

Arbitron: Public Likes Digital Billboards

by Erik Sass, Tuesday, Mar 4, 2008 8:00 AM ET

DIGITAL BILLBOARDS GOT TWO BOOSTS yesterday. The first came from an Arbitron study which found the public is broadly favorable to the electronic displays, valuing them for their ability to inform drivers about news, weather, emergency conditions and "Amber Alerts" for missing children. The Arbitron study surveyed motorists from the Cleveland market, where seven digital billboards have operated along major roadways for the last three years. Separately, Texas also approved digital billboards last week.

According to the Arbitron survey of 402 adults in the Cleveland area, 80% of travelers said they think the billboards provide an important community service. Survey subjects were also receptive to digital billboard advertising, with 83% of viewers saying they recalled at least one out of nine advertisements in the test group, and 65% saying they recalled two.

After seeing an ad on a digital billboard, roughly 20% said they were motivated to visit a featured store, and 15% said they would visit a featured restaurant. Overall, roughly 90% of motorists said they paid attention to digital billboard ads at least some of the time.

Digital billboards actually benefit other media, the Arbitron survey found. Thirty-five percent of respondents were reminded of a local radio station, and 28% noted a TV show to watch because of digital billboard ads.

Last year, another Cleveland-area study provided ammunition to outdoor advertising companies that want to create new digital installations, but face resistance from authorities that fear the eye-catching displays may distract drivers, causing accidents.

In June 2007, a study of automobile accidents in Cuyahoga County (centered on Cleveland) by Tantala Associates showed that "accidents are no more likely to occur near digital billboards than on highway sections without them," according to principal Albert M. Tantala. Several large Interstate highways pass through Cuyahoga County, including U.S. 90 and U.S. 77--and with about 2.2 million inhabitants, the metropolitan area experiences heavy commuter traffic.

Finally, last week the Texas Transportation Commission handed outdoor advertising companies another victory with its decision to allow digital billboard installation statewide, with approval from county and municipal authorities.

According to the new rules, which take effect June 1, no video or motion is allowed on the digital billboards, which must only display static images. The TTC's decision was motivated partly by the digital displays' ability to convey information during an emergency and for Amber Alerts.