

How long should a TV commercial be?

 By [Chris Brewer](#)

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It still amazes me that so many TV (and radio) commercials are 30 seconds long.

Who was the guru who pronounced that to be the optimum time? When asked how many TV commercials would be in a campaign, why do most media planners calculate the answer using the 30-second rate?

New York agency, Ted Bates, issued a statement (admittedly many years ago) about length. It was that “the true answer is that 15-second commercials are potentially half as effective as 30 seconds.” I’ll leave it up to you to decide if that’s remarkably astute or unbelievably stupid.

What is of paramount importance is that, for example, a 15-second commercial must NOT be a speeded up version of a 30-second commercial! A specific message must NEVER be trimmed “to fit” within a time span that’s too short.



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If the message demands 35 seconds of air time, then that’s what it should get – not 30 seconds. Similarly, 35 seconds will not be long enough to do justice to a 45-second commercial.

Regarding the Ted Bates’ comment; what we do know is that a 15-second commercial can be just as successful as any other length – because it depends on the message. That is so obvious it hardly needs to be said at all.

In the USA they found, in a survey, that:

1. The recall of a 15 second commercial was between 80% and 90% of that of a 30 second commercial.
2. The average 15 second commercial is two-thirds as intrusive and “persuasive” as a 30 second commercial.

What we can further assume is that fear of consumer irritation is very, very real. This is not a direct result of the length of a TV commercial. In fact, some 60- and 90-second commercials are so highly entertaining and informative that consumers stop fast-forwarding in order to watch them again.

On the other hand, in my house anyway, there's a huge groan when the same commercial is shown 10 times during an evening.

Some other interesting research results on TV and cinema commercials is that most viewers are unable to assess the length of a commercial anyway!

So, where does all this leave us?

(a) Well, for a start, we can assume that the irritation level cannot be directly ascribed to the length of the commercial and that the blame lies with the message itself.

(b) Another assumption we can draw is to agree with the statement *“tell them quick, tell them who and tell them what.”*

(c) It is generally accepted that if an advertiser doesn't announce who he is until after the halfway mark then he will have to work SO hard in the second half that the nett effectiveness of his time available will be reduced alarmingly.

(d) Thus we see that the content and the technique will affect the effectiveness of a commercial and that this danger is more significant than the length of the commercial itself.

(e) Consequently, there is nothing to fear from using a shorter-length commercial – provided the message can be effectively communicated within that time.

There is very little reliable data regarding the ideal length of a commercial. The general consensus internationally, however, would seem to indicate that a 15- or 20-second commercial is well suited to reinforcing an established brand image or as support to a longer, more informative spot.

But it seems logical to assume that the question of “how long is ideal?” is dependent entirely on how long the copywriter needs to put across the message.

The inevitable conclusion therefore is:

Question: How long should the commercial be?

Answer: Long enough.

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