The effective use of billboards as a communications tool

Donna M. Lithgow
Rowan University

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THE EFFECTIVE USE OF BILLBOARDS AS A COMMUNICATIONS TOOL

by
Donna Lithgow

A Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Arts Degree of The Graduate School at Rowan University June 21, 1999

Approved by ____________________________ Professor

Date Approved ____________________________

June 21, 1999
ABSTRACT

Donna M. Lithgow
Using Billboards as an Effective Communications Tool
1999
Dr. Donald Bagin
Public Relations

The purpose of this study was to identify guidelines for communicators to use as a reference when designing an outdoor campaign.

Secondary research provided information on properly designing and using billboards as a communications tool. This information included studies on billboards, research on color and design, and statistics relating to the outdoor industry.

The author compiled a list of agencies who won OBIE awards between 1994 and 1998. These awards are given to agencies annually by the Outdoor Advertising Association of America to recognize outstanding billboard campaigns. These agencies are among the best in outdoor communication throughout the United States and Canada. A total of 58 agencies who won OBIE awards were sent surveys. Thirty surveys (51.7%) were returned and analyzed. The author compiled a list of suggestions made by the agencies and analyzed trends in the answers. The results provided many helpful suggestions to anyone planning a billboard campaign. Communicators may use this research as a reference when they are using billboard messages.
MINI-ABSTRACT

Donna M. Lithgow
Using Billboards as an Effective Communications Tool
1999
Dr. Donald Bagin
Public Relations

The purpose of this study was to identify guidelines for communicators to use as a reference when designing an outdoor campaign. Through secondary research this study identifies information concerning recent trends and studies in the billboard field. Primary research was conducted through a survey sent to agencies in the United States and Canada that received OBIE awards between 1994 and 1998. This survey results provided many helpful ideas for communicators who are planning a billboard campaign.
The author would like to thank...

Her family and friends for always believing in her and giving her confidence in her abilities to achieve her goals;

Everyone at Beach Advertising for their help in creating the survey and locating information;

Dr. Donald Bagin for his guidance during Seminar I and II.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Communicating through billboards is becoming more popular each year. In 1997, $2.135 billion was spent communicating through this channel, which was an 8.8% increase over total spending in 1996.¹

There are three basic billboard sizes: 30-sheet posters, 8-sheet posters, and bulletins. Although most billboards use vinyls rather than posting paper, the names have not changed over the years. The most common type of billboard is the 30-sheet poster. In 1998, there were a total of 396,000 registered billboards throughout the United States. The following chart lists the breakdown according to billboard size:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Billboard Type</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30-Sheet Posters</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-Sheet Posters</td>
<td>140,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulletins</td>
<td>56,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>396,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Outdoor Advertising Association of America (OAAA) uses the following description to explain the appeal of billboards:

"You can't zap it. You can't ignore it. When it's done right, you can't wait to see more of it. It's as BIG as all get out, yet up-close and personal. It's as simple as a single image, but challenging to create. It sneaks up on you and gets you when you're not looking. It asks little time, but leaves a long impression."³

Outdoor media provide an excellent channel for communicators to reach their target audiences. Billboards have the unique ability to display messages 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Drivers often pass the same messages numerous times, which increases the impact.⁴ If a billboard is designed properly, the message benefits from the high reach and frequency, and will have high audience recall.

Billboards offer the opportunity to creatively communicate with a large audience. Market research provides data on which locations are best suited to effectively target an organization's audience. Demographics and geographics are used to segment the market. Information is available on factors such as age, income and purchase behavior. Resources are available that pinpoint specific streets that target audiences are most likely to travel.⁵

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⁴ “Building Brands Beautifully” Video Produced by OAAA.
Trends show people spend more time commuting than in the past.\textsuperscript{6} Between 1970 and 1993, the number of vehicles on the road has increased by 147%. During that time period there was also a 110\% increase in the number of miles driven daily.\textsuperscript{7} This increases the amount of time that billboards can reach commuters, which gives outdoor an advantage over other mediums.

Chris Culver, President of Culver Associates, Ltd. states,

"It is a changing world. People are moving faster, they're moving more, they're on the go. And that's what outdoor does- it captures these people. Outdoor reaches everyone."\textsuperscript{8}

Another benefit to using billboards is the low cost. Compared to radio, television, magazines or newspapers, outdoor offers the lowest CPM (cost per thousand people reached). A 30- sheet poster displayed for 30 days costs $1.60 for every thousand people reached. The cost of a 30- second prime TV spot is as high as $18.00 per thousand people reached.\textsuperscript{9}

Billboards are growing in popularity due to their high reach, low cost and ability to communicate in a creative and effective manner.

\textsuperscript{6} "Building Brands Beautifully" Video Produced by OAAA.
\textsuperscript{8} "Building Brands Beautifully" Video Produced by OAAA.
I. Need for the Study

Billboards enable organizations to communicate with a large audience, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Due to the fact that most people are in a moving car while reading a billboard, communicators only have a few seconds to deliver their message. Therefore, organizations need to present their message in a format that is easy to read and understand in less than seven seconds. This poses the challenge of designing a creative billboard using few words and one picture.

English copywriter Tony Brignull said,

"How simple it is. Just one picture and no more (ideally) than five words. In that brief twinkling of an eye, you have to arrest the attention, tickle the imagination, arouse the emotions, stimulate the desire. Just one image and a few words. These are all the weapons at an agency’s disposal."

Bob Kwait commented on the challenges faced by billboard designers, when he said,

"In my opinion, outdoor advertising is the most difficult medium to do well. The person you’re trying to reach is flying by your message at 60 mph. He’s not going to stop his car and pull over to the side of the road to read your billboard."

Although there are excellent books on award-winning billboards, there are few handbooks available as a reference on outdoor communications. Through primary and secondary research, information was gathered on billboard design and usage. This study

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10 OAAC website.
serves as a guide for designing billboards that effectively deliver an organization’s message.

II. Purpose

The purpose of this study was to gather information to serve as a guide for properly designing and using billboards. It is important for organizations to use proper colors, fonts and images when producing billboards. Viewers have only a few seconds to read a billboard; therefore, the message needs to be presented in a manner that is easy to understand and memorable. When created properly, outdoor is an excellent communications tool. Dave Stanger, executive VP of Genesis Media in Vancouver, noted, “Outdoor used to be thought of as a complementary medium, but not anymore. Outdoor messages have to be able to stand on their own.”

This study compiles information into a single reference source for organizations planning to use outdoor media.

III. Limitations

This study provides a guide to billboard usage, and does not suggest that these rules apply in every situation. However, it does provide a background for organizations planning to use outdoor media.

Secondary data was gathered from periodicals, books and internet websites published within the past ten years. Only agencies that received OBIE awards within the

last five years were chosen in the survey sample. Some agencies were left out of the sample because the author was not able to obtain any current information on their addresses.

IV. Procedures

This study began with a search of secondary research in libraries and through the internet. Materials were also purchased from a list of OAAA publications. The OAAA and Outdoor Advertising Association of Canada (OAAC) were both contacted for additional information. The author also met with Beach Advertising's creative director Bruce Penzer and media director Larry Ferenchick for personal interviews.

The survey sample was determined by using a judgment sampling method. Agencies that received an OBIE award within the past five years were chosen to receive surveys. The surveys measured the agencies’ preferences for designing and using billboards.
Definitions

Blanking- A white border surrounding the poster's copy area, which is applied between the poster and panel molding.

