Comparative Effectiveness of 30- Versus 60-Second Radio Commercials
On Memory and Money

Dr. David Allan
Department of Marketing
The Erivan K. Haub School of Business
Saint Joseph's University
5600 City Avenue
Philadelphia PA 19131
610-660-1637
610-660-3239fax
dallan@sju.edu
Comparative Effectiveness of 30- versus 60-second Radio Commercials on Recall and Rate

ABSTRACT

Is less really more? This study is designed to provide the radio and advertising industries with an objective, theoretical foundation to what is being called “Less Is More.” Specifically, this study compares the effectiveness of 30-second and 60-second radio commercials on un-aided recall. The results indicate that the brand recall of commercials of these different lengths is not significantly different although a relationship was observed. However, the general and proven recall of advertising messages from 60-second commercials is significantly greater than from 30-second commercials. Based on these results, this study further suggests the possible rate of these 30-second commercials at 50% below that of a 60-second commercial.

INTRODUCTION

The radio industry is facing new and diverse challenges to its ability to grow revenue from competitive sources. Satellite radio has recently announced the signing of Howard Stern (Sirius) and the licensing of Major League Baseball (XM) on a medium with music channels that are free of commercials and broadcast license regulations. Clear Channel, the largest owner and operator of radio stations with over 1200 in the United States, has responded by reducing the length and amount of commercials. On July 19, 2004 Clear Channel Radio announced “a company wide initiative to improve the value of radio to listeners and advertisers” (“Clear Channel Radio moves,” 2004). Included in this “Less Is More” plan were “limits on the length of commercials in a spot break” (“Clear Channel Radio moves,” 2004). The plan was “officially” launched on January 1, 2005.
At issue is the effectiveness of 30-second versus 60-second radio commercials. Unlike television, which runs 15- and 30-second commercials, radio has relied primarily on 60-second commercials (although radio currently does run some “piggybacked” 30-second commercials in syndicated programming). Also at issue, is how to price the shorter commercials. Traditionally, a 30-second commercial is priced at about 80% of a 60-second commercial with the advertiser usually opting to pay the extra 20% for the extra time. Clear Channel has responded by offering 30-second commercials at 75% of the cost of a 60-second commercial. This research examines the comparative effectiveness of 60- versus 30-second radio commercials. Additionally, it makes rate recommendations based on these findings.

**BACKGROUND**

Some believe that “a thirty-second spot will deliver better response,” (“Push for less,” 2004). Clear Channel agrees, suggesting that “listeners will be able to recall the ads more readily” (McBride, 2004). CFO Randall Mays is quoted as saying that “the company’s research has shown that 30-second commercial spots are just as effective as 60-second spots when it comes to recalling the advertised product” (Oestricher, 2005). Mays is referring to a commissioned study that found that “spot length is not a significant factor in radio advertising recall; creative, well-executed and relevant 30 second spots can generate similar recall to 60-second spots; and, for a number of :60s users, it takes several :60s to equal the recall scores of certain :30s” (“Less is More,” 2005). Clear Channel executives have reported that the initial feedback from advertisers on the plan had been “positive to overwhelmingly positive” (McBride, 2004), but some advertisers were not so enthusiastic calling the plan “giving you less, charging you more”
Comparative Effectiveness (McBride, 2004). Since then, Clear Channel provided an update on its “Less Is More” initiative saying “Clear Channel Radio Stations sound great and are clearly the best environment for listeners and advertisers. The response from both is exceeding our expectations” (“Less is More Success,” 2005). The company also reported an “increase in the utilization of shorter length commercials by advertisers of all sizes” (“Less is More Success,” 2005). But with regard to rate, Harris Nesbitt analyst Lee Westerfield said that Clear Channel is reporting difficulty building a market for 30-second commercials but that Entercom is reporting the sales of 30-second commercials at 70%-75% the rate of 60-second commercials (“July Experiences,” 2005). Mays confirmed this telling analysts at the Merrill Lynch Media & Entertainment conference that 30-second ad sales are slower than expected (“CC CFO Randall Mays,” 2005).

