When CTV Delivers an Ad, Who’s Actually Watching?

ADWEEK House: Advertising HQ brings the people shaping advertising, commerce, and media together for four days of unscripted conversations and after-hours connections. **Meet us in Midtown, Oct. 5–8.**

This post was created in partnership with Viant

An ad can reach the right screen and still miss the person watching it. So, how can marketers tell which ads earn attention, and use that knowledge to improve their campaigns?

That question shaped ADWEEK Exchange in Dallas, the second stop on a national roadshow from Viant and ADWEEK spanning the country’s leading advertising markets. Speakers examined how to measure attention, what it reveals about creative, and how brands can use it to make smarter media decisions.

How to measure and use attention data

Yan Liu, CEO of TVision, opened with a question the Dallas audience would return to throughout the event: How can marketers properly measure and use attention data to drive better ad performance?

First, marketers need to understand when people are paying attention to their ads. To illustrate this idea, Liu compared one of YouTube’s most-viewed videos, “Johny Johny Yes Papa,” with a scene from the political thriller television series Paradise. The YouTube video had far more views, but the Paradise clip drew 5X more attention.

“This example shows that the reach, impressions, or ratings don’t tell the entire story,” Liu said. “When you think about your media, you need to pair that with a quality signal—which is attention.”

TVision’s Yan Liu

Liu then explained how TVision measures attention. TVision tracks what’s on screen and whether people are watching, second by second. But measurement alone isn’t the ultimate goal. It’s about whether attention translates into results.

In a study involving a subscription brand and a home services brand, he tested this question, comparing attention with conversions. For both brands, conversions rose as attention increased, giving marketers a clearer reason to consider attention when evaluating their media.

How brands are rethinking creative and CTV

Will Lee, CEO of ADWEEK, moved the event forward in a panel with Whitney Magnuson, head of brand and media at Zoom; Scott Ludwig, VP and head of consumer marketing at AT&T; Rebekah Payne, VP of advertising and integrated media at ALSAC, and Chris Vanderhook, COO and co-founder of Viant. Lee began by asking what problem each brand was trying to solve with connected TV (CTV).

For Zoom, the challenge was changing what people think the company does. Magnuson said nearly everyone knows the company name, but many still associate it only with video meetings. “The problem is that in the past few years, Zoom became the verb of a very specific industry, which was video conferencing,” Magnuson explained.

But its products now also serve customer service, marketing, sales, and other teams. To change the perception, Zoom partnered with Colin Jost on humor-driven campaigns and released an ad featuring Kate McKinnon as a CEO trying to overthrow Zoom.

Zoom also uses some linear TV placements to build broad reach and buzz, but puts most of its spend into CTV. There, it can target business buyers who choose tools for their organizations, then follow up with messages on other channels.

AT&T faced a different problem. In a mature, competitive category, Ludwig said, it can be difficult to show customers how one provider’s coverage will differ from another’s in their daily lives. “How can you be about more than a price point?” he asked. For AT&T, it’s about building an emotional connection, with CTV helping the brand reach the right people with the right message.

For St. Jude, Payne described the organization’s need to keep reaching longtime donors while introducing itself to a younger

audience. While its three-minute patient stories have helped build a loyal donor base, the team is now experimenting with shorter CTV ads, including the spot “Just a Kid,” which shows a young patient playing dress-up.

“How do we grow that new donor base?” Payne asked. One approach, she explained, is to introduce viewers to St. Jude through a shorter ad, then follow with a longer patient story.

Vanderhook added that while CTV is addressable and measurable, there are some signals that are missing. “Each of these brands has very unique problems, and they want to align their message with the right type of content,” he said.

However, with CTV buys, brands purchase at the ad level and don’t necessarily know what content their ads run alongside. To help address this pain point, Viant acquired IRIS.TV, which gathers title-level signals from content editors, helping brands match ads to relevant shows.

Attendees mingle on the terrace.

Putting attention data to work

Tim Vanderhook, CEO and co-founder of Viant, closed out the day by turning the conversation from measurement to action. He said marketers should use attention data to adjust campaigns while they’re running, rather than waiting for a report after they’ve spent the budget.

The goal of attention data is not to “have a pretty attention chart. It’s about increasing reach with the same budget that you actually had,” Vanderhook said. His ultimate advice was to start with an attention baseline, then shift spend toward the creative and placements earning more attention.

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