

How do Networks Schedule Program Promotions?

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Abstract

Television program advertising is the largest single product category advertised on television. Broadcasters use valuable airtime for promos that could otherwise be sold to third-party advertisers. The effects of program promotions must be understood to ensure that the airtime allocated to them is used wisely to enhance broadcasters ratings and revenue levels. However, minimal academic research has been conducted thus far. This study takes an important first step by describing how networks have scheduled promos for 17 new programs. The campaigns are assessed in a similar manner to traditional advertising. We found substantial variation between campaigns, but consistently observed ‘burst’ of spots in the week leading up to the premiere.

Introduction and Background

Fred Silverman, a respected TV programmer at CBS, ABC and NBC during the 1970s, was quoted as saying that 50% of a programs' success comes from the quality of the show and the other 50% comes from how it is promoted (Bedell, 1981). The main avenue that television broadcasters use to promote their shows is on-air promotions. The amount of on-air promotion is staggering – making television programs the single largest product category advertised on TV. Program promotions account for approximately 4.5 minutes of airtime per hour during prime-time (Eastman, 2000). Broadcasters use this valuable airtime, which could otherwise be sold to third-party advertisers to promote their own wares with the primary goal of building or sustaining audiences for their programs or channel. This is very important for a network's revenue, as ratings figures are used to sell advertising space to other companies.

Most research into the effectiveness of on-air program promotions has focused on scheduling issues, such as the frequency or timing of the promotion (e.g., Billings, Eastman and Newton, 1998; Eastman and Newton, 1999; Walker, 1993; Walker, 2003). There is relatively clear evidence that on-air promotions are more effective when aired closer to the time of program screening (Billings, et al., 1998; Eastman, Newton and Pack, 1996); Walker, 2003). However, research on the effect of frequency of exposure has produced conflicting results, both across different studies, and when results are compared to traditional advertising effectiveness studies (Newstead et al., 2009). An early study found a negative relationship between frequency of showing the promotion and ratings (Walker, 1993) while subsequent studies found a (more expected) positive relationship (Eastman and Newton, 1998, Walker, 2003). There was no obvious explanation for the disagreement.

The effects of program promotions must be understood to ensure that the airtime allocated to them is used wisely to enhance broadcasters ratings and revenue levels. However, minimal academic research has been conducted in the area. No one has taken the simple step of describing how television networks are actually scheduling promotions (Billings et al., 1998, Eastman and Newton, 1998, Eastman et al., 2003, Walker, 1993). We propose that this is an essential starting place upon which future research can be built. This research looks at how promotions for 17 new programs, launched during 2008 to 2010, have been scheduled. The promotions were examined in the same way that traditional advertising campaigns are assessed; how many spots have run, over how many weeks and the resulting reach and frequency achieved by the campaign.

Research Method & Data

This study uses OzTAM ratings data to assess the planning and performance of 84 promotional schedules that were run to launch 17 new prime-time programs across Australia during 2008 to 2010. OzTAM records consist of more than 9,000 individual people-meter records of minute-by-minute television viewing. This viewing data was merged with the schedules for the promotional campaigns. The analysis uses AGB Nielsen's Arianna software to describe and assess the performance of the program's promotion schedules.

The 17 programs launched during 2008 to 2010 debuted between 18:30 and 21:30. The program launches occurred across various weeknights, including five on a Monday, two on a Tuesday, six on a Wednesday, one on a Thursday and three on a Sunday.

Results and Discussion

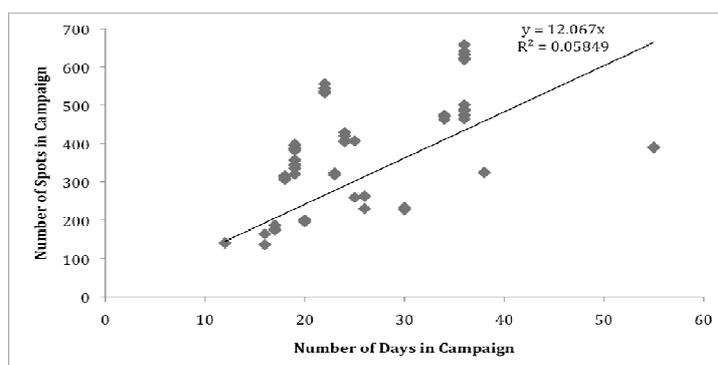
Scheduling pre-emptive promotions for a program launch is different to advertising for day-to-day consumer products for one key reason. That is, the purchase occasion is known in advance. Each program has a specific launch date and time. The objective of the campaign run by the network airing the program is to attract viewers to this “purchase occasion”. Consequently the scheduling of launch promos is likely to be more akin to schedules used to promote events such as stock-take sales (Belch and Belch, 2004). Knowing the ‘purchase occasion’ also allows us to investigate the structure of the promotional schedule in terms of recency and availability scheduling. Availability scheduling is the idea that viewers who watch TV at a particular time or particular day of week are more likely to be available to view at these times in the following weeks (Goodhardt, Ehrenberg and Collins, 1987; Collins *et al.*, 2006; Beal, Collins and Sharp, 2009).

