

# Advertising Tracking

By Jerry W. Thomas

The promise of media advertising is great. It's an opportunity for a brand to tell its story directly to the ultimate consumer. It's an opportunity to build awareness and project a powerful brand image. It's an opportunity to create and build brand equity. It's an opportunity to bypass the trade, an opportunity to circumvent competitors.



In actual practice, however, the promise of media advertising is seldom realized. In fact, the opposite is true. Media advertising is probably the most inefficient and least productive expenditure in the typical company's marketing budget. Why is media advertising's potential not realized?

First, few companies do basic strategy research to develop a creative blueprint to guide the development of their advertising. Second, few companies pretest their advertising creative to make sure it has a chance to work. Third, even fewer companies track their advertising once it's "on air" to measure the effects of the advertising over time. Advertising tends to be created in an informational vacuum and is rarely evaluated in any consistent, systematic way thereafter. In effect, there is no reliable feedback loop, so the advertising muddles along from year to year, never getting any better.

No wonder that many companies have grown weary of traditional media advertising and have shifted media dollars into digital (online, social, mobile) and have shifted budgets to favor sales promotion and direct marketing activities. The strategic potential of media advertising is just as great as ever, perhaps even greater, since so few companies seem to understand how to create and deploy consumer advertising that really works.

## Advertising Success

To successfully utilize media advertising in the marketing mix, three types of research are essential:

- **Strategy Research.** How advertising works differs from product category to product category, and from brand to brand within a category. This means that each brand must develop an understanding of its consumers and their motivations to serve as a template for creative development.
- **Advertising Pretesting.** Once the advertising creative is developed (either rough or finished), it's really important to pretest the advertising. Pretesting helps identify outstanding commercials and flags the underperforming commercials. More importantly, pretesting provides guidance to the improvement of the commercial and to the improvement of all future commercials. However, pretesting is not perfect nor foolproof. Pretesting cannot perfectly predict on-air success.

- **Advertising Tracking.** Once commercials go “on air,” the only way to know “for sure” if the advertising is working is by conducting tracking research. It’s the ultimate “acid test” of advertising effectiveness. The term “tracking research,” as used here, refers to a series of surveys over time among a representative sample of target-audience consumers. These surveys can be continuous (i.e., a certain number are conducted every day or every week throughout the year) or pulsed (i.e., the surveying is conducted in waves, at discrete points in times, say every three months or every six months).

## The Tracking Questionnaire

A well-designed advertising tracking questionnaire should include the following essential measurements:

- **Unaided and Aided Brand Awareness.** The creation and maintenance of brand awareness is one of the most fundamental (and most valuable) goals of media advertising. Advertising can be effective even if it does nothing more than create brand awareness.
  - **Unaided and Aided Advertising Awareness.** These tend to be diagnostic measures. These measures help indicate if the changes in brand awareness or market share are related to the advertising itself. For example, if brand awareness and advertising awareness are both trending up over time, then we can reasonably assume that the advertising is having positive effects. But if brand awareness is rising while advertising awareness is declining, then one would have reason to suspect that the advertising might not be responsible for improving brand awareness.
  - **Advertising Message Recall.** What messages and ideas from the advertising do consumers remember? Do the remembered messages correspond to the advertising messages that the advertising was intended to communicate? Advertising message recall is measured by an open-ended question to which respondents give unaided, spontaneous answers. This question helps determine if the intended messages are getting through to consumers.  
  
Advertising message recall also provides an indication of consumer memory distortion and learning effects over time. That is, once a commercial starts running, consumers do not remember everything in it equally. Some elements stick in the memories of consumers, and other elements fade away. Knowing the elements that have the highest memory value is of great benefit in improving future creative executions.
  - **Brand Image.** Advertising can shape and magnify a brand image over time. This is one of the most important strategic benefits of advertising. However, if you include brand image rating questions in the tracking questionnaire, don’t expect to see any meaningful changes of the brand’s image in the short run. Typically, it takes a minimum of one to two years of consistent advertising to cause a measurable change in brand image. The full effects of brand image shifts play out over 10- to 50-year intervals (sufficient time to let the stubborn and the rigid of mind pass away).
  - **Brand Trial and Usage.** Trial (ever tried) of the subject brand and major competitive brands is a useful measure to track. Usage of the subject brand and the major competitive brands (i.e., how often, what size package) allows market share estimates to be calculated and tracked over time. Moreover, both “trial” and “usage” are valuable analytic variables. The survey results can be cross-tabulated by triers versus nontriers, users versus nonusers, and light users versus heavy users. Including a measure of volumetric usage of the target brand is always important, because one of the possible effects of the advertising is an increase in the frequency of brand purchase (i.e., an increase in the volume or amount of the brand consumed).
  - **Demographics.** Key demographics (such as geography, age, gender, education, and income) should always be included. These variables are extremely valuable in analyzing tracking survey results and in defining the optimal target market for a brand.
- The following measurements might also be considered for inclusion in an advertising tracking questionnaire. Typically, these are not must have questions, but there are times these optional questions can be very useful.
- **Aided Advertising Message Recall.** Sometimes researchers will include a list of all major copy points and ask consumers who are aware of the advertising whether

the advertising communicated each point. This can be an effective way to measure messages conveyed by the advertising. One must be careful in how this question is posed and interpreted, because consumers have a tendency to claim they recall all aided messages—even messages not actually in the advertising itself.