In support of radio over television advertising, two studies by the Radio Ad Effectiveness Lab have reported that radio ads are more “personally relevant” than television ads (“Personal Relevance,” 2004, p. 6) and that “radio’s return on investment (ROI) was 49% higher than television” (“Radio’s ROI Advantage,” 2005, p. 24). The Television Bureau of Advertising has (see www.tvb.org) refuted both studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most of the scholarship in this area has focused on executional elements within television commercials. Using a sample of more than 1000 commercials, Stewart & Furse (1986) observed small variations in the influence of the executional elements such as commercial length on recall. Stewart & Koslow (1989) replicated these results using a different set of commercials, produced and tested at different points in time. Laskey, Fox, & Crask (1994) also replicated aspects of the Stewart & Furse study but used the Shimp

Very few studies have researched radio commercial lengths with Sewall and Sarrell (1986) observing both 30-second and 60-second commercials as part of a larger study to model and quantify characteristics. Unfortunately, a comparison was not conducted to compare their recall effectiveness. Most other radio studies have dealt with the effect of other executional cues on unaided recall including music tempo and placement (Brooker & Wheatley, 1994) and music/spokespersons (Wheatley & Brooker, 1994).

With regard to the pricing of longer versus shorter commercials, only Stanton (1998) offered some insight. He found that there was a 77% reduction in recall using the 15-second commercial and suggested that if the cost of a 15-second commercial was less than 77% it would potentially have more impact to run a 15-second commercial for the same fixed advertising budget.

HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH QUESTION

It is clear that there is not sufficient research to guide the radio and advertising industries as they attempt to predict the recall effectiveness of 30-second versus 60-second commercials and/or price them. With this goal in mind, the following hypotheses will test the unaided, general recall of advertising brands and messages:

H1 Advertising brands in 30-second radio commercials will be recalled as effectively as those in 60-second radio commercials.

H2 Advertising messages in 30-second commercials will be recalled as effectively as those in 60-second commercials.
Because proven recall has been argued to be the most effective way to observe the recall of advertising messages (Ross, 1982; Stapel, 1998), and is the primary area of interest for advertisers (Sewall & Sarel, 1986), the following hypothesis will also be tested:

H₃ The proven recall (main theme or message) of 30-second commercials will be as effective as those in 60-second commercials.

Finally, based on the results of the general recall of the advertising brands and messages and the proven recall of the advertising messages, the question of rate for the 30-second commercial will be made as follows:

RQ1 Based on the comparative effectiveness of 30-second commercials and 60-second commercials with regard to brand and advertising message recall, what insight can be gained to predict some type of pricing model?

**METHOD**

A study was conducted to test the prediction and answer the research question.

**Stimulus Materials**

Four different nationally advertised brands (Macy’s, Home Depot, Cavit Wine, and Lasik Plus) were arbitrarily selected. Each brand had both 30-second and 60-second versions available. One of two different sets of treatments (four 30-second or four 60-second commercials) were placed (similar to a typical radio commercial set) in between two segments of an actual Top 40 morning show from a different city (Nashville) from the experiment city (Philadelphia). The segments included the music, disc jockey talk and radio promotional production elements. The choice of Top 40 was appropriate because it is the most listened to format of the participants (Arbitron, 2004). Top 40 programming has been found to be more “interesting and involving” (Bickart, 1984). In 1990, Sullivan
added that “the more involving music formats [like Top 40] produce more strongly positive advertising effects than do less highly involving music formats” (p. 107).

**Participants**

Eighty-five subjects in the target demo for Top 40 radio (18-24), who represent the most frequent listeners to this radio format (Arbitron, 2004), volunteered to participate in the study. They were then assigned in equal numbers to each experimental condition. Subsequent analysis indicated no major differences existed among treatment groups in terms of demographic characteristics. Ages ranged from 17-26. Fifty-two percent of the subjects were male and 48% were female. Ninety-one percent of the subjects were white.

**Procedure**

One of the two treatments was randomly assigned to one of the two groups of participants. After listening to the tape, each group was asked to complete a questionnaire that began with general questions regarding music consumer behavior and moved on to specific questions concerning the radio station including familiarity and likeability. The participants were then asked to recall (unaided) the brands and advertising messages from the commercials on the tape.

**Hypothesis Testing**

Separate independent t-tests and cross tabulations were conducted on the recall of brands, advertising messages and number of advertising messages associated with each brand for the 30- and 60-second versions. The independent variable was length of commercials (:30/:60). The dependent variable was unaided recall for the brand and advertising messages. Recall for the brand was measured by asking “Please write down all the brands in the commercials” dichotomously (“yes” or “no”). Recall for the
messages was measured by asking “Please write down what you recall about each of the brands you heard in the commercials.” Recall was measured by those general messages contained in the commercial (e.g., location, phone number, slogan). Proven recall was determined by those specific messages contained in the commercial (e.g., sale, event, promotion). The results were then analyzed and coded for each brand and analyzed between brands consistent with past research (Roehm, 2001, Wallace, 1994).

