

MEPA Newsletter

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Readership Accumulation: The time has never been better for magazines to capture a larger share of media-mix budgets

The UK's National Readership Survey has recently launched a survey of the rate at which magazine and newspaper readerships build up through time. It will have substantial impact on the planning of advertising campaigns which use print media.

The time has never been better for magazines to capture a larger share of media-mix budgets. There are now two countries which have readership accumulation surveys – the USA being the other one. Consequently magazine advertising campaigns can be planned like television advertising: with weekly target points, weekly reach estimates, and weekly weight goals.

The similarity between the two countries' results, and the close match with what we already know about how people acquire and use their magazines, means we can be confident that a broadly comparable pattern exists in most if not all other countries around the world.

The UK survey was conducted by NOP World (NOP and MRI) and was designed along similar lines to the USA project which MRI conducted three years ago.

Both surveys used a large sample of 7,000-10,000 respondents who filled in one-week diaries of their reading of magazines – and newspapers too in the UK. By comparing the dates when an issue first appeared and when it was first read by a diarist, it was possible to measure the speed at which different publications built up their readership over a period of days, weeks and months. Every magazine has its own individual curve showing its build-up of readership across time.

Consider three contrasting examples of UK accumulation curves. Television weeklies accumulate less than 30% of their eventual readership in the first three days, but shoot up to 91% by day 5 when the listed TV programmes start. There are negligible new readers after day 7. General weeklies (excluding women's weeklies) immediately reach 50% on the on-sale day, but thereafter accumulate readers at a slower rate than the TV weeklies, and are still attracting new readers after day 21. Monthly magazines generally accumulate much more slowly and thereby extend an advertiser's campaign. For example the women's general monthlies shown in the graph take 28 days to reach 50% of their readers and 60 days to reach 80%. They are still delivering new readers for advertisers beyond 90 days from the on-sale date.

The differences in the curves for the many different types of publication make good sense. They demonstrate that there are three prime factors which determine the rate at which a title's readership builds up through time. One is how time-critical the editorial content is. Another is the degree of interest a publication has for people outside the purchasing household – the wider the interest, the greater the pass-on readership and therefore the slower the rate of build-up. The third factor is the physical qualities of the publication: is it still an attractive object to pick up after a few weeks (such as the home interest 'shelter' magazines), or is it likely to be dog-eared and scruffy?

What does accumulation mean for magazine advertising?

For magazine-only campaigns the accumulation data will be of great benefit. The information will help make magazine advertising even more effective than before, by phasing the insertions and thus the time-released delivery of exposure in the optimum way.

For mixed-media campaigns the benefit could also be substantial. Kathi Love, CEO of MRI (and a member of FIPP's Research Committee), spoke about accumulation data at FIPP's Ad Sales Workshop in Amsterdam last November. "Bringing print into media-mix has always been difficult because print has never been planned like television. TV planning sets a target reach goal each week to influence purchase decisions as they occur. Magazine planning hasn't had that option because the weekly data have not been available. It's been impossible to schedule print to meet basic week-by-week media objectives. So it's been difficult to put print into a media-mix plan with TV." Now it can be done.

Another advantage is that accumulation data will improve post-campaign analysis of magazine delivery and sales response. By distributing the advertising exposure more accurately through time, it will link it with sales more efficiently, thus producing more measurable effects, and leading to better proof of performance.

Erwin Ephron, of Ephron, Papazian & Ephron Inc in the USA, and a well-known media philosopher, said "The big step is to lose insertion planning and focus on how print delivers messages. The answer is 'over time'. We should use actual week-by-week audience delivery for planning, just as we do with television. We have all the data we need from the accumulation studies to place magazine exposures in time. It's our thinking that has to change."

Source: International Federation of the Periodical Press