■ **Ad Recognition.** Typically, a campaign consists of several commercials. By showing the commercials or “storyboard” of the commercials, the level of ad recognition can be determined. This is not an exact or perfect measure, but it can provide a “first approximation” of the impact of each commercial. Once it has been confirmed that respondents have seen a specific commercial, it is then possible to ask follow-up questions, such as (a) the number of times each commercial was viewed, (b) whether respondents remembered the name of the brand advertised in each commercial, and (c) some type of simple rating of each commercial. Again, none of these are perfect measures, but each can tell us a little about the commercial’s on-air performance.

■ **Promotion Awareness and Usage.** If promotion plays a significant role in a company’s marketing plan, then it could be useful to track awareness of a brand’s various promotions and consumer participation in those promotions. These questions can be unaided and/or aided, and questions about competitive promotions can be included as well.

■ **Market Segment Characteristics.** This information is typically obtained by asking questions to identify important market segments in order to refine one’s ability to analyze the tracking survey data. For example, questions about price sensitivity, cents-off coupon usage, preference for shopping at certain types of retail outlets, propensity to participate in promotions, etc., can be useful cross-tabulation variables. These questions might reveal that the advertising is doing particularly well among certain groups, but it is not reaching other segments of the consumer market.

■ **Media Habits.** These questions can be simple and few, or complicated and many. Generally, it is best to limit media questions to a few important measures, such as the amount of time the respondent spends “consuming” various types of media, or the types of programming

watched most often. The media questions can be analytic variables and can help refine media strategies. Since so many good syndicated sources of media data are available, it usually doesn’t pay to add a lot of media questions to an advertising tracking study.

■ **Lifestyle/Psychographics.** These types of attributes or statements can allow us to analyze tracking data by lifestyle or “psychological” segments. Typically, lifestyle and/or psychographic measures have limited value in an advertising tracking study. First, the correlation between lifestyle/psychographic market segments and marketing-relevant consumer behavior tends to be low (i.e., these measures don’t work very well). Second, limits on questionnaire length tend to preclude the inclusion of sufficient measurements to provide statistically reliable results.

Once you have decided what questions to ask in your tracking study, two critical decisions remain to be resolved: the sample definition and whether to use continuous or pulsed surveys.

## Sample Definition

It is wise to define your sample broadly, to make it as inclusive as possible. For example, even if your target market is defined as consumers 25 to 34 years old, it would still make sense to track all consumers 18 to 64 (or older) in age. The broader definition of the sample is a safety net, because the demographics of a market can change over time. If you define your sample too narrowly, you run the risk of the sample becoming obsolete. Likewise, you should define the product category you are tracking as broadly as possible. Also, always set quotas for gender so that you do not underrepresent men.

## Continuous Versus Pulsed Surveys

Continuous surveys offer a number of advantages over pulsed. A continuous survey provides a complete record of consumer measurements over time—with no gaps or missing time periods. The quality of data collection is higher with continuous surveys. Continuous tracking smooths out the effects of short-term disturbances, such as adverse publicity, new product introductions, and bad weather, whereas pulsed tracking can be biased strongly if some negative event occurs just as a “wave” of surveys takes

place. Continuous tracking is a better monitor of competitive information, since the surveys are ongoing and not biased to the media schedule of one brand (as tends to happen in pulsed surveys).

Continuous tracking data can be analyzed in relation to other continuous data (sales, advertising expenditures, market share, etc.), normative standards can be set, and predictive mathematical models can be derived. That is, it is possible over time to develop a model for a specific brand that explains the relationship among media expenditures, tracking variables, and market share (given sufficient time and data). Such an understanding is the Golden Fleece that marketing executives seek.

Pulsed tracking is not without some advantages. Pulsed tracking is less expensive than continuous tracking. Pulsed surveys can be concentrated into a short time interval to provide highly precise before-after measurements for specific flights of media advertising, and the waves of data collection can be precisely timed to coincide with media schedules.

Regardless of whether you choose continuous or pulsed surveys, several guidelines should be followed to ensure that the tracking data is comparable from time period to time period:

- **Maintain Constant Methods.** The questionnaire, the sample definition, the type of data collection, the editing, the coding, and the tabulation procedures must all remain

constant from time period to time period. Any change in methods is very likely to cause perturbations in the survey results and destroy the comparability of data between different time periods.

- **Stay With One Research Company.** Once you have found a research company with (a) financial stability and (b) good quality-control systems to do your advertising tracking, stay with that company. If you change research companies every year or two, the tracking data will not be comparable across time. Small differences in methods (i.e., sampling sources, “callback” policies, editing and coding conventions) from research company to research company will almost always destroy data comparability.

- **Stick With Advertising Tracking.** The tracking research will grow in value from year to year as you learn more about the long-term effects of your advertising. You must stick with your tracking measurements year after year to fully realize strategic insights into your brand, your market, and your advertising.

If you consistently pursue the three keys to successful media advertising (strategy research, pretesting, and advertising tracking), you will gradually increase the yield from your media advertising investments year after year—and leave your competitors choking in the dust behind your advertising machine.

## About the Author

Jerry W. Thomas is the President/CEO of Decision Analyst. The author may be reached by email at [jthomas@decisionanalyst.com](mailto:jthomas@decisionanalyst.com) or by phone at 1-800-262-5974 or 1-817-640-6166.

Decision Analyst is a global marketing research and analytical consulting firm. The company specializes in advertising testing, strategy research, new products research, and advanced modeling for marketing-decision optimization.



604 Avenue H East ■ Arlington, TX 76011-3100, USA  
1.817.640.6166 or 1.800.ANALYSIS ■ [www.decisionanalyst.com](http://www.decisionanalyst.com)