Consumers' moment-to-moment processing of television commercials
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Chapter 2
Commercial Avoidance: Trends and Coping

2.1 Introduction

With the growing number of channels available on television, the development in the use of cable and satellite television programming, the rising penetration of the remote control and VCR’s in Western households and the upcoming technology of Personal Video Recorders (PVR’s), consumers’ control over exposure to TV programming and advertising has increased enormously. This chapter discusses how these technological developments have contributed to the increase in consumers’ control over and avoidance of viewing TV commercials. Switching during commercial breaks has become the major concern of advertisers, media agencies and producers. With creative message strategies, medium planning strategies, or a combination of both, advertisers have attempted to attract and retain consumers’ attention for their commercials and thus to decrease consumers’ physical, mental and electronical avoidance of TV commercials. This chapter presents some illustrations of these advertising strategies and discusses how these strategies may attract and keep consumers’ moment-to-moment attention to a TV commercial.

2.2 Trends of commercial avoidance

Over the past decades, four technological developments have significantly contributed to consumers’ control during exposure of TV commercials. Aside from other possible factors, such as the increase in the number of TV commercials, longer commercial pods and viewer expectations, these technological developments may therefore contrite to the increase of the number of audience members that avoid TV commercials. They are discussed in the following subsections.
2.2.1 The remote control device

The most investigated cause of increasing commercial avoidance, and the factor over which is the most agreement, is the use of a remote control (e.g., Aitchison 1985; Danaher 1995; De Meyer, Hendriks, and Fauconnier 1989; Greene 1988; Heeter and Greenberg 1985; Kaplan 1985; Kitchen 1985; Sylvester 1990; Van Meurs 1999; Zufryden, Pedrick, and Sankaralingam 1993). In the United States and in the Netherlands about 96 to 97% of the households have a remote-control for their main television set (Carat Nederland 2002; Media Dynamics, Inc. 2002). The overall conclusion is that homes with a remote control device switch channels significantly more than homes without a remote control device; hence having a remote control stimulates switching behavior during TV programming and advertising. For example, Sylvester (1990) found that 70% of the American homes had remote tuning capability in 1990 and in these homes, an increase of the switching incidence of about 75% was noted. A study conducted by AGB (AGB 1985; Aitchison 1985) in the United Kingdom reported that there was 70% more switching in homes having a remote control.

2.2.2 The number of channels

Technical developments such as cable and satellite have lead to a rapid increase in the number of channels available, and the time for advertisers to broadcast commercials. Also the increased opportunities for commercial television channels since 1989 in the Netherlands, has contributed to the number of channels available to Dutch viewers. For example, in 1988, television viewers received, on average, 11 channels, while in 1998 it was possible to receive an average of around 23 channels in the Netherlands (Van Meurs 1999) of which seven are Dutch commercial channels (Carat Nederland 2002). In the United States there were 1290 commercial channels available across the entire country in 2002 (Stevens 2003). Although more channels give viewers more time to watch television, their time spent on watching TV programs and commercials increased only slightly in comparison to the increase in programming and commercial time (Krugman and Rust 1993; Van Meurs 1999). Most studies that have investigated the relationship between the number of channels a household...
can receive and channel switching during TV commercial breaks found that commercial avoidance occurred more often in households that receive many channels (Billet Consultancy Ltd. 1992; Danaher 1995; Research International 1994). Zufryden et al. (1993) stated that cable typically provides access to several times the number of channels that are available over-the-air reception (See also Katz 1983) and therefore they found that households with cable TV were engaged in more channel switching than households without. Lipman (1992) also reported that commercial avoidance was higher on cable station than on network television. Lin (1994) concluded that homes with cable TV were much more active grazing different channels when they wished to make a viewing decision and were also more likely than homes without cable TV to be engaged in multiple-channel viewing during commercial breaks.

