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To Zap or Not to Zap: A Study of the Determinants of Channel Switching During Commercials

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Abstract

We present a conceptual framework to describe the commercial zapping phenomenon and use it to identify factors that influence channel switching during commercials. Drawing on previous research, published reports of practitioner gut feel, interventions used by advertisers to reduce channel switching, and proprietary studies reported in the published literature, we describe how these variables might potentially affect the decision to zap a commercial. We use a latent class approach to model the impact of the identified factors on two aspects of the switching decision—whether or not a commercial is zapped (modeled with a binary logit model) and, conditional on a zap having taken place, the number of seconds that the commercial was watched before being zapped (modeled within the proportional hazards framework). The model is estimated on telemetry data on commercial viewing in two categories (spaghetti sauce and window cleaners) obtained from a single-source, household scanner panel.

The results from the empirical analysis show that households can be grouped into two segments. The first, which consists of about 35% of households in the sample, is more zap-prone than the second. For this “zapping segment,” the probability of zapping a commercial is lower for households who make more purchases in the product category. Also, zapping shows a J-shaped response to previous exposures to the commercial, with the associated zapping elasticity reaching its minimum value at around 14 exposures and increasing rapidly thereafter. This finding suggests that advertisers

should be cautious not to use media schedules that have excessive media weight or that emphasize frequency over reach.

We found that zapping probabilities for ads aired around the hour and half-hour marks to be significantly higher than for other pod locations. Based on these results, we argue that prices for advertising pods located around the hour/half-hour marks should be between 5% to 33% lower than those in the remaining portion of the program.

We explore the impact of advertising content on zapping and find that the presence of a brand differentiating message in a commercial causes a statistically significant decrease in zapping probabilities. While the magnitude of this effect is small, the finding suggests that it may be helpful to include qualitative variables in future models of advertising response.

We propose the expected proportion of time that an ad is watched as a benchmark to compare 15-second and 30-second ad formats from a zapping standpoint. We found no significant differences between the two formats on this dimension. Our analysis also shows that, due to the impact of previous exposures on zapping, the use of 15-second ads runs a greater risk of reaching the threshold exposure level beyond which zapping probabilities start to increase. This implies that while managers must be cognizant of the risks of overexposure for any ad, it is especially important in the case of the shorter, 15-second ad format.

(Advertising and Media; Econometric Modeling; Zapping; Single-Source Data Analysis)