WARC

The true cost of advertising attention

9 min read

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WARC

WARC Exclusive, January 2021

Summary

New cross media attention research attempts to show how much more visual engagement ads in one media generate than another, and if this extra attention is reflected in the price advertisers pay.

- Combining attention data from TVision and Lumen with media cost data from Ebiquity, advertisers can evaluate the true cost of attention across media by calculating an 'attentive CPM' – the cost of generating a thousand seconds of attention.
- 'Attentive CPMs' can help us understand the true cost of the attention advertisers buy, and the true value of the attention that advertising generates.

New research in marketing

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Why it matters

Treating visual attention to advertising as a commodity means attention can be consistently measured, graded, priced and traded.

Takeaways

- When we measure not just what is viewable, but what is actually viewed, we see that, even if someone is in the room when a TV ad is playing, not all TV ads get looked at. In fact, the TVision data suggests that while 74% of 30-second TV ads have the opportunity to be seen, only 43% of TV ads actually get looked at.
- Not all TV ads get looked at, but when they do, they generate a lot of attention: a thousand 30-second ad impressions will generate around 6000 seconds of actual attention. YouTube ads almost always get looked at, but for less time than a 30-second TV ad, meaning that a thousand impressions will generate around 4500 seconds of attention.
- It is a simple step to combine the 'attentive seconds per thousand' (APM) with the 'cost per thousand' (CPM) to create a measure of the 'cost per thousand seconds of attention' (aCPM). Using the average media cost data of a single Ebiquity client for illustrative purposes, we can see that while TV looks expensive on the basis of its CPM, it is probably the most cost effective media in terms of aCPM.
- Video ads on publisher desktop websites looked pretty cheap on a CPM basis – until you factor in the actual attention such ads receive, which makes them an expensive option in terms of aCPM.

'Unseen is unsold': so goes the famous marketing maxim. We all have an intuition that ads can't work unless they get at least some attention. Attention is the 'active ingredient' in advertising.

We also all have an intuition that different media deliver different levels of attention: a thousand 30-second TV ads probably generate more attention than a thousand desktop banner ads, and consequently cost a lot more on a 'cost per thousand' ('CPM') basis.

But how much more attention do ads in one media generate than another? And is this extra attention reflected in the price advertisers pay?

In this article, I want to add some precision to our intuition. Combining attention data from TVision and Lumen with media cost data from Ebiquity, I want to demonstrate a way advertisers can evaluate the true cost of attention across media by calculating an 'attentive CPM' – the cost of generating a thousand seconds of attention.

This new approach will allow us to treat visual attention to advertising as a commodity: to be consistently measured, graded, priced and traded. 'Attentive CPMs' can help us understand the true cost of the attention advertisers buy, and the true value of the attention that advertising generates. Understanding the reality of attention will help marketers save billions of dollars on wasted media spend and ineffective advertising creative. It will help quality publishers charge a fair price for fewer, better ads. And it will improve the consumption experience of the viewers and readers, whose precious attention we are all competing for.