Bleed poster- The use of blanking papers that are the same color as the poster background to bring the design area to the molding.

Bulletin- Billboards measuring 14 x 48 feet.

Display period- The time period that the message is on display.

Eight sheet- Billboards measuring 5 x 11 feet.

Exposure- The opportunity for a message to be seen and read.

Extension- A cut-out added to the basic rectangular shape of a billboard to increase design area.

Facing- The direction the poster is seen by traffic flow. (Example- south facing billboard can be seen by north flowing traffic.)

Frequency- The number of times a person is exposed to a message.

Gross Rating Points- A point system representing daily circulation. One GRP represents 1% of the target market.

OAAA- The Outdoor Advertising Association of America.

OAAC- The Outdoor Advertising Association of Canada.

Permanent bulletin- A painted display that remains in one location throughout the entire length of the communicator's contract.

Reach- The number of people exposed to a message. (Expressed as a percentage.)
Rotating bulletin- Moving a billboard from one location to another to achieve a more balanced coverage of a market.

Thirty sheet- Billboards measuring 12 x 25 feet.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{15} Matthew Outdoor Advertising “Billboard University” Website.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

This review of related research is organized into two parts. The first section is a background of information concerning billboards. The second section contains information on designing billboards effectively. This research includes information provided by books, periodicals, internet websites, and personal interviews. Only information published between 1989 and 1999 was used in this study.

The author contacted the OAAA’s publications department. The OAAA has 36 publications available to non-members. Three publications and one video applied to this study.

An extensive search for information about billboards was conducted on the internet. Using the keywords “Outdoor Advertising” in an AltaVista search, the author found seven websites significant to this study.

The author contacted the OAAC, after viewing their website. The OAAC referred the author to Sharon Dixon, Research Manager at Mediacom. Sharon Dixon provided the
author with "A Study of 282 Campaigns" that was researched by Rosanne Caron, the vice-president of research at Mediacom and two professors in the United States.

The author also researched this topic at the Rowan University library. She found two books significant to this study. She also used the keywords "Outdoor Advertising" to find periodicals through InfoTrac. Through this search, she found four periodicals that were significant to this study.

The Free Library in Philadelphia also contained periodicals that applied to this topic. Using the keywords "Outdoor Advertising" in the Business InfoTrac, the author found four periodicals related to this study. Using the same keywords, the author also searched the NewsBank Info Web and found four periodicals related to this study.

The author also used one book from her own personal collection in this study.

Part I- Background Information About Billboards

History

Outdoor is often referred to as the first method of mass communication. It evolved from early carvings that displayed public messages. In Egypt, hieroglyphics were carved onto stone tablets and placed along road sides to communicate sales messages. In Pompeii and Rome, paintings appeared on walls, in a practice similar to today's use of roadside billboards.

The invention of the printing press in the 15th century created new opportunities for outdoor communicators. In early American history, posters were used as a form of

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communication between colonists. In fact, posters are credited for reporting the Boston
Massacre and keeping citizens informed about developments during the Revolutionary
War.17

By the late 1800’s, organizations began to realize the potential for communicating
through this channel. Companies began leasing space on wooden boards to display
messages. Artists even started competing to draw the designs used on these boards. The
Associated Bill Posters Association (now known as the Outdoor Advertising Association
of America) was formed in 1891 to set industry standards. Through the 1900’s billboards
gained popularity and are now one of the fastest growing channels of communication.18

Types of Billboards

Billboard sizes were originally referred to by the number of poster sheets required
to cover the surface structure. Although billboards can now be produced with as little as
one sheet, the names have remained the same.19 There are three basic billboard sizes:
bulletins, 30- sheet, and 8- sheet.

Bulletins are the least commonly used billboard.20 They are 14 x 48 feet (672
square feet) and are generally found in high density traffic locations. Often, extensions are
added to the top or bottom of the structure, allowing the communicator more freedom in
their design.21 Communicators also have the option of using rotary bulletins. These are

19 Marcann Inc. Website- www.marcann.com
21 General Outdoor Advertising Website- www.general-outdoor.com
generally placed at different locations every sixty days during a six- to twelve- month period. This allows the organization to create a large presence in the market.\textsuperscript{22}

The most widely used billboard is the 30-sheet poster. This type of billboard is often used to saturate a market in a short amount of time.\textsuperscript{23} It is 12 x 25 feet (300 square feet) and is placed on primary and secondary routes.\textsuperscript{24}

The smallest billboard size is the 8-sheet poster, which is 6 x 12 feet (72 square feet). It is generally used to reach both vehicular traffic and pedestrians. It is usually found in urban neighborhoods, shopping areas, and point of purchase locations.\textsuperscript{25}

Spectaculars take posters one step further. These use movement, graphics, and lighting to attract attention. Due to the high production costs, spectaculars are usually found in major cities, where they are viewed by large audiences.\textsuperscript{26}

\textbf{Technology}

In recent years, technological advances have increased the effectiveness of using billboards. Computer imaging, weekly rotations, and zip code targeting have improved the ability to reach specific demographics.\textsuperscript{27} Avenir, a French agency, uses signs that change their messages throughout the day. There are 20 rotating signs along Le Périphérique, a major route in Paris. These signs allow the communicator to target

\textsuperscript{22} Matthew Outdoor Advertising “Billboard University” website- www.abnl.com
\textsuperscript{23} Matthew Outdoor Advertising “Billboard University” website- www.abnl.com
\textsuperscript{24} General Outdoor Advertising Website- www.general-outdoor.com
\textsuperscript{25} General Outdoor Advertising Website- www.general-outdoor.com
\textsuperscript{27} Radio Advertisers’ Bureaus Marketing Resource Center Website- www.rab.com
different audiences during specific hours throughout the day. For instance, a message targeted to business people would appear during rush hour. Later in the day, the sign would rotate to show another campaign targeted to an entirely different market.²⁸

Technological advances have also cut the time required to produce billboards. Instead of spending months producing a poster, it now only takes a few days. Most signs are produced digitally, which guarantees that each billboard looks exactly the same. In the past, when signs were actually hand painted, individual billboards did not necessarily look the same. This also assures that the colors used remain consistent in each poster.²⁹ Vinyl backings help billboards fight against factors such as the weather.³⁰ Many messages are printed on vinyl sheets called “mattress covers,” which are wrapped around the billboard structure. It is not permanently attached, and can therefore be used for a rotating bulletin. Communicators can also send the mattress covers to other locations to use in different markets. The improved technology has lowered the cost of producing an effective campaign, which makes outdoor an even more attractive option for organizations considering this medium.³¹

Targeting

One of outdoors’ biggest appeals is the fact that it is the last “mass medium.” However, that does not suggest that communicators cannot send a highly targeted message. There is detailed computerized population data available that pinpoints locations that are most effective for target audiences. Computerized city maps show zip code areas with breakdowns of the city’s specific demographics. These maps show traffic patterns of the routes that pass billboard sites.32 Caron Nightingale, marketing director at PATTISON in Canada, stated, “Flexibility is the great advantage of outdoor. You can target a specific street, specific block, even a specific direction.” 33

Wrigley’s Gum is an example of a company that ran a very successful billboard campaign. They took advantage of outdoors’ unique advantage of targeting specific areas. Their target audience was teenagers, so they needed to place billboards in locations where young adults would view them. They chose locations near malls and even on routes that the children took to school. This campaign worked without other media.34

Costs

Communicators can use billboards to target a specific audience, 24 hours a day, for a smaller cost than other forms of media.35 The cost per thousand people reached is much less for billboards, as the following table shows:

Cost Per Thousand Comparisons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Billboards (30-sheet/ 30 days)</td>
<td>$1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio (30 second spot)</td>
<td>$5.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazine (Full page, Color)</td>
<td>$7.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV (30 second, Prime Time)</td>
<td>$9.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper (1/4 page)</td>
<td>$13.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The low cost of communicating through outdoor is making billboards a more attractive option for organizations to use. The low cost and high reach combine to make communicating through billboards more effective than other media.