Structure of Launch Promo Schedules

The average length of the promotional campaigns prior to launch was 26 days and the majority of campaigns fell between 20-40 days before the program premiere. At the extremes, some campaigns were run for as little as 12 days, and the longest ran for 55 days. The programs that received the longest campaigns tended to be hour-long dramas from the US that were being introduced in Australia. Given that television ratings are a measure of the performance of a program (Webster, Phalen and Lichty, 2000) it can be expected that a program that rates highly in the US, will likely perform well in Australia. Hence, a possible reason for the more lengthy campaigns could be that the programs are hoped to be ‘ratings winners’. In addition, the long lead-time between purchasing a US drama compared to those produced in Australia means that networks have ample footage and time to plan and execute long promotional campaigns.

On average, promotional campaigns consisted of 339 spots. Again there was substantial variation, with campaigns ranging from 136 spots to 658 spots. The relationship between the length of the campaign and the number of spots was not a straightforward linear relationship (see Figure 1 below). For example, some campaigns that ran for around 20 days had as many spots as those that ran for 55 days. This suggests that networks vary the structure of the campaigns they run depending on the objective at hand, or that some campaigns are scheduled with more advanced planning than others. For example, a program that has been a substantial investment for a network, and/or is predicted to perform well in the ratings, it is likely to receive a longer more comprehensive promotional campaign both on and off-air.

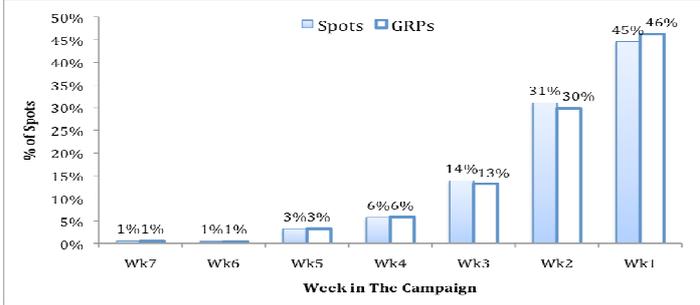
Figure 1: Relationship between Number of Spots and Length of Promotional Campaign



Given the unique opportunity of knowing the ‘purchase occasion’, we investigate recency and availability scheduling. Examining the distribution of the promotional spots across the weeks leading up to the premiere episodes reveals that the week prior contains 45% of the campaigns spots, and the fortnight prior contains 75%, on average. This can be seen in Figure 2 below. The distribution of spots across the weeks is closely reflected in the GRPs achieved in each week. There is a substantial difference between campaigns depending on the length of the campaign (+/- 11% points), but we see a consistent pattern where there is a ‘burst’ of spots in the week leading up to the premiere. Networks appear to believe there are strong recency effects for program promotions as supported by previous research (Billing, et al., 1998; Eastman, et al., 1996; Walker, 2003).

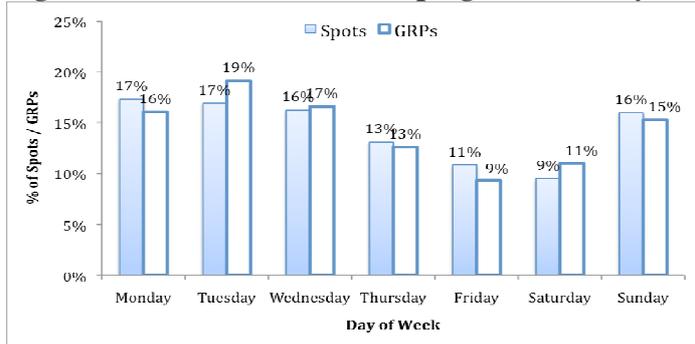
Viewers watching the network on the day, and especially those watching in the hours preceding, the premiere have an increased likelihood of watching the program given that they are available to view. Also, due to weekly habits we would expect that those who viewed on the same day the previous week would also have an increased likelihood of viewing the premiere (Barwise and Ehrenberg, 1988; Collins et al., 2006). However, looking at the 17 schedules, we found that, on average, 7% of promo spots aired on the day of the premiere, 8% aired on the day before and 7% aired on the same day in the previous week. Essentially, the promos appear to be quite evenly distributed over the days in the week (and then fortnight) preceding the premier.