2.2.3 VCR

Videocassette recorders (VCR's) are widespread nowadays. They added the dimension of time as a new factor of television viewing (Hunt 1987). For example, in the United States 91 % of the TV owning households in 2001 also own a VCR (Stevens 2003). In the Netherlands, 78 % of the households own a VCR (Carat Nederland 2002). VCR's allow consumers to defer their viewing by recording television programs for later viewing - a phenomenon known as time-shifting (e.g., Henke and Donohue 1989; Harvey and Rothe 1986; Sims 1989). In addition VCR’s make it possible to view rented or purchased prerecorded videotapes. Remote control devices provided with virtually all VCR’s enable viewers to play, fast forward, rewind and pause prerecorded TV programs and commercials. Probably it is therefore, that owners of VCR's have the feeling of having more control over their television viewing behavior (Neijens and Smit 1998; Heeter and Greenberg 1985): They are less dependent on the programming on different channels and on different times and they are able to watch television more selectively. Although Lee and Lumpkin (1992) found that owners and non-owners did not significantly differ in their attitude towards zapping TV commercials and Van Meurs (1999) found that VCR owners switch channels less than non-VCR owners, other studies found strong support that more commercial avoidance takes place when a viewer or a household owns a VCR (A.C. Nielsen Co. 1984; Danaher 1995; Metzger 1986; Potter et al. 1988; Zufryden et al. 1993). Also, studies investigating
consumers’ viewing behavior during prerecorded television programming concluded that the majority of commercials were zipped or not viewed (see Table 1.1). Some more advanced VCR’s are even capable of detecting TV commercials during recording and automatically fast-forward through them during playing (Gottschalk 1996; Tarr 2001).

2.2.4 PVR

Instead of videotape, Personal Video Recorders (PVR’s) rely on high-capacity computer hard disks and take TV from cable, satellite, of the air, digitize the shows and save them to a hard drive that can hold 10 to 60 hours of programs (LaGesse and Rae-Dupree 2000; Poniewozik 1999). They basically consist of a TV tuner, storage and replay software, a modem used to fetch the program guide from the Internet, and a big hard drive. In addition to making video much easier to record, these recorders enable viewers to pause, rewind and replay (in slow-motion), and fast-forward live and recorded programming as if they were on a videotape (Poniewozik 1999). PVR’s pitch the idea of “personal” TV viewing (Dreyfuss 1999) and allow consumers to ignore traditional television schedules. Instead PVR’s search for and records TV programming tailored to viewer’s preferences based on previous “thumbs-up” and “thumbs-down” votings on programs (LaGesse and Rae-Dupree 2000; McPoland 2001). The recorders also allow viewers to zap, zip, skip or even strip out TV commercials in a more efficient way. Some are equipped with a “Quick skip” function enabling viewers to jump automatically ahead 30 seconds at a time, making it easy to skip commercials (LaGesse and Rae-Dupree 2000; Manes 2001; Singer 2000). A bunch of taps on this button lets the consumers sail past a pod of commercials. Others give the viewers three speeds to fast-forward through TV programs and commercials (Wiley 1999). Other PVR’s are equipped with the “Auto Skip” button, which allows the viewer to skip entire commercial pods at once (Pargh 2001). Like the more advanced VCR’s, some PVR’s also allow to digitally strip out commercials from recorded programming (Melillo 1999). In other words, PVR’s give viewers a tremendous control over their viewing behavior during TV programs and TV commercials (Hall 2001). For example, recent studies have shown that owners of a PVR skip 50 to 72 % of TV commercials (Elkin 2002, Friedman 2002, Saunders 2002; Tiegel 2000; see Table 1.1 for details).
2.2.5 Conclusions

Aside from other possible factors, such as the increase in the number of TV commercials, longer commercial pods and viewer expectations, these technological developments have significantly contributed to changes in the traditional way of television viewing. These technological developments have increased consumers' control over every moment in a TV program or commercial. Therefore it is even more important for advertisers to develop TV advertising in such a way that it captures and retains consumers' attention at every key moment during commercial exposure. As a result, understanding is necessary of consumers' moment-to-moment attention to and processing of commercials.

It is widely accepted that a viewer's response to a TV commercial, depends on the individual's motivation and ability to process the message (e.g., Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983; Schumann, Petty, and Clemons 1990). We suggest that the consumer’s decision to stop watching a commercial is a behavioral measure of a consumer's situational motivation to pay attention to and to process a commercial - the lower the motivation to pay attention and to process an ad, the greater the likelihood to stop watching it (see also Siddarth and Chattopadhyay 1998). Most advertising models agree that consumers need first to be exposed to the ad (contents) and need to pay attention to the stimulus under interest, before intermediate affective and cognitive responses take place that may affect consumers’ memory and purchase behavior (Rosbergen 1998; Vakratsas and Ambler 1999).

