Fast-working advertising

Charles Young, Ameritest, shows why – and when – quick-cut commercials can work well

SUBJECTIVE TIME, AS opposed to clock time, is fundamental to our experience of film or video and, by extension, TV advertising. The elements of a commercial may be the pictures and the words that you can lay out on a storyboard, but the audience experiences a commercial as movement, ideas and images that arrive in unfolding sequences that surprise, involve and persuade. The intuitive decision-making that shapes the tempo of audience experience is the creative art of editing.

Someone once described editing a film as the simple process of cutting out the boring bits. There is more to it than that, as can be seen in the range of film structures created over the years. Narrative rearranges time, with cuts, camera movement, close-ups, flashbacks and flash-forwards, to manipulate audience attention, memory and anticipation in the service of dramatic storytelling. Montage destroys time, juxtaposing and fusing images to create new insights into the deep connectivity of reality.

The evolution of film technique is the story of endless experimentation with how movies can be edited to create new effects with time. George Lucas set the tempo for modern mainstream movie-making with the fast-cut action of *Star Wars*. A generation earlier, Alfred Hitchcock pushed in the other direction by putting together *Rope* with a seamless series of ten-minute camera shots. *Koyaanisqatsi* by Godfrey Reggio employed time-lapse photography at various speeds to create the cinematic equivalent of a symphony.

Our emotions as an audience are inextricably tied to our sense of the passage of time in the movie. Good movies 'fly by'. Bad movies 'drag'. In a dramatic scene, slowing down or slow motion might be used to heighten emotional tension, as in the climatic football touchdown scene in *Invincible*. We still laugh at the staccato visual humour of Charlie Chaplin or the Keystone Cops running at hyper-speed in classic chase scenes. And, in an ironic inversion, Andy Warhol plays a trick on us in his art film *Sleep* by boring us with a movie presented in clock, rather than movie, time.

The complex relationship between our senses of time and of changing events and the perceived rate of information flow has been commented on by a founder of chaos theory and complexity science, Benoit Mandlebrot. He describes 'market time' in financial markets: 'On occasion, trading is fast. Scores of news items are flitting across the electronic "crawl" on the bottom of the screen. Colleagues are waving and shouting all around. Phones are ringing. Customers are zapping electronic orders. The volume of trades is climbing and prices are flying by. On such days are fortunes won or lost. Time flies.

'Then there are the slow times. No news, only tired reports from the in-house financial analysts to chew over. No big money to be made here; might as well go for a long lunch. Time hangs heavy.

'Just handy metaphors? Not at all: they are at the heart of how a financial market really works. Imagine for a moment that you could take the tape ... and play it fast or slow, like a videocassette tape. Run it slowly when prices are flying; there is so much action ... that you can only see it all by liberal use of the "pause" and "review" buttons. Speed it up during the boring parts, when there is little new information to digest. This is, it turns out, exactly how my current and best mathematical simulations of the market work. Their engine is a "multi-fractal" process: it takes normal clock time, deforms it into a unique form of "trading time," and then generates a price chart from it all.'

An altered sense of time is also characteristic of effective TV commercials. To understand why, we need to explain what's unique about our approach to studying the temporal flow of audience response to TV ads.

Moment-by-moment measurement tools

Over the years a number of research techniques have been developed to get 'inside' the, for example, 30-second time frame of a commercial to provide diagnostic insight into the structures that distinguish effective from ineffective ads.

TABLE 1

Perception of commercial 'speed' and commercial performance

'The commercial went by fast'

Ameritest performance metrics	Top 2 box agree	Not sure/disagree on 5-point scale
(n)	(842)	(1329)
	%	%
Attention score	**38****	**30**
Branding	**34****	**27**
Motivation to visit		
Definitely/probably would visit restaurant	52**	43
Definitely would visit restaurant	21	18
Probably would visit restaurant	31**	25
May or may not visit restaurant	28	32*
Probably would not visit restaurant	14	16
Definitely would not visit restaurant	6	9**
Motivation to buy featured product		
Definitely/probably would buy product	49**	40
Definitely would buy product	21**	15
Probably would buy product	28	25
May or may not buy product	23	28**
Probably would not buy product	15	18
Definitely would not buy product	12	15*

* Significant with 95% confidence
** Significant with 99% confidence

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For example, physiological measures – brain waves, facial response, and brain-imaging – have been used in an attempt to identify the biological basis of ad effectiveness. These approaches have particular appeal because they promise to provide grounding in 'hard' science about how the brain works for the 'soft' science of advertising research. Because these approaches are linked to physiological rhythms they could also provide insights into the role our internal, biological clocks might play in synchronising the processing of advertising.

