The New Measure of Money in Media: Web & Wireless (*Have You Checked Your Ratings?*)

Does *anyone* really like TV ads? Oh sure, there are virtuous viewers that support them out of the goodness of their heart because ads pay for programming. I'm not knocking that. Sponsorship is, after all, a key link in the broadcasting food chain. But the Mute button is my friend to shut them up, and the digital video recorder (DVR) skips them completely. Budweiser and Toyota spots don't even exist as far as TiVo's concerned.

Needless to say, the much rumoured demise of the thirty-second ad break is not something I will mourn. What a relief: no more gnawing attacks on the inner lining of my brain while I'm trying to log some serious hours staring down the tube.

I am just fascinated, however, with the economics of TV-land audience mindshare. And that's changing as content continues to flood over from conventional broadcasting to broadband and wireless portable platforms.

How do we know it's changing? Because the media and broadcast industries have their own barometers, and they are giving us new readings. By the way, if you work in those industries and don't pay attention to what's happening, there are consequences. Casualties may include incumbent products and programming, not to mention skill-sets and job security. A canary in the coalmine, the death of the thirty-second advert signals the dawn of a limitless, on-demand world. But where will the sponsorship dollars go? Another 2005 barometer reading was the top three US TV broadcasters' (ABC, CBS, and NBC) prime time advertising revenue being left in the dust by Yahoo! and Google online ad revenues. A third is the end of mainstream broadcast news as we know it. "It's dead," said former ABC news reporter and anchor Sam Donaldson (below), referring to the role of the evening anchor person as your primary source of the day's news.

Now, meet the newest barometer in town: the online, wireless, downloading ratings system. You know the economics have shifted when Web and wireless TV viewing are being polled. And that's exactly what's happening.

Nielsen, Schmielsen.

For years, the Nielsen Ratings have been a bellwether of demographics used by broadcasters, studios, and advertisers. Renowned for measuring in-home television viewing, they were devised in 1960 by Arthur Nielsen. They are considered by many to be *the* commercial gauge for counting unique viewers watching particular TV programmes in the US and many other countries around the world.

Nielsen, Schmielsen. Who cares? If you follow the money, you do care about, and watch Nielsen Media Research's moves. Consider that $385m that will be placed in online video ads this year out of a $16.7 billion online advertising spend. This reflects where the future is headed. In the media-on-demand age, Nielsen is implementing a plan to *go wide* and measure the new media services that are complementing—and perhaps burying—traditional TV.

This summer, the company announced A2M2 - Anytime Anywhere Media Measurement - to "measure the new ways consumers are watching television, such as on the Internet, outside the home, and via cell phones, iPods and other personal, mobile devices." Media of the future will be not only produced and distributed, but also measured in new ways. Centrepiece, monolithic TV no longer dominates, and advertising must move in new directions to follow suit.

This year, Nielsen will measure Internet video streaming and develop software to monitor mobile phones and PCs. Next, they're going to expand to measuring digital video recorder (DVR) and video on demand (VOD) viewing. And they say they are "exploring set-top box data and video diaries" as a way to measure all local markets by 2011, and take a majority stake in sister company NetRatings, Inc, who specialise in Internet measurement.

Viral Centre of Gravity

"The real centre of gravity is the consumer," says newsletter pundit Esther Dyson. What she means is the consumer is now in control of programming at home, and on the go for their laptop, iPod, and mobile phone. Those multiple viewing opportunities spark word-of-mouth between friends especially when email, SMS, and blog posts are just a click away.

But isn't all this new media economy hoopla a little over the top? There are still massive new amounts of data to collect and analyse and getting client test groups to embrace always-on, potentially invasive metering services will be a challenge as Gartner Research has pointed out.

AlwaysOn editor Tony Perkins (creator of Red Herring magazine) seems to agree that patronage of advertisers is less secure as the industry branches off from traditional television to new broadband portable formats. "Advertisers in the dawn of the Google era are addicted to very specific ad placement analytics," says Perkins, adding that, "in order to survive, Nielsen has to adapt as more and more people are going to be watching video over the internet and on their mobile phone."

Perkins' 'AlwaysOn' Conference at Stanford University in July is host to the major luminaries analysing the next new media and web developments. Maybe they'll set the record straight on what's really around the corner. Maybe in the near future we won't have the 30-second ad to kick around anymore. Sounds good to me. Now, where's my Mute button?

About the writer

Howard Greenfield is principal of Go Associates, a leading consultancy that develops and implements high tech product marketing and business development strategies. Howard has held senior management and consulting positions with Sun Microsystems, Informix Software, BT, Apple Computer, and other world leaders. He was a developer of Sun Microsystems' first Media Lab and is a frequent contributor to industry publications. howard@go-associates.com