

# The Interruptibles

January 2008

## The return of interruption marketing?

The emergence of Web 2.0 has empowered consumers and demanded that brands shift their communication away from interruption marketing towards 'permission marketing'.

Permission marketing – coined by Seth Godin – suggests advertisers should wait for potential customers to volunteer their interest before communicating with them, and that communication should seek to develop an ongoing and bespoke relationship.

Conversely, interruption marketing is communication that is one-to-many and comes to consumers without invitation. In other words, interruption marketing can be any form of traditional advertising from television commercials to direct mail:

*"A 30 second spot interrupts a Seinfeld episode. A telemarketing call interrupts a family dinner. A print ad interrupts an article." (Seth Godin')*



## Overview

- In spite of concerns over the value of traditional 'interruptive' marketing, the effects of modern technology on consumers have led to a valuable and more clearly defined role for this increasingly maligned model of communication
- While more and more commercial communication focuses upon establishing a collaborative and conversational relationship with an audience, the role of relevant interruption marketing is to capture consumer attention in a noisy and fast-paced world
- People's different states of attention can be mapped on an 'attention continuum'. When they are in a less focused state of attention, they are more likely to welcome appropriate interruptions
- We identified a group of people called Networkers, who present advertisers with a greater number of interruption opportunities; but converting them from 'interrupted' to 'engaged' is more challenging than for other consumers
- The golden rule: an interruption should be an icebreaker, not the sole form of communication; only interrupt an audience if it offers the opportunity of engaging them

While questions about the effectiveness of traditional advertising techniques are widespread, Mediaedge:cia's research demonstrates that there is still a valuable and clearly defined role for interruptive marketing – and that there are even audiences who actively welcome it.

### Different states of attention affect receptivity to commercial communication

Recognising the validity of interruption as a marketing tactic is not a call for random interjections within target audiences' lives. The role of an interruption should be to get someone's attention; so because the road to engagement begins with

getting that attention, successful interruptions act as a gateway to an engaging dialogue. To succeed, the interruption must be perceived by the audience as being positive. This is determined by the appropriateness of its content and context:

*“A good interruption is something like a friend ringing you, but a bad interruption can be the same news but at a different time when you are busy or annoyed, so your mood or what you’re doing is usually the difference between the two.”*

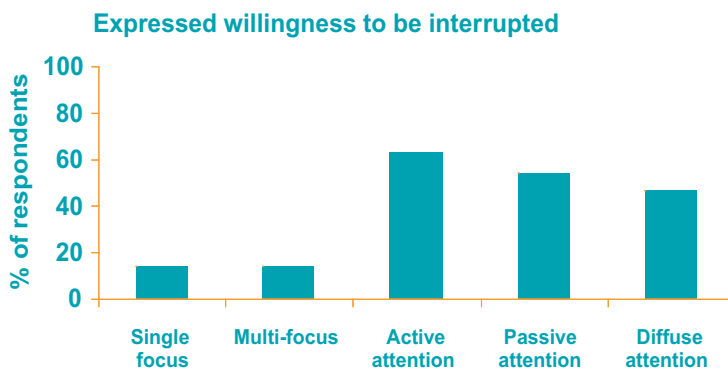
Ultimately, what determines a person’s receptivity to an interruption – even a good one – is their state of attention when interrupted. In *Pay attention, please!*, an earlier report on partial attention behaviour, we identified an attention continuum that features five states of attention, ranging from totally focused (Single focus) to totally unfocused (Diffuse attention, **Fig. 1**). A person’s position on this continuum will govern an audience’s responsiveness to interruptions, and to commercial communication generally.

People’s state of attention is dynamic and affected by their environment and circumstances: theoretically, they can experience all states of attention during the day, but this will depend on their different locations and activities.



Looking at these different states of attention, we find that people most welcome positive interruptions when they are in a less focused state of attention – active, passive, or diffuse attention (**Figs. 1 and 2**).

