

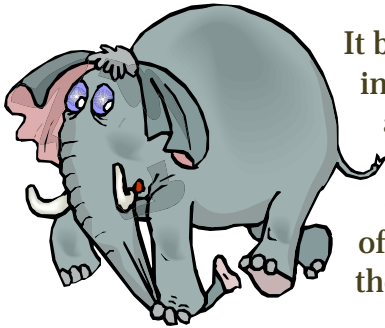
TEACHING TAP TO THE ELEPHANT.

Media Planners Have Fewer Options Than They Think.

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Media theorists are naive. Like Captain Kirk, we assume if we can think it we can make it so. We are choreographers, who do not understand the limits imposed by nature. Why else would we try to teach the elephant to tap dance?

In this parable, the elephant is television, the tap dance is scheduling.



It begins with the simple idea that advertising works by informing and reminding. We look to brand experience and communication theory to help us find the best message pattern to inform and remind. The key question is “are we better off reaching less people, more often or more people less often with our message?” It’s the familiar choice between reach and frequency.

In the following example we’ve decided a low level of repetition works best for the brand. For convenience, we’ve expressed that pattern as a set of numbers called a “response function”. It shows the value of each exposure.

A Response Function

Frequency	Response	Total
Group	Value	Value
1	0.25	0.25
	0.60	0.85
3	0.10	0.95
4+	0.05	1.00

In this example the first exposure has a value of 0.25, the second has a value of 0.60, the third has a value of 0.10 and additional exposures, past three, have little value. Translated into media terms, this response function calls for a weekly frequency of two (shaded), because that is the frequency group with the highest

value. In fact, a frequency of two is the recommended level in what we call “effective frequency” planning.¹

The paradox is we cannot buy a frequency of two cost-effectively, because that frequency group exists only as part of a larger frequency distribution. And the shape of that distribution is dictated by television viewing, not by planning goals.

The Heavy Viewer Problem

Since 25 percent of TV viewers do more than half of all TV viewing, a schedule bought to reach many viewers twice will waste most of its impressions reaching heavier viewers four, five and six times.

The dominance of heavy viewers also means the familiar formula *Reach x Frequency equals GRP's* is terribly misleading. It suggests Reach/Frequency is a zero-sum game. It isn't. As reach increases, frequency must increase also. One hundred GRP's can buy a 50 reach at an average frequency of 2.0. But it can't buy a 70 reach at a frequency of 1.3, because television doesn't work that way. A 70 reach will usually require a frequency closer to 3.0 and more than 200 GRP's.

It is the co-dependent relationship between reach and frequency that makes our old approach to planning flawed. We consider reach more valuable than frequency (a principle of recency planning), but we often act as if high reach goals carry no penalty. They do. And that severely limits our scheduling options.

Planning for either a high reach or a minimum frequency invariably costs more than it's worth. Both goals build very high frequency among heavy viewer groups, which adds little communication value, and both burn GRP's fast, which results in far fewer weeks of advertising.

It is this loss of continuity and concentration of message weight that produces less cost-effective schedules. As a result, the best scheduling solution for any brand is more weeks of advertising at moderate weekly reach goals, regardless of the presumed value of frequency.

As Scotty might say to Kirk. “Sorry Captain. The old girl just can't tap.”

¹ See Colin McDonald, Advertising Reach and Frequency, ANA, 1995.

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(For a fuller analysis of TV scheduling options, see “Why Response Functions Don’t Matter,” in the Technical Papers archive.)

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