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Spot Load Study 2005:

Managing Radio Commercial Inventories for Advertisers and Listeners

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Introduction

In 1999, Arbitron and Edison Media Research conducted a research study to probe listeners' perceptions toward radio advertising. At that time, most radio stations were increasing inventory to deal with the rising demand for ad inventory sparked mainly by the dotcom boom.

Now, in 2005, Arbitron and Edison Media Research revisit the subject of spot loads. In the current environment many of the issues are the same as they were six years ago, but the context has changed. The dotcom boom is a distant memory, ownership consolidation has slowed considerably, and new sources of audio entertainment and information are far more common.

Arbitron and Edison Media Research are pleased once again to provide compelling and insightful research for the benefit of the radio industry. In this second spot load study, we reexamine many of the findings from the first spot load study, including determining the degree to which listeners perceive an increase or decrease in the number of radio commercials, and we also ascertain how listeners would like programming and advertising to be presented. In addition, we evaluate several techniques that some radio stations are employing to manage the number and length of individual commercial breaks and to communicate these changes to their listeners. We evaluate radio listener perceptions in this study, rather than engage in experiments or measurements of actual behavior or usage. Certain topics, such as the impact of commercial length and the relative value of a given position within a cluster of commercials, are beyond the scope of this study.

This document and all charts for the Arbitron/Edison Spot Load Study 2005 can be found at www.arbitron.com and www.edisonresearch.com, along with the numerous national studies that Arbitron and Edison Media Research have conducted on the Internet and multimedia, media consumption of 12- to 24-year-olds, media usage at work, and media usage in the car.

How the Study Was Conducted

In March of 2005, 1,003 telephone interviews were conducted with Arbitron radio diarykeepers from the Fall 2004 survey period. The sample was drawn to represent a national overview of radio listeners in continuously measured markets. Listeners' responses were compared with data obtained from the Arbitron radio ratings diary, including format preferences and time spent listening to radio overall and by location.

The results from this survey were tracked against the previous survey, conducted in June 1999. For that survey, 1,071 Arbitron radio diarykeepers from the Winter 1999 survey were reinterviewed. The sample was also drawn to represent a national overview of radio listeners in continuously measured markets.

We will begin with a summary of main messages from the study. The key findings of the research will then be reviewed, followed by recommendations for the radio industry.



Main Messages

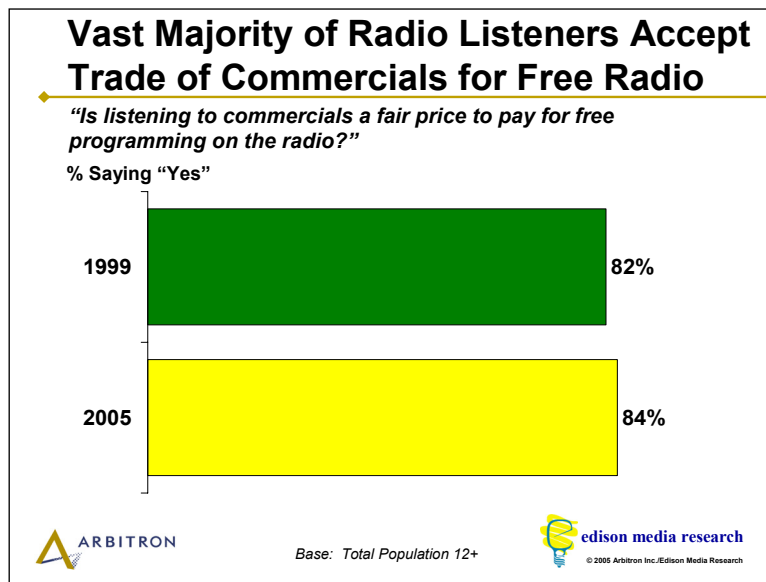
Overall, this study reveals several significant main messages:

- A large majority of Americans continue to support the basic premise of commercial radio. More than eight in 10 say that listening to commercials is a fair price to pay for free programming on the radio.
- Respondents overwhelmingly said that television has more commercials than radio and that the commercials they see on TV are more intrusive than the ones they hear on radio. Consumers are also more likely to tune out during television commercials than they are to tune out during radio commercials.
- A majority of listeners say they never tune away from radio commercials while they are listening to the radio at work or at home. Even while listening to the radio in a car, where the ability to switch stations is usually easier, only one-third of listeners say they “always” or “usually” change stations during a commercial break. Only a small minority of radio listeners claim that they typically switch the station immediately upon hearing the beginning of a commercial break—6% of those listening at work say that they switch immediately; 11% at home; and 28% in car.
- The vast majority of respondents find radio commercials to be informative. While some in the radio industry assume that listeners hate the very idea of commercials, the opposite is true. More than eight out of 10 Americans say listening to commercials is a fair price to pay for free radio programming.
- Listeners indicate that the quality of the commercial is as significant a consideration as the quantity of the commercials. Younger listeners are more irritated by numbers of commercials, while older listeners are bothered more by “annoying” ads. A “one-size-fits-all” spot load strategy may not be the best choice for every radio station. Reactions to the quantity and the quality of commercials vary by age, gender and format preference.
- The younger the listener, the louder the complaints about stations playing too many commercials. Also, 12- to 24-year-olds are much more likely to respond positively to stations that reduce the number of commercials that they play. Three months into industry efforts to address spot loads, more than a third of 12- to 24-year-old listeners have noticed stations playing fewer commercials and shorter breaks.
- Listeners say they generally prefer more frequent, shorter commercial breaks as opposed to long blocks of programming with long blocks of commercials. For example, when asked how to distribute 12 commercials in an hour—two blocks of six commercials per hour or three blocks of four commercials per hour—the clear choice is three blocks of four commercials.

