Outdoor ads drive considerably more mobile search

In outdoor's Active Space, our brains work harder

The outdoor media industry has claimed for some time that there is a communication benefit from reaching consumers in the out-of-home environment, as we are more alert, active and purposeful. New research proves that this really is scientifically valid. We are 33% more alert out of home, says Rob Ellis Director of COG Research.

Outdoor advertising has always been famous for high profile campaigns, but the research data was light by comparison with other media. Over the last five years this has changed dramatically with the arrival of GPS-based traffic data for all UK outdoor sites (called Route), virtual reality planning tools, and ethnographic studies on the impact of outdoor.

New technology has meant that outdoor sites can be animated, interactive and updated in an instant, leading to new creative and planning opportunities. And of course the growth of mobile means that it is easier than ever to respond to outdoor ads as soon as you see them. But the idea that outdoor somehow works harder was still just a theory, until the Outdoor Media Centre decided to bring science to bear.

New scientific measurement

Outdoor has been designated the "active space", but is all the physical activity we do out of home accompanied by a higher level of brain activity? In early 2014 the OMC commissioned COG Research, working in collaboration with On Device Research and Durham University, to set about testing the theory. COG have past experience of media research, having won awards for their work with Thinkbox on TV viewing, and are experts in using eye tracking technology for media testing. But eye tracking alone could only tell us what people were looking at, not what brain activity was taking place.

We decided to couple eye-tracking and skin conductance measurement, as the skin sensors provide a simple and accurate measure of the changes in activity of the brain and nervous system. This was a first for media research, although the measures have been combined before in medical and sports research (for example measuring the way Olympic gold medal winner Lizzy Yarnold scans the skeleton track and processes the information as she races). Dr Amanda Ellison of Durham University comments, "Skin conductance is the most useful measure of brain activity that we can take outside of the laboratory: it allows us to see how the brain and nervous system respond to change in stimulus and environment, and with eye tracking we can match that to the exact stimulus taking place."

What we see and how we feel

This new approach meant that we could accurately match brain activity or arousal to visual and auditory stimulus. The study involved 20 men and women across a range of occupations, ages and environments. We met them at home and tracked them throughout the day and evening, as they travelled to work or social events (with the exception of their actual working time). This gave us 140 hours of continuous data including time at home playing with children, cooking, cleaning, relaxing and watching TV and on mobiles, time travelling (walking, bus, train, tube, in stations and driving cars), shopping and socialising (in cafés, bars and betting shops).

Mobile based research on mood and purpose

Alongside this, we also worked with On Device Research to survey 3,600 people in the moment. This sample was across seven days and between 8 a.m. and 10 p.m., with responses required on where they were, what they were doing and how they felt 'right now'. They also told us about the last ad seen or heard, and whether this prompted any follow-up.

The research showed we feel more active, switched on and full of beans when we are out of home than when we are in home, with substantially higher scores for all three measures.

We also found that people had a 28% higher propensity to take action (look something up, buy something or talk about the ad) if exposed to an outdoor ad as opposed to ads in other media – and outdoor ads drove considerably more mobile search as well.

What people are up to out of home

We also partnered with Dipsticks Research to stop and ask people a few simple questions about what they were up to when out of home. A total of 355 people were interviewed in a variety of street locations across four urban centres. The key findings illustrate that almost all people have money on them and seven in 10 people on the street are in active purchase mode (even if not originally intending to).

So are we really more alert?

The above research tells us what we think but it is not based on science. That is why we used a programme to match every second of video with the level of skin conductance recorded for that individual, across all their daily activities. For each individual, there was a clear pattern of arousal linked with different activities and environments.

Across the complete test, the average level of arousal out of home was 33% higher than the in-home results for the same people. This had been predicted by the scientists on the basis of theory, but just like with the Higgs Boson, it is gratifying to know that it really had been detected at last. Only childcare had a higher level of alertness than being out of home.

What does it mean for the outdoor industry?

This research programme was carried out as part of the Outdoor to the Power of 5 programme launched by the Outdoor Media Centre. Their remit has been to bring the best science, metrics and insight to bear on how the medium works and how advertisers can use it to best effect.

The fact that we are more alert and purposeful in the outdoor space means, in the words of Dr Amanda Ellison, "our brains and nervous system are working harder out of home, as they absorb and process more information and stimulus. From an advertiser's point of view, it means we are both more likely to process more information (including ad messages) and more likely to automatically save it to our implicit memory."

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