REPORT:
PODCAST ADS PERFORM,
HOST READS OUTPERFORM

By Paul Riismandel

Introduction

Since the dawn of podcast advertising there has been a long-held belief that ads read by podcast hosts work exceptionally well. This comes not just from those of us who sell podcast ads; we’ve heard it over and over again from the brands that have realized class-leading returns on their spend, from the trailblazers who first invested in podcasts to the leading brands of today.

A leading reason why we believe host-reads excel – and why so many brands choose them – is listeners’ trusted relationship with hosts. For them a podcast host is not just a personality, but a dependable influencer.

Though our confidence is high, we wanted to put this hypothesis to the test. That’s why Midroll commissioned a brand lift survey with Signal Hill Insights to tackle this very question: do host-read podcast ads outperform announcer read ads?

The Influencer Effect

For a number of very practical reasons (see the side-bar discussion), most brand lift studies in podcasting work with general population panels of podcast listeners. The folks who participate in the study are podcast listeners – usually ones who like the genre of the podcasts being tested – but not necessarily regular listeners or fans of that podcast or podcasts.

While this method very reliably lets us measure podcast ad effectiveness, we’re less able to isolate the influencer effect tied to listeners’ relationship with hosts.

To do that we need to focus on those who we believe are most influenceable: a hosts’ fans and listeners. And that’s just what we did.

Method

Midroll is in a unique position to conduct this research because of our industry-leading first-party demographic survey, Podsurvey. Tens of thousands of Midroll podcast listeners have opted-in to participate in podcast research, and we tapped into this resource to recruit a pool of respondents who are very likely to be listeners to one of the shows on our roster.

692 podcast listeners chose to complete our survey, and 412 of this group told us that they’re listeners to the show we tested, allowing us to isolate results from that group, gauging the impact of that relationship.

In an online survey, one group of respondents – the exposed cell – heard two clips of the podcast under analysis, each with one ad from a different brand.

Half of the exposed cell heard announcer-read ads, and half heard host-read ads.

Another group – the control cell – heard the same clips, but without those ads.

In order to help balance out effects of the brands themselves, we chose ads from four, each from different verticals. Two brands were classified as established brands, one in the health and beauty category, and the other in the consumer web app category. The two classified as emerging brands were in the home care and food and beverage categories.
Top-Line Results: All Podcast Ads Work!

The good news is that all the ads we tested, announcer-read and host-read, generated a healthy amount of lifts. Confirming what we’ve seen in the dozens of brand lift studies we’ve conducted, as a platform, podcast ads just work.

However, host-read ads work even better.

Let’s get into it.

Hosts Read Ads that Listeners Remember

First, an important and core measure is unaided recall, which tells us how well listeners remember the brand they heard about. Unaided means that it’s a fill-in-the-blank, tell us what you remember – they’re not prompted with any names.

For the emerging brands we saw 59% more recall. After hearing the host-reads 27% of listeners could recall the brand, compared to just 17% who heard the announcer reads. You’ll note that those recall numbers are lower than for the established brands, but that lines up with our experience. By definition, established brands are more well-known, and come to mind more easily. To put this in perspective, only 6% of our control group – who heard no ad – said they were familiar with these emerging brands.

Host-reads outperformed announcer-reads for all four brands, and the difference was statistically significant for three of them. 58% of the listeners exposed to the host-reads for the established brands correctly recalled the brand name, compared to 35% of those who heard the announcer-reads. That’s a lift of 23 points, or 66% more recall.

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Importantly, emerging brands are building their awareness. These results show that host-reads do that much better, creating a big boost. We’ll drill down on that top-of-funnel story shortly.
Hosts Drive Significant Brand Health Lift

For brand health measures (see sidebar for a deeper dive on these measures), host-reads generated an astounding 91% more statistically significant lifts than the announcer-reads.

Now, keep in mind that the announcer-reads performed very well. Across a total of 32 possible lifts (4 brands x 8 measures), the announcer-reads generated 11 significant lifts. But the host-reads generated 21. Next we’ll drill down on how these lifts affect the sales funnel.

Announcer reads perform, but host reads outperform.

Hosts Boost Awareness and Top-Funnel Measures

In addition to driving 59% more unaided recall for our two emerging brands, the host-reads also drove greater lifts for the three top-of-funnel measures: top-of-mind Category Awareness; Brand Familiarity; and Total Awareness (ever heard of the brand).

We were confident in identifying our established brands as such because we could see it in the data. With the control group – listeners who didn’t hear an ad – Total Awareness was 99% for the health and beauty brand, and 81% for the web app. With brands that strong, awareness isn’t as critical as boosting measures further down the funnel.

Even so, podcast ads still generated lift for established brands together in these top-funnel measures, and host-reads outperformed announcer-reads.

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The eight brand measures are: Category awareness; Total Awareness; Familiarity; Affinity; Intent to Purchase; Intent to Look for Info; Intent to Recommend; Intent to Take Any Action.
Hosts Entice Customers Closer to Purchase

The path from awareness to purchase is driven, in part, by frequency, which is something more difficult to measure in a study limited to a single ad exposure. Therefore, when we see lifts in down-funnel KPIs in this study it’s a strong indicator of real-world performance.