The Benefits of Using Billboards Instead of Other Media

The appeal of using outdoor is growing as television, radio and print are becoming more fragmented. Billboards have the ability to cover an entire market overnight. Billboards offer the opportunity to reach the public with large attention-grabbing colors, movement, and even three dimensional parts. They combine copy and design to make one long lasting impression on the audience. The size of billboards alone draws attention to

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their message. Audience recall can be affected by the amount of “read time” for each message. (The read time is simply how long the message is visible to motorists.) In fact, average message recall is higher for outdoor than for other channels of communication. The average speed of traffic during rush hour in London in 1997 was 10.9 mph. Major cities around the world have similar driving conditions. One of the biggest drawbacks of using print media is the short life span of the message. Magazines and newspapers are generally viewed only once. However, billboards have the advantage of reaching the same people numerous times. Often a motorist will pass the same message each day while driving to work.

Cable and digital television are drawing viewers away from the major networks. Digital TV offers consumers the opportunity to watch as many as 500 different channels. This makes it even more difficult to pinpoint specific target audiences. Another problem with both television and radio is the audience’s ability to turn off a message by changing the channel. Billboards on the other hand cannot be turned off. They exude a presence 24 hours, every day.

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40 Matthew Outdoor Advertising “Billboard University” website- www.abnl.com
42 Matthew Outdoor Advertising “Billboard University” website- www.abnl.com
Billboard campaigns generally last six to twelve months, which builds a strong market presence. An outdoor campaign has the ability to quickly cover an entire market. It offers the opportunity to reach every member of a target audience. The constant presence of an outdoor sign demands the viewer’s attention. The audience actually looks for new messages. According to Matthew Outdoor Advertising, “Billboards have the best impact, the best CPM, the best frequency, the best reach, and best targetability of any medium.”

Current Trends Affecting Outdoor

In 1997, billboard revenue increased 8.8% over 1996, to $2.135 billion. This reflects the country’s societal and economic changes over the past 25 years. These changes are seen in the increase of dual income families, multiple car ownership, suburban residency and the increased need to commute for work and shopping.

The OAAA offers the following description of the changes affecting outdoors’ audiences:

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46 Matthew Outdoor Advertising “Billboard University” website- www.abnl.com
49 Matthew Outdoor Advertising “Billboard University” website- www.abnl.com
51 General Outdoor Advertising Website- www.general-outdoor.com
Time Spent With Major Media Channels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Channel</th>
<th>1993 vs. 1970</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>+ 19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>+ 6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>- 2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>+ 3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consumer Choices in Media Channels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Choice</th>
<th>1993 vs. 1970</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homes receiving cable</td>
<td>+ 814%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV channels per household</td>
<td>+ 530%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total radio stations</td>
<td>+ 53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>+ 198%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Traveling Trends

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traveling Trend</th>
<th>1993 vs. 1970</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>US population</td>
<td>+ 25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automobiles per household</td>
<td>+ 53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily vehicle trips</td>
<td>+ 103%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily vehicle miles</td>
<td>+ 110%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of vehicles on road</td>
<td>+ 147%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

52 Basics- Basic Facts About the Outdoor Advertising Industry 1998-99. OAAA, New York, 1998. p. 12. (These are the most recent statistics available.)
Characteristics of the American Driver

According to the Department of Transportation, 90 percent of American adults drive. Men spend an average of 81 minutes each day driving, and women spend an average of 64 minutes driving daily. During the five year span between July 1992 and July 1997, the number of miles driven on U.S. highways increased by 16 percent. On the average two-thirds of all trips are made alone, which means the driver has only the radio and billboards for entertainment.\(^5\)

Half of all Americans drive at least 100 miles each week. Most drivers enjoy driving and believe billboards provide useful information. Mertz Marketing Research studied the number of miles drivers tend to drive in an average week.\(^4\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How many miles do you drive in an average week?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don't drive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't drive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fewer than 100 miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 to 299 miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 300 miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know/ refused</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this 1997 study, Mertz Marketing Research noted that Americans tend to drive a significant number of miles each week. This gives outdoor communicators the opportunity to deliver their messages to adults who are often alone and drive frequently.\(^5\)


\(^54\) Edmondson, Brad. “In the Driver’s Seat.” American Demographics. March 1998, p. 49

They took this study a step further to look at exactly how much time is spent during the commute to work itself.\textsuperscript{56}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>On average, how long does it take you to drive or ride to work?</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 10 minutes</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 to 19 minutes</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 to 29 minutes</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 to 44 minutes</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 45 minutes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/refused</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This study shows that only half of all drivers commute less than 19 minutes to work. It also shows that the highest proportion of drivers with an annual salary of more than $50,000 tend to commute more than 20 minutes to work each day.\textsuperscript{57}

Billboards are especially effective in targeting working women. These women tend to make multiple task trips while driving to and from work. These trips may include driving children to school, running errands or stopping at stores. This means that women are more likely to be thinking about buying things and caring for other people while driving.\textsuperscript{58}

Another recent trend shows drivers often carry cellular phones with them while driving. In 1997, there were approximately 62 million people with cellular phones. In 1997, 31 percent of men and 28 percent of women carried cellular phones with them when they traveled.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{56} Edmondson, Brad. “In the Driver’s Seat.” \textit{American Demographics}, March 1998, p. 48.
\textsuperscript{57} Edmondson, Brad. “In the Driver’s Seat.” \textit{American Demographics}, March 1998, p. 48.
\textsuperscript{58} Edmondson, Brad. “In the Driver’s Seat.” \textit{American Demographics}, March 1998, p. 48.
\textsuperscript{59} Edmondson, Brad. “In the Driver’s Seat.” \textit{American Demographics}, March 1998, p. 52.
This gives organizations the ability to use billboards as a direct response method of communication. Larry Ferenchick at Beach Advertising sees this trend as an opportunity for communicators to use telephone numbers on their billboards to promote immediate action. This also gives organizations a method to measure the effectiveness of their billboards by tracking the number of calls received.  

**Types of Measurement**

Reach and frequency analyses are the most common types of research performed to test the effectiveness of a billboard campaign. This analysis provides numbers showing the number of people who saw the billboard, and how many times they saw it. This type of measurement allows the communicator to compare the impact and cost to other forms of media. This type of research shows how well the billboard campaign met the organization’s goals.  

In the United Kingdom, outdoor companies use Poster Audience Research (Postar). This type of measurement is similar to methods used in evaluating television and radio effectiveness. They use demographic research to estimate the amount of traffic passing billboards and the visibility of different locations.  