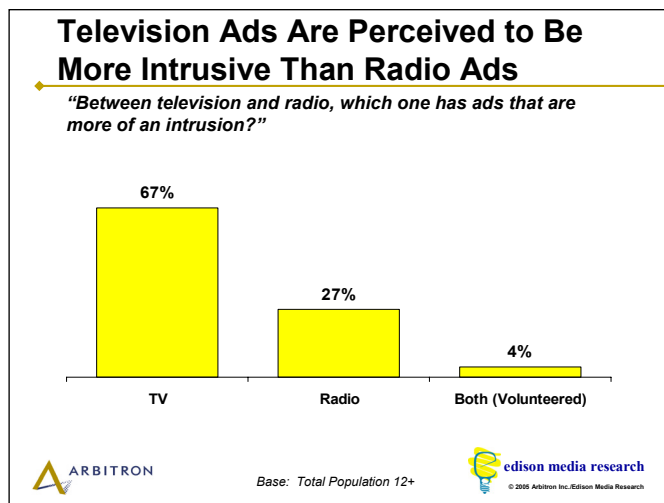
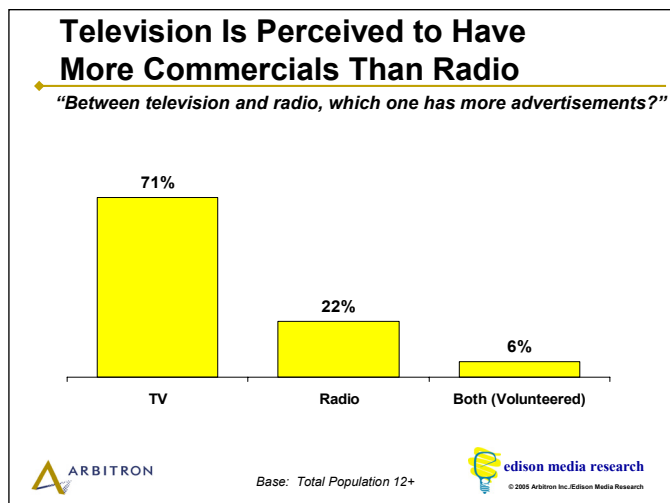
Key Findings

A. Listener Perceptions of Spot Loads

1. **The vast majority of Americans feel listening to commercials is a fair price to pay for free programming on the radio.** The basic premise of commercial radio is viewed by most radio listeners to be a fair deal. When asked the question “Is listening to commercials a fair price to pay for free programming on the radio?,” 84% of all persons age 12 and over agreed. This result matches our finding from 1999 (82% said “yes”) and is consistent among all ages, even among the hard-to-please teenagers.



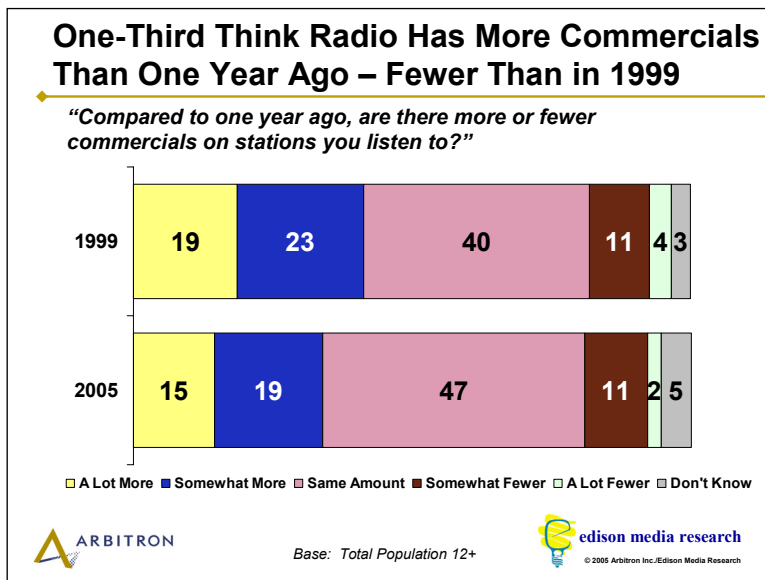
- 2. Overwhelmingly, Americans say television has more commercials (71%) than radio (22%).** By more than a three-to-one majority, consumers perceive that television has more commercials than radio. Despite all of the recent discussion about radio spot loads, it is television that is seen as the medium with the most commercials. In addition, when asked which of the two media has advertising that is more intrusive, television is mentioned far more than radio (67% vs. 27%).



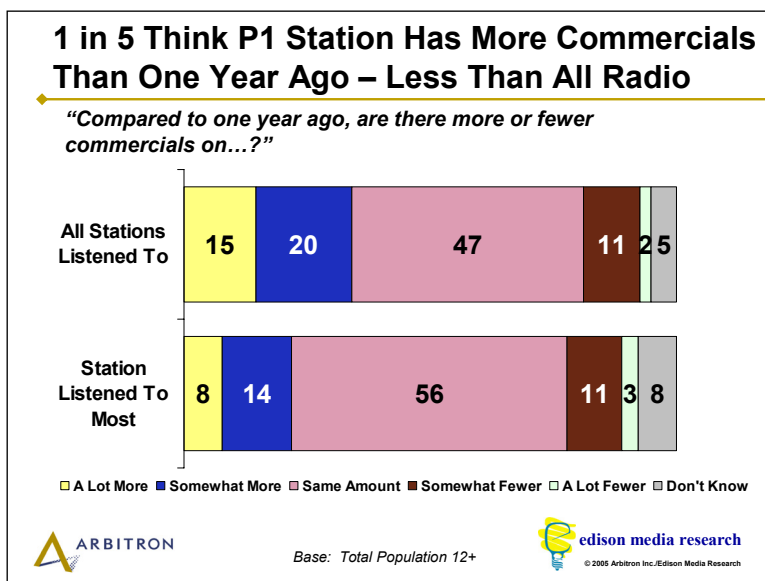
Throughout this study, we see that there is more sensitivity to radio commercials among younger respondents. While a majority of younger respondents also say that television has more commercials than radio, that belief is not as strong with older respondents. Nearly one-third of 12- to 24-year-olds (32%) say radio has more commercials than television, though only 13% of those 55 and over say radio has more commercials than television. In addition, 23% of 25- to 54-year-olds choose radio. Similarly, younger respondents are more likely than older respondents to find radio commercials to be more intrusive than television commercials, with 44% of 12- to 24-year-olds finding radio commercials to be more intrusive compared to 27% among 25- to 54-year-olds and 12% among those 55 and over.

While consumers view television commercials as more numerous and more intrusive than radio commercials, more consumers say they pay attention to television ads. When specifically asked which has commercials that make you pay more attention, respondents choose television (64%) over radio (30%) by more than a two-to-one margin.