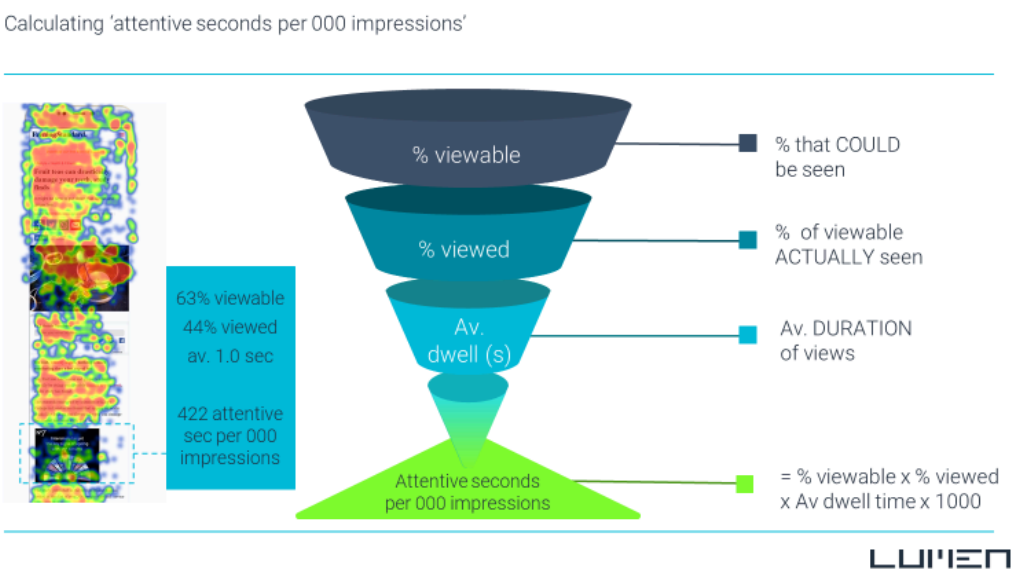
Attention as a commodity

Thinking about consumer attention to advertising as a commodity is not a new idea. Rick Bagozzi wrote about the concept in the 70s[1], and media owners have been 'selling eyeballs' for years[2].

Nor is it a new idea that simply counting impressions is an inadequate measure of attention. Fifty years ago, Anthony Swindells of Millward Brown was highlighting that a great gulf existed between the 'opportunity to see' ads and how many were, in fact, seen.

'One cannot study the methods of measuring media coverage without becoming increasingly conscious of their limitations. ... in short, we are still dealing in 'opportunities to see' the advertisement . . . rather than actual impressions made.' [3]

What has changed in the last few years is our ability to measure visual attention at scale. Eye tracking and head tracking approaches developed by Lumen (for digital media) and TVision (for TV) reveal not only what consumers could see (i.e. what was *viewable*), but also what they did in fact look at (i.e. what they *viewed*) – and, crucially, how long they looked at the ad for. Combining these measures – the percentage of ads that could be seen, the percentage of those ads that are actually viewed, and the average eyes-on dwell time with the ad – allows us to estimate the 'attentive seconds per thousand impressions' ('APM') that each media generates. This 'APM' can then be combined with the 'cost per thousand impressions' ('CPM') to create a 'cost per thousand seconds of attention' ('aCPM').



In this article I will work through these calculations for selected video advertising platforms and formats. Firstly, though, some caveats. TVision and Lumen use slightly different technologies to assess attention. TVision installs devices into participants living rooms to measure if someone is looking at the screen while an ad is on TV: if they are looking at the screen when the ad plays, they are deemed to have looked at the ad. It is slightly more complicated online, where ads and content can be served simultaneously and have to compete against each other for attention. Lumen's technology therefore has to track not only if people are looking at the screen, but what section of the screen they are looking at to measure attention to the ads served. But we believe the attention-to-advertising of the two approaches to be broadly comparable.