Another method of measuring a campaign’s effectiveness is by conducting personal interviews. Subjects are questioned about whether or not they remember seeing a billboard. By performing this type of research, the communicator learns how memorable

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their message was. Although reach and frequency are important to a campaign’s success, audience recall is the most important measurement of a campaign’s success.⁶³

**Resources Available for Outdoor**

Various organizations provide valuable information to communicators using billboards. They are:

- **The Buyer’s Guide To Outdoor Advertising** - a guide that identifies outdoor companies operating throughout the United States. It covers every market, and reports the cost of poster panel showings and bulletins in each market. Available through the Leading National Advertisers (LNA.)

- **Circulation Data** - shows which structures in specific markets work best to meet the communicator’s objectives. Available through the Traffic Audit Bureau For Media Measurement (TAB.)

- **Audience Delivery** - an audience measurement system providing reach and frequency information by demographics in over 550 markets throughout the country. Provided by Simmons Market Research Bureau (SMRB) and Harris Donovan Systems.

- **Telmar** - provides media cost comparisons and media mix analyses.

- **MISA** - an organization that tracks license plate registrations to zip codes to obtain demographic information.

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• PRIZM- a desktop analysis system that allows users to pinpoint their audience by zip code, census tract, and block group. Area residents are divided into groups based on demographics such as education levels, ethnicity, family life cycle stage, and housing.

• Conquest- identifies product and media consumption patterns throughout the United States. Provides comparisons of geographic areas by target audience, analyses of rapidly growing markets and measurements of a market’s buying behavior.\(^6^4\)

**Delta Airlines**

An example of a company who successfully used outdoor as a part of an integrated marketing communications plan is Delta Airlines. Delta was introducing a new business class, and they needed to change their image to attract this audience. Saatchi and Saatchi created a campaign that took billboards one step further- they created a living billboard in Manhattan across from the Port Authority Bus Terminal at 42nd Street and 8th Avenue.\(^6^5\)

The display involved various public relations and marketing tools. Delta held a special event the first day that the billboard went up that corresponded with the beginning of its new TransAtlantic Business Class.\(^6^6\)

The billboard was a replica of a Delta Airlines jet. It was large enough to fit ten passengers and a flight attendant. Delta invited travel and food writers as their guests to "fly" on the jet. There were three "flights" each day with travelers entering the jet


through a cab on a crane. They were served real Delta food, witnessed how the individual movie screens worked, and experienced how comfortable and roomy the seats were. They experienced “travel” as passengers flying business class on a Delta jet.\textsuperscript{67}

Media across the world covered the innovative living billboard. New York DJs broadcast parts of their morning shows on location. Area television stations as well as CNN reported stories about the “jet.”\textsuperscript{68}

The location of the billboard was ideal. Nearly 1.5 million people pass through that section of Manhattan each day. Paulette Stout, of Saatchi and Saatchi, who developed the campaign, noted, “Even jaded New Yorkers who had seen it all had to look up. It had real people, and they were shouting to the crowds, having a ball.”\textsuperscript{69}

The entire campaign cost only $250,000. As a result, they gained enormous press coverage and there was a noted increase in requests for Delta flights from New York. The display was only up for six days. Reporters from London, Hong Kong and Singapore were still running stories on the billboard, even after it was taken down.\textsuperscript{70}

Delta continues to use outdoor as a channel of communication. In August 1998, they signed a three year sublease for the corner of the Port Authority Bus Terminal across


from where the living billboard once stood. The new 3,000 foot sign premiered during spring 1999.71

A Study of 282 Campaigns

In 1994, a study on improving the effectiveness of outdoor advertising was conducted by evaluating 282 billboards. The research was performed by Mukesh Bhargava, an assistant professor at The University of Alberta-Edmonton, Naveen Donthu, an associate professor at Georgia State University, and Rosanne Caron, the vice-president of research at Mediacom in Canada. Most research on outdoor focuses on showing that billboards work. However, this study concentrates on the qualities that made 282 campaigns successful. The study focuses on the qualities that improve audience recall.72

Humorous approaches were used in 29.8% of the campaigns studied. The study also showed that humor and intrigue were both linked to positive recall scores. Intriguing executions were used in 24.5% of the sample.73

The number of concepts that the campaign focused on was also directly linked to recall. On average, there were 2.89 concepts communicated in the sample studied. As the number of concepts rose, the recall declined. This confirmed that a single focus results in

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a higher audience recall. This shows that communicators must prioritize what concepts need to be focused on in a campaign. The researchers wrote, “The significance of low number of concepts confirms that outdoor requires a more disciplined approach in presentation- minimizing the information presented.”

Illustrations were the dominant concept in the majority of the campaigns; however, there was no clear correlation between this and recall. On average, the visual made up 59.8% of the total area of the billboard. Bleeds were used in 17.2% of the campaigns. The researchers noted that photographs were linked to lower recall scores than artwork. The research noted that the creative department at Mediacom considers artwork as “warmer, more accessible, and having the ability to connect the consumer to the billboard.”

The number of words in the billboard’s copy had a strong correlation to the average recall. The mean number of words used in the campaigns (including the organizations’ names or logos) was 9.8. As the number of words increased, the recall

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decreased. There was no relationship between recall and whether the text was used strictly as headlines or as headlines with messages.78

Factors Influencing Recall

Naveen Donthu, an assistant professor at Georgia State University, Joseph Cherian, an assistant professor at The University of Illinois, and Mukesh Bhargava, an assistant professor at The University of Alberta, researched the factors that influence the recall of outdoor. The researchers studied 142 adult residents in a suburban area outside of a large U.S. city. The study targeted adults who commuted on a 30-mile stretch between the suburb and a specific city exit. Ten new billboards were introduced on this route 30 to 45 days before the interviews took place. The billboards communicated information concerning local and regional products and services.79

The respondents passed the 10 billboards at least five times each week, so they were exposed to the messages between 30 and 50 times before the interview. They were asked to describe the billboards in as much detail as they could remember. In cases where respondents did not recall one of the billboards, the researcher then provided the name of the product or service represented in the billboard, and asked the respondents if they saw

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that message. Researchers then analyzed the characteristics of the billboards that were recalled most often.  

The following chart lists the characteristics of the 10 billboards studied:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Billboard</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Number of Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Highway</td>
<td>Right Side</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Highway</td>
<td>Right Side</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Highway</td>
<td>Right Side</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Highway</td>
<td>Right Side</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Highway</td>
<td>Right Side</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Highway</td>
<td>Right Side</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Surface Street</td>
<td>Right Side</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Surface Street</td>
<td>Left Side</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Highway</td>
<td>Left Side</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Highway</td>
<td>Left Side</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Researchers found recall was influenced by the billboard’s location, position, and number of words in the message. Billboards located on the right hand side of the street were recalled more often than billboards on the left side. The researchers believed that these messages were more effective because drivers tend to look to the right for traffic and road signs. Also, on multiple lane highways, signs on the left may be too far away to attract the driver’s attention.