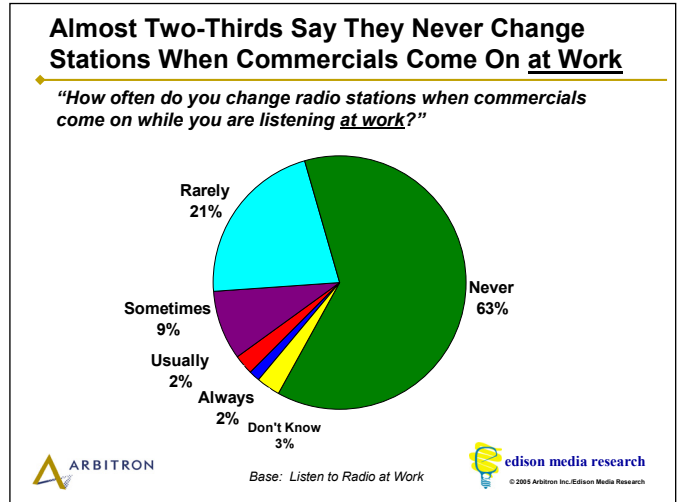
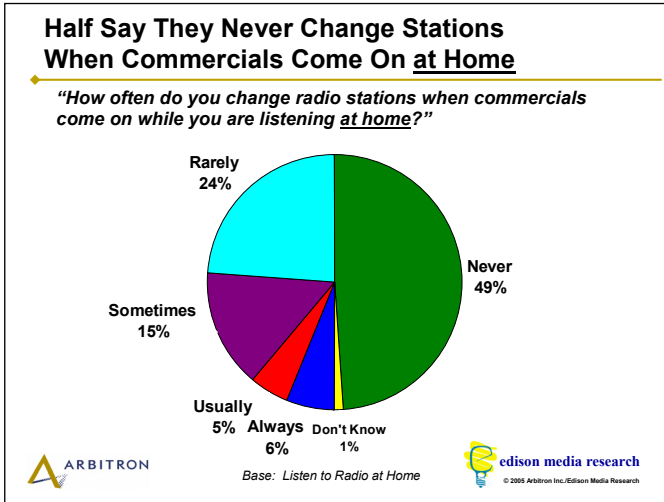
3. While 34% of radio listeners think radio has more commercials than one year ago, that number is down from 41% in 1999. Nearly half (47%) say that commercial levels on radio are the same, and 13% indicate stations are playing fewer commercials than one year ago. When we examine the actual listenership from the Arbitron diaries of these respondents, there is no difference in current time spent listening among those saying radio is playing more commercials, those saying radio plays the same amount and those saying radio is playing less.



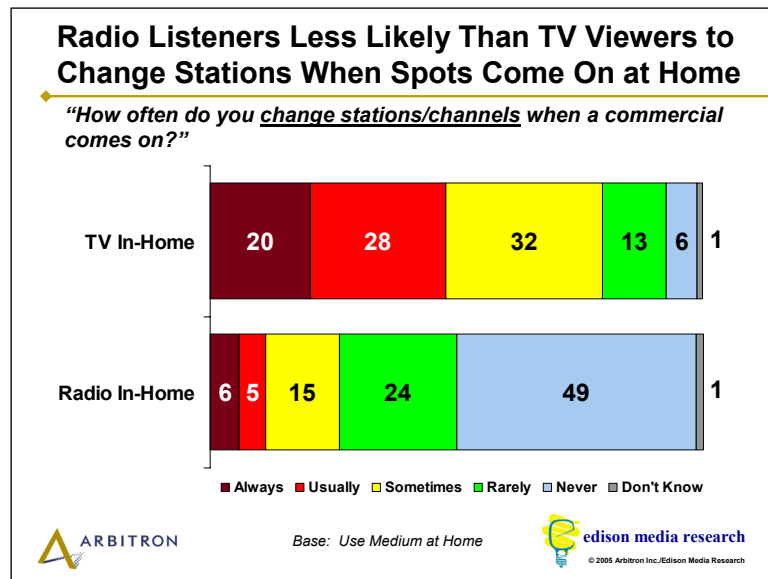
4. Fewer listeners perceive an increase in commercials on the one radio station that they listen to the most. Only 22% say that the station they listen to most is playing more commercials than one year ago; this number is down from 32% who said so in the 1999 survey. Fifty-six percent say that their P1 (first-preference) radio station is playing the same amount of commercials and 14% say that their P1 station is playing fewer commercials. The data indicate that individual stations—at least among the listeners who listen most often—have less of an image problem for playing more commercials than the radio industry as a whole.



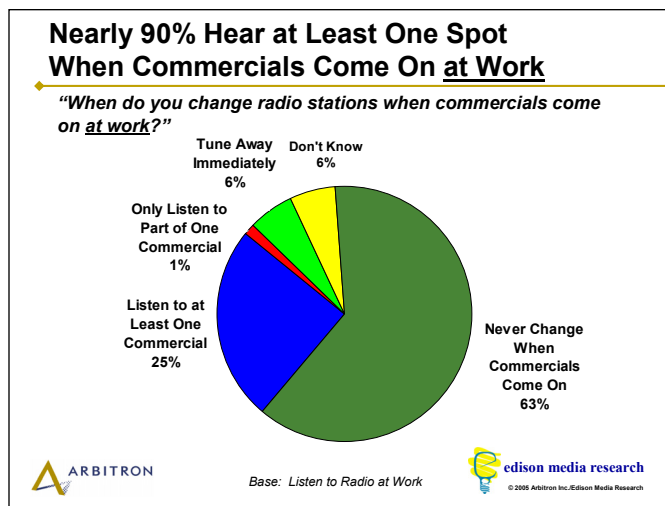
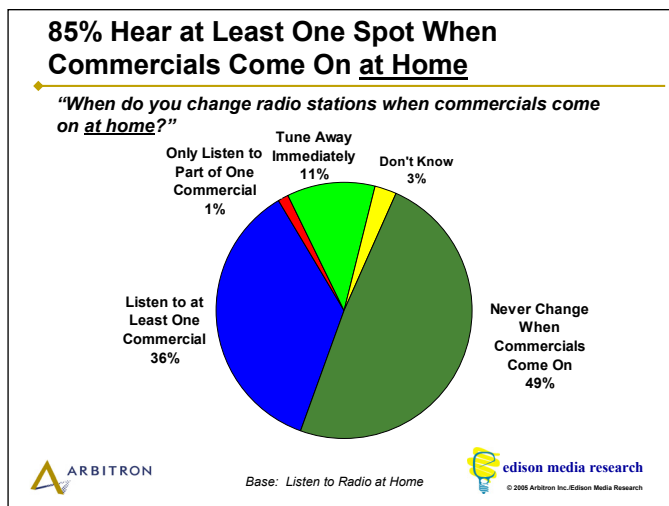
5. **Half of the people who listen to radio at home and nearly two-thirds of those who listen to radio at work say they “never” change stations when commercials come on.** Radio listeners seldom (“rarely” or “never”) change stations when commercials come on at home or at work, the locations that account for 63% of radio listening (Arbitron American Radio Listening Trends, Fall 2004, Average Quarter-Hour, Monday-Sunday 6AM-MID, Persons 12+). Just one in 10 (11%) radio listeners at home “always” or “usually” change stations when commercials come on. Only 4% of radio listeners at work “always” or “usually” change stations when commercials come on.



