



# BIG FEAT MARKETING

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## Which Ads Don't Get Skipped?

**A TiVo service that tracks viewer fast-forwarding yields big surprises**

What if I told you that the least-fast-forwarded commercial on TV isn't for any major brand but for a company called CORT Furniture Rentals? And what if I added that those spots aren't much more than a string of CORT salespeople delivering trite slogans like: "It's not about the furniture, it's about lives"? That's the most recent result of an ongoing study by digital video recorder-maker TiVo Inc ([TiVo](#)). Called TiVo Stop||Watch, it examines the commercial-viewing habits of some 20,000 TiVo-equipped households, including which ad campaigns are fast-forwarded by the lowest percentage of viewers. So far, heavyweights such as Publicis-owned media agency Starcom and ad holding company Interpublic Group ([IPG](#)) have subscribed to the data feed.

What has marketers scratching their heads is that so many of the winning campaigns are direct ads, like CORT's. Ask execs at some top-flight creative agencies (who are responsible for some big-budget, glitzy Super Bowl ads), and they'll launch into the type of spin used by oil companies when they say more study is needed on global warming. (One exec asked me: "Do we know that this accounts for when people fast-forward but then rewind to watch the ad?") Here's the question I'm left with: Does this mean that TV ads of the future should be less creative and more about the hard sell than ever before?

**IF THERE'S ONE LESSON** from TiVo Stop||Watch, it's that ***relevancy outweighs creativity*** in TV commercials--by a lot. The ads on the "least-fast-forwarded" list aren't funny, they aren't touching, and they aren't clever. And they don't have big budgets. The top three overall in June (the latest month for which data are available) were CORT Furniture, Dominican Republic Tourism, and Hooters Restaurant. Several throw 800-numbers at you at the end.

But all of these ads are well-tailored to their audiences. For example, during prime-time broadcast TV in June, the No.1 least-fast-forwarded campaign was for home-gym brand Bowflex. Bowflex placed prime-time ads exclusively on professional wrestling on the CW Television Network--just the kind of show that might lead a viewer to reevaluate his or her own musculature and check out a home gym. Leaders on the overall least-fast-forwarded list, which included all advertisers that ran at least 20 spots during any time on any channel, were often those that advertised during daytime on cable, where shows have smaller, niche audiences, and it's easier to deduce viewer interests, according to TiVo.

***Smart media planning, not creative ads, seems to be key.*** These advertisers put the product --whether it's a desk, a Dominican beach, or, ahem, the good food at Hooters--front and center in the most straightforward way.

Outside of TiVo, there are other trends that will only exacerbate the divide on television. Digital delivery of TV signals will allow advertisers to segment by household, enabling them to target niches even on hit shows like *House* and *Grey's Anatomy*. Prices for 30-second spots will soon be tied to individual commercial ratings, compounding the need to maximize the number of viewers for each ad. And chief marketing officers are under the gun to demonstrate sales results more than ever. (It's why the eminently measurable junk-mail business is growing strongly.)

Creativity in advertising won't go away. Opportunities to entertain and engage customers are fast proliferating--from online micro-sites to viral videos to brand integrations within TV shows, where entertainment value is paramount. In those media, content must generate word-of-mouth all by itself.

Not so with TV ads. And if TiVo owners are any guide, it seems that just reaching an interested audience and putting the product right out there sets you leagues ahead, no matter how banal or bludgeoning your spot is. So if you have only 30 seconds, why not skip the soft seduction and just sell, sell, sell?

See the least-fast-forwarded ads on Burt Helm's media and branding blog, [businessweek.com/brandnewday](http://businessweek.com/brandnewday).

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