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Billboards placed on the highway had a higher recall than the billboards that were on the surface streets. The researchers believed that highway drivers are able to pay closer attention to billboards because highway driving takes less concentration than city driving. However, it is important to note that surface street billboards are targeted to pedestrians as well as drivers.83

Messages containing fewer words were more often recalled than billboards with many words in the copy. (In this study, “many words” were described as eight or more words, not including fine print messages.) This finding is not surprising, considering the fact that past research has shown that billboards with fewer words are easier to read.84

Finally, billboards that used black and white were recalled more frequently than billboards that used color. The researchers hypothesized that black and white billboards may be more memorable, because they are less common. In fact, fewer than 10 percent of all billboards are in black and white.85

The researchers also noted that the respondents’ views on billboards also influenced their recall. Respondents who have a positive attitude concerning outdoor

advertising were more likely to notice billboards than respondents with a negative opinion of billboards.86

The researchers summarized their research by noting, “The effectiveness of outdoor ads may be enhanced by placing them on the right-hand side on highways, and using few words and unusual executions, such as black and white instead of color.”87

Another study conducted by two University of Georgia professors, Karen Whitehill King and Spencer Tinkham, looked at the retention of billboard messages. They designed a billboard that simply read, “Calvin Coolidge was the 30th President of the United States.” The billboard had an orange background with white reverse type, and a drawing of Calvin Coolidge. The researchers avoided product advertising because they could not control other marketing activities that may take place for that product.88

A random sample of 1,015 residents of Athens, Georgia were contacted through a telephone interview. The interviews took place approximately every four weeks during a four month span. The first set of interviews took place before the billboards went up. The second set of interviews was conducted four weeks into the campaign, as the billboards began to come down. The third set of interviews took place four weeks after the

researchers took down the billboards. The final interviews were conducted after the billboards had been gone for eight weeks.\textsuperscript{89}

Respondents were told that the research was being conducted to determine people's awareness of political figures. They were asked to name the governor of Georgia, the Vice-President of the United States, the fifth President of the United States, and the thirtieth President of the United States. This question determined the rate of unaided recall. The respondents were then asked if they saw any billboards with the thirtieth President on them, and if they remembered which President was shown. They were given five choices of Presidents that may have appeared on the billboards. This question measured the exposure and recall of the billboards' message. They were then asked if they remembered the exact copy, and if they discussed the billboards with anyone else. Finally, the respondents reported their opinions of the value of billboards.\textsuperscript{90}

The researchers found that the respondents did retain the billboards' message over the two-month span. The billboard was up for only one month, but respondents remembered the message two months after the billboard was taken down. They also noted that the respondents were more likely to discuss the billboards with friends rather than family members. This shows drivers may discuss billboards with friends and this


helps the communicator to send the message through word-of-mouth as well as through the billboard message itself.\(^91\)

The message used in this study was unusual, and therefore, may have added to the retention of the billboards. This is consistent with the idea that novel messages are more likely to be remembered. This study shows that a billboard with a memorable and original message will be retained even after the campaign ends.\(^92\)


Part II- Designing Billboards
Overview

“When you have creative billboards, it creates awareness and memorability,” Jim Pridgen, GM at Fairway Outdoor Advertising said. “A person can buy all the space we have, but if he doesn’t have a good message, he doesn’t make his money.”

The combination of size, color and illumination is what attracts attention to a billboard. The average consumer is exposed to over 500 visual and verbal messages each day. When faced with that number of different messages, only a billboard that is original and stands out will create a lasting impression. In the introduction to Gotcha! The Art of the Billboard, Wei Yew states, “There is a definite art to transforming a message onto a billboard that will instantly capture the attention of a driver traveling at 60 mph or more.” Billboards must be legible from a variety of angles at different speeds and distances. To effectively communicate a message, the viewer must have the ability to read the billboard regardless of lighting or weather conditions. Because billboards need to communicate a message quickly, an effective poster uses a simple visual and a short headline.

94 Radio Advertisers’ Bureaus Marketing Resource Center Website- www.rab.com
Visuals

On the average billboard, the visual element makes up between 75 and 85% of the entire layout. It is the first thing the audience will see as they approach the billboard. If the visual is powerful enough to grab the viewer's attention, then the billboard will be a step ahead of other posters on that street. In some cases, a powerful visual can work faster than words. In fact, there are times when a strong visual can be used in place of any words other than the organization's name. 99

When designing a billboard's visual, the communicator needs to begin with an image that represents the meaning of the words. One of the main advantages of designing a billboard is the amount of space available for the design. Extensions can be added to the outside of the billboard to allow the designer to have more room to work with. The designer has the opportunity to use illustrations that are big and bold. 100 Communicators must remember that billboards have only a few seconds to deliver a message. There should be no more than three major elements in the billboard design. Communicators must keep in mind that their audience is passing by in a moving car. 101 The idea is to create a design that works quickly. The billboard that will stand out is the one that is unlike the others around it.

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101 Marcann Inc. Website- www.marcann.com
Copywriting

Copywriters have the challenge of communicating their message through the use of very few words. Wei Yew commented, “I have found that the most effective billboards come from the controlled use of words and creative handling of graphics.”

An effective message is short, yet creative. The message needs to make its point quickly, and should not be too tricky. The copy should include only relevant information, and should be concise enough for the audience to understand its point right away.

Bob Kwait spoke of the challenges faced by copywriters in the introduction to Gotcha! The Art of the Billboard.

“A lot of people ignore the basic rules and try to put too much copy on a board. Or they’ll use type that is too small to read. There are plenty of awful boards out there. That’s the norm.”

As a general rule, a billboard should only use seven words in its copy. Ideally, the copywriter should limit the wording to only three or four clear words. If the copy uses more than 10 words, the reader will not have the opportunity to read the entire message. At the most, readers have six seconds to view and comprehend the billboard.

Billboards are unlike other types of print media because they are limited in the number of words that can be used to communicate their message. The copywriter must creatively communicate important information in approximately seven words. The copy

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105 Marcann Inc. Website- www.marcann.com
needs to stir the imagination of the readers so they will still think about the message long after they passed the board.\textsuperscript{106}

One suggestion for writing catchy copy is to borrow from famous words or sayings. For example, a poster for City Square Sports Club used the copy, “Take a lawyer to court.” Under the headline was a picture of a basketball. The copy consisted of only five words, but by using the words “lawyer” and “court” together, the poster made its point in one short statement.\textsuperscript{107} This is also a great example of how surprise can grab the reader’s attention. Outdoor designers strive to develop billboards that use the element of surprise whether it is in the form of changing a popular phrase or by using humor.\textsuperscript{108}

The authors of Great Outdoor consider humor as one of the most effective ways to communicate a message in the United States. They wrote,

“American humor is probably the finest in the world. Humor is one of the key tools the creative department has at its disposal. If you can metaphorically put your arm around a consumer and make him smile, you stand a better chance of getting him on your side.”\textsuperscript{109}

If the copy uses humor effectively, then readers will continue to think about the message long after they pass the billboard.


Dramatic and emotional approaches are often used to communicate messages about serious issues such as crime and drunk driving. These messages often use shock as a way to carry the message. A powerful headline causes readers to think past their own personal problems, and concentrate on the billboard’s message. A billboard designed by McKinney & Silver showed a Red Cross bottle filled with blood with the headline, “Some Drunk Drivers Never Give Up the Bottle.” The best billboards combine drama, words and pictures to make one simple statement.

There are many different approaches a copywriter can use when developing a billboard’s headline. The challenge is communicating the message in fewer than ten words.