**RESULTS**

The results for this experiment are presented in two parts. The first part contains preliminary analyses including music/radio behavior, familiarity/popularity of the radio station/morning show and familiarity of the ads. The second part discusses individual testing of the hypotheses and analyses that address the research questions. Finally, an analysis was conducted to determine the effect of primacy or recency.

**Preliminary Analysis**

Analyses were performed to determine if each group of participants was similar with regard to behavior, attitude, and familiarity.

Table 1 indicates that the groups had similar music behavior and attitudes toward radio and commercials. Music behavior was determined by the following: “How well would you say the following statements describe you?” (“I buy a lot of CDs;” “I download a lot of music;” and “I go to a lot of concerts”) using a seven-point semantic differential scale (1 = “not at all”/7 = “very well”). Analysis of attitudes toward the radio station were performed to determine if the radio station used was considered “interesting and involving” (Bickart, 1984; Sullivan, 1990). The five attitudes toward the radio station (“very bad”/“very good”, “dislike it very much”/“like it very much”, “not very
entertaining”/“very entertaining”, “not fun”/“very fun”, “not very interesting”/“very interesting”) were tested using a seven-point semantic differential scale and the results were then factor analyzed (Principal Component extraction with varimax rotation) and shown to all load together on a single factor that was highly reliable (Cronbach’s alpha). Analyses of attitudes toward commercials were performed to determine general opinions concerning commercials and radio listening. Commercial attitudes were determined by the following: “I think radio stations play too many commercials” and “If radio stations would play less commercials I would listen more” using a seven-point semantic differential scale (1 = “strongly disagree”/7 = “strongly agree”). Both groups appear to prefer downloading music to buying CDs and attended concerts. Both rated the appeal of the radio station to be average with a below average likelihood to listen. Finally, both groups overwhelmingly agreed that radio stations play too many commercials and would listen more if the amount of commercials were reduced.

Table 2 confirms that the groups had similar radio listening behaviors and radio station/commercial familiarities. Radio listening behavior was determined by asking following: “How many hours in an average day do you spend listening to the radio?” (0/1-2 hours/3-4 hours/5+ hours). Radio station familiarity was determined by asking the following: “Are you familiar with the radio station you just heard?” (yes/no). Commercial familiarity was determined by asking the following: “How you heard this commercial before?” (yes/no). Both groups reported average listening levels of 1-2 hours per day. With regard to familiarity, both groups rated the radio station to be 100% unfamiliar. Both groups also rated the commercials significantly more unfamiliar than
familiar. While familiarity was not specifically for, the results indicate that the groups scored the commercials similarly on familiarity.

ANALYSIS

Analyses were conducted to test the hypotheses and the results can be observed in Table 3. The results of the hypothesis testing will be discussed individually according to the dependent variable (DV).

H₁ predicted that brands in 30-second radio commercials will be as effectively recalled as those in 60-second radio commercials. The number of brands recalled for the 30-second commercials (m = 1.6) was slightly lower than for the 60-second commercials (m = 2.4). While this was not a significant difference, a relationship (Chi-square) was observed between length of commercial and brand recall ($x^2 = 10.8$, df = 4, p < .03).

H₂ predicted that advertising messages in 30-second commercials will be as effectively recalled as those in 60-second commercials. The recall of advertising messages for the 30-second commercials (m = 1.3) was significantly lower ($F(1,83) = 3.81$, p < .05) than for the 60-second commercials (m = 2.4).

H₃ predicted that the proven recall (main theme or message) of 30-second commercials will be as effective as that in 60-second commercials. The proven recall of the advertising messages for the 30-second commercials (m = .65) was significantly lower ($F(1,83) = 13.27$, p < .000) than for the 60-second commercials (m = 1.52).