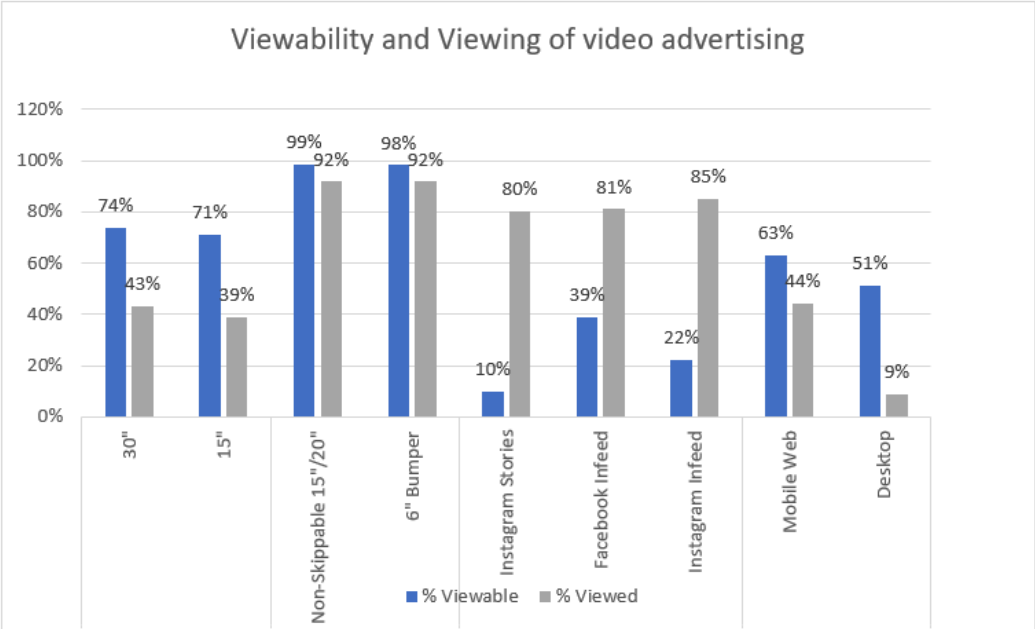
Secondly, the data I'll use come from different countries and devices. The TVision data is from the US; the Lumen data from the US and UK; the Ebiquity price data for a single, anonymous UK client. The Lumen data mixes desktop and mobile data into one number. Merging these data sets contains significant opportunities for error. The results should be taken as an indication of what's possible with the method rather than definition of what's actually happening in the market.

Finally, the attention data presented here is the average of thousands of different video ads of varying creative standards. Some particularly interesting or well targeted campaigns will generate much more attention than the average; others will generate much less. Creative and targeting matter a great deal in generating attention, and these differences are not represented in these estimates.

Viewability and viewing

Viewability is the first step to viewing. According to the Media Ratings Council, 50% of the pixels of a video ad have to be onscreen for 2 seconds or more to be counted as technically viewable[4]. This concept of viewability is well understood in digital marketing, but applies equally well to TV. TVision data suggests that only 74% of 30-second ads and 71% of 15-sec ads achieve these standards, suggesting that around 25% of TV ads play out to empty rooms. We all know that people go off to make a cup of tea when the ads come on. Thanks to TVision, we can now measure how many ads are missed when this happens - and can compare this to the viewability rates of video advertising on digital channels.

Things get even more interesting when we measure not just what is viewable, but what is actually viewed. Here we can see that, even if someone is in the room when a TV ad is playing, not all TV ads get looked at. In fact, the TVision data suggests that while 74% of 30-second TV ads have the opportunity to be seen, only 43% of TV ads actually get looked at. On YouTube, almost all the ads that are served get at least some attention, whereas there is a considerable drop off between what shound be seen and what actually gets looked at for video ads on mobile and desktop publisher websites.