**Typefaces**

Billboards are viewed by drivers passing at speeds up to 60 mph. Therefore, designers must use typefaces that are legible at high speeds and at various distances. Sans serif fonts are generally most effective on billboards. Typefaces with high contrast between thick and thin elements should be avoided. Bulky typefaces tend to blend together at a distance making them impossible to read. Readers may have trouble reading a message written in a delicate font such as Script, until the last second. Lettering that

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is too tight or too thin disappears at a distance. If the type is fat where letter spacing is thin, the message becomes unreadable.\textsuperscript{113}

Capital letters tend to be read individually, and should be avoided in long headlines. They work best for copy that is between two and four words long. When using longer words or phrases, lower case letters work better. The eye is more accustomed to seeing numerous lower case letters combined, and therefore the message is easier to read.\textsuperscript{114} The letters also need to be spaced in a manner that makes it easy for the reader to comprehend. If the letters are spaced too far apart, the letters will be read individually instead of together. If the letters are too close, the reader will not be able to make out the words.\textsuperscript{115}

Marcann uses a "17 times rule" to judge legibility. This rule states that the designer should look at a rough design from a distance equal to 17 times the width of the artwork. The design should then be viewed in different lighting conditions, to simulate how it will be seen during different times of the day. Then the designer should look at it from different angles, to test how well readers will be able to view it from different distances.\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{113} OAAC Homepage- www.OAAC.com  
\textsuperscript{114} OAAC Homepage- www.OAAC.com  
\textsuperscript{116} Marcann Inc. Website- www.marcann.com
Colors

A huge, colorful poster creates a presence that other mediums cannot achieve. Designers should use combinations with contrast in both the hue (the identity of the color, such as red, blue, yellow) and value (how light or dark the color is.) Billboards should use bright colors that are legible from a distance. Contrasting colors are easier for viewers to see while driving by the billboard from a distance. Color combinations with low contrast reduce the impact on viewers. Designers should also avoid using pastel colors.

Figure 2.1 shows a color wheel, that designers can use to find colors with contrasting hues and values.

Combinations such as yellow and purple work well because they have dissimilar hues and values. On the other hand, red and green are not a good combination despite the fact that they are opposite on the wheel, and have a good contrast in hues. Because they have similar values, they do not work well for outdoor. White works best with dark value colors such as blue. Colors with light value such as yellow, work best with black.

Figure 2.2 shows 28 color combinations available for billboard designs. The color combinations range from best to worst, based on the ease in which a motorist can view the

118 Marcann Inc. Website- www.marcann.com
Figure 2.1

Color Combinations

Figure 2.2
colors while passing by. The best combination (black on yellow) is in the upper left corner, and the worst combination (yellow on red) is in the lower right corner.  

Designers should avoid using combinations such as yellow and red, because they are difficult to read.

Backgrounds should remain uncluttered to achieve the best level of legibility. The author spoke to Bruce Penzer, creative director at Beach Advertising, about his preferences in designing backgrounds. He said that he prefers to use white backgrounds. With a white background, the billboard gives the illusion of blocking out the other objects surrounding the billboard such as trees or buildings.

Creative Guidelines

The University of Texas put together the following guidelines for communicators to consider when judging their finished billboard design:

- Can the copy be more succinct? Does the copy make its statement in fewer than ten words?
- Is the typeface legible? Will viewers be able to read the words at a distance?
- Is the graphic singular? Is there one powerful image?
- Is the read good? Will viewers recognize the billboard from a distance?
- Is the optimum color achieved? Are the colors attractive with a proper contrast?

122 OAAC Home Page- www.OAAC.com
124 University of Texas- Gannet Advertising Archives Website- www.texas.edu
Chapter 3

Secondary Research

The author began gathering secondary research by viewing the OAAA homepage. After reviewing the OAAA website, the author contacted their publications department. The OAAA has 36 publications available to non-members, and four applied to this study. The OAAA also produced a short video called “Building Brands Beautifully,” that was significant to this study.

The author also conducted an extensive search of websites on the internet. Using the keywords “Outdoor Advertising” in an AltaVista search, the author found seven websites significant to this study.

The OAAC was also contacted for information. The OAAC referred the author to Sharon Dixon, Research Manager at Mediacom. Sharon Dixon provided the author with “A Study of 282 Campaigns” that was researched by Rosanne Caron, the vice-president of research at Mediacom and two professors in the United States.
The author then researched this topic at the Rowan University library. She found two books significant to this study. She also used the keywords “Outdoor Advertising” to find periodicals through InfoTrac. Through this search, she found four periodicals that were significant to this study.

The Free Library in Philadelphia also contained periodicals that applied to this topic. Using the keywords “Outdoor Advertising” in the Business InfoTrac, the author found four periodicals related to this study. Using the same keywords, the author also searched the NewsBank Info Web and found four periodicals related to this study.

The author also used one book from her own personal collection in this study.

The Survey

The survey was designed to measure agencies’ preferences for billboard design and usage.

The author used a judgment sampling method that set a specific standard for agencies to meet to be included in the sample. Only agencies that were recognized at the OBIE awards within the past five years were qualified to be included in this survey. Addresses were available for 58 agencies in the United States and Canada that fit this criteria.

The author received a total of 30 completed surveys from the agencies. The surveys provided information that was gathered and analyzed, to find trends in the respondents’ answers. The results were translated into text, graphs and charts.
The author drew conclusions and made recommendations based upon the data gathered through this study.
Data Analysis

Surveys were sent to 58 agencies throughout the United States and Canada that received OBIE awards between 1994 and 1998. A total of 30 surveys was collected resulting in a 51.7% return rate. Twenty-one surveys were returned by mail. Follow-up calls were made to the remaining agencies resulting in nine additional surveys being completed over the telephone.

The survey consisted of questions about media and production. Because of the wide scope of information covered in the questionnaire, some respondents were unable to answer all of the questions. Some respondents were cautious about setting “rules” for designing billboards. One respondent wrote, “The first rule of creating great billboards is that there are no rules.”

The data provided by the survey responses is translated into text, charts and graphs.
When would you suggest using billboards as your primary method of communication?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand awareness</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broad reach with a general demographic</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple/ quick message</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When targeting geographically</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would not use it as a primary medium</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New product introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For directional purposes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When other mediums are restricted like liquor</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local companies</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When there are a lack of funds</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For high reach and daily frequency</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When it makes sense as part of the overall strategy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image building efforts</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time sensitive issues</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When a striking visual is needed</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With radio</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For trade show messages</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.1
The respondents listed various circumstances when they would use billboards as their primary method of communication. The most common response to this question was to use billboards as a method of building brand awareness or image. Billboards are a valuable tool when communicators are introducing a product or service as well as when they need to reinforce their message.

Respondents also stressed the fact that billboards should only be used as a primary method of communication when the message is simple and quick. Billboards are not an effective channel to send complicated messages.

The ability to reach a large audience was attractive to many respondents. They used billboards to achieve high reach and daily frequency when they were communicating to broad target groups. Billboards are most effective when used with messages directed toward broad demographics.

Respondents also noted that billboards were an excellent option for messages targeted to local drivers. Billboards are an effective channel for local businesses’ brands or services that are influenced by geography. A common suggestion was to use billboards to provide directions for drivers to find local businesses. Local companies also benefit from the low cost of developing a billboard campaign.

Three respondents noted that billboards are effective for companies who are restricted in other media. Companies such as liquor distributors who are unable to use other forms of media are able to communicate through outdoor.
One respondent noted that billboards can be produced quickly, and are useful in time sensitive campaigns. Another respondent noted that billboards are effective in announcing trade shows.