Looking first at the established brands, all ads generated lifts over control for three out of four lower-funnel measures: Intent to Purchase, Intent to Seek Info and Intent to Take Any Action. In the fourth measure, Intent to Recommend, only host-reads generated lift.

While announcer-reads did not drive Intent to Recommend, they did exceed the host-reads in Intent to Seek Info. Host-reads outperformed for the other three measures.

That’s an interesting result, which could mean that announcer-reads were a little better in piquing curiosity among listeners who are more on the fence, while host-reads did a better job of pushing them over the fence, moving more listeners both to Purchase and Recommend.

As we observed with the top-funnel metrics, consumers are just being introduced to emerging brands, and moving them to action is even more dependent on frequency. This is where host-read ads really take it to the next level.

The host-reads generated lifts for emerging brands in all four bottom-funnel metrics, while announcer-reads only boosted two: Intent to Seek Info and Intent to Take Action. Host-reads also exceeded announcer-reads in these measures. Recall that announcer-reads actually drove more Intent to Seek Info for the established brands, but we see the inverse here.

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Across all forms of advertising purchase and recommendation intent are the most challenging metrics to drive. Moreover, additional exposure – beyond just the one in this study – is usually needed for an emerging brand to move a customer to buy.

So it’s not surprising that saw host-reads driving relatively small lifts for these measures, and announcer-reads resulted in a neutral impact.

The takeaway here is that the host-reads enhance listeners’ education about a newer brand, as well as piquing their curiosity to pursue more information.
Conclusion

Midroll was one of the very first networks to test podcast ad effectiveness rigorously with third-party brand lift studies. Whether read by hosts or announcers, the more than five dozen studies we’ve conducted show time and again that podcast ads perform very well. Now, for the first time, we can demonstrate how the effect is magnified when the show’s host does the ad.

From the top of the funnel to the bottom, both emerging and established brands realize additional benefits when they opt for host-read ads.

Does this mean that a brand should choose only host-read ads?

Not necessarily.

An effective ad campaign is bigger than one ad read, and no single study or method can capture every aspect of performance over the life of a campaign.

Both announcer-read and host-read ads have their place, and each can play an important role in a well-designed campaign. Moreover, there are shows where only host-reads or announcer-reads are on offer, and we would never advise counting a podcast out based on that factor alone.

This study confirms that host-reads are highly effective for hitting KPIs, especially outperforming in lower-funnel measures. At the same time, announcer-reads offer the ability to scale a message that drives the awareness and familiarity that bring customers into the funnel in the first place—all with efficiency.

To maximize frequency and scale along with class-leading effectiveness, the smartest option is to choose both

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Sidebar:
Brand Health Measures

This study focused on two recall measures as well as eight brand health measures that are common in lift research.

Recall Measures
Recall is only relevant for respondents who were exposed to a given brand’s message, therefore it is not appropriate to measure lift. For Aided and Unaided Recall we only reported the percentage of respondents who were able to successfully recall the brand, along with the differences in recall between those exposed to the announcer-reads or host-reads.

Unaided Recall
This measures how well respondents are able to recall the brands they heard advertised, without prompting, by filling in an open text box.

Aided Recall
This measures how well respondents are able to recall the brands they heard advertised, with prompting, by letting them select from a list of brands, which includes both the ones that were included along with ones that were not.

Brand Health Measures
For the brand health measures there’s an opportunity to find lift in each measure across the four brands in the study, which is how we result in having 32 total possible lifts. These are the eight measures:

(1) Top-of-Mind Category Awareness
Respondents are asked what is the first brand that comes to mind, unaided, in a given category, such as mattresses or meal kits.

As with Aided Recall, for all of the following measures respondents are presented with a list of brands to rate. This list includes both brands heard in the podcast content along with ones that were not heard.

(2) Total Awareness
This measure refers to the proportion of respondents who indicate they have heard of each brand.

(3) Familiarity
This measure indicates the proportion of respondents who report being “moderately,” “very” or “extremely” familiar with each brand.

(4) Affinity
This measures respondents’ affect for a brand on a five-point scale using the following descriptors: love it; like it; neutral; dislike it; hate it.

Intent to (5) Look for Info, (6) Recommend, (7) Purchase or (8) Take Any Action:
For each listed brand respondents are asked “which of these actions do you plan to take in the near future?” The actions are: look up information about their products; use or buy their products; recommend them to a friend; none of the above (exclusive).
Sidebar: Why Wasn’t this Tested Before?

As the medium has matured we’ve gotten better at objectively measuring effectiveness using methods like attribution and brand lift studies. While these metrics have provided undeniable evidence that podcast ads – across all types of creatives – are one the very top performing ad platforms, getting a clear read on that host effect has been elusive.

There are two reasons for this gap. First, most client-commissioned brand studies aren’t designed to measure this. Any given campaign may have all host reads or all announcer reads; very few have a mix of creatives. And those few that do are unlikely to have both announcer and host reads on the same show, a prerequisite to conduct a fair apples-to-apples test.

Moreover, the vast majority of studies aren’t conducted with the listeners of a specific show. Though the overall podcast audience is growing by leaps and bounds, it’s still a challenge to assemble a sufficiently sized respondent pool of any given show’s audience, especially on a deadline and on a budget.

If our working hypothesis is that the performance of host read ads is enhanced by the influencer effect, then we need to focus on those who we believe are most influenceable: a hosts’ fans and listeners.