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**Report Sends Message To Advertisers:
Too Many Messages Per TV Break**

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If commercial clutter is the bane of advertising attention and recall that everyone says it is, then new data reveals an interesting weather pattern planners and buyers should be aware of. The Weather Channel, which is perceived to be highly cluttered because of the fast-paced, snippet-like nature of the news and information it conveys, actually is the least cluttered national TV outlet, running less than four commercial messages per prime-time commercial pod. At the other end of the clutter spectrum, Lifetime Television runs nearly 10 messages per break.

"When did A,B,C,D become A,B,C,D,E,F,G,H,I?," chides Brian Cauley, a partner of Media IQ, the media performance monitoring firm that has been tracking advertising clutter, pod positions, and television advertising costs as part of a new auditing service it is providing to major national advertisers and agencies looking to improve the quality of their media buys.

The litany of letters Cauley ticks off refers to the number - and position - of messages in a co-called "commercial pod." The "A" message is the first message - either a paid advertisement or a network's own promotion unit - while the last letter represents the last message in a break. Current wisdom suggests that the first commercial in a pod is the most valuable, followed by the last, because that is when viewers tune in and out of commercial breaks and are most likely to see the message.

Starting this summer, Media IQ has begun providing a regular monthly reports to *MediaDailyNews* analyzing the quality of buys on broadcast and cable TV networks. Last month (*MDN* Oct. 18), the report revealed which networks were most likely to utilize the most valuable pod positions for their own promo spots vs. an advertiser's message. That analysis proved to be a sore spot for some networks, though some TV promotion and advertising experts claim it actually reflects a positive trend, because they believe a network's own promos are more of an extension that viewers tune to a channel for in the first place and are more apt to stay through a commercial pod if it is led by a promo.

While that's a subject of debate, few in the industry would argue that the length of a pod and the number of commercial messages in it has a deleterious affect on ad attentiveness, recall and the willingness of viewers to stick through it, and as Media IQ's Cauley notes there are some extreme disparities among both broadcast and cable networks that advertisers and agencies need to be mindful of. And it's not just the number of commercials networks are running, but also the number of their own promo units that are compounding the situation.

"TLC has the dubious distinction of running more than three of its own promos every commercial break," he says, referring to the number of promos carried by Discovery Networks' The Learning Channel, which allocated 38 percent of its relatively cluttered commercial breaks to its own promo messages.

Interestingly, cable networks were both the worst offenders and the best managers of commercial clutter during their commercial breaks, while the broadcast networks tended to average about the same amounts and fell in the middle of the pack. The worst offender among the broadcast networks was ABC, which 7.13 messages per commercial break during the 2003-04 prime-time season, 20 percent more inventory than the 5.95 messages averaged by Fox.

Units Per Commercial Pod

	Average # Units/Pod	Commercial Units/Pod	Promo Units/Pod
Weather Channel	3.53	3.28	0.25
Speed	3.96	3.00	9.96
Headline News	4.12	3.15	0.97
ESPN2	4.21	3.60	0.61
ESPN	4.44	3.82	0.62
Golf	4.63	3.68	0.95
Fox News Channel	4.67	4.16	0.51
Outdoor Life Network	4.83	3.84	0.99
CNN	4.91	3.93	0.98
ESPN Classic	5.23	3.90	1.33
CNBC	5.51	4.63	0.88
AMC	5.64	3.69	1.95
Spike	5.73	5.17	0.56
Court TV	5.80	4.67	1.13
Fox	5.95	4.46	1.49
HGTV	6.24	3.87	2.37
NBC	6.29	4.85	1.44
UPN	6.33	4.82	1.51
TV Land	6.38	5.72	0.66
CBS	6.42	4.79	1.63
Comedy Central	6.48	4.25	2.23
Animal Planet	6.50	4.52	1.98
Cartoon Network	6.67	5.06	1.61
WB	6.70	5.09	1.61
Discovery	6.71	5.13	1.58
Game Show Network	6.85	5.98	0.87
Nickelodeon	6.91	5.73	1.18
E!	6.95	5.47	1.48
A&E	6.97	5.75	1.22
Pax	7.12	5.95	1.17
ABC	7.13	5.42	1.71
MSNBC	7.17	6.18	0.99
Travel Channel	7.18	4.98	2.20
Hallmark Channel	7.21	5.61	1.60
FX	7.21	5.59	1.62

Food	7.24	5.26	1.98
Bravo	7.72	5.92	1.80
MTV	8.03	6.74	1.29
USA	8.18	6.81	1.37
TNT	8.19	6.07	2.12
TBS	8.20	6.00	2.20
Sci-Fi	8.21	6.71	1.50
TLC	8.29	5.16	3.13
BET	8.29	6.67	1.62
WE	8.29	6.87	1.42
Oxygen	8.56	6.60	1.96
CMT	9.01	8.03	0.98
ABC Family	9.03	7.59	1.44
VH1	9.37	8.00	1.37
Lifetime	9.50	8.02	1.48

Source: Media IQ Commercial Clutter Monitoring Report, 2003-04 prime-time TV season.