Figure 2: Distribution of Promo Spots Over Campaign Weeks (Note: Week 1 is the final week before the premiere)



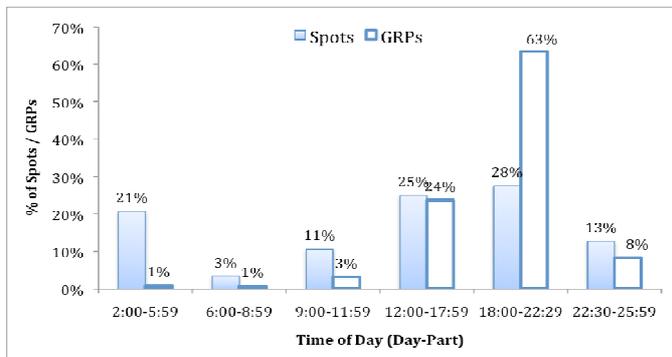
Looking at the distribution of spots across the days of the week we can see (in Figure 3 below) that Thursday, Friday and Saturday receive a lower share of spots, which is again reflected in the GRPs achieved. This pattern could be due to the fact that only one of the new programs in the sample premiered on a Thursday, and none on a Friday or Saturday. Consequently, networks seem to have made less effort to reach viewers who watch regularly on these days-of-week. We also observe that there is little variation in this weekday structure across schedules.

Figure 3: Distribution of Campaign across Days of the Week



As for day-parts, promos were aired across the entire day. On average, 28% of campaign spots fell during prime-time hours and achieved 63% of the GRPs of the entire campaign. This spread is not inappropriate, but slightly surprising given that all of these new programs were prime-time premiers.

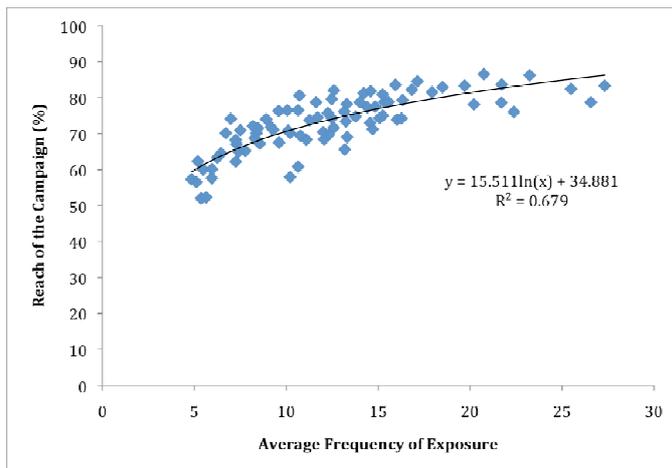
Figure 4: Distribution of Campaign across Day-Parts



Overall Campaign Performance

To assess the overall performance of the promotional campaign we looked at the number of people who were exposed to the promos (reach %) and the average number of times they saw the promos. The promotions reached 73% of individuals who saw the promos 12 times, on average. Figure 5 shows the performance of the schedules and in particular, how frequency builds whereas campaign reach quickly levels off. While this pattern is familiar to advertisers, advertising campaigns that use multiple television networks have the ability to obtain higher reach for lower frequency. Promotions are not able to do so, being aired solely on a single network. We suggest that networks in Australia should take advantage of the opportunity to cross-promote their programs on their newly launched digital channels.

Figure 5: Reach and Average Frequency of Exposure to Promos



Conclusions and Future Research

Television networks place the vast majority of their promotions on their own network, some programs are advertised in other media such as outdoor, magazines and radio. It is thought by many that this is done for cost motivations, but this space is not necessarily ‘free’. The spot that a program promotion fills loses the potential revenue it would have gained if sold to other advertisers. A good reason why television is a suitable place to advertise programs is because the promotions will reach television viewers, and, more specifically, the people who view that channel. Channel loyalty is a well-established fact, audience duplication between programs is always higher *within* a channel that *between* programs on different channels (Goodhardt, 1966; Sharp, Beal, and Collins, 2009). Finally promotions that are played on the evening of the programs launch reach people who are watching that channel that evening. However, following this logic we would expect networks to place more of their promotions on the day of the actual premiere of the program, and on the same day of the week in preceding weeks. Instead we only observe a bunching of promotions in the week and fortnight before the premier. This would suggest that there is room for networks to take fuller advantage of this recency effect – we aim to investigate this mechanism in our research agenda.

The descriptive findings reported in this research are the first step in a research agenda that looks at the impact of program promotions on audience behaviour. The second phase of the research investigates the contribution of the schedules described above to the performance of the premiere episode of the new programs. The third phase involves using single source data to group viewers based on exposure to promotions, and monitor their resultant viewing of the promoted program (Beal and Romaniuk, 2009). This will enable true assessment of the impact of frequency and recency of exposure to program promotions on subsequent behaviour. Hopefully, this work will culminate in insightful findings that we can share with television networks to help them use their precious airtime most efficiently to gain maximum audiences.

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