Taking the guesswork out of outdoor

Thanks to the US Military's global positioning system, it's become a whole lot easier to find your way around a strange city. It's also becoming a whole lot easier to determine whether your outdoor spend is buying the right audiences, what with the South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF) becoming one of the first in the world to embrace an electronic audience measurement system which combines refined GPS technology with research methodology.

Developed by Nielsen Outdoor in the States, and piloted in South Africa by SAARF and Nielsen Media Research, the new empirical outdoor measurement system should bring accountability into the outdoor buying and selling game.

How it works

Most people in the industry know at least the basic facts about how SAARF's new electronic outdoor audience survey works. Respondents set out each morning for nine days with a cellphone-sized Nielsen Personal Outdoor Device, or Npod, in their pocket or bag. Every five seconds, these Npods use GPS technology to get a fix on respondents' locations to within half a meter, as well as their speed and direction of travel, whether by car or foot.

While GPS itself is nothing new, the Npods go one better than the average global positioning systems found in running watches and other consumer tracking and mapping gadgets. Unlike such devices, the Npods are able to determine a location even if they can't get a fix on the usual three or more satellites needed to triangulate a position. So even when driving through high-rise areas, or when running down a tree-lined road, SAARF's respondents can continue to be tracked.

The Npods gather data on some 13 000 GPS-determined locations per respondent per day, depending on how long the Npod is in use. These locations are then plotted onto geographic information system (GIS) road and area maps to determine people's routes, whether on foot or in vehicles. The routes are then married to the GIS-coded outdoor site data provided by outdoor media owners, which pinpoints the position of outdoor inventory ranging from street poles to gantries. Nielsen Media Research is also provided with the direction in which these sites are facing, and their distance from the road.

More than mere geography

At this point in the process, it is known who travelled past which site during the nine days when the Npod was carried. But the new system has had to be more than just a technology-enabled traffic count.

"Used on its own, the raw travel data tends to produce fairly large numbers of viewings for all outdoor types," says Ken McArthur, MD of Nielsen Media Research. "We needed to go one step further, and determine how much of that passing traffic had a real opportunity to see the site."

SAARF's CEO, Dr Paul Haupt, says that by doing this, the new electronic outdoor research "will move outdoor into the same realm as TV, print and radio, which have always been sold on the basis of opportunities to see."

The thinking is that just because a million people use a particular road in a week, they do not all have the same opportunity to see a site. In reality, of those one million potential viewers, maybe only the 200 000 who walked on the pavement have a real opportunity to see the branded dustbin, while people driving past at speed do not have the same opportunity.

Impact zone

Nielsen Media Research has therefore developed the concept of an impact zone, which will be used to calculate opportunities to see. Currently in the process of fine-tuning these criteria with Out of Home Media SA (OHMSA), McArthur explains that factors such as size and the site's angle to the road will be used to determine these impact zones.

"Based on these criteria, we would ascribe an opportunity to see only once the respondent entered the site's impact zone," he says. The branded dustbin would, for instance, have a smaller impact zone than the gantry across the road. People would need to pass through a much narrower geographical zone to have an opportunity to see the dustbin, whereas with the gantry, a person whose position was tracked some way off could nonetheless have seen the larger site.

So while SAARF's media research cannot show whether people actually saw an advertising message and acted on it, by February 2007, once the first outdoor data for Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal is released, the industry will know reliably whether people at least had the chance to see the message. It's then up to the creatives to make the most of that opportunity.

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