The advertisers' first objective for a commercial is to postpone the consumers' decision to stop watching a commercial during exposure and thus first to design a commercial that enables and motivates consumers to pay attention to, and process, every key commercial moment. For a TV commercial to capture and to retain consumers' attention, advertisers may either use a creative message strategy, a media planning strategy or a combination of both (Aaker et al. 1992; Ray 1982; Percy and Rossiter 1987). In this chapter we give some examples of these strategies that advertisers have used to gain and retain consumers’ attention to their commercials, and thus to reduce commercial avoidance. It is not the thesis' objective to investigate the effect of particular message and medium.
planning strategies on consumers’ attention to and processing of TV commercials. However, these illustrations reveal that advertisers often change ad contents and temporal aspects of TV commercials to retain consumers’ moment-to-moment attention to them and that it is therefore important to obtain insights into the influence of moment-to-moment commercial aspects on consumers’ processing of TV advertising.

2.3 Message strategies to retain attention

Using a message approach for TV advertising, the objective is to create commercial content that contrasts with respect to its environment (e.g., context, other commercials, TV programming or products) or a commercial that is so interesting to watch by itself that it attracts and retains consumers’ attention. Within the message strategy, decisions need to be made about the message appeals and message structure of a TV commercial. (Percy and Rossiter 1987). Some examples of these message strategies are:

2.3.1 Humor

Humor is one of the most commonly employed message strategy in advertising and researchers estimate that between 11 and 24 % of TV commercials in the U.S.A. use humor (Kelly and Solomon 1975; Speck 1991; Weinberger and Spotts 1989). Similar or higher usage has been reported in international studies of humor (Alden, Hoyer and Lee 1993; see also Unger 1995). The use of humor in advertising has been experimentally studied in several dozen studies over the past 25 years (Weinberger and Gulas 1992). Studies have shown that 94 % of the advertising practitioners see humor as an effective way to gain attention. Furthermore, 55 % of the advertising research executives believe humorous commercials are superior to non-humerous commercials in gaining attention (Madden and Weinberger 1984). Based on these findings we may also expect that humorous commercials are also less avoided by consumers.
2.3.2 Sexual appeals

Using sexual appeals in advertising is nowadays a very common message strategy (Reichert and Lambiase 1999). Advertisers' assumption that “sex attracts attention” has also been noted in numerous articles both in the general and business media (e.g., Horowitz 1987; Sullivan 1988; Trachtenberg 1986). Studies have found that advertising using sexual (versus nonsexual) sources creates more attention to the ad (Baker 1961; see for an overview Belch, Belch, and Villareal 1987) and creates greater interest in the commercial (Bello, Pitts, and Etzel 1983; Severn, Belch, and Belch 1990). However, it should be noted that most research investigating the influence of sexual appeals on consumers’ attention to the ad are done for print advertisements (Belch et al. 1987) and we should be careful in extending these conclusions to TV advertising. Sexual appeals used in ads are of many types and consist of a variety of elements. They often are grounded in visual elements, such as attractive models, and may portray varying degrees of nudity and suggestiveness (Cohen 1981; Severn, Belch, and Belch 1990). Sexual suggestiveness or double entendre appeal is utilized when some portion of the commercial has a double meaning. Investigating sexual appeals in TV commercials. Johnson and Satow (1978) report that when alternative interpretations have sexual overtones only certain consumer segments object, while others either fail to make an interpretation or do not find it offensive. Bello et al. (1983) showed that physical attractiveness in a controversial TV commercial increased the interest in the commercial. Although no academic research has investigated the use of nudity in TV commercials on ad effectiveness, research on print advertisements showed that the more nudity is used, the more attention-getting the advertisement is (Dudley 1999). Based on these results we believe that the use of certain sex appeals in TV commercials may increase consumers’ attention to them and lower their likelihood to stop viewing them. However, the use of other sexual appeals may generate offensive reactions (e.g. Johnson and Satow 1978) and therefore increase the consumers’ probability to stop watching the commercial.