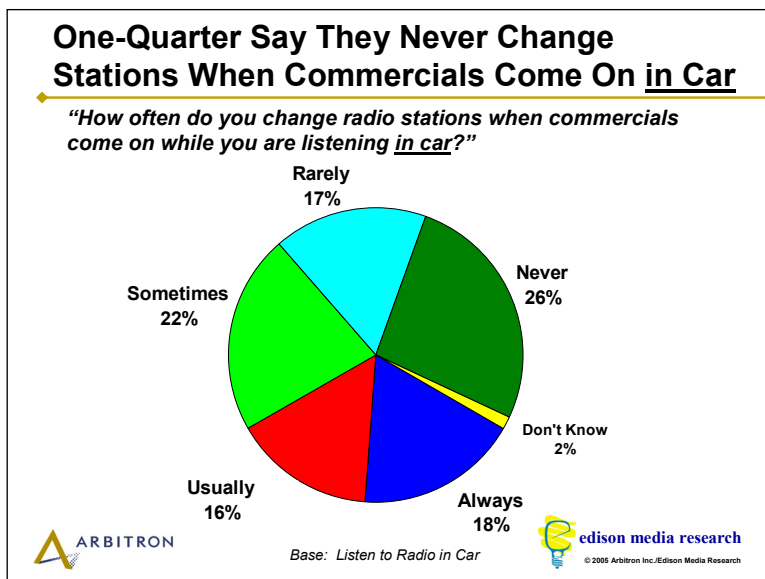
6. **During commercial breaks, consumers are more likely to change channels while watching TV than to change stations while listening to the radio.** While watching television at home, only 6% of viewers say they “never” change channels when television commercials come on, with a total of 19% saying they “rarely” or “never” do. Nearly half of radio listeners at home (49%) say they “never” change stations when radio commercials come on, with a total of 73% saying they “rarely” or “never” do. Nearly half (48%) of television viewers “always” or “usually” change channels when a television commercial comes on. Just one in 10 (11%) radio listeners at home “always” or “usually” change stations when radio commercials come on.



7. **Fully 85% hear at least one spot when the commercials come on at home; nearly 90% hear at least one spot when commercials come on at work.** We asked respondents, “When do you change radio stations when commercials come on at home?” Nearly half (49%) said they never change stations when commercials come on at home, and another 36% said they listen to at least one commercial—combining for 85% of respondents typically listening to *at least one* commercial when listening to radio at home—with only 11% saying they tune away immediately. Among people who listen to the radio at work, 63% said they never change stations when commercials come on, and another 25% said they listen to at least one commercial—88% typically listening to *at least one* commercial when listening to radio at home, with only 6% saying they tune away immediately.



8. **Even in the car, where there is easier access to the dial or preset buttons, one in four “never” change stations when commercials come on.** Twenty-six percent “never” change stations during a commercial break when listening in car, with 46% saying they typically listen to *at least one* commercial. Only one-third (34%) “always” or “usually” change stations when commercials come on.



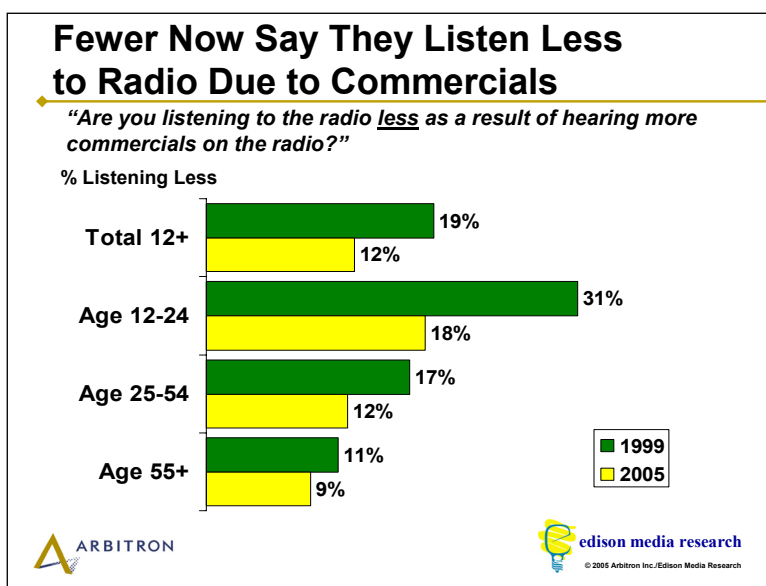
9. Twenty-two percent say radio commercials are “always” or “usually” informative. Fifty-seven percent say they are “sometimes” informative, and only 19% say they are “rarely” or “never” informative. These results are consistent with those from the 1999 survey.

10. One in four listeners say that radio commercials are “always” or “usually” intrusive.

Twenty-four percent say radio commercials are “always” or “usually” intrusive. About half (48%) say they are “sometimes” intrusive and about one-quarter (26%) say that they are “rarely” or “never” intrusive. These results are also quite consistent with those from our 1999 survey. Those who listen most to an Alternative format station are more sensitive on this issue, with 39% saying that radio commercials are “always” or “usually” intrusive.

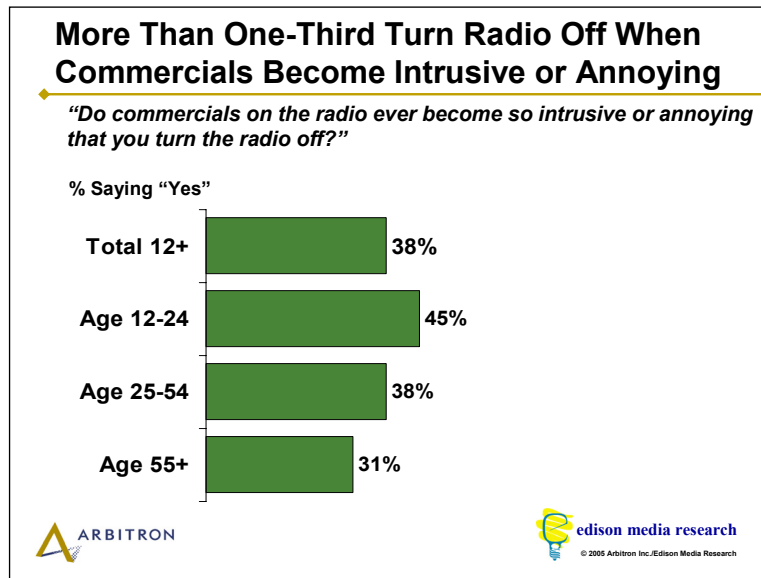
B. Listener Reaction to Commercials

11. Fewer now say they are listening less to radio because of increased commercials. Overall, 12% of listeners indicate they are listening less to radio due to a perceived increase in the number of commercials. This compares to 19% in 1999. The drop was even more dramatic among younger listeners. Eighteen percent of 12- to 24-year-olds (down from 31%) indicate they are listening less to radio, compared to 12% for 25- to 54-year-olds and 9% for those 55 and older.

