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ARF Releases Large-Scale Study of Attention Metrics in Live Campaigns

Latest phase examines how attention metrics perform across media channels, platforms and placements in real-world advertising environments

NEW YORK — June 9, 2026 — The Advertising Research Foundation (ARF) today released Phase 3 of its Attention Measurement Validation Initiative, offering new evidence on how attention metrics behave in live advertising campaigns and how they relate to brand outcomes.

Building on earlier phases that explored the theoretical and operational definitions of attention and its role in creative testing, Phase 3 moves into real-world conditions—analyzing attention across four national campaigns spanning television, online video, social media and digital display. The study compares multiple attention measurement approaches, providing one of the most comprehensive assessments to date of how these metrics align and diverge in practice.

Key Findings:

Television and Video Drive Higher Attention Than Social and Display
Across campaigns and measurement approaches, television and online video—including YouTube—consistently generated higher attention levels than social media and digital display, reinforcing the role of screen size, format and viewing conditions in capturing attention.

Attention is Most Consistent at the Channel Level

Attention measures aligned most clearly at the broad channel level, where structural differences in exposure conditions were largest. At more granular levels—such as platforms and placements—results diverged more often, reflecting differences in what each method defines and measures as attention.

Media Weight Plays a Critical Role in Translating Attention Into Outcomes
The study found no simple one-to-one relationship between attention and upper-funnel brand lift. Lower-attention channels sometimes delivered meaningful recall or awareness gains when they received sufficient media weight, reach and frequency, while higher-attention channels did not always produce the strongest lift on their own. The findings underscore that attention should be interpreted alongside impression volume and exposure strategy.

Within Television, Viewing Context Matters
Within television, attention varied by broad viewing conditions such as device and daypart. Television screens generally received higher attention than desktop, phone or tablet environments, while prime time and late night tended to outperform early

morning and overnight. However, device effects should be interpreted carefully because device, platform and placement are often intertwined, and patterns among desktop, phone and tablet were less consistent.

Different Methods Measure Different Dimensions of Attention
Attention measurement approaches often produced different results, especially at detailed platform and placement levels. This reflects a core finding of the study: attention is not a single universal metric. Different methods capture different aspects of advertising exposure, from visual focus over time to modeled probability, digital signals, emotional response and contextual fit. Marketers should understand what each metric measures and maintain consistency when applying attention across campaigns.

What This Means for Marketers
The report concludes with practical implications for marketers and advertisers. It recommends that marketers understand what each attention metric actually measures, request historical platform norms when interpreting results, maintain consistency in the measurement approach used across campaigns, and use judgment when applying attention metrics to highly granular optimization decisions. Most importantly, the report emphasizes that attention should be considered alongside media weight, reach and frequency rather than treated as a stand-alone proxy for outcomes.

"One of the clearest lessons from this phase is that attention does not operate in isolation," said Paul Donato, Chief Research Officer at the ARF. "Media weight, reach and frequency all shape whether attention translates into brand impact. For marketers, the question is not simply which channel gets the most attention, but how attention works together with the broader media plan."

For Tracy Adams, Senior Director, Research & Insights at the ARF and lead researcher on the study, the findings suggest a need to reframe how the industry talks about attention.

"Attention should not be treated as a simple contest for the highest score. The more important question is when advertising has enough opportunity to be noticed, when it is effectively ignored, and how those conditions shape brand impact."

About the Study

Phase 3 evaluates attention across four live national campaigns using multiple independent measurement providers and methodologies. The research builds on Phase 1, which mapped attention space and showed that definitions of attention are often shaped by the capabilities of specific methods and tools, and Phase 2, which found limited consistency across measurement approaches in creative testing.

About the ARF

Founded in 1936, the Advertising Research Foundation (ARF) is the leading authority on research quality, standards and innovation in advertising, media and marketing. With more than 400 member companies, the ARF advances the practice of marketing research through education, collaboration and unbiased thought leadership.

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