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Web vs. TV: Research Aims To Gauge Ads

Goals Include Finding Optimal Mix Of Media and Long-Term Results

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When marketers buy ads on the Web, they can track everything from the number of clicks an ad receives from a certain ZIP Code to how long a person watches a video clip on a specific site.

But while those metrics help marketers gauge how successfully online ads lead to purchases in the short term, they don't reveal how the ads affect a brand's image over longer periods. And they don't help marketers compare an online ad's impact with that of a television ad.

Now, as a growing number of big marketers allocate as much as 20% of their ad budgets to online marketing -- often at the expense of TV -- they are increasingly interested in those questions. And ad-research firms are taking steps to supply answers.

IAG Research, which uses online polling to measure how well TV viewers remember commercials, is the latest firm to do so. IAG is adding questions about Internet ads to its surveys, acting at the request of longtime client [Toyota Motor](#) and several others. Toyota has been putting more of its ad budget into online in the past couple of years and wanted to compare how the ads did compared with TV spots.

"We wanted to be able to have a consistent measurement tool to really start judging the Internet compared to TV," says Kim McCullough, Toyota's corporate manager of marketing communications. She says Toyota is trying to understand questions like "What is the optimal mix between TV and the Internet? Where are their synergies?"

Measuring the effectiveness of any ad is fraught with difficulties. Advertisers have long complained about the lack of hard data on how well TV ads work. Nevertheless, firms like IAG, as well as rivals including ARSgroup and TNS Media, have come up with various ways to give marketers some idea of how their ads do.

IAG, whose clients include [American Express](#), [Procter & Gamble](#) and major TV networks in addition to Toyota, conducts online surveys using a group of more than two million consumers, who visit a Web site called RewardTV.com to answer questions about TV shows they watch. In the midst of the questions, IAG sprinkles in questions about the ads that appeared during the TV program. IAG now will include questions about Internet ads in the surveys. By participating, panelists earn points that they can redeem for prizes and also have the chance to win bigger items, such as \$10,000 in cash or three years of free gas.

But measuring Web ads is a trickier business than measuring their TV counterparts. The use of targeted ad sales means that two people visiting the same Web site aren't likely to see the same ads. IAG compensates for that in its surveys, placing "cookies," or small pieces of tracking data, on panelists' hard drives so its system knows when panelists are exposed to an ad.

Toyota is the first advertiser to use IAG's new Web-measurement tools and has yet to receive any data.

IAG is measuring all kinds of Web ads, from banner ads to video spots and sponsorships. IAG Co-Chief Executive Alan Gould predicts that standard banner advertising might prove to be less effective than previously thought. He notes IAG's data show that many TV ads don't work. "The same thing will happen with the Internet," he says.

Other companies have their own tools to track online ads against traditional media. Market-research firm TNS Media recently put together a new unit that links its traditional and digital media research groups. The goal is to be able to track ads and consumer behavior across all media. ARSgroup, which has done advertising research for 30 years, has started testing a way to help advertisers measure how engaging their ads are across a number of outlets, including the Web, TV and in movie theaters. ARSgroup assembles groups of panelists to test different elements of an ad campaign before its launch.

Despite all of the tools designed to measure ads, some marketers caution against putting too much value in the results. "Short of somehow being able to have a chip in my brain, I'm not sure how you could know what it was that really got me to make a purchase," says Bruce Haggerty, director of marketing research at Nestlé USA, a unit of Swiss food giant Nestlé.