

An Evaluation of Cinema Advertising Effectiveness

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The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of cinema advertising. Specifically: To quantify the proportion of cinema audiences who had an opportunity to see advertising messages screened prior to a movie; to calculate the number of brands recalled by movie goers exposed to advertising messages; and to detail the level of advertisement recognition displayed by movie goers exposed to advertising messages. The findings raise some questions about the effectiveness of cinema advertising. First, a reasonable proportion of the audience was not exposed to any advertising, although this is, arguably, also a characteristic of other media. Second, the low levels of unprompted recall, the vagueness with which respondents recalled some advertisements, and the varying proportions of respondents able to recall any details about the advertising content, raises more questions than it addresses about cinema advertising and its effectiveness. Overall, it seems reasonable to conclude that, while cinema may fulfil a useful role as a support medium, media schedules in which it is the dominant medium may be unable to generate high frequency.

Keywords: cinema advertising, effectiveness, exposure, recall

Introduction

Cinema attendance worldwide has increased rapidly in recent years and this growth in attendance has seen a parallel increase in the utilisation of cinema as an advertising medium (Val Morgan Cinema Advertising, personal communication 1996).

In addition to the increasing reach of cinema, some researchers have argued that cinema possesses a number of advantages which make it a more attractive medium than has hitherto been recognised (see Johnson 1981). In the only major study to explore cinema advertising, Johnson identified the high quality, high resolution presentation offered by cinema; the "social" aspect of movie going which, he suggested, ensures decision-makers view advertising in the company of purchase influencers; the captive environment of cinema, and the lack of clutter affecting the medium, as reasons for its increasing popularity. He acknowledged some disadvantages, especially the difficulty of building frequency (although this is easily addressed through the use of other media within a specific schedule); the lower reach when compared to traditional broadcast media, and booking constraints. However, despite these problems, Johnson concluded that cinema was an under-utilised medium.

In order to further demonstrate the attractiveness of cinema as an advertising medium, Johnson reported the results of two recall studies. The first of these tracked the recall levels of respondents interviewed during various time periods following known exposure to an advertising stimulus. The results, reproduced below, appear to constitute a sound argument for the effectiveness of cinema advertising as a means of generating awareness.

Since Johnson provided no information about the methodology of this study, it is difficult to critique it. However, key points which require further clarification include how the specific effects of the test set of advertising were differentiated from those of the numerous other advertisements respondents would have been exposed to during the research project. In other words, there is no evidence that the 12.5% who recalled seeing the advertising after one year were in fact referring to the test advertising, or whether repeated exposure to the same

stimulus had contributed, at least in part, to their recall. It is therefore impossible to ascertain whether respondents' recall of specific advertisements resulted from exposure to cinema advertising that occurred some time ago.

Table 1. Recall of respondents exposed to cinema advertising

Exposure	Recall Results	
	% recalled seeing advertising	% recalled 1+ advertisers
Past hour	98.0	90.0
Past 24 hours	83.5	72.6
Past 2-7 days	77.6	64.3
Past 7-30 days	69.4	49.4
Past 1-3 months	51.1	31.8
Past 3-12 months	36.6	18.6
Over 1 year	12.5	5.7

Source: Johnson 1981. No information provided about methodology, or sample size.

Moreover, if the study involved re-interviewing the same people at each time point, its very methodology would have sensitised respondents and so heightened the immediacy and importance of the information they were repeatedly called on to provide.

Although Johnson was unable to provide more detailed information about this particular study, because of the limited information given by the survey sponsors, he did report a second awareness experiment, about which he provided more specific details. The results of this second study are summarised below.

Table 2. Recall of respondents exposed to cinema advertising (II)

	Day After Recall (N= 109)	2 Weeks (N= 105)	4 Weeks (N= 38)
Advertiser A	67.0	53.3	50.0
Advertiser B	78.0	71.4	76.3
Advertiser A or B	87.0	78.0	76.3

Again, the problem of intervening stimuli seems almost certain to have affected these results. While Johnson stated that members of a control group (who did not see the stimulus material) were dropped if they had been exposed to a cinema commercial within the past two weeks, he does not report enough information to enable a comparison of the test and control group responses. Thus while the absolute levels of recall apparent in Table 2 may look high, only comparisons against a control group could reveal whether these levels greatly exceeded those that occurred without exposure to the test stimuli.

A further problem was that respondents were recruited as they entered the cinema theatre and, depending on what they were told, they may have paid more attention to the commercials than they would otherwise have done.

Johnson also discussed attitudinal response obtained from the second recall study. However, he discussed only three commercials, thus the evidence he produced is more anecdotal than generalisable, and is consequently difficult to analyse.

