Two seconds are all an advertiser needs

By Se Young Lee, Globe Correspondent  |  July 4, 2007

Radio advertisers, frustrated by station-hopping listeners, are trying something new: the two-second commercial.

More than 1,200 US radio stations run by Clear Channel Communications Inc., including four in Boston, have been selling super-short ads the company calls "blinks" and "adlets" that are tucked between music or disc jockey's chatter. Blinks, in about two seconds, may spit out three or four words like "Sweet tea at McDonald's." Adlets, about five seconds, offer a bit more: "This Saturday at Rain, it's a glamorous VIP afterparty hosted by Fergie. Visit rainnightlife.com."

These quick blurbs are the newest radio advertising product, as clients and stations begin to move away from 60-second ads that were the norm for decades. The share of 60-second ads for Clear Channel's four Boston stations went from as high as 95 percent three years ago to 60 percent today. Thirty-second ads now take up 30 percent of the ad times, with shorter varieties like blinks and adlets making up the rest.

Mike Crusham, regional vice president of Clear Channel in New England, said blinks and adlets were introduced last year as part of Clear Channel's "less is more" strategy to cut down on advertising clutter.

"People's attention spans are getting shorter, and the shorter and more effective we can make the commercials the better chance we can make the campaigns more effective," Crusham said. "And it also keeps out listeners around longer."

Clear Channel's Boston stations -- which include KISS 108 FM and Jam'N 94.5 FM -- have reported increasing demand for adlets. They have been used by major advertisers such as Dunkin' Donuts and...
Comcast, as well as various Boston night clubs.

One reason some clients are opting for shorter ads is cost: Randy Greenstein, president of Evolution Marketing Inc., a Boston firm that purchases advertising for clubs like Rain Nightlife and Felt Boston, said adlets could cost between $30 to $150, depending on the time they air, as opposed to $150 to $500 for 30-second ads. Sixty-second ads could cost as much as $1,000, he said.

Some advertisers also say short ads can be just as effective as longer ones. Farah Casis, director of marketing and public relations for Felt Boston, said adlets the club runs on KISS 108 FM are good for putting the club in listeners' minds.

"It's still getting consumers to hear your name out on the radio," she said.

Bob Galietti, senior vice president and group account director of MPG, a global marketing firm, said blinks are best used by brands with a recognizable name or sounds -- in conjunction with longer ads. He noted that the McDonald's sweet tea blinks produced by MPG were received well in Philadelphia and Washington.

"It works great for us," Galietti said of the McDonald's blinks. "When you're in a car, bouncing around from station to station, you're probably driving past a McDonald's from 15 to 20 minutes of driving anywhere in the US. And then you hit it."

But Karen Agresti, senior vice president and director of local broadcast for Hill Holliday, a Boston ad agency, said most of the firm's clients, including Dunkin' Donuts, have chosen to go with adlets instead of blinks because of the length.

"It'd be hard to say something in one to two seconds," Agresti said. "I'd imagine that someone who'd do best in those ads is someone with a recognizable sound. 'Got Milk?,' to me, is something that could work well."

For now, the short-form ads are mostly limited to Clear Channel stations. And although television is also struggling to get viewers to watch commercials, most stations will not sell two seconds or five seconds of ad time because they do not want to deal with the hassle of having to mix and match commercials of varying lengths on the standard three-minute ad block.

But Chris Cakebread, an advertising professor at Boston University, said traditional media such as network television and radio have to figure out a new business model. As the number of media alternatives -- from the Internet to improving mobile technology -- multiply, he said, the coveted 18-to-49 demographic is becoming harder to reach.

"It seems that the creative world has responded to the attention deficit that consumers have," Cakebread said. "Why bother to listen to a local radio station where all you hear is two songs and then two minutes of commercials?"

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