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A Channel Is A Channel Is A Channel, Not

By BILL HARVEY

In the continuing quest to qualify the different TV networks in terms of media effectiveness, it is prudent to consider all available measures, so as to triangulate the problem from as many angles as possible. One of the measures is commercial audience retention: the percentage of the program audience that stays tuned through the average commercial on each network. This is of course a reflection of the degree to which each network's audience tends to channel-switch. That in turn is a combination of two things: the types of people that generally view that network and the likelihood of the programs on that network to hold viewers back from switching away, once they have switched in.

The data in the accompanying table are some of the first of their kind to reach industry eyes. As digital set-tops and other forms of Interactive TV (ITV) roll out, we will be seeing more of such data, since ITV in all its forms will make practical the collection of clickstream data for TV. Whereas Nielsen meters are accurate down to half minutes, clickstream data can be accurate down to milliseconds, and therefore are more useful for analyses of this type.

The main conclusion I've drawn from these findings is that the broadcast networks do not stand apart from the cable networks in terms of holding their program audiences through the commercial.

We also observe that the music video channels tend to cluster at the low end of this spectrum. This is logical in that their programming can be enjoyed in small doses; one does not need to wait very long to see a plot resolve, for example.

As mentioned, media planners ought to look at all measures, not just this one. For example, the high standing of Cartoon Network in this measure might well be offset by some other measure, such as attention or room-leaving; however, that is speculation, while these retention data are empirical.

The sample size of about 500 homes across a month is higher than the average Nielsen meter sample size in local markets and each network's percentage is an average across at least 100 spot airing observations. The data show reasonable stability when broken out by top advertisers. For detailed data feel free to contact me via e-mail.

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% of Program Audience Retained Throughout Average Commercial

Cartoon	75.1%
CMT	69.4%
Headline	69.4%
ABC	67.9%
Lifetime	65.8%
NBC	64.3%
Weather	64.0%
Fox	63.7%
Sci-Fi	63.0%
A&E	62.9%
CBS	62.5%
Nickelodeon	62.3%
CNN	61.2%
ESPN	60.6%
TBS	59.9%
ESPN2	58.9%
USA	58.9%
Comedy	58.4%
Discovery	58.4%
CNBC	57.8%
UPN	57.3%
TNT	57.2%
Fox Family	57.0%
TNN	56.9%
The WB	55.8%
MTV	54.9%
TLC	54.6%
E!	54.2%
VH1	54.1%
BET	49.4%

Source: Next Century Media Clickstream data, July 1997, BellSouth Interactive trial, all dayparts.