This review of Johnson's work, the only key work in this area, shows that the few studies examining the effectiveness of cinema advertising are either seriously flawed, limited in their scope, or both. However, while the deficiencies of earlier studies are easy to identify, addressing these in detail is problematic, since cinema has a considerably less sophisticated audit system than its nearest equivalent, television. Unlike television peplemeters, which document viewers' opportunity to see particular programmes (and by implication advertisements), little is known about cinema goers' exposure to advertising messages. In order to enable more detailed analysis of the potential reach cinema could provide, it seemed timely to investigate audience presence during cinema advertisements and viewers' recall of advertising to which they were exposed. While recall has been criticised as a measure of advertising effectiveness as it is a poor predictor of subsequent behaviour (Gibson 1983; Haley & Baldinger 1991), it is a useful measure in this context, since it is very sensitive to advertising weight and the variable of interest in this experiment was not behaviour but exposure.

Thus the purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of cinema advertising in a more robust manner. The study had the following objectives:

1. To quantify the proportion of cinema audiences who had an opportunity to see advertising messages screened prior to a movie.
2. To calculate the number of brands recalled by movie goers exposed to advertising messages.
3. To detail the level of advertisement recognition displayed by movie goers exposed to advertising messages.

These objectives were addressed by exploring awareness and recognition of a series of family violence advertisements in an experiment outlined below.

Method

Procedure and Sample

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 180 people, all of whom had just finished watching a movie at the Palmerston North Downtown Cinema 7 complex, between August 11 and August 16, 1995. During this time period, the Palmerston North City Council Family Violence Prevention Unit had scheduled the screening of three different family violence advertisements. The sampling was stratified by advertisement version and by daypart to ensure that the sub-samples relating to each version contained a broad range of demographic groups. A gender quota was also imposed to ensure an equal number of men and women over 18 years of age were interviewed.

Sample members were randomly selected as they left movies during which the family violence advertisement had screened. Interviewers approached every nth person and conducted a short interview in the cinema foyer. One hundred and eighty people of the three hundred and sixty approached refused to be interviewed when contacted, resulting in a response rate of exactly 50%.

Instrument

Three structured questionnaires, each relating to a specific advertisement version, were used. These aimed to establish respondents' whereabouts while the advertisements were screened; their unprompted recall of all brands advertised, and their prompted recall (if necessary) of the Family Violence advertisement, its sponsor, and its constituent parts. Interviewers also collected details of respondents' demographic characteristics.

Results and Discussion

Respondents were asked whether they were present in the theatre when the advertisements were shown, their recall of these, and their specific knowledge of the Family Violence advertisements. The following sections discuss each of these objectives in turn.

Exposure

Just under 73% of respondents were present while all the advertisements screened, although another 14% saw some of the advertising feature. The remaining 13% were outside the theatre for the entire duration of the advertising feature. As Table 4 shows, men were less likely to be exposed to the advertising than were women.

Table 3. Potential Exposure to Cinema Advertisements

Present during...	Men (n=90)	Women (n=90)	Total (n=180)
All advertisements	67.8	77.8	72.8
Some advertisements	16.7	11.1	13.9
No advertisements	15.5	11.1	13.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 3 suggests that, at best, about 87% of this audience would have had the opportunity to see a given advertisement, although potential exposure could only be guaranteed for 73% of the audience. Without comparable figures for other media, it is difficult to establish whether this potential exposure is high or low. Since other media do not release this kind of information, the only comparison we can draw is with Johnson's estimates. Against these, the potential exposure figures in Table 4 seem low, though this is not surprising for two reasons. First, Johnson's analyses seemed likely to inflate the recall levels obtained, as has been outlined above. Second, the timing and length of the advertising feature screened prior to movies is extremely predictable, thus making it easily avoided. However, of the viewers, listeners or readers exposed to any medium, some will not be exposed to advertising

messages. In the absence of comparative data, a more pertinent question is how memorable the advertisements were. The following section therefore explores how well these respondents were able to recall the advertisements to which they were exposed.

Recall

The 87% of respondents present for at least some of the advertisements were asked to recall the brands or companies they saw promoted. As Table 5 shows, fewer than 10% recalled seeing the Family Violence advertisement unprompted, although a further 61% recalled having seen it when prompted.

All respondents who recalled the Family Violence advertisements without prompting were present in the theatre for the entire duration of the advertising feature. Of the 61% who recalled seeing the advertisement when prompted, 92% (87 people) were present throughout the advertising feature while 8% (8 people) entered the theatre after the advertisements had started screening.

Table 4. Prompted and unprompted recall

Type of recall	Men (n=76)	Women (n=80)	Total (n=156)
Unprompted	9.2	7.5	8.3
Prompted	52.6	68.8	60.7
No recall	38.2	23.8	31.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

These results suggest that, despite the apparently captive nature of cinema, very few people were able to spontaneously recall more than a small proportion of the total number of advertisements screened. However, combination of the prompted and unprompted results shows nearly 70% of those who could have seen a Family Violence advertisement actually recalled it. While this figure may seem promising, it must be noted that the interviews took place immediately after the movie concluded, a maximum of three hours after the advertisement screened. Given the proximity between exposure to the advertisement and the interview, respondents' recall would arguably be at its highest and would almost certainly begin to decay soon afterwards (assuming another exposure did not occur).