2.3.3 “Shock” elements

Another message strategy that has been used by advertisers to attract consumers’ attention is the use of “shock” elements in TV commercials.
“Shock” commercials consist of a story and/or elements that the audience does not expect from commercials and they are designed to “shock” and to grab the attention of the audience (Edwards 1999; Manchanda, Dahl, and Frankenberger 2002). An example of the use of this strategy is the commercial of Cliff Freeman & Partners in 1998 (Crain 1999). They designed a wild and wacky Outpost.com TV commercial which featured a pack of frenzied wolves attacking a high school marching band. Using a different story and/or elements than expected from traditional commercials, advertisers hope to grab and keep consumers’ attention and prevent them from stopping to view the commercial. Indirectly support for this is found by the results of Manchanda et al. (2002). They showed that using “shock” elements in a public service print message that advocates condom use for the prevention of HIV/AIDS indeed enhances consumers’ attention.

2.3.4 Suspenseful elements
The use of tactics to arouse the suspense and curiosity of the audience about the brand, the message, or the executional content, to provide cues that lead to surprise at the end and to arouse reactions of suspense within TV commercials is a well-known message strategy often used by advertisers to increase consumers’ attention to their commercials (Alwitt 2002). Theories about curiosity state that curiosity arises when people become aware of the existence of a knowledge gap (Loewenstein et al. 1992; Loewenstein 1994), for example, not knowing the brand advertised, how a problem is solved or how the story ends in the commercial. This awareness of knowledge gap produces a feeling of deprivation or discomfort that can be alleviated only by obtaining the information needed to close the gap, for example by revealing the brand name, showing how the product solves the problem or revealing the story’s end. Mystery commercials are a special kind of suspenseful commercials. In these commercials, the brand only appears at the end of the commercial (Fazio, Herr, and Powell 1992). Viewers of mystery ads are drawn into the commercial, presumably in search of a specific question, namely: “What is it?” (Fazio et al. 1992). In order to find the answer on this question, they are more likely to stick with the commercial to the end, when the brand name is revealed. Alwitt (2002) showed that suspenseful commercials are better
liked and she found indirect support that suspenseful commercials maintain viewers’ attention better than non-suspenseful commercials. Therefore we think that suspenseful commercials will have a lower probability to be stopped watching.

2.4 Medium planning strategies to retain attention

Using a medium planning approach for TV advertising, advertisers have to make intelligent decisions with respect to the timing, frequency, placement and pattern of broadcasting a TV commercial in such a way that the probability of capturing consumers’ attention with the commercial is maximized (Percy and Rossiter 1987). Also, decisions made on the use of additional media besides the television for the commercial message belongs to the medium planning approach. Some examples of these medium strategies are:

2.4.1 Roadblock commercials

A good example of an advertiser’s medium planning strategy to prevent consumers’ avoidance of their commercials is to place the same commercial on all major channel at exactly the same time (Van Meurs 1999; Tse and Lee 2001; Zufryden et al. 1993). This strategy is called “roadblocking”. The reasoning is that when consumers zap away from the commercial at a particular point in time, they zap into the same time point of the same commercial on the other channel. In this way the probability of missing the commercial message is minimized. However, research on the effectiveness of the “roadblocking” strategy is lacking.

2.4.2 Twin commercials

One medium planning strategy to prevent viewers from avoiding commercials is “commercial warp around” or “twin commercials”, namely splitting a commercial into two parts within the same commercial pod. “Twin commercials” involve presenting a given commercial message as a split set of two mini-commercials promoting the identical brand instead of as one uninterrupted commercial. Then, the set of two commercial spots that belong to each other is separated by multiple commercials from other
brands. The two mini-commercials are often different, where the first one is a long commercial and the second one is a short reminder commercial (Faasse 1994), but they can also be identical (Singh and Linville 1995). An example of a twin commercials set is the Energizer Bunny commercial (Roehm and Roehm 2001, p. 249): “The first mini-commercial of the set ended with the bunny parading through. Several time shots later, a second mini-commercial would appear and provide an addendum of the first. The bunny was shown continuing on its rampage to “keep going and going and going””. Twin commercials may keep consumers’ attention to the entire commercial “package” by leaving relevant information in the first commercial, e.g. the brand name or giving referring information to the second commercial (e.g., the Energizer Bunny commercial), such that consumers become curious and interested in viewing the second commercial and stick with the commercial break. Therefore the design of ad contents within twin commercials may also be part of an advertiser’s message strategy. Also, other viewers who missed the first commercial will still be confronted with the ad as they are exposed to the second commercial when zapping into the commercial break (e.g., Van Meurs 1999). In this way, advertisers try to increase the probability of consumers’ confrontation with their message. On the other hand, consumers may find twin commercials very irritating (de Swarte 1999). Because of wear-out by being overloaded to repeated confrontations within one commercial break (e.g., Singh and Linville 1995), twin commercials may have the opposite effect and increase commercial avoidance. However, research by Van Meurs (1999) found that no significantly more or less switching takes place during commercial breaks including twin commercials.