Two other more mainstream moment-by-moment diagnostic tools (widely used both online and offline) are the dial meter, like Millward Brown's Interest Trace™, and the Ameritest Picture Sorts®. Dial meters have been around for a long time and used on a variety of research problems, from assessing voter response to presidential debates to rating audience response to movie endings.

Picture Sorts® are more recent and have mainly been used to study consumer response to TV ads, though a recent *Admap* article showed how they can research branded entertainment, in a study of the BMW internet movies. Two of our proprietary picture sorts are of interest here:

1. Flow of Attention®, which asks respondents to sort images from the commercial into two groups – those they remember seeing and those they do not and

2. Flow of Emotion®, which asks respondents to sort the same images onto a five-category scale based on how they were 'feeling' as they watched the image in the ad.

Recent studies conducted for the ARF showed that the measures produced by the dial meter are not correlated with measures produced by Picture Sorts®. In other words, the two approaches to getting inside the advertising produce completely different insights. These differences are fundamentally tied to differences in how time is measured by the two systems.

In general, there are four reasons why dial meters and Picture Sorts® produce systematically different results.

1. Picture Sorts® deconstruct the visual channel of communication as a separate analysis from the audio (a companion technique, copy sorts, deals with verbal content), while dial meters track the combined audio/visual experience. Because of this, we expected a partial correlation between Picture Sorts® and dial meters, but not a total lack of correlation.

2. Dial meters contain an uncertainty range around which moment is actually being measured, because of differences in respondent response times. For example, reaction times of younger respondents used to playing video games are typically much faster than those of older respondents. This reaction time is more than just the time it takes for a signal to move from brain to hand, because, as neuroscience research has shown, there is also a time delay between perception itself and conscious thought.

Unless you calibrate the dial by normalising the data to each individual's reaction time, aggregate sample data spread responses over many measurement intervals. In contrast, the Picture Sort® is anchored in discrete still images, frozen moments of time, taken from the commercial. There is no uncertainty about which moment is being measured. As a result, dial meter data can be thought of as 'analogue', Picture Sort® data as 'digital' information.

Perhaps more significantly, respondents provide feedback at a much slower rate of signalling than the pace of information flowing through the commercial. The average 30-second commercial contains over 13 cuts, representing 13 decisions by the director in the editing room regarding cutting and timing the film. It would be extremely rare to see a respondent casting 13 'votes' about different shots in one 30-second commercial.

So, dial meters provide more coarse-grained information than Picture Sorts®. This effect can be seen when comparing the curves produced by the two approaches: with dial meters, the curves tend to be smoothed so much that only large-scale features can be seen in audience response, compared to the more sensitive Picture Sort® data. This micro-detail turns out to be valuable for predicting commercial performance.

3. Dial meters record respondent reactions while they are watching the ad; but Picture Sorts® are used to reconstruct the experience after viewing. At first glance, this appears to be an argument for dial-meter measurements, as being taken in 'real time'. Many researchers have argued, however, that by making respondents artificially self-conscious and critical during viewing, dial meters keep them from 'entering into the commercial experience'. By keeping the viewer 'outside' the ad, the dial transforms the point-of-view of the measurement, from an 'advertising experience' into a 'research experience'.

Indeed, one dimension of the experience that may be altered or distorted by the intrusion of dial meters is the respondent's sense of film time. It is the difference between performing a factory work task normally and when an efficiency expert is testing you with a stopwatch.

4. Finally, the frame of reference provided by dial meters is 'clock time', while the frame of reference for the Picture Sort® is the 'subjective time' of the commercial experience. To explain this, we build on the ideas of those who suggest that our subjective experience of time is tied to the rate of information flow that we perceive.

Fast-cut editing of a commercial is a way of 'speeding' through information. A useful metaphor for this is to think of your TV as the windshield of your car as you view the road ahead. If you speed up, the scenery changes very fast. Slow down and it changes more slowly. One question we occasionally get asked is 'What is the "speed limit" for editing film?' The answer is that it depends on what you're trying to do.

If you are trying to communicate a single, pure idea or feeling, you can fix it on your horizon and with tunnel-vision focus speed towards it as fast as you like. That's a montage commercial. If you are trying to communicate multiple ideas or sales messages, you slow down, so that you can look around and take in ideas from the passing countryside. The 'speed limit' is set by the complexity of the strategic concept being communicated.