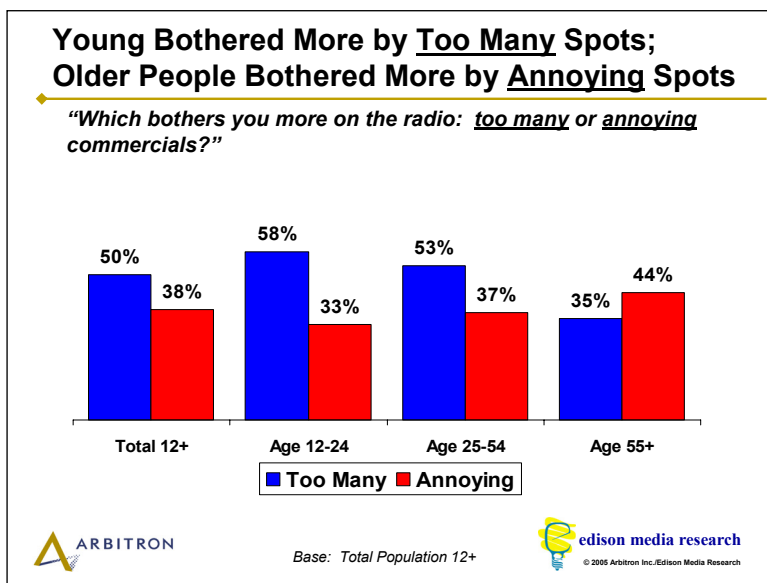


Not surprisingly, listeners to younger-targeted formats such as Contemporary Hit Radio (21%), Urban Contemporary (14%) and Alternative (13%) are more likely to say they are listening to radio less compared to the norm.

12. Thirty-eight percent of listeners find that commercials become so “annoying” or “intrusive” that they sometimes turn off the radio. This number is consistent with the results from the 1999 survey (42%). Nearly half of 12- to 24-year-olds (45%) say commercials are “intrusive” and “annoying.” Accordingly, Alternative (60%) and CHR format partisans (50%) are most likely to turn off the radio when the commercials become too “annoying” or “intrusive.” This finding, along with others in this study, suggests that radio stations should be addressing the quality of commercials as well as the quantity of commercials they air on the station.



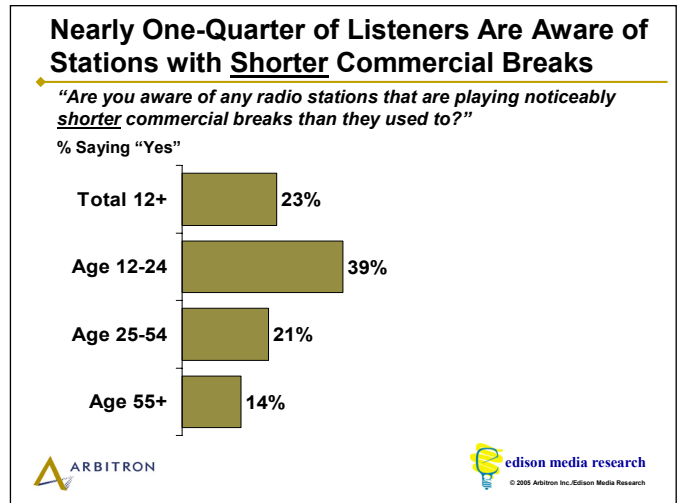
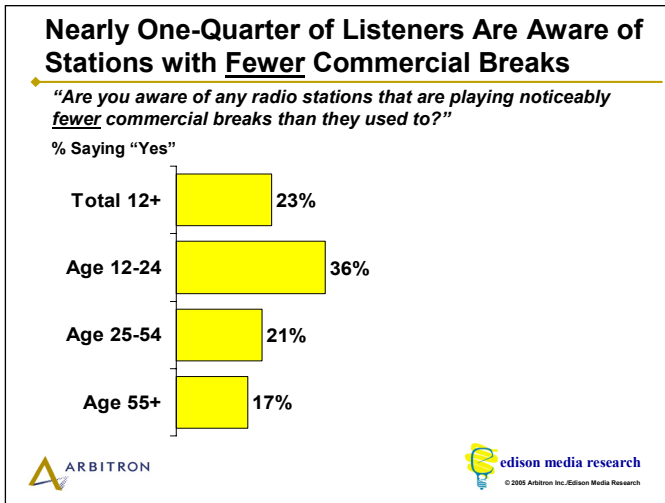
13. Younger listeners are more irritated by the number of commercials, while older listeners are bothered more by “annoying” ads. Fifty percent of Americans say they are bothered more by radio stations that play “too many” commercials; 38% say they are bothered more by stations that play “annoying” commercials; an additional 10% volunteered that they are equally bothered by both “too many” commercials and “annoying” commercials. Many advertising and media executives tend to focus on the number of commercials as a key issue. Listeners indicate that the quality of the commercial is as significant a consideration. Younger listeners (age 12-24) are bothered more by commercial quantity than by “annoying” commercials, by a 58% to 33% margin. The 25- to 54-year-olds are also bothered more by the quantity (53%) than the quality of commercials (37%). Older listeners are slightly more bothered by “annoying” commercials (44% to 35%).



Formats geared to a more mature audience, such as News/Talk, Oldies and Country, have listeners who are bothered as much by “annoying” commercials as by the quantity of commercials. Partisans of younger-skewing formats, such as Alternative, Album-Oriented Rock, Urban Contemporary, Adult Contemporary and Contemporary Hit Radio, are more bothered by “too many” commercials.