To answer the research question of what insight can be gained to assist in determining the constructing a pricing model based on the results of testing of the comparative effectiveness of 30-second commercials and 60-second commercials with regard to the proven recall of advertising messages, the results suggest that a 50% rate.
**Primacy and Recency.** An analysis of the effects of primacy and recency was also performed to observe the relationship between commercial placement and recall. For the 30-second commercials, a relationship was observed ($x^2 = 14.08, df = 3, p < .003$) with the first brand (Macy’s) being the most recalled followed closely by the second brand (Home Depot). For the 60-second commercials, a relationship was also observed ($x^2 = 17.55, df = 3, p < .001$) with the second brand (Home Depot) being the most recalled followed closely by the first brand (Macy’s). These results suggest the influence of a primacy effect and the importance of being either the first or second advertisement in a commercial stop set.

**DISCUSSION**

This study was designed to provide the radio and advertising industries with some objective, theoretical foundation to what is being called “Less Is More.” Specifically, this study compared the effectiveness of 60-second and 30-second radio commercials on recall. The results suggest that, if the goal of the advertising is simply brand recall than there is no significant difference between the two commercial lengths (although a chi-square relationship was observed). This could suggest that an advertiser that was brand imaging or reminding, especially of a familiar brand, might accomplish this by either a 30- or 60-second commercial but further study should be completed. However, if the goal of the advertising is the general or proven recall of advertising messages, then a 60-second commercial will out perform a 30-second commercial.

The question then is, How much better and how much more should an advertiser pay for the extra advertising time? The results of this study suggest that a 60-second commercial is approximately twice as effective as a 30-second commercial and thus a 30-
second commercial should be priced (rate) 50% lower than a 60-second commercial. Based on this rate, the statement “Less Is More” seemingly could assume new meaning. If the advertiser pays “less” per commercial this leads to “more” commercials purchased, then less is more. The increased frequency could then offset the “less” revenue that a station will be receiving per 30-second commercial. It should be noted, however, that most of the participants in this study already think that radio stations play too many commercials and would listen more often if radio stations played fewer commercials (Table 1). Alternatively, a lesser supply of commercials due to a reduction in commercial load could result in more demand and a higher rate regardless of the length of the commercial.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study presents an important glimpse into the recall effectiveness of 30-second versus 60-second commercials, the view will have to be broadened. First, future research could include longer periods of radio programming and more commercial sets. Second, this study focused solely on recall. Future research should also consider attitude toward the brand and toward the advertisement in relation to commercial length. Third, the commercials in this study were primarily unfamiliar to the participants. It is obvious that recall will increase with greater exposure. Future research should look at the effectiveness of 30-second commercials and frequency. Fourth, since television already uses 30-second commercials, future research could observe the recall of the audio of a familiar television commercial. Finally, this study did not observe if executional cues (e.g., music, announcer voices, etc.) can interact with commercial length. Future research
could examine this interaction as well as analyze if fit (i.e., cue to the brand) and commercial have any type of significant relationship.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to compare the effectiveness of 30-second and 60-second radio commercials on unaided general and proven recall of brands and advertising messages. The results suggested that the brand recall of commercials of these different lengths is not significantly different even though a relationship was observed. However, the general and proven recall of advertising messages from 60-second commercials is significantly higher than from 30-second commercials. Based on these results this study suggests that 30-second commercials have a rate 50% below a 60-second commercial.

In the future, two factors could contribute to the greater use of 30-second commercials. First, if radio moves to all 30-second commercials, the disparity will no longer be an issue. Accordingly, other executional factors will increase in importance. The second factor is a listener behavior issue. The “Less Is More” campaign is designed to reduce radio’s clutter of a radio station with the goal of reducing tune out. Some listeners change stations, especially in their cars, when they anticipate a lengthy commercial break beginning. In this instance, it does not matter if the commercial stop set contains 30-second or 60-second commercials because the potential consumer will not hear either of them. If the “Less Is More” campaign can “image” radio as playing less commercials through a combination of shorter commercials in shorter commercial breaks, then all commercials, regardless of their length, have a better chance of being heard and recalled.
References


http://www.radioadlab.org/


### Table 1
Music Behavior/Radio-Commercial Attitudes

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<td>m</td>
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<td>Buy CD’s</td>
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<td>Download Music</td>
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<td>4.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attend Concerts</td>
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<td>1.4</td>
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<td>Attitude Toward the Station</td>
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<td>Too many</td>
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<td>Would listen more if less</td>
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<td>1.3</td>
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Cronbach alpha * .88 ** .94 *** .92
## Table 2
### Listening/Familiarity

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### Table 3
#### Brand/Message Recall

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<td><strong>Brand Recall</strong></td>
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*Chi-square (x² = 10.8, df = 4, p < .03)