Maybe U.S. Airway's barf-bag ads aren't such a weird idea after all. At least the medium is likely to have its users' complete attention.

Multi-message media. It's not just that there are a lot of media carrying messages. There are a lot of simultaneous (or rapidly sequential) messages on most media.

Message overload is the norm online. Unlike traditional broadcast media, which have a sequence of program material-commercial-program material, everything's on the screen at once on line. The dismal click-through rates of social networks simply reflect the fact that visitors have the choice of looking at the ads or the content that attracted them to the network in the first place. Hmm. Pretty easy to guess which they pick. Actually, that holds true for most any site but search portals. Though behavioral targeting can ramp up interest in the ads.

Picture-in-picture TV sets first appeared in the 1980s. Today they can combine TV and web images simultaneously, so viewers can surf the web and the channels simultaneously. Works the other way, too. Computers with built-in tuners can show TV, either full screen or in a window. And on Memorial Day the Indianapolis 500 was broadcast like a web site. Instead of cutting to commercials, the screen split into two windows with a banner and a footer. The race continued in one window while a commercial ran in the other and the sponsor's one-line message showed on the banner.

Outdoor used to be the most stable of media. The message just stayed there for a month or a quarter or, on some boards, for years. But now digital boards change messages like a rapid-fire PowerPoint. It's impossible for drivers – and often even passengers – to see more than one or two of the sequence of six or more messages that flash by. And if the board catches their attention in the middle of one message and holds it through the middle of the next, neither may register.

Multi-media media. Many media aren't free-standing content purveyors any more. They're part of a converged multi-platform message delivery system. Scripps Networks' lifestyle channels (HGTV, DIY, Food Network) are structured on convergence. The shows that go up to the satellite are just the tip of the iceberg. Viewers go online for detailed instructions and materials lists for projects. Online and on-cable are two halves of the communications system

New permutations of interactivity add more layers of media interconnectivity. A digital billboard may offer a coupon to a nearby retail establishment that can be downloaded onto a cell phone. Someone watching "American Idol" (the direct descendant of "The Original Amateur Hour") can vote for contestants online or via text messaging.

Even direct mail has gone multi-media. We recently saw mailer elements with a polarized screen to go over a section of a website to decode a prize message.

Radio stations and newspapers may be the only media which retain their sequential, linear formats. (Of course all broadcasters and publishers have web sites – we suspect most kindergarten classes do, too – but the core media of radio and newspaper are essentially as they have been since the 1930s.)

Mini attention spans. The three-second window to hook TV viewers has shrunk to a second-and-a-half according to I-Media Connection. CW's cwickies have reduced the entire commercial down to two seconds.

Web sites have just seconds to capture visitors' attention: basically the time it takes to click twice after hitting the landing page. If they don't find what they're looking for by then, they're gone.

Digital billboards have cut the time drivers and passengers can see a message from however long it takes the car to get past the sign to six or ten seconds.

Web ads are seen peripherally if at all.

TiVo lets delayed viewers rip through commercial clusters in seconds. Fortunately, only 1% to 8% of most broadcast shows' audiences presently watch on a delayed basis.

New Arbitron data shows that drivers hit the button for another station within seconds of a commercial starting.

Recipients decide to discard four out of five direct mail pieces with just a glance at the outside envelope. The mailers never even get opened.

Newspapers and magazines may be the only media that still have multi-second attention spans for ads. Well, maybe those U. S. Air barf bags, too

Audiences are pressed for time and impatient. They'll spend time with a message once hooked, but the window of opportunity to hook them is constantly getting smaller.

Get in touch with BrainPosse by visiting www.brainposse.com or calling (865) 330-0033.

BrainPosse: Innovative, agile, experienced advertising, public relations, and marketing communications professionals who get into the right heads and make the psycho-mental-emotional connections that build your brands, your business, and your bottom line.