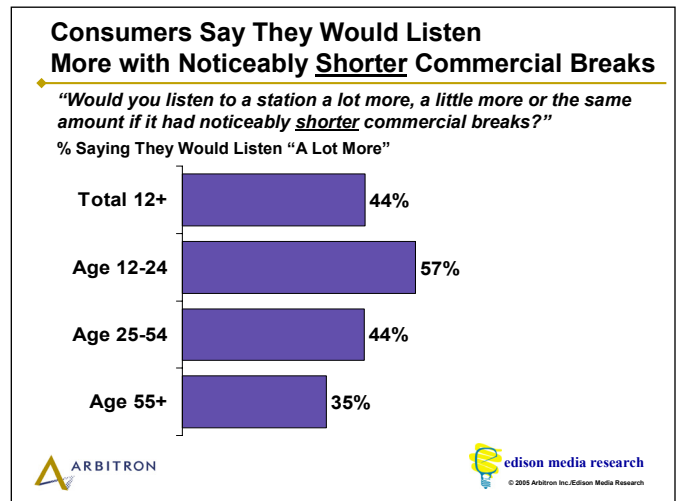
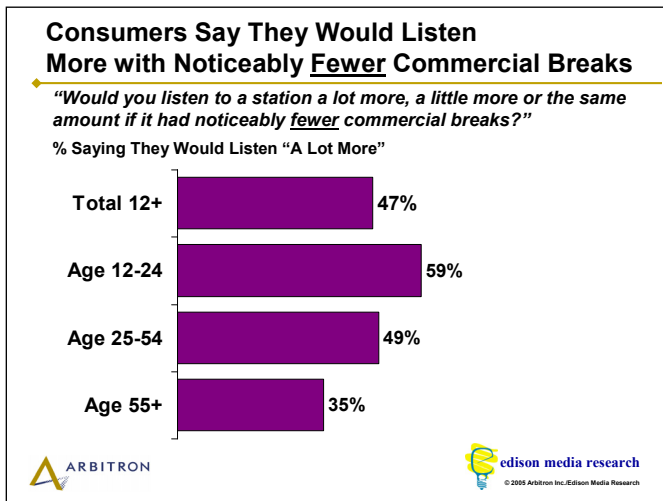
14. Most respondents agree with the statement “All radio stations basically play the same amount of commercials; they just use different gimmicks to make you think they play fewer commercials.” By a margin of 55% to 38%, radio listeners believe that all radio stations basically have the same number of commercials. This finding demonstrates that stations pursuing a strategy of differentiation based upon playing a smaller number of commercials still need to convince radio listeners that these strategies provide a tangible benefit.

15. Radio listeners are beginning to notice fewer commercials and spot breaks. Three months into industry efforts to address spot loads, just under one-quarter of respondents were aware of radio stations that played noticeably *fewer* commercial breaks than they used to and noticeably *shorter* commercial breaks than they used to. Young Americans (12 to 24) are the most vocal demographic segment when it comes to commercial quantity. More than a third of 12- to-24-year-old listeners have noticed stations playing fewer commercials (36%) and shorter breaks (39%). In addition, about one-third noticed stations that play fewer loud or obnoxious commercials than other stations (32%). The key word in these questions is “noticeably.” Radio stations need to promote their spot load strategies to make their listeners aware of the changes being made.

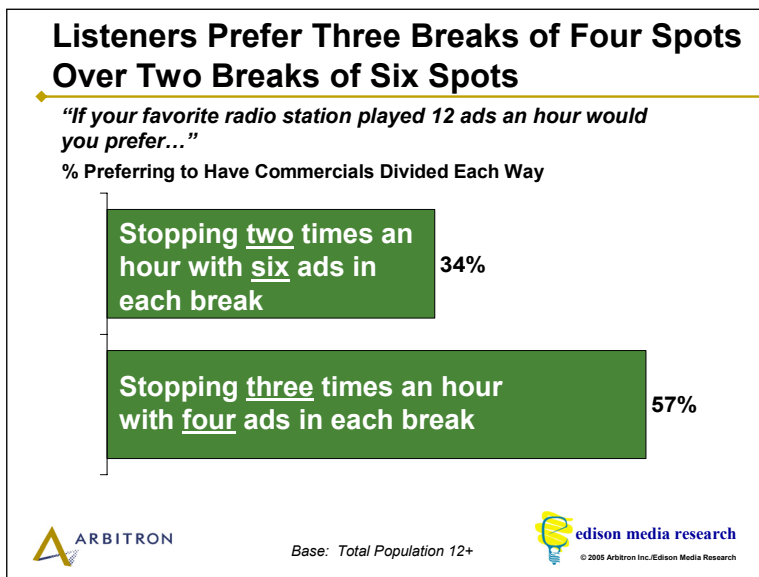


C. Spot Load Strategies

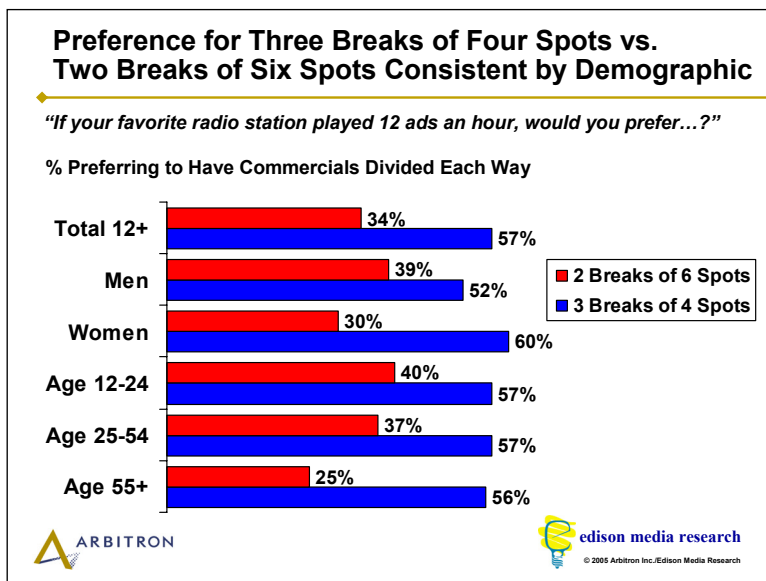
16. Most listeners say they would listen more to radio stations with noticeably fewer or shorter commercial breaks. About half (47%) would listen a lot more to a radio station that had noticeably fewer commercial breaks. Nearly the same number (44%) would listen a lot more to a radio station that had noticeably shorter commercial breaks. Just over one-third (35%) would listen a lot more to a radio station that played fewer loud or obnoxious commercials than other stations. There are several spot load strategies that radio stations can pursue to increase their time spent listening. The data indicate that there is not a single “one-size-fits-all” strategy to maximize radio listening. Radio stations should analyze results by age and by format to design a spot load strategy that will work best for their audience.



