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Driving Time Can Hamper Effectiveness

Gain Insight Into Viewing Patterns by Studying Audience's Road Habits

By Mark Dominiak

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Special to TelevisionWeek

If you're a planner looking to gain some insights into your target audience's television viewing habits, here's a suggestion for a very unconventional source: Dig into the driving habits of your target consumer. You'll learn a lot about the nature of their viewing habits by how much they drive.

America Drives a Lot

One of the less-utilized areas in the MediaMark Research Inc. tool can be found within the automotive section of the product's codebook. Within the more standard areas like car ownership, make and model preference and new or used statistics are a number of questions about mileage driven, sliced and diced a number of different ways.

Among the ways to consider the data are numerous breaks and levels that divvy up the information. Data about those who don't drive, all the way up through those who drive more than 50,000 miles a year can be studied. Fifty thousand sounds like a whole lot of miles, yet MRI reports that a little over 3 percent of adult drivers are shackled to the wheel at least that much during the year.

There's also the ability to look at volumetric slices as well. Volume of driving backs up what can be learned by the breaks. For example, American adults on average drive a little more than 13,350 miles per year. That corresponds well with the range in which the largest segment of the population resides, driving from 10,000 to 15,000 miles annually.

Those few tidbits are nice, but when you dig into them further, a number of interesting insights start to pop up.

First, if you take the 13,350 and slice it up by week, it works out to about 250 or so miles. At an average speed of around 30 miles per hour, that's about 8 1/2 hours of driving per week per adult. That works out to roughly an hour and 15 minutes a day in the car. And that's just the average adult.

For the nearly 15 percent of America's heaviest drivers, annual mileage balloons up to more than 34,000 miles. Per week, that's an incredible 660 miles driven. At the same average of 30 miles per hour, it equals 22 hours a week, or more than three hours a day.

The insights flow from the obvious. If so many Americans spend large amounts of their time behind the wheel, they don't have that time available to do other things. It would be easy to equate that time with lost potential viewing time. But think about the real-life implications as well.

If people are on the road longer, it means they leave home earlier or arrive home later. That bumps other activities to earlier or later, whether household or personal. The more time challenges an individual has, the more negative impact those driving hours have on attending to other needs, which must be managed with a dwindling supply of disposable time.

Dig deeper, and the findings become more interesting. Some of the more desired target-group demographics are those who drive the most. Adults in the 35 to 49 age range, moms and dads are among the heaviest drivers.

In MRI, they even have some other areas where you can get a sense of how much time people invest in doing other things, like time spent weekly at work, sleeping, or with a spouse or children. With a little work, you can create a rough pie chart that gives you an idea of how much time your target group says it spends on particular activities.

Not surprisingly, you'll find that those desired demographic groups like active adults and parents not only spend a lot of time driving, they spend more time than average at work and with children. When you consider that a number of those individuals happen to reside in the same home, it's not difficult to imagine the time pressures these folks face.

Implications for TV

Within MRI, if you look at viewing habits by driving levels, you can see the impact from television daypart to daypart. The less driving an individual does, the higher the viewing across more dayparts. The more driving an individual does, the less likelihood that significant viewing will occur across dayparts.

Younger or older individuals who don't drive much and who either aren't working or working part-time will show much more television viewing in dayparts from early in the day until the evening. For the older individuals, you'll even see behavior start to tail off from the end of prime through late news and late fringe. Presumably, they have gotten their fill of television throughout the day and are turning in earlier to a good book or a good night's sleep.

The heavy drivers, on the other hand, rarely show any pop in viewing among dayparts during the day and only start to show evidence of heavier viewing in the later dayparts and shows tied to late prime or late night. It's only when they finally have a

chance to put their feet up late in the evening that things like the late news or Letterman or Leno help them end their busy day.

Their time away from the television manifests itself in other places. Where the low-mileage drivers will show average-to-lower indices for media like outdoor, the Internet and radio, the higher-mileage drivers will show much more robust performance in these media areas. Outdoor and radio demonstrate higher indices because they are used more frequently by individuals in transit. Internet will show higher use levels because those individuals at work utilize the medium away from home for business and pleasure.

If a brand's target happens to consist largely of heavy drivers, one conclusion would be to shift media resources out of television and into other media like outdoor, radio or the Web. While that may be partially true, a planner should look more deeply at the situation.

TV and Heavy Drivers

The overall take-away should not be that because heavy drivers do not have as many disposable hours to view television, TV does not have value to them. The conclusion might be just the opposite: People who are tied to their cars for such extended periods of time may find the release of watching good television content a blessing as they unwind from the stress of the day.

A relevant conclusion is, however, that for heavy drivers, inflexible, scheduled television content has very little value. They do not have the ability to alter their schedules to meet TV content in the old programming paradigm. Content must be flexible to fit their needs.

So for media planners, it is perhaps important to evolve the way in which we assess the television medium as it is considered for various targets. When immersed in the media-selection process, consider target audiences not only from what kind of television programming skews their direction, but also to determine within which television content paradigm the target's viewing occurs.

Is the target's life circumstance flexible enough to make the time compromise of viewing content offerings on the programmer's schedule, or is the target's life circumstance so inflexible that content offerings must compromise to meet the consumer's schedule?

If the target does happen to be one where heavy driving habits and very little disposable time are the norm, that doesn't mean television is out of the question. It simply means that the planner needs to rely more on the evolved avenues of television content delivery now available instead of traditional stand-bys.

Because many consumers face time pressures, they have embraced outlets like TiVo, pay-per-view, online viewing and wireless content. Planners must make sure to attack content opportunities relevant to target consumers in these environments. They must also understand the subtle difference in circumstance associated with those viewing occasions.

Viewers had to make an extra effort to meet that content. They didn't simply plop down in front of the television for some casual viewing. They had to program their needs into a device or navigate their way to a hub where content is available. There's a good chance that the reason they are engaging in extra navigation is because of time pressures. If they've invested a bit more effort into the process, it stands to reason that the desired end content has value to them.

It should prompt planners to take more care in the planning process and ask additional questions. Are there ways to work with vendors to appropriately marry the brand's message to the content opportunity? Is there a way for the execution of message placements to take that into account? Have these insights been communicated to the creative team?

So the next time you're struggling to gain insight into your target audience's television viewing, try an unconventional approach. The best insight may come from knowing when your consumers are in the car.

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