It is possible that, since the Family Violence advertisements were part of a new initiative, respondents had less prior experience or knowledge of this message and so were less likely to recall advertisements which promoted it. However, analysis of respondents' overall recall showed 25% recalled no advertisements, 29% recalled one, 25% recalled seeing two advertisements, and the remaining 21% recalled seeing either three or four advertisements. Overall, respondents found it difficult to recall having seen more than two advertisements, despite the fact that over fifteen advertisements screened prior to the movie. Nor was respondents' recall particularly accurate. Of the advertisement mentions given, a third were recalled imprecisely or vaguely. Overall, these findings suggest that respondents' unprompted

recall of any brand promoted via cinema advertising is low. However, while our results are clearly lower than those reported by Johnson, it is possible that they would compare more favourably to figures relating to other media. Such cross-media analyses are important issues which future research should address.

Recognition

All respondents who, either prompted or unprompted, recalled having seen a Family Violence advertisement, were asked if they could identify the advertisement's sponsor, its messages and its visual components. Table 5 summarises the information gleaned in response to these questions.

The left hand side of Table 6 suggests that, despite comparatively low recall of the advertisement's sponsor, between approximately 50% and 90% of those who recalled seeing a Family Violence advertisement were able to recall an aspect of the advertisement copy and visuals. However, since these figures refer only to those people able to recall the advertisement, they tend to inflate the level of recall noted. In other words, perhaps not surprisingly, a majority of those who recalled the Family Violence advertisement were also able to recall specific features of the advertisement. To balance this possible over-estimation of recognition, the figures on the right hand side of the table were recalculated to present the proportion of people in each sub-sample exposed to some or all of the advertising feature who were able to recall these details. Put in this more conservative perspective, the results suggest that while recall of the sponsor was comparatively low, on average, around half those potentially exposed to the advertisement were able to recall an aspect of its message and visuals.

Table 5. Recognition of advertisement content

Recall of...	Respondents able to recall FV Advertisement			Respondents exposed to some or all of the advertising feature		
	Version 1 (N=40)	Version 2 (N=30)	Version 3 (N=38)	Version 1 (N=54)	Version 2 (N=49)	Version 3 (N=53)
Sponsor	60.0	43.3	42.1	44.4	26.5	30.2
Message ¹	47.5	86.7	84.2	35.2	53.1	60.4
Visuals ¹	70.0	90.0	60.5	51.9	55.1	43.4

Note:

1. Since a number of copy and visual features could be recalled, these figures represent respondents able to recall at least one element of the advertising copy.

Before addressing the implications of these findings, it is important to consider other factors which may have contributed to the discrepancy between these results and those Johnson reported. First, the Family Violence advertisements were *Screen Vistas*, which take the form of static images accompanied by a voice-over. Although each vista could contain more than one visual, they were typically a succession of still images and none employed animated movement. Given the less dynamic presentation of these images, it is quite possible that they were less memorable and hence less easily recalled than more dynamic advertisements. If the

advertisements used in the experiments reported by Johnson were the equivalent of full production commercials it would seem possible that at least some of the discrepancies noted could be attributed to variations in the production quality. However, not all advertisements screened prior to these movies were *Screen Vistas* and at least some employed more sophisticated production techniques. Although the more developed advertisements did outperform some *Screen Vista* advertisements, the differences noted were neither large enough nor consistent enough to suggest that variations in production quality greatly affected respondents' propensity to recall advertisements.

A more plausible explanation of the recall scores is that the advertising feature contained the first exposure respondents had to the Family Violence advertisements. In other words, insufficient frequency had been built and, not surprisingly, few respondents were able to recall the advertisement details. Use of cinema as an advertising medium clearly depends on the regularity with which people attend the movies. In our sample, the average movie attendance was bi-monthly, thus the maximum exposure possible in a year would be six. This, however, assumes that the advertising is being shown in every theatre and that the people who view a film also see the advertising feature which precedes it. A more realistic frequency estimate therefore, appears to be three or four. Overall, it seems unlikely that cinema alone would be able to build high frequency levels.

Conclusions

These findings raise some questions about the effectiveness of cinema advertising. First, a reasonable proportion of the audience was not exposed to any advertising, although this is, arguably, also a characteristic of other media. The absence of some potential viewers could be offset by evidence of knowledge amongst those present during the advertising feature. However, the low levels of unprompted recall, the vagueness with which respondents recalled some advertisements, and the varying proportions of respondents able to recall any details about the advertising content, raises more questions than it addresses about cinema advertising and its effectiveness. Overall, it seems reasonable to conclude that, while cinema may fulfil a useful role as a support medium, media schedules in which it is the dominant medium may be unable to generate high frequency.

Media generally appear to be delivering smaller audiences, and those who are delivered are more able to avoid advertising altogether. It is not surprising, therefore, that a medium which has seen attendance increase greatly should have attracted advertising support. However, until more is known about cinema audience behaviour relative to other media, advertisers should avoid assuming benefits which have not yet been empirically established.

References

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