Online Brand Effectiveness Research
Best Practice Guidelines

Background

With mounting investment in the online medium, agencies and advertisers increasingly seek to demonstrate effective return on investment from their advertising expenditure. Growing awareness and more sophisticated approaches to planning and executing online advertising campaigns have meant the demand for advertising effectiveness research is becoming the norm.

This increasing utilisation of online brand effectiveness research (BER) has meant several issues, largely consistent across the industry, have emerged. Some of these include:

- Declining response rates (caused at least in part by the considerable increase in the amount of research now being conducted online in the UK).
- As a result of this, there is concern about the quality of responses due to users being well practised in responding to advertising research, and thereby biasing results.
- Many (but not all) BER surveys invite respondents via pop-ups. (Other invite mechanisms can also be used successfully, such as banners, MPUs, email and text-links.) The issue now emerging is that certain sites are selling out of ad inventory (pop-ups & MPUs) at the same time as response rates are falling. The value of BER survey invites is hence increasing, and so they need to be used more effectively than ever.

The Online Brand Effectiveness Research Best Practice Guidelines have been drawn up by IAB members to ensure that research requested by media agencies and clients is mutually beneficial and is conducted as effectively as possible. The following aims to outline some of the key aspects for consideration when planning and setting up online advertising effectiveness.

When Should Brand Effectiveness Research Be Conducted?

The following gives some examples of the most common circumstances under which BER is utilised:

- The overriding objective of the campaign is to drive offline purchases, increase brand awareness and/or change brand perceptions.
- As part of an ongoing brand tracking study.
- When a campaign is of sufficient weight/duration to affect clearly defined brand metrics.

Campaigns usually carry a number of key objectives, for example, signing up for a newsletter, requesting further information in offline brochure form or booking a test drive. These types of objectives can be measured via click streams or on the destination site's pages; they are not objectives that are measurable via this style of research.

Considerations such as future intention to purchase or trial of a product can be covered in advertising/brand effectiveness work if it is coupled to brand awareness.

Who should conduct this research?

The research should be conducted or overseen by an individual who is a member of the Market Research Society, so ensuring they comply with all the legal and best practice guidelines of that organisation

Methodology

There are two main recommended approaches to this type of research, Pre and Post or Control and Exposed testing. It is acknowledged that other solutions are available, for example, offline testing in a mock up situation or using non internet based solutions like CATI, however a live, in situation methodology is preferred.

Pre & Post

- Research is carried out before and after the campaign is live.
- The difference between pre and post measurement is given as the effect of the campaign.
- This is the most frequently used methodology for measuring sponsorship or campaigns where an element of the activity is not ad served.
- The survey is conducted prior to campaign launch and again after the campaign has reached its end. In some cases a mid campaign 'dip' can be used, this is particularly applicable if a campaign is running over a long time period.
- The differences between the pre and post (or pre, mid and post) are deemed as the impact of the campaign.
- This approach is useful in isolating the online campaign uplift when there has been an ongoing offline campaign and a high baseline of existing awareness.
- The approach is also useful in tracking other forms of advertising, for example, sponsorship or custom microsites where access to allow 'tagging' at the programming level is not available.

Test & Control (Exposed and Not Exposed)

- A cookie is dropped from the creative into the browser of the user exposed to the campaign.
- Respondents are identified as exposed to the campaign (test sample) due to the presence of the cookie and are compared to those not exposed (control).
- Test & control is a more technical approach to the advertising/brand effectiveness question.
- There are two basic approaches to this method:
    - A piece of code or 'cookie' is placed within the advertising creative which is 'dropped' onto the user's PC when they have seen the campaign. A separate code is dropped onto users' PCs from a control creative, for example a house banner.
    - The code is served from anywhere in the site and tracks the users usage through the site.
- Whichever approach is used, the first uses the cookie itself to identify who saw the campaign (exposed) and who didn't (control), or the second approach using the tracking to establish control and exposed, the difference between the two groups is used to establish effectiveness.
- This approach can make cross media comparisons difficult, although an offline approach can be developed. It may be worth considering overall campaign research deliverables and discussing with media owner.

Note that methodologies where the user is served the research at the same time as when exposed to the campaign can skew awareness (and possibly message association, depending on the creative) and are not deemed comparable with research for other media.

Further Considerations:

- Research should be MRS compliant in approach and adhere to their code of practice
- Response rates for your research – as a general rule of thumb, shorter, more concise questionnaires elicit more completed responses. Evidence suggests that response rates tend to decline after between 15 and 20 questions.
- One way to improve sample quality would be to, where possible, remove respondents who have completed the survey significantly quicker than the expected completion time.
- Incentives can be used, but consideration should be given to any potential bias this might cause. They may also serve to attract the 'serial' respondent.
- Lead time to set up research should be considered, generally speaking pre and post research requires longer to implement. Agencies should give consideration to research needs earlier in the planning process.
- Research should be conducted over a time period appropriate to the campaign term. Traffic patterns to the site where the research is served should be considered – for example by running research for at least 7 consecutive days the possibility of not recruiting any "weekend" only respondents is avoided.
- Consent to run the research must be requested of the media owner, before the IO is assigned.
- Research should be placed in the environments where the campaign ran or where the media owner can prove the same audience visits an alternative environment to reach an adequate sample of respondents exposed to the campaign.
- Media owners can advise on which invite approach works best within their domain, i.e. pop-up, banner, text link etc.
- It is recommended that appropriate weightings be applied to the recruited samples.
- Steps should be taken to ensure users are only invited to participate in a survey once.
- Research should adhere to cookie and data protection regulations, and proof must be provided to media owner who are ultimately responsible for protecting their user base.

Information Sharing

- Sharing of research findings and data ownership should be negotiated between the media owner and the agency/advertiser at the project outset. Efforts will be taken to ensure confidentiality of sensitive information, for example, percentage uplifts will be used rather than actual awareness levels.
- Media agencies should be aware that media owners are now subjected to a high volume of research requests and face serious issues of over-burdening site users with questionnaires.

This Code of Practice is endorsed by: Yahoo, MSN, AOL, Wanadoo, Guardian, ANM, Ask Jeeves, and the Association of Online Publishers

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