2.4.3 Interactive commercials

Another form of a medium planning, but also a partially message strategy is interactive TV advertising. In this strategy the commercial message is linked between television and internet in order to get the consumer more actively involved during the TV commercial. Recent technology related to the development of the PVR’s makes it possible to merge the television set and the PC to get interactive set-top boxes. This allows viewers to surf the Internet on their television screen via their interactive remote control devices, while watching TV programming and commercials (Cooper 2000).
In this way PVR’s enable content producers and advertisers to deliver internet content that is synchronized to a TV program or commercial (Stark 1999). PVR’s allow advertisers to show brief audio and video clips promoting a product with on-screen links that users can click to buy merchandise or retrieve more product information (Vonder Haar 1999). For example, a short commercial message (of e.g. 2 seconds) can pop up on the TV screen during TV programming, in which the consumer is asked whether s/he wants to buy a certain product at this moment, for example, a pizza (Adams 1999). If the consumer does not want a pizza, s/he can ignore the short message. If the consumer wants a pizza, s/he can click on the message and gets a longer presentation and a menu. Next the consumer can make a choice and because the PVR knows the zipcode, it contacts the local pizza vendor by phone or Internet and the desired pizza is delivered at home. In this way it is possible to deliver targeted TV advertising to PVR users who can learn more about the ad by clicking on it (Dickson 2000; Tiegel 2000). Interactive ads also allow viewers to store the commercial message and associated internet-link and look at the commercial content later (Tiegel 2000). A recent study by Respond TV, in which an interactive pizza commercial was shown during a TV program, showed that the interactive commercials were effective in terms of number of click-throughs and pizza orders (Cooper 2000). Not being confronted with long undesired commercials that interrupt the program being watched, we expect that interactive commercials decrease commercial avoidance, because the messages are short-lasting and do not disturb viewing behavior by giving irrelevant information to the viewer. At the same time, consumers willing to find more out about the commercial and product or service promoted are given the opportunity to do so. In this way interactive commercials are very efficient is reaching their target customers. However, future research should investigate this expectation.

2.4.4 “Personalized” commercials

The most recent medium planning strategy to target commercials to viewer’s interests is the use of demographic variables collected by the PVR companies to broadcast more “personalized” commercials. With precise viewing details known, advertisers are able to target their commercials more carefully, and deliver specific commercials aimed at specific demographic profiles to the PVR companies (Singer 2000). Based on
collected demographic information of the viewer, the PVR software downloads instructions from advisers on which commercials to play to this viewer (Stark 1999). A kind of ad-switching process occurs in which general market commercials in a broadcast can be switched for targeted spots from the same advertiser - a charter sponsor - that have been downloaded into the PVR (Linnett 2000). Since, in "personalized" commercials, advertisers have to make decisions not only on commercial timing and placement, but also on the ad contents, this strategy is a combination of medium planning and message strategy. For example ACTV, a pioneer-company in individualized TV, encodes multiple advertisements in a way that the PVR seamlessly selects the appropriate commercial based on a demographic profile of the viewer. Procter & Gamble may give ACTV a series of product ads, and ACTV determines the appropriate audience for each ad using demographic targeting software, which has been used by direct marketers for years and modified for television (Stark 1999). Another example of a different form of more "personalized" TV advertising of the PVR is to allow viewers to pick the commercials they want to see (Stark 1999). For example, a Toyota commercial will show several models and then asks the viewer which of the models s/he wants to learn more about. By pressing a button on the remote control, the viewer can determine which commercial will be shown (Stark 1999). By pressing nothing, the viewer gets the default commercial. Because of its novelty, no research has been done on the effectiveness of more "personalized" commercials. However, it may be argued that commercials that fit better to the viewer’s profile are less often avoided.

