

What we know about the context and positioning of TV ads

The positioning of television advertising, whether first in the ad break, 'mid-pod' or the last commercial can have varying degrees of effect and resonance with viewers. Further, the placement of ads adjacent to contextually relevant programming can enhance the impact of the communication on the viewer, with new technologies enabling this process to achieve greater results.

Definition

Television advertising positioning is the place where commercials fall within an advertising break – sometimes also known as a pod. Both context and positioning can have a bearing on the success of the advertising. Context refers to the tone and topics of the surrounding content, and the other ads in the break.

Key insights

1. Media context drives ad recall and recognition

A meta-analysis of 70 different studies focused on advertising recall and recognition found that high media involvement, greater congruency between media and advertising content and content liking drove advertising memorisation. However, highly arousing humorous, violent, sexual and suspenseful content had a negative effect. The analysis also found that context exerted a greater impact on unfamiliar brands, so particular care should be taken when launching new brands or trying to reach new, non-user target audiences not aware of the brand.

2. TV context is also a potential brand safety risk

As the media has become more polarised and extreme political ideas are increasingly normalised on some TV channels, advertisers are coming under pressure from activists to take responsibility for where they spend their advertising dollars. There is debate whether placement in polarising shows can be considered endorsements or not, but some advertisers have decided they are doing damage to their brands and are avoiding them regardless of the reach they can provide. A study by CNN International found that consumers of news media are increasingly drawn towards media brands they consider to be "trustworthy and reliable". In a time when not all mainstream media are 'fair and balanced', brands need to think carefully about the potential impact on the consumer of ad placement in TV content they are appearing to support.

3. Addressable TV opens up new opportunities around context

Audience-addressable TV can be regarded as a new form of context for advertisers. This new format of advertising hugely improves targeting abilities and the capacity to channel commercials towards specific audiences, with audience data being used to guide ad placement. An ad may now appear during any show but with the unprecedented insight of the advertiser knowing what the target audience watches.

Advanced targeting

enables a single ad buy that can effectively reach the right audiences with a relevant marketing message at the right time. Recent research amongst marketers from The Association of National Advertisers (ANA) and Forrester Research shows that addressable and advanced TV are gaining traction amongst brands. In the UK, addressable TV via Sky in partnership with Virgin Media already reaches 40% of TV homes.

4. Context is a key influence on ad engagement

In an age where advertising is engaged with more personally, on the move and on different devices, context has become of paramount importance. It is not just about inappropriately placed ads, but the timing, the media environment and the mood of the recipient to the message and its objective. Responsibility for getting it right lies not just with the media planner, but art directors and account planners, too, need to build the end game – the context of the received message – in at the start of the creative development.

5. Placement of short-form spots mixed with traditional formats offer potential for brands

According to research in the US from the Advertising Research Foundation (ARF) while short-form spots accounted for only 3% of ad placements, the same as the 60-second spot, they drove around 6% of Impressions. In broadcast TV, just 1% of placements drove a 21% share of impressions. Ad placement could be a key reason for the high impact, such as being first or last in the pod. Short form ads tend to use one of the following strategies to ensure they have the maximum impact:

Reach Build/Premium focus: Short form ads placed in targeted areas on premium content. These ads produce a high number of impressions with a lower number of ads aired. Frequency Build/Multi-Airing Cable: Short-form spots run throughout content of all types, pushing the level of frequency. Hybrid: Six-second ads placed in both general and premium content. Ads that produced an even distribution among unique airings and number of impressions.

Such short-form ads have typically been used for brand building and for less competitive categories. They have also been shown to deliver halo effects for longer-form ads. Research from the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for Marketing Science has also shown that a mixed portfolio brings some distinct benefits for brands.

6. Consideration of placement can lead to increased effectiveness

Research carried out in the US found that message delivery may differ for commercials when they are placed in various positions of an advertising break. The first commercial may receive a high level of exposure before channel changing occurs. If advertising breaks are long the last spot can be seen as advantageous as viewers have returned to the programming. However, thought should be given to where the commercial break lies. If the first or last break surrounding the television programme, position advantages may differ from breaks within the programming itself.

7. Some contexts retain audiences better than others

Kantar Media and Millward Brown, in the US, developed two databases to better understand the acceptance of an ad and the subsequent audience behaviour when the ad appears. Several trends were found including how ads that are shown first in a commercial pod tend to have higher levels of tune away, with the previous programme also affecting the ad's performance as well as the specific product category being advertised. With so many consumers intuitively changing the channel immediately after the commercial break starts the study found that certain programming (such as drama, which requires continuous engagement) is better at retaining audiences, a key factor for advertisers to acknowledge. Other research has shown that getting the context right impacts the emotional response to advertising. The right message delivered to the right viewer and in the right emotional context will yield the greatest return on investment.

8. Spots aired in low-clutter ad breaks can increase recall by 40% in some markets

Advertisers often make scheduling decisions based on reach and program ratings, but a multitude of additional factors such as the context and the position should also be considered. TV spots included in advertising breaks shown mid program generate three times as much recall as those included in breaks shown mid-programme. The study also suggests that it is more effective to use long spots in the last position in a break, as the increase in effectiveness is by far greater than the increase in cost. The context of the TV spots also affects viewer's perception as spots that are aired in low-clutter advertising breaks increase recall by 40%.

9. AI can be used to identify positive contextual moments in programming

The UK broadcaster Channel 4 has used AI to identify storylines and positive contextual moments in programmes to enhance its media planning. By using AI, it has been able to assess the role of a product in any scene and score both its 'strength', and 'positivity' for advertisers. The research showed that when an ad was seen in a contextual placement, this returned the highest level of spontaneous awareness, brand perception as well as ad recall. Interestingly, the research also showed that participants started to replace the product placed in the programme with the product featured in the ad. This 'erroneous recollection' potentially provides an opportunity for challenger brands.