REAL-TIME ATTRIBUTION SPEEDS TV CAMPAIGNS TO PROFITABILITY

When it comes to television attribution solutions, the race to deliver actionable insights is on.

Instead of waiting days or weeks, a new breed of real-time automated content recognition (ACR) solutions is promising to speed your television campaign to profitability in less time. In terms of timeliness of reporting and overall accuracy, ACR holds great promise compared to traditional methodologies that require hiding an encoded signal inside of TV commercials. With ACR the entire commercial can be fingerprinted (both audio and/or video) and automated systems can detect commercial occurrences with greater accuracy. Many attribution companies are partnering with ACR providers to automate the detection and reporting of commercials on a real-time basis. Before jumping aboard, let's look at some of the unique challenges that can compromise the quality of data from ACR providers.

It's important to understand that some ACR providers may not be able to report 100% of your airings.

For many TV campaigns, it's not uncommon for ACR providers to be missing 15 – 30% of ad occurrences. It really has nothing to do with the accuracy of ACR detections and everything to do with how these ACR providers get their television signals. To understand how airings get missed, it's important to first understand that there are two different types of ad inventory sold by national cable networks. Your campaign may be buying one or both of the following ad types:

Type 1 Ads – This type of ad runs in national ad breaks. Commonly referred to as a "national ad", Type 1 ads are seen by a national audience and benefit from Nielsen ratings allowing advertisers to understand the audience reached.

Type 2 Ads – This type of ad is purchased on a discounted basis. Nielsen doesn't measure the audience that Type 2 ads reach, but many advertisers, including direct-response advertisers, understand the value of this inventory based on alternative metrics such as consumer response. Unlike Type 1 ads, Type 2 ads do not air in all markets because local cable systems have the right to 'cover up' these ads with ads sold to local market advertisers. On larger networks, a smaller number of viewers will see Type 2 ads because of higher levels of local 'cover-up'. Type 2 ads are generally discounted for this and other reasons, in some cases selling for 10 cents on the dollar compared to Type 1 ads.

Many ACR providers don't see the Type 2 ads running on the cable networks because they monitor 'consumer-grade' feeds from local cable systems, or from other multichannel video programming distributors (MVPDs) such as DirecTV, Dish, etc. During Type 2 ad breaks, these ACR providers see the spots inserted by the MVPDs instead of the Type 2 ads being inserted by the national networks. This can be a huge problem considering that many direct-response and brand/direct campaigns purchase a substantial amount of Type 2 ads. If your campaign buys Type 2 ads, you'll want to work with an ACR provider that monitors commercial rather than consumer grade feeds. 'Commercial-grade' feeds should be sourced from commercial satellites and should have no local cover-up so that the TV monitoring company is able to report 100% of both Type1 and Type 2 ads.

Even if your campaign is buying 100% Type 1 ads, you may still encounter serious problems with ACR providers monitoring consumer-grade feeds.

The culprit is that consumer-grade feeds are void of special signals referred to as "digital program insertion" (DPI). It is the DPI signal that tells the ad inserters at the local TV provider that it's time for a local ad break, so they can begin inserting and covering up the Type 2 ads with commercials from their own local-market advertisers.

If your campaign is buying media directly from any of the MVPDs, or doing programmatic or advance advertising buys, there's a high probability that your ACR provider will see these ads and confuse them with national cable occurrences. The only way to separate the two different types of ad breaks is with DPI signals that are only available on commercial-grade feeds, provided the monitoring company is DPI compliant, which most aren't.

MVPDs such as Comcast can insert your ad across their entire footprint or target certain regions of the country, multiple markets, and even target certain demographics regardless of geography. Accordingly, without DPI signals, the ACR provider doesn't know for sure whether ads are being inserted locally or nationally. From an attribution perspective, reporting local cable airings as national airings are what we call "false positives," and they wreak havoc with attribution results.

Some ACR providers have tried to reduce the amount of false positives by monitoring dual-network feeds from different markets and only considering an ad to be national if they see it across both feeds.

While this may reduce the occurrence of false positives, it doesn't eliminate the problem given the frequency with which MVPDs insert ads across their national footprint and via advanced advertising campaigns. The number of false positives even with dual feeds is very concerning and the problem will only grow worse over time given the popularity of MVPD ad targeting and new programmatic models. The devil is in the details, as they say, and when you look at this type of ACR data carefully you will find numerous instances of false positives. If you're doing any local, regional, or programmatic buys on MVPDs, you'll want to carefully consider the capabilities of the ACR provider that you or your attribution company is using.

In summary, it's important for television-monitoring companies to monitor commercial-grade feeds, but it's equally important for them to be DPI compliant as this is the only way to properly segment Type 1 and Type 2 ad occurrences.

Considering how discounted Type 2 ads are, you wouldn't want your attribution company treating them the same as Type 1 ads. So be aware that some of the older encoding based technologies (monitoring solutions that are not ACR based) may also be using older technology standards that precede the DPI standard. The older standard used analog "cue-tones" to signal local ad breaks. However, most of the cable networks have phased out this old analog signaling in favor of digital standards (i.e. DPI) as part of the industry's 2009 digital transition. This means that providers that only detect cue-tones can no longer distinguish between Type 1 and Type 2 ads on the vast majority of cable networks today.

Depending on your situation, you may be well served to find a real-time solution provider that monitors commercial-grade feeds and is DPI compliant. Only then will your real-time attribution strategy be able to properly account for all of your airings.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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