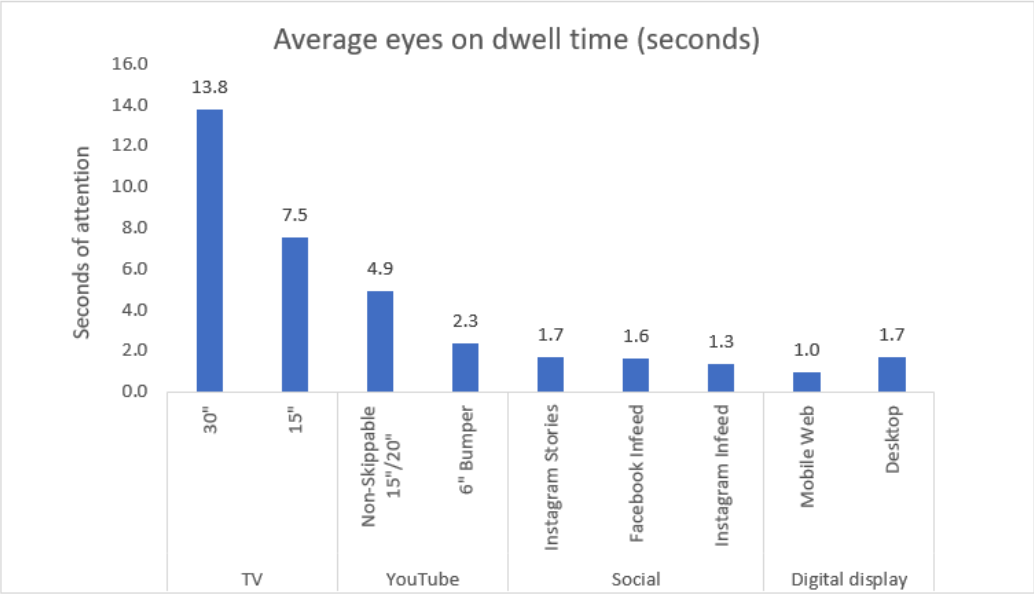


But there's something weird in the data here. For some sites – notably social media platforms – viewing rates are higher than viewability rates. How can this be?

This anomaly is an artefact of the viewability standards themselves. Video ads are only considered viewable if at least 50% of the pixels are on screen for two seconds or more. Many users flick through their social feeds so quickly that many ads fail to achieve these standards. However, this does not mean that these ads go unnoticed. They do get seen – just not for very long.

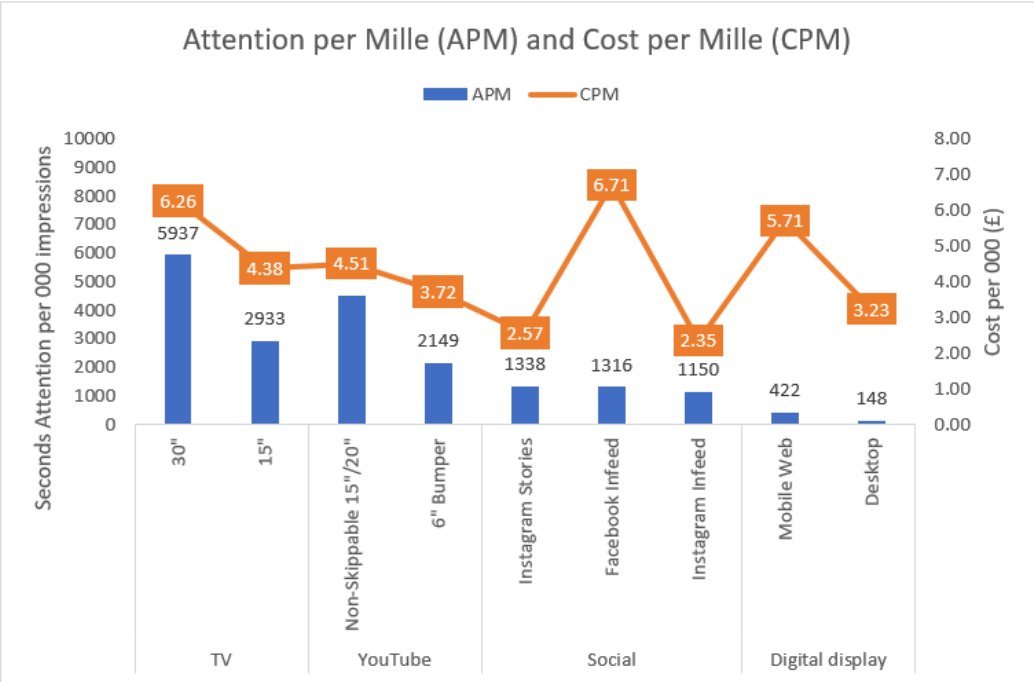
Eyes on dwell time

Understanding how long people look at ads is the next component in calculating the 'attention per thousand impressions' generated by each media. If someone is in the room, and if they look up at the screen when the ads is playing, the average 30-second TV ad generates 13.8 seconds of actual attention. In comparison, the average 15-second YouTube ad will generate around 5 seconds of attention, and the average Instagram Stories ad will generate 1.7 seconds of attention. These are, of course, mean averages: some ads will be watched right the way through, others merely glanced at.



