

HOW MANY ADVERTISEMENTS IS A PERSON EXPOSED TO IN A DAY?

For more than thirty-five years journalists have been kicking around the number 1,518, variously stated as “1,600,” “2,000,” “between 1,500 and 1,600,” and recently exaggerated to “up to 3,000.” These numbers are unsubstantiated, and the citations never get more specific than “experts agree.” Experts certainly do *not* agree—on that number or any other number.

The source for the number 1,518 was a remark made by Edwin Ebel, then Vice President in charge of advertising at General Foods, in a speech in 1957. Wanting a high number to emphasize a point, Ebel had conducted a little “research” of his own—all pretty much speculation. Journalists jumped on the number, which was supposed to represent ad exposures for a whole *family of four*, and it quickly became “the number of advertisements an *individual* is exposed to every day.”

So what is the real number?

Experts may not agree, but they have been interested in the question and have conducted surveys.

We sponsored a study in 1964, which was carried out by Bauer and Greyser and reported in 1968 in *Advertising in America: The Consumer View*. As part of the study, about 750 people were asked to count the ads they noted from the time they got up in the morning until 5:00 P.M., and another group of 750 people were asked to count ads from 5:00 P.M. until they went to bed.

If “exposure” means you paid attention to the ad . . .

These “exposures,” as defined for the people who were to count them, were advertisements to which they paid at least

some attention in four major media: magazines, newspapers, radio and television—but not other media. The average number for the wake-up to 5:00 P.M. group was 36.3 advertisements; for the 5:00 P.M. to nod-off group it was 39.6. For a full waking day, that would give a total of 76 advertisements of which a person is to some degree aware.

Charles F. Adams, working with the Bauer and Greyser data in 1965, emphasized that of the 76 advertisements a day of which a person might be aware, only 12 made any kind of impression on him, and three of those impressions were negative.

If “exposure” means you could have paid attention . . .

Adams estimated that the average American—reading one and a half newspapers, half a magazine and one piece of direct mail, and listening to 2.3 hours of radio and watching 3.8 hours of TV—would be exposed to a minimum of 560 advertisements in a 16-hour period.

Looking at the amount of advertising in media . . .

BBDO’s Robert Wachslar came up with some different numbers in 1970, but without stating his exact methodology. He’s quoted in the December 1972 *Journal of Advertising Research* as saying “We laid out all available media usage data that we had—e.g., television, radio tuning hour by hour, percentage of a book (sic) seen during the average reading, etc., etc. Against these time segments and reading proportions we placed the number of scheduled ad messages.” His results led him to expect the average male to be exposed to 285 ads a day, and the average female, 305. His numbers included outdoor

advertising as well as the other four major media.

Plotting individual demographics against a database . . .

Stuart Henderson Britt, Stephen C. Adams and Allan S. Miller, in their 1972 study, started with this question: “How many advertisements is an individual exposed to during an average day?” Rather than try to look at an “average individual”—a somewhat meaningless term—they designed a study using a computerized database in which they could query for an individual. How many advertisements is Mrs. Real Person exposed to during an average day? By inputting an actual person’s demographic characteristics, their computer model plotted (predicted) ad exposures per day. In their Milwaukee metropolitan area test run, ad exposures for males ranged from 117 to 285 per day, and for females, 161 to 484. The higher exposure for females showed up especially clearly for housewives. The researchers were impressed by the remarkable consistency of their results no matter how many individuals’ demographics they input to their database.

If none of the above numbers is to your liking . . .

TV Dimensions, using as its source Media Dynamics, takes into account the difference between potential exposure and actual exposure to advertisements. Their study also offers some judgmental data on the amount of attention given to advertisements, and the difference in time spent (e.g., a 10-second TV spot vs. 60-second spot). As for the number of daily ad exposures for a U.S. adult, they figure 157 actual exposures out of 294 potential exposures.

What are all those numbers again?

1,518 exposures per day for a family of four (Ebel; 1957)

76 *noticed* exposures (Bauer/Greyser; 1964)
560 whether noticed or not (Adams; 1965)

285 for men, 305 for women (BBDO’s Wachsler; 1970)

117 to 285 for men, 161 to 484 for women (Britt et al; 1972)

157 actual exposures out of 294 potential exposures (TV Dimensions; 2005)

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