More than half of Super Bowl viewers using smartphones or laptops while they watch the Seahawks take on the Broncos on TV. In this story from HBS Working Knowledge, Harvard Business School professor Thales S. Teixeira explains how advertisers should market to multitaskers.

BY MICHAEL BLANDING

What about your smartphone, tablet, or laptop?

When most people sit down to watch the “big game” this Sunday, the television won’t be the only screen they’ll be looking at. Increasingly, viewers are doubling up on entertainment with a second media device in their hand or on their lap to complement—and compete—with the television. In 2012, Nielsen found that
close to 40 percent of smartphone and tablet users multitask in front of the TV daily.

If anything, says Harvard Business School marketing professor Thales S. Teixeira, that number understates the prevalence of media multitasking. “That 40% figure is probably already outdated,” he says. “Nowadays you can imagine a much higher number.”

Even two years ago, one survey found that 60% of fans planned on using a second screen while watching the Super Bowl. The same survey, however, found that only 13% of respondents were most likely to do so during the game—with the rest pulling out their phone or laptop during halftime or commercials.

That trend has advertisers, who paid an average of $4 million per 30-second Super Bowl spot last year, worried. “Advertisers are paying based on the audience watching a program,” says Teixeira. “If people stop paying attention en masse, they are not getting everyone they are paying for.”

The possibility of consumers tuning out during ads is even worse during the rest of the year—when commercials aren’t as hyped as they are during the Super Bowl. But advertisers fretting about the multitasking trend may be missing an opportunity, says Teixeira.

“A second screen can be a competitor, but it can also be a collaborator,” says Teixeira. After all, if consumers already have their smartphones or laptops in
hand, it only takes a few clicks to visit an advertiser’s website and buy a product they see advertised on television.

In a recent working paper, How TV Ads Trigger Online Shopping, Teixeira explores this concept, analyzing how advertisers can turn this trend to their advantage. Along with fellow researchers Jura Liaukonyte of Cornell University and Kenneth C. Wilbur of the University of California, San Diego, he analyzed not only when viewers were likely to act on the ads that they saw on television, but also what type of ads were most likely to make them surf on over to the advertiser’s website and make a purchase.

To do this, the researchers used two specialized databases. The first, from Kantar, utilizes data from households across the country that install a set-top box alongside their television that analyzes second by second what family members watch. At the same time, Kantar records everything that is shown on every station, including commercials.

The second database, by comScore, likewise uses volunteers to analyze what users do online—what websites they visit, how long they stay there, and, for the top 100 e-commerce sites, what specific products they purchase.

By putting together the two databases—combining more than 300,000 ad insertions and 100,000 consumers—the researchers were able to tell to the second how the airing of a particular ad affected both the number of people visiting an advertiser’s website, and the number of purchases they made there.
Next, using 22 important features of ads (including a call-to-action, an emotional trigger, and a product claim) the researchers divided the ads into four types. The first two types, product-focused and action-focused, look for a direct response from the viewer. Product-focused ads showcase products and features, explaining to the viewer why he or she would like to buy an item. Action-focused ads call viewers to action with a particular task—for example, announcing a semiannual sale starting the following day.

The other two types of ads focus on image, building up the perception of the brand rather than exhorting a consumer to purchase. Imagery-focused ads do this with stunning visuals that overwhelm viewers’ senses with beautiful pictures, upbeat music, or dramatic lighting. Finally, emotion-focused ads do this by appealing to consumers’ emotional attachment to the brand by personally connecting the product to how it will fit into their lives. (See videos below for examples of each ad type.)

When Teixeira and his colleagues analyzed the data, determining the effects of ads within both two minutes and two hours after airing, they found very different results depending on the type of ad. Action-focused ads increased visits to advertisers’ websites, but didn’t increase the number of purchases by each visitor. Teixeira speculates that may be because the ads focus explicitly on getting viewers to click on a site, but don’t give them particular reasons to make a purchase.
Since more consumers were visiting, however, the net effect resulted in higher sales.

By contrast, the product- and emotion-focused ads didn’t increase the number of visitors to a website—in fact for product-focused ads, it actually decreased the number. But both types of ads increased the number of sales made by those already visiting. Teixeira suggests that by making a specific claim for a product—because of the features it contains or the emotions it engenders—advertisers will attract some people but turn away others. Those whom they do attract, however, will be more likely to make a purchase.

“When you talk about a product, it divides people into two classes—some people are interested and some people aren’t,” says Teixeira. “But those people who are interested are ready to go now.” While emotion-focused ads still led to a net increase in sales, product-focused ads led to a net increase or decrease depending on the industry or brand. Brands such as eHarmony, for example, saw a net increase, while Amazon.com saw a decrease. “Depending on your brand or category you might want to watch out and be careful in selecting the type of ad to run,” counsels Teixeira.

Finally, the researchers found that imagery-focused ads—those big showstoppers often aired during the Super Bowl—actually led to both fewer visitors and fewer sales for advertisers. Teixeira speculates that is because they are too good at capturing viewers’ attention. “You stay with the medium you are on and are not going to switch,” he
says. “So it keeps you watching TV and doesn’t increase visitation.” Of course, the study only measured purchases within 24 hours—so there may be a longer-range benefit to enhancing brand image through imagery-focused ads.

The most surprising result of the study is that there is no one type of ad that definitively wins in both visitors and sales.

“You can’t do both things—there are trade-offs that we didn’t expect,” says Teixeira. “You need to understand what you want the consumer to do.”

If advertisers are primarily selling in brick-and-mortar locations with traditional advertising, then imagery-focused ads still might be the best choice—as masters of the genre like Coca-Cola, Pepsi, and Anheuser-Busch consistently show.

On the other hand, says Teixeira, “if a good portion of your sales—or even a good portion of your communications—are online, you might get a better response from an action- or emotion-focused ad.” A company such as GoDaddy, for example, has been very successful using sex appeal and humor to create brand recognition. Now that the brand is well known, says Teixeira, it might benefit from a more direct call to consumers to purchase its services.

On the other hand, he is impressed by Coca-Cola’s new strategy of using action-focused ads for its 2014 Super Bowl commercials. Even though Coke doesn’t sell beverage products online, much of its advertising content is on its website. By creating 30-second ads that serve as
teasers for longer ads online, Coke could increase its overall advertising potential. “With $4 million, Coke may get $40 million in people’s time and attention over the course of the year,” says Teixeira.

The Super Bowl has always been as big a battle between advertisers as a competition between the teams on the field. The insights from this study give advertisers new plays with which to form their overall strategy—both during the big game and afterward in the marketplace.

What’s in an ad?

Thales and his fellow researchers divided advertisements into four types. Here are examples of each, using actual ads that will air during the 2014 Super Bowl.

Product-focused ads showcase particular products and features.

Action-focused ads induce an action, such as a search, visit, or buy.
Imagery-focused ads make use of stunning images and sensory stimulation.

Emotion-focused ads engage by evoking specific emotions.
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