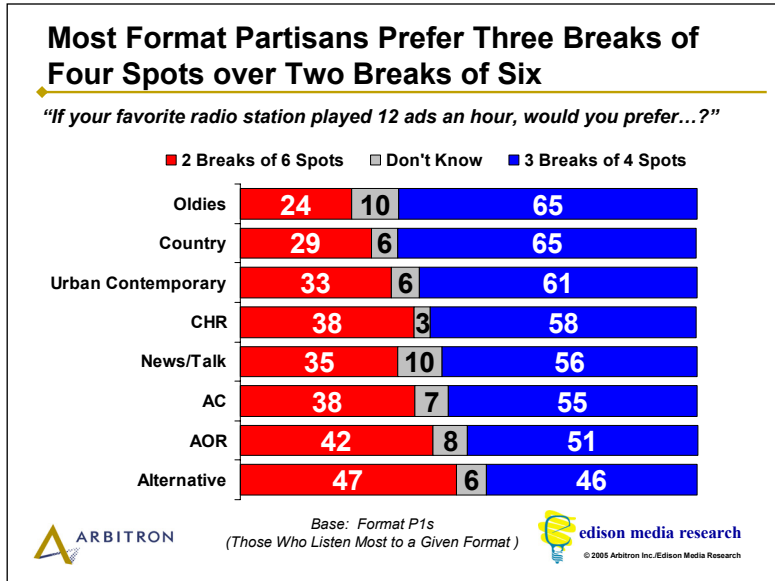
17. When given specific scenarios of programming and commercials, listeners generally opt for more frequent and shorter breaks. Given an example of a programming hour with 12 commercials, most favor dividing those commercials over two breaks of six commercials rather than all 12 commercials in one break (66% vs. 25%). When given the choice of three breaks versus two, 57% vote for three breaks, while 34% vote for two breaks. These findings suggest that recent initiatives to play more frequent breaks with fewer commercials are consistent with consumer preferences.



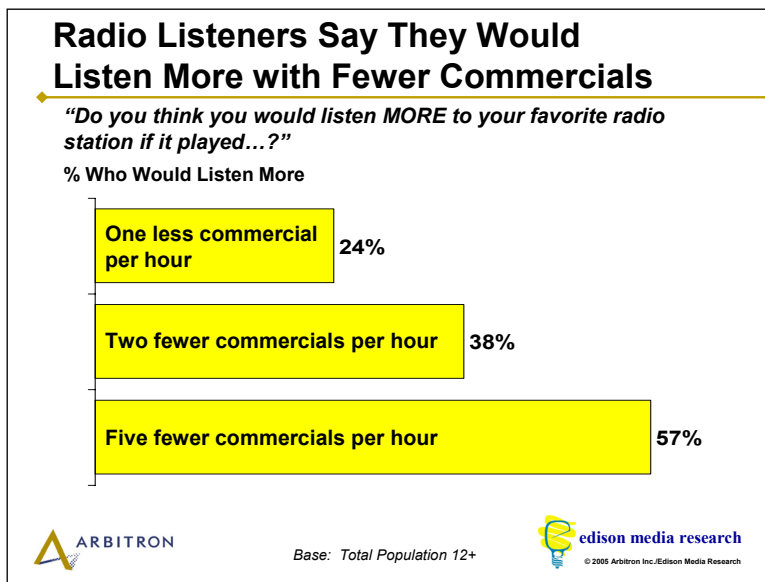
However, the disparity between choices of three breaks versus two is closer among men (52% prefer three breaks vs. 39% who prefer two) than among women (60% vs. 30%). By nearly equal margins, with 12 commercials in an hour, three breaks are preferred to two among 12- to 24-year-olds (57% vs. 40%) and 25- to 54-year-olds (57% vs. 37%), while those age 55 and older have an even wider gap (56% vs. 25%).



In addition, partisans for younger male-targeted formats—Alternative (46% for three breaks, 47% for two breaks) and AOR (51% for three breaks, 42% for two breaks)—tend to show a more equal preference between three breaks and two breaks. Three breaks of four commercials are favored over two breaks of six commercials by fans of Oldies (65% vs. 24%), Country (65% vs. 29%), Urban Contemporary (61% vs. 33%) and News/Talk (56% vs. 35%). These results are very consistent with the results we saw for these same questions in 1999. Listeners clearly factor in both the number and the length of the commercial breaks. A commercial break of three or four commercials is implicitly measured against the length of a typical song.



18. Radio listeners would listen more to their favorite radio station if it played fewer commercials per hour. We asked respondents about three different scenarios in which their favorite radio station would start playing fewer commercials per hour. With one less commercial per hour, 24% say they would listen to their favorite radio station more. With two fewer commercials per hour, 38% say they would listen more. With five fewer commercials, 57% say they would listen more. There is a point between two and five fewer commercials that would lead about half of a radio station’s listeners to listen for a longer period of time.



One can theorize that two to five minutes is about the average length of one song. At this point, a listener to a music station can easily see the payoff for listening to the radio station. In other words, three or four fewer commercials per hour are equal to one more song per hour. Perhaps by putting the added benefit of fewer commercials in concrete terms to the listener, radio stations can go a long way to making their spot load strategy more “noticeable” to their listeners.

19. Younger listeners are most likely to respond positively to fewer commercials. As we have observed throughout this study, younger listeners say they are more “annoyed” by the amount of commercials. However, they are also the most likely to respond positively to radio stations that play noticeably fewer commercials. Over one-third of listeners ages 12 to 24 are already aware of stations playing fewer and shorter commercial breaks. When asked if they would listen to their favorite radio station more if it played a certain fewer number of commercials per hour, listeners ages 12 to 24 were much more likely than older listeners to respond that they would listen to the station more. A spot load strategy of fewer commercials is more likely to find fertile ground among younger listeners.

20. Station involvement with an advertiser increases listener interest in the advertiser's product or service. Twenty-five percent of listeners say they are more interested in a product or service when they hear about it on a radio station they typically listen to. Twenty-five percent say they are more interested when a radio station is involved with an advertiser's promotion. Twenty-six percent are more interested in a product or service when a personality on a station endorses that product or service. Partisans for CHR and Urban Contemporary stations are more likely to express interest in a product or service that is associated with the radio station or its personalities.

D. The Challenge to Radio from New Technologies

21. Satellite radio subscribers are much more affected by the number of commercials on radio than nonsubscribers. Slightly more than half of the respondents are aware of XM and Sirius. Satellite radio subscribers in this study (5% of the sample) are much more likely to say that their listening to traditional radio is affected by the number of commercials. Nearly half (48%) of satellite radio subscribers perceive that there are more commercials on the radio now than there were one year ago, compared with only 33% of nonsubscribers. The number of satellite radio subscribers who say that they are listening to radio less because of more commercials is double (22%) that of nonsubscribers (11%).

22. Owners of iPods and other portable MP3 players are more likely to find radio commercials to be intrusive. One in six respondents in this survey own an iPod[®] or another portable MP3 player. These MP3 player owners are more likely to say that radio commercials are "always" or "usually" intrusive (34%) than are those who do not own a portable MP3 player (24%). This group is more likely to be younger, and, as we have seen throughout this survey, younger radio listeners are more likely to have their amount of listening affected by commercials. However, as we have seen in our most recent survey, *Internet and Multimedia 2005*, the time spent listening to radio per day reported by owners of iPods and other portable MP3 players is only slightly less than average.