Respondents also cautioned that billboards must make sense as part of the overall campaign. One respondent noted that billboards work well when they are part of a strategy that uses radio. Another respondent wrote that billboards need a striking visual to send an effective message.

Three respondents said that they would not use billboards as their primary method of communication. One respondent noted that billboards are an effective method of reinforcing a message, but they are not useful as the primary channel of communication.

**What demographics are best reached through billboards?**

Respondents listed various demographics that are effectively reached through billboards. Ten respondents mentioned that billboards could target all demographics because it is the only universal medium. Two respondents wrote that anyone in an urban neighborhood can be reached through billboards. However, billboards can be used strategically to target specific demographics. The placement of the billboard is very important when developing an outdoor strategy.

Respondents mentioned that communicators should not try to use this channel to attract seniors, but it is very effective in targeting active adults. Three respondents mentioned that billboards were successful in reaching commuters who are on the go.

One respondent wrote that billboards are a good option for communicating
messages targeted toward upscale consumers, but another respondent suggested using billboards to communicate with lower class audiences.

Four respondents mentioned that younger demographics can be targeted better through billboards than other mediums. They also noted that teenagers are difficult to reach through channels such as magazines. However, it is very effective to use campaigns that use radio and billboards together to reach this audience. One respondent wrote, “Younger audiences like outdoors’ larger-than-life creative capability.”

What communications goals are best reached through billboards?

Fourteen respondents mentioned that billboards were most effective when communicators are trying to build awareness, identity or reinforcement. The ability to achieve high reach and frequency was listed by nine respondents as goals that are achievable through outdoor.

Four respondents warned that billboards should not be used to achieve complex goals. Billboards are most effective when used to communicate simple concepts such as price, location or ideas that are already on the top of the consumer’s mind. Billboards are also effective when targeting specific ethnic groups or geographic areas.

One respondent mentioned that billboards are most effective when used to support broadcast messages.
What is the average amount of time you would run a billboard before changing its design?

As figure 4.2 shows 12 respondents suggested changing billboard designs at least every three months. One respondent mentioned that a communicator does not want to keep the same design up longer than three months because drivers often see the billboard daily. The creative should change to keep drivers' interest in the billboard.

An additional 11 respondents believed that designs should change every three to six months. Only two respondents recommended keeping the same design for six to nine months. One of these respondents suggested using the same design during that period, but rotating the board to various locations throughout the market.
One respondent suggested using the same design for nine to 12 months. The only respondent who suggested using one design for more than a year mentioned that some clients need consistency throughout a campaign for branding purposes.

Three of the respondents did not answer this question. These respondents mentioned that the ideal amount of time to use one design may vary depending on the campaign. One respondent pointed out that some billboards may be effective for one month, while a painted billboard may only need to be changed annually. Other factors that influence a design's effectiveness are location, the number of other billboards surrounding the area, and the message itself. Billboards located in urban areas with competing messages may want to change the creative after three to four months while a billboard communicating directions may stay up indefinitely.

**Do you prefer using bulletins, 30-sheet posters or 8-sheet posters?**

![Frequency Chart](image)

*Figure 4.3*
Only 23 respondents preferred one type of billboard over the others. The majority of the respondents preferred bulletins over the smaller billboards. These communicators mentioned benefits such as size, quality, and placement on major highways. Respondents preferred 30-sheet billboards for local messages. Respondents who preferred 8-sheet posters used them in urban areas. One respondent wrote that 8-sheets were more durable during inclement weather.

Five respondents said that the decision of what type of billboard is most effective depends on the campaign’s goals and objectives as well as the market itself. The size should be determined by the location and the creative. One respondent wrote, “All types have specific purposes when they are suitable.” Another respondent mentioned that bulletins are effective when communicating to mass audiences, but 30-sheet or 8-sheet posters are better for specific audiences.

What should be the dominant feature of a billboard’s layout?

![Pie chart showing the dominant feature of a billboard's layout.]

- Depends: 21%
- Picture: 31%
- Balanced Copy and Picture: 38%
- Copy: 10%

Figure 4.4
As figure 4.4 shows, the majority of respondents preferred using a balance of copy and visual elements in a billboard’s layout. Slightly fewer respondents chose using a picture as the dominant feature of a design. These communicators felt that pictures made a more powerful presence than copy. Only three respondents preferred using the copy as the main element.

Six respondents said that the dominant feature should be determined by factors such as the creative strategy and message content. One respondent wrote, “It could be either. What’s important is the impact of the billboard. You need a clear, memorable message that gets noticed.”

**Which typeface is best for legibility: serif or sans serif?**

Only fourteen people responded to this question. Five respondents preferred serif, and nine chose sans serif. One respondent wrote, “There is no right answer. Serif and sans serif typefaces both have fonts that are illegible. Designers need to choose a face that reflects your message and brand you are advertising.” Other communicators mentioned factors such as treatment, size, spacing and color that determines a typeface’s legibility.

**Do you prefer using bleeds or blanking?**

This question was answered on 14 surveys. Of these responses, 11 agencies (78.6%) preferred bleeds and three agencies (21.4%) preferred blanking. One respondent wrote that the choice should be made based on the creative. Another respondent
mentioned that it does not matter because the consumer does not know the difference between the two, and the communication of the message is the important issue.

How many words do you generally use in a billboard's copy to communicate your message most effectively? (Not including company name/logo)

As figure 4.5 shows, answers for this question range from a no words at all to 25 words maximum. The most common response to this question was seven words (31.82%). The highest percentage of answers fell between seven and 10 words (68.18%). The average number of words was 7.9.

One respondent wrote, "Seven or less is best. You can go over that in a spot where traffic piles up, or there are pedestrians. But seven or less is still best."
Another respondent told the author, "I try to have a seven word maximum, but usually I go over that."

One out of home specialist mentioned that logos should be prominent in the layout to communicate the organization's name without using words.

Some surveys that did not include an actual number of words mentioned that the copywriter should keep the message as simple as possible.

One respondent that did not answer this question wrote, "The message should be as concise as possible, but I avoid making rules about it."

Are billboards more effective in rural, urban or suburban settings?

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Figure 4.6

As figure 4.6 indicates, the majority of the respondents preferred using billboards in urban neighborhoods. Urban neighborhoods tend to have more availability, but also more clutter. There are also more impressions in urban areas.

Respondents also commented that placement depends on the purpose, product, and target market. Communicators need to place their billboards in areas where their
target group will be exposed to the message. One respondent mentioned the fact that
communicators can place billboards on the streets that their audiences travel on.

One respondent that did not choose a location wrote, “Rural is only good for
placing bulletins. Posters are successful in urban and suburban areas.”

Another respondent told the author that there are benefits to placing billboards in
all areas, and it was impossible to choose one setting over the other. Rural is effective
because there is not as much clutter. However urban and suburban areas have higher
reach.

Many respondents agreed that placement depends on the goals, objectives, and
strategies of the campaign.

**What methods do you use to measure the impact of your billboard messages?**

A variety of methods are used to measure the impact of billboard messages. The
most common forms of measurement, used by 12 respondents, are pre- and post-
campaign awareness surveys. These measure the rate of change in the public’s awareness
as a result of the campaign.

The Traffic Audit Bureau (TAB) and Daily Effective Circulation (DEC’s) provide
useful information in determining a campaign’s success. They give the communicator
feedback on the what structures meet the communicator’s needs.

