



## And Now, a Commercial Break That Doesn't Seem Like One

By [STUART ELLIOTT](#)

ABC is considering changes in the decades-old way it interrupts programs for commercial breaks. The goal is to encourage viewers to stick around rather than reaching for the remote or racing to the refrigerator.

At a meeting scheduled for today in Burbank, Calif., ABC, part of the Walt Disney Company, will show several ideas to executives from media agencies gathered for the network's annual spring development meeting. The meeting offers ABC a chance to share program concepts that are being considered for the 2007-8 season.

Along with the program proposals will be suggestions for what Michael Shaw, president for sales and marketing at the ABC Television Network unit of ABC, called "ways to hold the audiences the best we can" during commercial pods, which is the term for the series of spots that runs during a break.

"We want to bring the audiences right to the commercial so they don't feel they've gone into the commercial," Mr. Shaw said after a panel discussion at an industry conference yesterday.

"The more commercials are being seen," he added, "the more value you are to advertisers."

That opinion was echoed by a major national advertiser. "Anything that engages and holds the audience will benefit everybody," said Perianne Grignon, vice president for media services at the Sears Holdings Corporation, which owns Kmart and Sears.

"It's not about labeling a 'good' commercial or a 'bad' commercial," Ms. Grignon said. "It's about engagement."

ABC has created several video clips, Mr. Shaw said, to demonstrate the ideas the network is considering. He declined to describe them further, deferring to Stephen McPherson, president at the ABC Entertainment unit of ABC, who is to be the host of the meeting today.

If ABC changes how it presents commercial breaks during programs like "Desperate Housewives," "Grey's Anatomy" and "Lost," it would be the biggest broadcast network to do so. A smaller broadcaster, the CW network, owned by CBS and Time Warner introduced what it calls content wraps for the 2006-7 season.

CW is selling commercials that resemble programs, with the sponsors' products incorporated into the plots. They typically appear as a skein of three two-minute segments during commercial pods. Marketers that have bought content wraps on CW shows include Cadbury Schweppes and Procter & Gamble.

On the cable side, the VH1 network, owned by Viacom, tested last month a method of keeping viewers tuned in during commercial breaks that it calls Showstoppers. The experiment, during a show named "Hogan Knows Best," commingled program snippets and spots in a way that was intended to lead the viewers through the commercial pods to the moment the show came back.

The trade publication Mediaweek reported this week the results of the test, including a finding that 47 percent of the viewers surveyed by VH1 said they paid more attention to the commercials in the Showstoppers format than they normally would. The growing interest among all networks in retaining viewers throughout commercial pods is primarily because of the advertisers and agencies are focusing on what are known as commercial ratings.

For decades, the ratings gathered by Nielsen Media Research, which help marketers select the series they support or ignore, have measured viewership of the programs. It was up to Madison Avenue to figure out how many viewers stayed to watch the spots.

Now, Nielsen is moving toward reporting average commercial minute ratings, based on the average of all the spots in a program. Madison Avenue is asking for more, in the form of ratings that would be brand specific — that is, for each individual commercial.

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The subject was a central theme of the conference at which Mr. Shaw spoke, sponsored by the Association of National Advertisers. The conference, called the TV Forum, drew about 400 people to the Marriott Marquis hotel in Midtown Manhattan.

“Without this change, I don’t know how long television can be sustainable as an advertising medium,” said O. Andrew Jung, senior director for advertising and media services at the Kellogg Company. He has been leading the push for brand-specific commercial ratings.

“We need to make our advertising more effective,” Mr. Jung said, but “25 percent of an average hour is not measured properly.” His reference was to the typical amount of commercials during 60 minutes of TV.

“We do not know and cannot quantify how many people watch commercials and how many people skip through commercials,” he added, which is disturbing for a \$70-billion industry. That is the estimated value of the commercial time sold each year on American television.

Another speaker at the TV Forum offered results from a test of what, if anything, viewers notice when they skip through spots while using digital video recorders.

The speaker, Beth Comstock, president for integrated media at NBC Universal, part of General Electric, described some preliminary data from “physioneurological research, with brain waves and eye tracking, of how people react to certain images on screen.”

“When people fast-forward commercials on a DVR,” Ms. Comstock said, “they’re scanning the commercials, eyeing the logos at the end of the commercials, registering the price in the auto ad.”

Even so, Ms. Comstock said, that is no substitute for “creating better marketing messages” that viewers will stop DVR replays to watch.

For example, “too often advertisers are just giving us their 30-second spots from television” to accompany programs being shown on nbc.com, she added. “That’s not good enough.”

The search for more effective methods of preventing viewers from changing channels or walking away during commercial breaks is nothing new. But the amount of time commercial pods last nowadays, and their cluttered nature, are bringing the subject additional attention.

In the so-called golden age of television, when shows did not make it on the air without sponsors, the commercials were often integrated into the programs. That helped keep viewers tuned in.

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General Electric is evoking that era in commercials in new-media outlets like video on demand and the Internet, which bear titles like “G.E. One-Second Theater” and “G.E.’s Imagination Theater” that echo the days when the company sponsored “General Electric Theater.”

Viewers in the 1950s and 1960s also kept watching commercials because the spots were often delivered by the hosts or stars of the shows in which they appeared. The industry coined a term, cast commercial, to describe spots in which, say, Jack Benny and Don Wilson bantered about Jell-O or Dick Van Dyke and Mary Tyler Moore puffed Kent cigarettes together.

The test of the Showstoppers segments during “Hogan Knows Best” on VH1 featured a comedian, David Wain, who appears on another series on the network, “Best Week Ever.”

What next, ABC asking Dr. McDreamy and Dr. McSteamy on “Grey’s Anatomy” to diagnose ailments during commercial pods?