To measure the rate of information flowing through a commercial you could simply count the number of shots in ▶

TABLE 2

Perceptions of 'fast' commercial time and Picture Sorts® flows

	Frame counts			Flow of attention: Average image recall			Flow of attention: Peaks			Flow of emotion: Top 2 box emotion			Flow of emotion: Bottom 2 box emotion		
	Above	Below	Diff.	Faster group	Slower group	Diff.	5 or more	4 or less	Diff.	Faster group	Slower group	Diff.	Faster group	Slower group	Diff.
'Ad went by fast' (100%) Top 2 box agree	52%	48%	+4	49%	51%	–2	66%	34%	+32**	59%	41%	+18**	43%	57%	–14**

** Significant difference at 99% confidence
Base: 2171 respondents, 28 QSR ads

The perception of 'fast' is significantly driven by the *number of peak experiences* measured by the Flow of Attention®. The Flow of Emotion, which measures feelings or sensations, captures the 'time accelerator' – *positive* emotions *speed up* the perception of 'fast'; *negative* emotions *slow down* the perception of film time.

the ad. However, as the Hitchcock example illustrates, camera shots can last a long time, so that, as the action unfolds, the visual information present at the beginning might be perceptibly different by the end of the shot. For that reason, the number of pictures used in a picture-sorting deck to represent an ad's visual information content is usually greater than the number of shots or cuts. Moreover, it varies as a function of the ad's sequential visual complexity. A typical deck might contain from 10 to 40 pictures for a 30-second commercial.

Why would describing the performance of an ad based on the rate of information flow produce different results from a procedure based on clock time? Let us return to the car metaphor. Using a dial meter is like having an observer on the side of the road measuring the performance of a car with a stopwatch. In contrast, the Picture Sort® takes the point of view of the driver experiencing the speed and acceleration of the machine. While both approaches may tell you something useful about the car's performance, they will produce very different descriptions of the driving experience.

An experiment with subjective time

Time always seems shorter when we are doing anything than when doing nothing. When TV content is more interesting or engaging, time moves more quickly. So, we might expect that viewers' sense of time would be affected when watching commercials, with interesting commercials seeming to be shorter than boring commercials.

To investigate the relationship between a viewer's internal sense of time and commercial performance, we conducted an experiment with 28 commercials tested among a nationally representative sample of 2171 consumers. These were new 30-second commercials from 15 different fast-food restaurants, tested within two weeks of airing on national TV. We ran the commercials through the standardised interview of our online testing system – with one new rating statement to get at the perceived duration of these ads: 'The commercial went by fast'.

The relationship between ratings of 'fast' and our standard performance scores is shown in Table 1. The findings are statistically significant and important. Commercials perceived to go 'fast' are more attention-getting – 38% versus 30% – a difference with 99% confidence. Moreover, commercials perceived to go 'fast' are more motivating – 52% versus 43%.

You will also notice that branding scores move in the same direction, 34% versus 27%, suggesting that commercial speed is not a barrier to branding if the ad is well put together.

Let us see why. In Table 2 you can use the Picture Sort® variables to see the relationship between how images from these commercials are processed and audience perceptions of time.

Interestingly, there is no relationship to the first Picture Sort variable, the 'objective' measure of visual complexity, the number of pictures in the deck. But the number of picture-bits of information in a commercial is not important. Movies are a sequence of connected images, each of which derives meaning not just from its own unique content but from its context and relationship to other images in the film.

The average level of remembering does not correlate with the viewer's sense of time, either. This is because not every image in the commercial is equally important – though each is presumably there for a good reason, some matter more than others. These are the moments that film director Sergei Eisenstein considered the 'privileged moments' in a film, where pathos is created.

It's the number of peak moments in the commercial that matters to our subjective sense of time. Statistically, the relationship is striking. Commercials with more than four peaks are twice as likely to be rated as 'fast' as commercials with four or fewer peaks. (The mean number of peaks for the average 30-second ad is between four and five.)

The strongest association, and therefore the greatest determinant of the audience's perception of how fast an ad moves, appears to be the frequency of peaks in the Flow of Attention®.

The Flow of Emotion® also has a strong relationship to perceived time. Importantly, positive emotions speed up perceptions of time. Good times fly! And, as anyone who has watched a good horror movie knows, negative emotions slow the perception of time. My heart stopped!

What mental picture comes to mind? The back-and-forth dramatic tension between positive and negative poles of emotion; the ticking from one peak moment to the next? It is a clock!

Like a computer processor, our inner clock governs how our mind experiences film – including advertising film – by warping the time fabric of our inner universe.

Like a good movie, good commercials distort the audience's sense of time. From the subjective viewpoint of the audience in the driver's seat, good ads seem to work faster in the brain. Effective advertising is fast-working advertising. ■

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