'APM' and 'aCPM'

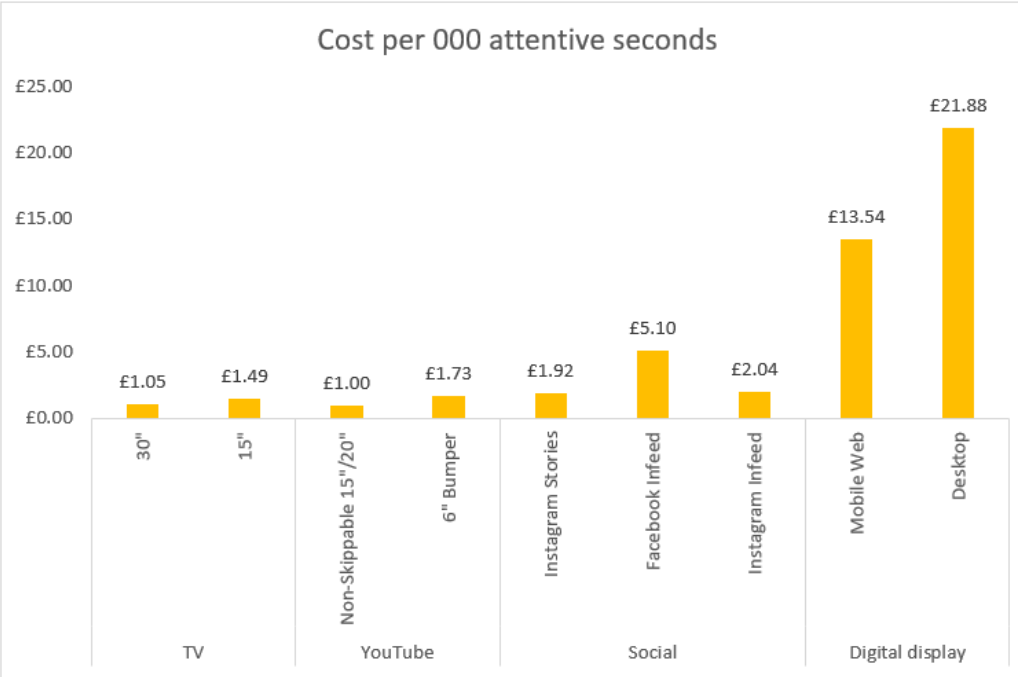
We can combine these data to understand the average amount of attention produced by a thousand impressions. Given the anomaly of non-viewable ads actually getting viewed, we will multiply the view rate by the eyes on dwell time by a thousand impressions to create a measure of attentive seconds per 000 impressions.



This analysis allows us to see the net aggregate amount of attention that is generated by video ads across different media. Not all TV ads get looked at, but when they do, they generate a lot of attention: a thousand 30-second ad impressions will generate around 6000 seconds of actual attention. YouTube ads almost always get looked at, but

for less time than a 30-second TV ad, meaning that a thousand impressions will generate around 4500 seconds of attention.

It is a simple step to combine the 'attentive seconds per thousand' (APM) with the 'cost per thousand' (CPM) to create a measure of the 'cost per thousand seconds of attention' (aCPM). Using the average media cost data of a single Ebiquity client for illustrative purposes, we can see that while TV looks expensive on the basis of its CPM, it is probably the most cost effective media in terms of aCPM. And video ads on publisher desktop websites looked pretty cheap on a CPM basis – until you factor in the actual attention such ads receive, which makes them an expensive option in terms of aCPM.



As mentioned above, such an analysis suffers from many limitations, but the approach points towards an exciting future tool for marketers and publishers. By helping advertisers understand what they are buying, and publishers what they are selling, the 'attentive CPM' will aid price discovery and reduce the negative impact of marketing's most notorious 'market for lemons'[5]. By revealing the fleeting and distracted nature of most attention to advertising, it will embolden advertisers to produce the simpler, more emotive copy advocated in *Lemon*[6]. And by highlighting the fact that just because an ad is viewable does not mean it will be viewed, it may help restrain the desire to overload pages with too many ads, improving the consumer experience of publisher pages.

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6. Orlando Wood, *Lemon: How the advertising brain turned sour* (2020)

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