Three respondents mentioned that they analyze reach and frequency. Other
respondents mentioned independent research such as recall studies, attitude surveys and
focus groups.
Respondents also based their measurement on sales, phone volume and word on
the street. One respondent mentioned that reservations were a good indicator of a
successful campaign when promoting a resort.

One respondent relies on analysis from the outdoor company itself in determining a
billboard’s success.

Three respondents base billboard’s impact on the amount of press coverage that is
generated by the campaign. Two respondents judge success by whether or not they
receive an OBIE award.

Some agencies mentioned that billboards are difficult to measure. One respondent
mentioned that it is difficult to measure because it is part of a communications mix.
Another respondent wrote that brand awareness is an indicator of success, but it is difficult
to measure the audience’s awareness. One respondent does not measure the billboard’s
impact because it is not a good channel for direct response.

One respondent tested billboards before placing them in the market. A process
called Mov-I allows the agency to place designs on a projector so the creative team can
view the artwork from the viewpoint of a driver approaching from 600 feet away. This
allows the agency to determine what changes need to be made before creating the actual
vinyl. This process makes it possible for the agency to create the most effective
billboards.
What are two tips you would suggest to a beginner in this field?

Respondents answered this question in a variety of ways.

Many respondents offered suggestions on how to create effective outdoor.

Eleven respondents advised beginners to “simplify.” Other suggestions were to be distinct and look at a design to find elements that can be taken out. One respondent advised against using addresses and phone numbers in the billboard’s copy, stating that they would not be remembered.

One respondent warned against forcing print campaigns into outdoor campaigns. A successful newspaper or magazine layout may not work as a billboard.

A media planner wrote, “Do not be seduced by low-cost 30- sheets, etc. Big and bold should always be part of the buy.”

Respondents emphasized the need to be creative, and not suggest ideas because “it has always been this way.”

One suggestion for creating a memorable billboard was to use “teasers.” Teasers begin the campaign by using a photo with a message that is “covered-up.” Later, the message will be added to “reveal” the copy.

Other answers offered tips on how to handle clients from an agency standpoint. Respondents stressed that the agency needs to have a clear understanding of the client’s goals before determining if outdoor is appropriate. It is important to know and understand the company’s business and the product life cycle of their products. It is also vital for the agency to understand the client’s target market. This allows the media planner to determine what locations are best suited for the audience based on their traffic.
patterns and product usage. One answer suggested asking a lot of questions and not assuming anything. Another respondent urged beginners to make formal recommendations in writing with specifics and reasons for options.

Suggestions were also made about qualities such as flexibility and a commitment to service that a person must have to work in an agency setting.

Other respondents offered advice on dealing with the outdoor companies that rent the actual billboards. Three respondents urged beginners to go look at the billboard locations personally whenever possible. They advised against letting the outdoor company choose the space. One media director said that beginners should look at all of their options. There are many outdoor companies that the agency should look at to get the best billboard sites and prices. Respondents stressed the importance of negotiating. Media planners need to be aggressive when dealing with the outdoor company. Many beginners make the mistake of accepting the price of the billboard without trying to negotiate first.

One respondent wrote that new opportunities and types of outdoor are becoming very popular. The director of outdoor media at one agency reminded beginners to keep up with technologies and advancements in this field. They should take advantage of opportunities to apply new technologies to their billboards.

Some respondents made suggestions about networking and career growth. It was suggested by one respondent that beginners should join organizations and network to gain respect. Another respondent warned against burning bridges and maintaining connections.
Two respondents advised beginners to read as many industry publications as possible, as often as they can. Another respondent suggested reading “The One Show Annual” and “Under the Radar” by Kirshenbaum and Bond.

One respondent suggested using vinyls instead of posting paper or paint.

One respondent urged beginners to look closely at the reasons why they want to work in outdoor. It is a difficult field to work in. Another respondent suggested that beginners should not specialize in outdoor because there are a limited number of opportunities in this field. Beginners should look at other media for career opportunities.

One respondent simply suggested that anyone working in outdoor should have fun with the job.
Chapter 5

Summary and Interpretation

Billboards offer communicators the opportunity to send their messages to a wide audience numerous times.

The author did not receive any surveys that had every question answered. Respondents felt the questions that required them to choose one answer over another were difficult to answer. Many respondents were hesitant about setting rules to follow when creating outdoor campaigns. They believed that decisions needed to be made for each campaign individually.

The most useful information came from the questions using open-ended responses. These allowed the respondent to elaborate on their answers. The data collected through these questions gave the author insight concerning what agencies feel is important in a billboard campaign. The answers covered a variety of areas ranging from how to deal with clients to the latest ways to judge a campaign’s success.

The author attempted to find strict guidelines to follow when developing an outdoor campaign. The variety of responses prohibited the author from finding patterns in many of the answers.
Some of the answers were not surprising. For instance, many respondents enjoyed working with outdoor because it had such high reach and frequency. They also considered outdoors’ ability to target a wide range of people a benefit over other mediums that are more fragmented.

Respondents also followed the general rule of “less is more” when determining the number of elements in a billboard’s layout. They suggested keeping the billboard as simple as possible. Another trend consistent with published research was the tendency to only use seven to 10 words in the copy. Only one respondent suggested using more than 10 words.

In previous studies of successful campaigns, the billboards’ visuals dominated the layout. However, the respondents in this study suggested using a balance of the copy and visual.

Another interesting point was the majority of the respondents preferred bulletins to 30- or 8- sheet posters. However, in data provided by the OAAA, bulletins are the least common size of billboard in the country. Over 60% of the respondents in this study chose bulletins, over the other billboard sizes.

One respondent strongly urged designers to avoid using any type of direct calls to action such as phone numbers. However, research is currently being conducted to show how billboards can effectively work as a direct response channel due to the increase of drivers with cellular phones.
The author expected a larger number of responses to the question concerning typeface legibility. However, most respondents were hesitant about choosing one typeface over another.

Recommendation

Further research in this area could include studies of successful billboard campaigns. These studies could look into the creative features of billboards. Designers have many options available when choosing the elements of a billboard’s layout. This study showed that many communicators do not prefer one element over another when designing a billboard. However, further research could be conducted to analyze the prominent features of successful billboards. By analyzing these campaigns, researchers would find what elements are found in the successful designs. This would help to set standards on how billboard designs should be created. This would not suggest that all billboards should use the same elements in the same layout, but it would help designers to avoid using elements that do not work such as hard to read fonts.
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APPENDIX
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11. What methods do you use to measure the impact of your billboard messages?

12. What are two tips you would suggest to a beginner in this field?

If you would like an abstract of the survey findings, please write your name and address in the space below.

Please return your survey to:

Donna Lithgow
42 Schalick Dr.
Pittsgrove, NJ 08318

42 Schalick Dr.
Pittsgrove, NJ 08318
March 3, 1999

Dear Creative Director,

I am writing a thesis on billboard design and usage as part of my graduate studies in public relations at Rowan University. This study targets creative directors and media directors at agencies that were recognized at the OBIE awards within the past five years.

Please take a few minutes to answer the following questions based on your thoughts on the proper usage of billboards. The survey will take approximately ten minutes to answer, and your participation is greatly appreciated.

If you would like an abstract of the survey findings, I will gladly send you one. Enclosed you will find a self-addressed stamped envelope for your convenience in returning this survey.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Donna Lithgow