2.4.5 Conclusions
The previous sections described how different advertisers’ strategies may positively influence consumers’ attention to TV commercials. It must be said that these strategies may also have positive effects on other ad effectiveness measures, such as comprehension, ad and brand attitude, recognition and recall, but they may also have no or a negative effect on other ad effectiveness variables (MacInnis, Moorman, and Jaworski 1991). To give some examples, humorous commercials attract attention, but do not significantly influence ad comprehension and do not show to have an advantage over non-humor commercials to increase persuasion.
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(Weinberger and Gulas 1992). Though sexual appeals enhance motivation to pay attention to an ad, these same cues found to produce less brand recall (e.g., Chestnut, LaChance, and Lubitz 1977) and fewer thoughts about the brand (Severn et al. 1990). Bello et al. (1983) showed that physical attractiveness did not increase the affect to the product or purchase intention. Some sexual commercials are found very offensive (Johnson and Satow 1978), and the same holds for “shock” commercials (Tomblin 2002). Mystery ads were found effective in brand recall for novel brands, but not for familiar brands (Fazio et al. 1992). Twin commercials and roadblocking increase the probability to get consumers’ attention, but may also increase consumers’ irritation (de Swarte 1999).

These findings are interesting because they suggest that a trade-off may occur between consumers’ attention and other ad processing measures. This means that advertisers’ strategies to keep consumers glued to their commercials, may damage other ad effectiveness measures. However, Stewart and Furse (1986) concluded that increases in processing time, thus length of ad exposure and length of brand exposure, enhanced comprehension and memory for messages (i.e., cognition). Tse and Lee (2001) also showed that people who did not zap TV commercials performed better on brand recall than zappers. Increased exposure to the message may also facilitate more consumers’ processing of the ad, because the advertiser has more time to show or to reiterate key points. Therefore, the first important stage in preventing consumers from avoiding commercials is to attract and retain their attention to every key moment in the commercial.

2.5 Discussion and concluding remarks

Due to many alternative (time-shifting) viewing opportunities, and intelligent remote controls that link TV programming and internet contents, TV-using may change from a passive medium (see Krugman 1965b; Barwise and Ehrenberg 1988) to a medium in which consumers control what to watch at every moment. The consequence for advertisers is that consumers have tremendous control over their viewing behavior during every moment of commercial exposure and a commercial fragment may be crucial in the consumers’ decision to continue or discontinue to viewing the commercial.
Therefore it is important to advertisers to capture and retain consumers’ attention during every key moment in the commercial. This chapter illustrated several message and medium planning strategies to attract and retain consumers’ attention or to decrease the probability of missing the consumers’ attention. Although previous studies have indicated that these strategies may increase consumers’ attention to TV commercials, their results rely on indirect overall measures of consumers’ attention (e.g., suspenseful elements in Alwitt (2002); humor appeals in Madden and Weinberger (1984)), managerial intuition (e.g., sexual appeals in Horowitz (1987), Sullivan 1988, and Trachtenberg (1986)), results for print advertising (sexual appeals in Belch et al. (1987)) or they do not rely on any testing results (e.g., roadblocking and “personalized” commercials). The message and medium planning strategies have a dynamical nature in terms of message structure, timing, frequency, placement and pattern across and within commercials. For example, it may be argued that humor is a dynamic executional cue (see also Chapter 3) that changes over time during commercial duration and thus that the placement of the humor during the commercial (message structure) may influence the commercial moment when consumers stop watching the commercial. For example, when the first job of the humor is to attract attention and then impart pleasant information leading towards a soft sell, humor often appears at the beginning of the commercial (Kelly and Solomon 1975), which means that most consumers may stop watching at the start of the commercial when they “got the joke”. When the humor is more used at the end of the commercial, which is the case in most commercials (Kelly and Solomon 1975), it might be argued that most consumers stick with the commercial to the end. However, the question rises on how (the dynamical elements of) the message and medium planning strategies influence consumers’ moment-to-moment attention, moment-to-moment ad processing, their overall assessments of commercial and their moment-to-moment decisions to continue or discontinue to watch during commercial exposure. The next chapter describes why commercials are such dynamical stimuli that consist of a lot of “moments” that facilitate moment-to-moment consumers’ attention to and processing of TV commercials.