

In the Picture



Gene Willhoft

Missed spots or wrong spots can confuse direct response and test results

Gene Willhoft, new director of media services at Grace & Rothschild, figures that, if asked, most of those involved on both the buying and sales side “would probably say that our current system of negotiating, trafficking and accounting used for spot television schedules works about as well as it can.

“The system seems to be working,” he adds, “but I have my doubts.”

One of Willhoft’s doubts concerns station performance: For instance, he asks, “I wonder if each station gives fair treatment to every advertiser, and if all stations provide a high level of quality control to the scheduling and stewardship of each media buy? In fact I see at least four areas that I feel need greater attention by station management.”

One such area, he notes, is equal rotation. He points out that many advertisers buy spot television time on a broad daypart or run-of-station basis. “The agreement is that a fair spot rotation will be given by the stations. They are supposed to make sure that your commercials are placed throughout the day in high, medium and low-rated programs. This kind of buy makes sense only if the spots are rotated fairly.”

Waiting for truth

But Willhoft observes that equal rotation doesn’t always occur and that it’s very hard to monitor just exactly when a client’s

New director of media services at Grace & Rothschild points to some holes in the spot broadcast buying system. These are the level of “quality control” in expected commercial rotation, lapses in station and/or rep communication to agencies about spot preemptions, and running the wrong commercials.

spots do run: “To get the true picture, the buyer or accounting people have to wait for the station invoice. And only after that invoice is checked, and the spots are lined up by hour, can unfair rotations be noticed and acted upon. And if the Spots weren’t run properly the agency is entitled to makegoods or credits.

Willhoft adds that all this can become a very time-consuming policing process and that “Unfair rotations can hurt the advertiser, the agency and the stations. The client loses because his brand may not get the desired media weight and awareness, and sales may not turn out as high as expected. The agency can lose because if it won’t take makegoods and wants credits instead, it will not get commissions on the credited spots. The stations lose because they lose revenue if agencies take credits.”

Another area Willhoft thinks calls for improvement is station/rep communication to agencies about preempted spots and uncleared buy orders. He notes that such a communication problem “can lie only in one of two areas: either the station is not constantly updating the rep of the exact buy situation, or the rep isn’t properly informing the agency.”

Confused test results

He points out that buyers frequently don’t find out whether all spots ran as ordered until after the station invoices are checked and emphasizes that missed spots are “no small matter. For one thing, knowing the exact status of a buy can be critical to interpretation of media or creative tests. It can be a nightmare to direct response advertisers who are forced into lengthy

investigations to determine why response has dropped off if spots are missed, or why response has picked up if spots were bunched up. Both stations and reps should make a greater effort to transmit accurate buy information to us as soon as possible.”

In many cases, adds Willhoft, “We know that the wrong creative was aired by many stations. I suspect that agency traffic instructions are either misread or ignored by many station traffic departments. This is also a tough one for agencies to monitor. It’s impossible to have agency or client personnel physically located in every spot market. The best way for agencies to determine if copy has aired correctly is to examine the commercial codes on station affidavits. But even then you can’t be sure the creative hasn’t been tampered with. We once ran into a situation where a major city station had, unknown to us, added a super that stated, ‘Only available in certain areas.’ The spot ran for six months before anyone realized this unplanned insertion, but the end result included a \$250,000 makegood.”

Willhoft sees competitive separation as “a concept that seems to be completely ignored by some stations. On New York outlets, especially during early and late local news, I’ve seen as many as six automobile ads in a single half hour newscast. Too much is too much. Most stations have guidelines for competitive separation, but I suspect these guidelines are quickly forgotten as buy order follows buy order. Asking stations to turn away ad dollars is an idea that meets with much resistance, so I believe stations should concentrate on better informing buyers when programs are saturated with competitive spots. Then it would be up to the buyer to decide if they still want to buy the program or not.

“It’s true that it’s not in the station’s short term interest to do this, but in the long run, they’ll benefit. This is an era when more and more local broadcast advertising opportunities are being created--on local cable, on low power television, and even on public television stations. The spot television people could learn from the networks. As soon as alternative media to network matured, like syndication and cable, a lot of advertiser dollars were redirected elsewhere.”