

How many times do I have to tell you?

How much message frequency is enough? And how much is too much?



In the Pennsylvania primary, Barack Obama's advertising budget was at least double Hillary Clinton's. Some pundits estimate the spread might have been as great as five times as much. And yet Obama lost. Although Obama's media juggernaut cut Clinton's initial lead in half, it still wasn't enough to close the gap and clinch the nomination.

Why didn't Obama's saturation media buy obliterate Clinton? Because – despite what the media rep who's lurking in your lobby might tell you – there's a point of diminishing returns in media weight.

We all know that too little message exposure can be a waste. Inadequate media weight may not reach the target audience at all, or may not attain the frequency necessary to break through the threshold of awareness. It is effectively invisible, so it accomplishes nothing.

But too much message exposure can be a waste, too. Recent research has shown that there is no additional impact once frequency has passed optimal levels.

How much is enough? And how much is too much?

One of the seminal books on frequency was published by the Association of National Advertisers in 1979. Although the media landscape has changed drastically in the intervening 39 years, the basic principles presented in *Effective Frequency: The Relationship Between Frequency and Advertising Effectiveness* are still valid.

The book cites a J. Walter Thompson tracking study of brand purchase and advertising exposure. There were four key findings:

- Two or more exposures to an ad in the four weeks before purchase made people who did not use the advertised product 5% more likely to switch to the advertised

product than non-users who were not exposed to two or more messages for the brand.

- Two or more exposures to an ad in the four weeks before purchase made people who were users of the advertised product 5% less likely to switch to another brand than users who were not exposed to two or more messages for the brand.
- One exposure to an ad had little or no effect.
- More than two messages were no more effective than two.

The JWT study used print ads (principally for better control of message delivery), but the finding that it takes two messages to move the needle has subsequently been confirmed by studies of television messages, most recently the Nielsen Apollo study.

The Apollo study did, however, recalibrate the point of diminishing returns for television spots. It found that messages gained effectiveness for up to eight repetitions per four-week period. The difference may relate to the way the media are used by their target audiences. Specifically, readers' greater involvement with and attention to print media and television viewers' lower levels of attention. It may also be impacted by the increasing tendency toward simultaneous use of multiple media.

But whatever the maximum effective number of exposures might be, the minimum is two. So all we need to do is hit 200 target rating points per four-week flight and product will fly off the shelves right?

Not quite.

An Alfred Politz Research study found that people's use of media varies tremendously. A plan which would reach the lightest-using quintile of a medium's audience twice would reach the heaviest-using quintile 122 times. If you split the difference and went with a plan to reach the middle quintile twice, the first and second lightest-using quintiles would be missed entirely. That plan would reach the fourth quintile 3.6 times and the fifth, or heaviest-using, quintile 12.7 times. How can an advertiser get 100% reach with a frequency of two to the entire target audience? Unfortunately, it can't be done. Alvin Achenbaum's presentation, "Facing the New Media Reality," analyzes a hypothetical 240 GRP, 4-week television plan. (A plan below the currently-accepted minimum sustaining 4-week level of 320 GRP.)

Achenbaum's example delivered a reach of 76.7% with an average frequency of 3.1. A reach of 76.7% means that 23.3% of viewers would never see the commercial at all. Another 22.2% would see the spot just once in the four week flight, below the threshold of effective awareness. So 45.5% of the audience would not be impacted by the television buy at all. Of the remaining 54.5% who saw the spot two or more times, only 1.7% would see the spot eight times for maximum effect, and 2.9% would see it more than eight times, so some of their exposures would be wasted.

So what's the answer? Actually, there are several.

1. Target your media strategy to your prospects' media usage.

There are, of course, the obvious distinctions. Older audiences read newspapers and watch TV. Younger audiences are online. Demographic data can sharpen the focus to your target socio economic group.

But correlations between product use and media consumption can be done much more effectively with lifestyle studies like PRISM. It's nice to know exactly which television shows users of your product or service category watch, which sections of the paper they read and what radio stations they listen to. Demographic and behavioral targeting online – combined with paid and organic search – can deliver similarly precise internet audiences.

Recognize that media use may vary not just by target audience, but by product or service category. Branding of virtually any category can be effective online (though it's getting prohibitively pricy), but consumer package goods will probably do better on TV. If you're putting together a rave, only IM will work.

By targeting to prospects' demographics, psychographics and buying patterns, it's possible to compress the range between frequency to the heaviest and lightest quintiles for more effective overall frequency and minimal waste.

2. Diversify.

The old axiom "Dominate in one medium before adding additional media to your mix" is passé. Heavy users of one medium tend to be lighter users of another, so diversification will increase frequency to a broader audience.

Perhaps more important, diversification will make your entire campaign more effective. The studies Rex Biggs and Gary Stuart reference in *What Sticks* show that one message in each of three media are more effective than three messages in one medium. They report "The experience encodes a deeper, more meaningful impression in consumers' minds."

Using different media also gives a message the multiplier effect of image transfer. We've seen data indicating that hearing a radio commercial based on a TV sound track will trigger images of the TV spot in listeners' minds. They'll often replay the entire spot mentally.

3. Stay with it.

There is data to support that heavily flighted campaigns can spike awareness and sales dramatically over the short term. But the evidence of long-term benefit from a consistent – if lower level – campaign was proven pretty conclusively by Hubert Zielske's study decades ago, and has not been refuted since.

Zielske showed that a heavy thirteen week campaign attained a +/- 63% awareness at the end of thirteen weeks, then dropped precipitously – to slightly over 20% in just four weeks after the campaign stopped. The decline continued to less than 5% over the remainder of the year.

A campaign with the same media weight spread evenly over the entire year built awareness to just half the heavy campaign's awareness at the end of the first thirteen weeks, but kept building to just under 50% by the end of the year. Total awareness (level X duration) generated by the consistent campaign was more than twice that of the flighted campaign.

4. Know when to reach your target audience.

Purchase decision cycles range from seconds to months. For frequent-purchase consumer package goods, the purchase decision is made between two and four days prior to purchase. So P&G, Lever and Colgate can concentrate their messages on Wednesdays and Thursdays for optimal frequency to weekend shoppers.

Companies' employee group health coverage decisions are generally locked in two months out from the contract date, so messages to the decision makers/influencers concentrate in

the period five to two months before the January and July renewal dates of most plans' contracts.

Some purchase decisions move through media at different stages of the decision cycle. In automotive purchase, for example, the decision on which cars to include in the consideration set is based on traditional media, but the internet becomes more and more important as the prospect progresses toward the purchase.

Concentrating your message when prospects are making up their minds (and perhaps sustaining it at a lower level until they actually buy) can multiply the effectiveness of your media and give you optimum frequency when it really matters.

Although strategies to achieve optimum frequency aren't rocket science, they are more complicated than just a GRP tally or even a simple reach and frequency analysis. Taking the time and making the effort to tailor a media plan to deliver frequency effectively and efficiently can have a significant impact on bottom-line performance.

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