NBCUniversal Eyes 15-Second Ad Reduction, Aims to Transform Industry During Pandemic

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Key insights:

- “Now is the time to ask ourselves even bigger questions” about measurement and technology.
- NBCU told marketers it is ready to work with them whenever they are ready to come to market amid the pandemic.

NBCUniversal, which has already moved to significantly reduce ad loads on some special programming during the pandemic, is further trimming ad loads on news programming by two minutes and is eyeing a reduction of 15-second ads, part of an ongoing effort to transform an industry already facing intense pressure from the Covid-19 pandemic and its related economic effects.

In its presentation to media buyers and planners Monday morning titled One Industry Update, Laura Molen, NBCUniversal president of ad sales and partnerships, said the company was actively looking for other ways to reduce ad loads and minimize ad clutter, including by reducing the number of 15-second ads during linear ad breaks.

“Going forward, we’re going to continue to find ways to minimize clutter,” Molen said. “Our goal is to get the very

best results for your business, and we have the permission to change right now."

The news comes a month after NBCUniversal said it would permanently reduce linear ad loads during the Covid-19 crisis, including a decision to slash ads during its new Stay In Theater Family Movie Nights franchise, from 35 minutes of national spots down to 1 minute and 15 seconds. That was positioned as one of many moves NBCUniversal is taking in an effort to push the industry to a future with fewer ads that offer marketers better results.

"This industry, it's changing no matter what—it just happened much faster than anyone expected," said Linda Yaccarino, NBCUniversal's chairman of advertising and partnerships. "Now is the time to ask ourselves even bigger questions, like: How do we change measurement to focus on the impact that you need right now? How do we make all of our technology work together? Or, more importantly, what do we want this industry to look like when we come out on the other side?"

The virtual presentation, which was held at the same time that NBCU had planned on conducting its annual upfront showcase at Radio City Music Hall, was not intended to serve as a replacement for its traditional upfront event, which the company is still planning to hold at a later date. Instead, the presentation was aimed at educating marketers about how they can work with NBCUniversal now to meet their ever-changing needs.

At this point, there seems to be only one category that NBCUniversal doesn't want ad business from: rival streaming services, which are currently prohibited from buying inventory on its Peacock platform, Molen said.

And while it wasn't technically an upfront presentation, the virtual event featured several typical staples such as sizzle reels, remote cameos from NBCUniversal talent like Kelly

Clarkson and Milo Ventimiglia, and a first-look trailer at the upcoming NBC comedy Mr. Mayor, starring Ted Danson and executive produced by Tina Fey.

As NBCUniversal slashes ad loads, it's offering buyers and planners new buying opportunities. One of those is a new global buying offering across NBCUniversal's OnePlatform, which was unveiled this January at CES in an effort to unify the broadcaster's linear and digital ad inventory into a one-stop shop. OnePlatform, which is still being rolled out to marketers, will now offer access to some global opportunities through a partnership with the Comcast-owned U.K. broadcaster Sky. The leaders of the new division will be announced in the coming weeks.

The message to marketers and buyers was clear: As they start thinking about transacting during an upended upfronts season, NBCUniversal wants to be there every step of the way. It's an attempt to keep the conversation going as the advertising industry faces unprecedented headwinds from the economic effects of the pandemic and fast-changing consumer behaviors.

"We know that chief marketing officers and agency partners are weathering this storm alongside us right now, but we also know you're starting to look forward," said Mark Marshall, NBCUniversal president of advertising sales and partnerships. "As you do, you are maybe weighing whether to invest in the broadcast upfront, or hold to calendar, or wait until scatter, or maybe you want to invest in real time on a daily basis through our programmatic and advanced advertising product.

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