Recommendations

Based upon the findings of this research, we offer the following recommendations:

- 1. There is considerable evidence in this study that reductions in radio spot loads should lead to greater time spent listening to radio—provided that the spot load reductions are noticeable and that stations inform their listeners of the changes.** A significant portion of radio listeners reported that they would listen to their favorite radio station more if that station reduced the number of commercials it airs per hour. With one less commercial per hour, 24% say they would listen to their favorite radio station more; with two fewer commercials per hour, 38% say they would listen more; with five fewer commercials, 57% say they would listen more.
- 2. The radio industry should promote aggressively to the advertising community the benefits of radio advertising compared to television advertising.** First, this study provides ample evidence that radio listeners are much more likely to stay tuned when commercials come on than television viewers. While watching television at home, only 6% of TV viewers say that they “never” change the channel when commercials come on. Nearly half of radio listeners at home and nearly two-thirds of radio listeners at work say that they “never” change the station when commercials come on. These two locations account for approximately two-thirds of all radio listening. Even radio listeners in their cars are less likely to “surf” during commercial breaks than are those who are watching television at home.

Another major point to promote to advertisers is that only a small portion of radio listeners tune away immediately upon the start of a commercial break. At work, only 6% of radio listeners typically tune away immediately when commercials come on; at home, 11% tune away immediately; and in the car, 28% tune away immediately. In the world of remote controls and TiVo[®], this is a claim that television cannot match.

- 3. Radio stations need to promote the value of commercial radio to their listeners.** Eighty-four percent of Americans say hearing commercials is a fair trade for free radio programming. Radio stations should continue to promote the fact that they are providing free content to their listeners and that in the future, with HD (digital) radio and other advances, even more free content will be available to radio listeners.

Radio stations also need to promote any changes they are making in terms of lessening the number of spots or shortening the length of the commercial breaks. One-quarter to one-third of radio listeners say that they are aware of any radio stations that have started playing fewer commercials, shorter commercial breaks, or fewer commercials breaks. It is not enough for radio stations to simply pursue these spot load strategies—radio stations must promote these strategies so that listeners will perceive the benefits.

- 4. Radio stations should consider a variety of spot clustering strategies.** When asked specifically whether they would prefer to hear 12 commercials in an hour broken up as three breaks of four commercials or two breaks of six commercials, a majority of radio listeners chose three breaks. These results do vary by age, format, station and market. Stations should conduct listener research to align commercial elements with listener desires. If a station adopts a shorter-commercial-break format, it should promote the concept to listeners, “*We never play more than three commercials in a row.*”
- 5. Producing better, not just fewer, commercials is an answer to protecting time spent listening and generating better results for advertisers.** Thirty-eight percent of listeners say they sometimes turn off the radio because the commercials become too “annoying” or “intrusive.” Quality in addition to quantity of commercials is an issue for many listeners. More creativity in commercials will benefit advertisers and improve the overall value of radio programming for listeners.
- 6. Programmers should seek to ensure that all 60 minutes in an hour are compelling and entertaining, not just the noncommercial elements.** This is a recommendation that we made in 1999, and we believe that it is still highly relevant. Stations tend to spend lavish resources on promoting their programming with compelling and entertaining voices and production elements. Applying the same focus and creative energy to advertiser messages will make a station more fun to listen to and create better results for advertisers.
- 7. Spot clustering could be reassessed based upon listeners’ location of listening.** The research reveals that listeners at work and at home rarely switch a station due to commercials. In-car listeners are more likely to punch around. Stations that have a large in-car audience might structure their commercial breaks differently compared to stations that have a larger at-home or at-work audience. A station with a large in-car audience composition might want to structure breaks to reflect the fact that listeners switch around more in their cars. Stations with larger at-work or at-home audiences could schedule more frequent breaks, since the at-work and at-home audiences are less likely to switch during commercials.
- 8. Spot load strategies are even more important to stations that target younger listeners.** For most questions in this survey, younger listeners (12 to 24 years old) were more likely to report that their amount of radio listening is affected by the quantity of commercials they hear on the radio. The good news is that younger listeners say they are more likely to increase their time spent listening to radio when they perceive decreases in spot loads. Managing spot loads is much more important for stations with younger audiences.

- 9. Consumers of new technologies such as satellite radio and portable MP3 players are more sensitive to spot loads.** Current XM and Sirius satellite radio subscribers are more likely to perceive that radio stations are playing more commercials than they did one year ago. Satellite radio subscribers are also twice as likely to say that they are listening less to radio because of an increased number of commercials. One of the benefits promoted by satellite radio is the promise of “commercial-free” channels, and those radio listeners who are most sensitive to spot loads are among the first to subscribe to satellite radio. Therefore, it is very important for commercial radio to address spot load issues as more consumers consider subscribing to satellite radio.
- 10. Stations targeting older listeners should take special care to avoid “loud” or “obnoxious” commercials.** The older the listeners, the more they complain about “annoying” advertising. For this reason, programmers and production directors of older-formatted stations should screen commercials before they air to identify and address content that may cause tune-out.

About Arbitron

Arbitron Inc. (NYSE: ARB) is an international media and marketing research firm serving radio broadcasters, cable companies, advertisers, advertising agencies and outdoor advertising companies in the United States, Mexico and Europe. Arbitron's core businesses are measuring network and local market radio audiences across the United States; surveying the retail, media and product patterns of local market consumers; and providing application software used for analyzing media audience and marketing information data. The Company has also developed the Portable People Meter (PPMSM), a new technology for media and marketing research.

Arbitron's marketing and business units are supported by its research and technology organization, located in Columbia, Maryland. Arbitron has approximately 1,700 employees; its executive offices are located in New York City.

Through its Scarborough Research joint venture with VNU, Inc., Arbitron also provides media and marketing research services to the broadcast television, magazine, newspaper and online industries.

About Edison Media Research

Edison Media Research conducts survey research and provides strategic information to radio stations, television stations, newspapers, cable networks, record labels, Internet companies and other media organizations.

Edison Media Research works with many of the largest American radio ownership groups, including Entercom, ABC Radio, Infinity, Bonneville and Westwood One, and also conducts strategic and perceptual research for a broad array of companies including AOL/Time Warner, Yahoo!, Sony Music, Princeton University, Northwestern University, Universal Music Group, Time-Life Music and the Voice of America. Edison Media Research also conducts research for successful radio stations in South America, Africa, Asia, Canada and Europe.

Beginning in 2004, Edison Media Research conducts all exit polls and election projections for the six major news organizations—ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, NBC and the Associated Press—and designed and operated the CNN RealVote election projection system in 2002.

All of Edison Media Research's industry studies can be found on the company's Web site at www.edisonresearch.com and can be downloaded free of charge.

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