

Ad glut turns off viewers

By Gary Levin, USA TODAY

Can't Bree grieve anymore without a MasterCard commercial loudly interfering?



Commercial gridlock: Shirley Knight plays Bree's (Marcia Cross) mother-in-law on *Desperate Housewives*. ABC

Lately, fans of *Desperate Housewives*, *Lost* and other top shows have been complaining about excessive commercials that seem more intrusive than ever and slow down the programs they surround.

"I have definitely noticed that the shows on ABC that I watch have significantly more commercials this season," complains Julie Raines, 33, of Denver. "It's so frustrating. Once you are really getting into a juicy story line, it stops, and you are bombarded with the same ads over and over."

Viewers have been griping about ads on TV since the days of black-and-white sets. Some have turned to digital video recorders such as TiVo to skip commercials altogether. Others sit and bear it.

We'll be back

The amount of "clutter," including network and local commercials and plugs for other shows, steadily has increased on broadcast and cable, to the point where an "hour-long" drama is about 40 minutes of original programming. Average non-program minutes in an hour of prime-time for each year:

Year	Broadcast	Cable
1996	9:53	12:46
1999	14:00	13:53
2001	14:39	14:30
2004	15:48	14:55

Note: Reflects prime-time hours on the six broadcast networks and all basic cable networks measured by Nielsen. Source: Nielsen Monitor-Plus

ABC ad-sales chief Mike Shaw says he's perplexed by increasing complaints.

"We've had the exact same commercial load for three years in a row," he says of the 9 p.m. ET/PT Sunday time slot, home to *Housewives* and before that, *Alias*. Viewers must "feel that way because they love the show so much, that they really notice it when the breaks are there."

But across prime-time TV, the number of ads and promos has increased sharply over the years. A typical "one-hour" prime-time series clocks in at less than

42 minutes, down from 44 minutes several years ago and nearly 48 minutes in the 1980s.

And shaving off the "previously on ..." recap, opening credits and a teaser for next week's episode, Sunday's *Housewives* ran 40 minutes and 30 seconds, meaning for every two minutes of programming, there's a minute of commercials or promos for other network shows. On cable, MTV has even more so-called clutter, with USA and Lifetime close behind.

But ABC, which studies show has slightly more commercials than other broadcast networks, has

changed its drama format in a way that makes it seem even more loaded with ads.

Until recently, dramas unfolded in four segments, or "acts," often preceded by an introductory teaser that aired before the opening credits.

Starting this fall, ABC required all drama producers to carve up each episode into six portions. For some shows, including *Housewives*, the first segment runs for nine to 11 minutes before the first break. Once viewers are hooked, they're confronted with four more commercial breaks, each about 3_ minutes long, over the next 45 minutes.

To prevent channel surfing, networks increasingly avoid airing commercials between shows. Instead, they save several minutes of more substantial scenes for a show's ending and then move "seamlessly" into the next program. The upshot is that more ads and promos air within programs.

'Housewives' adds to clutter

Prime-time dramas are being broken up into smaller segments and interrupted more frequently by commercials and network promo spots.

Sunday's *Desperate Housewives*, which carries 30 seconds more of ads than other ABC shows, featured six "acts," up from four traditionally.

The shortest ran for 4 minutes 14 seconds, not much longer than the commercial breaks that surrounded it.

The total episode included 40:30 of programming, 13:49 of commercials and 5:45 of promos, credits and a recap. The breakdown in minutes and seconds:

9 p.m.: Recap, "Teaser" (opening scene), Opening credits

Break 1: (9:09:45; 6 national commercials, 3 promos)

Break 2: (9:22:25; 3 national commercials, 2 promos, 3 local commercials)

"The way the structure was before didn't make any sense," says ABC Entertainment chief Steve McPherson. "You'd have people sit through a commercial break to come back to 30 seconds of programming" at the end of an episode.

Lost and *Housewives* adopted the six-act structure early last season. ABC quickly expanded the practice to its entire lineup of hour-long series. Competitors followed suit: WB's dramas began adopting the same format last January and since last month has used it on every show. CBS and NBC employ it on newer shows including *Criminal Minds*, *Las Vegas*, *Numb3rs* and *Surface*, although producers of *CSI*, *Law & Order* and *ER* refused to go along. Fox uses it only on *Bones*.

McPherson says most producers "like it because you have real content in each of the acts."

But *Boston Legal* producer David E. Kelley isn't among them.

"There's no opportunity to develop any kind of storytelling momentum," Kelley says, fearing that quiet scenes of dialogue will never hold up to increasingly loud — and frequent — commercial breaks. "High-octane shows, or puzzle shows, will be immune to it.

"If a knife is plunged into someone's sternum, you pay attention," Kelley says. "But for shows that don't depend on violence or melodramatic scenes, it's tougher to compete in a six-act show than in four acts, or in 41 minutes instead of 45 minutes. You have to be a little more aggressive with them, musically or filmically, just to get people's attention back."

Everwood producer Greg Berlanti says carving up emotion-packed dramas into even smaller pieces can be "annoying," even if it's a necessary evil in a business that exists to sell advertising. "It makes you long for the day when everything comes out in boxed sets of DVDs so you can enjoy it."

And advertising researchers say the cluttered airwaves, which also include logos and promos during shows, risk turning off viewers even from must-see shows and worsening recall of their ads.

Yet Nielsen Media Research says TV viewership in U.S. homes hit record highs last season.

"There's been a lot of hand-wringing in the business about when viewers are going to say, 'Enough's enough,' but they haven't," says Tim Brooks, a TV historian and research chief at Lifetime. "It may never be that commercials drive people away from the set, but it makes them pay less attention to avoid the irrelevant interruptions."

No federal agency regulates the amount of commercial time on television. Until 1982, the major networks adhered to a voluntary code of the National Association of Broadcasters that limited

commercials to 9.5 minutes per hour in prime time. But since the code was dropped, the number of commercials on prime-time TV has crept steadily higher.

Housewives sells 11 minutes, 15 seconds of national ad time and about 2_ minutes of local spots. On Sunday, it ran 4 minutes, 10 seconds of promos for 11 other series. Added up, they account for nearly 18 of the show's 61 minutes.

Housewives is among TV's most expensive shows. Thirty-second spots that sold for \$450,000 in May, in advance of the season, now fetch \$500,000 to \$600,000, Shaw says, meaning the network rakes in at least \$5 million an episode.

"If we had extra time to sell, I would tell everybody," he says.

Advertisers tolerate the excess bunching of commercials for the sake of reaching 25 million viewers in TV's biggest hits.

Housewives is among a handful of shows "where there's tremendous attention, passion and a halo effect where your commercial might actually resonate," says Initiative Media's top ad buyer Tim Spengler. "Up to a certain point, (they) look the other way."