By contrast, people in a more focused state of attention – single focus or multi-focus – are far less receptive to interruption, and will only welcome an interruption that is either directly relevant to the task at hand or that contains a vital ‘need-to-know’ message.<sup>2</sup>



Source: MEC Sensor CPA study

Fig. 1

### Who welcomes interruptions?

While anyone is likely to welcome an *appropriate* interruption if they are in a less focused state of attention (**Fig. 2**), our study identified a group of people who offer marketers a greater number of ‘interruption opportunities’ than the average population.

This group was defined by their strong tendency to consume media simultaneously – known as media multi-tasking – versus the average population. An examination of their attitudes to information and needing to be constantly connected to their different social and professional networks explains their underlying motivation for this behaviour. This gave rise to their name: Networkers.

### The attention continuum

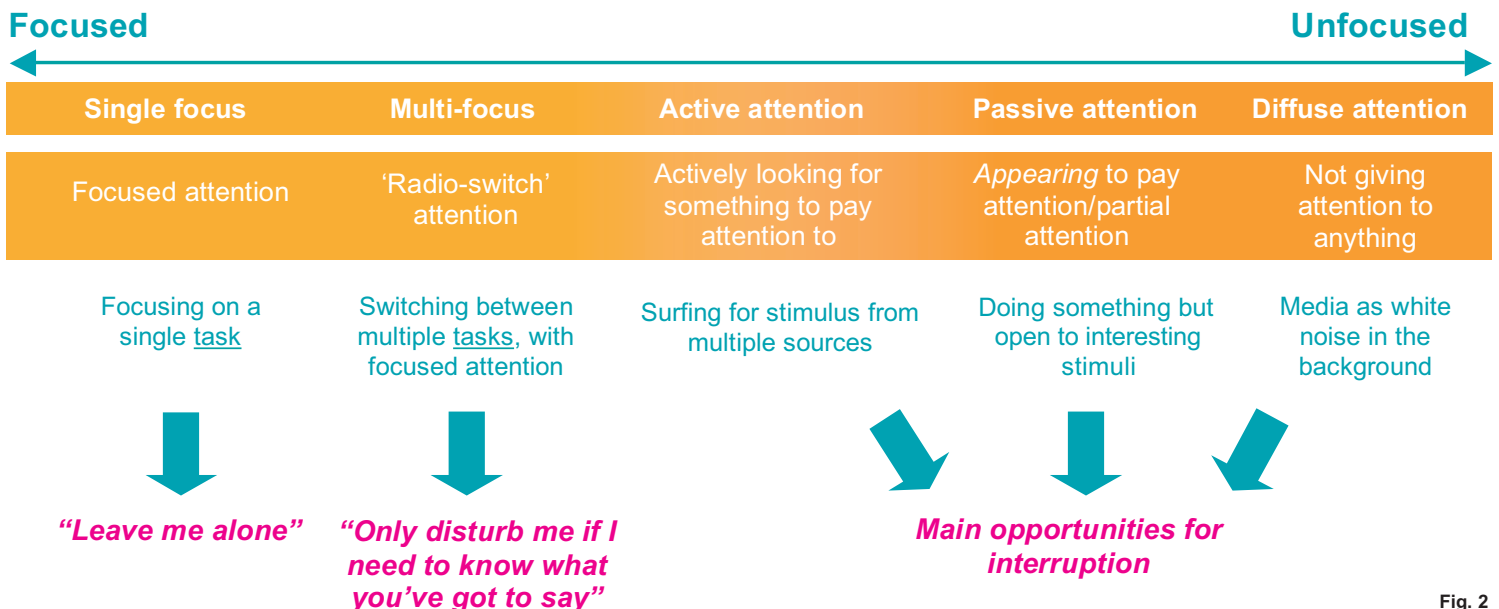


Fig. 2

## Networkers: always on, always connected

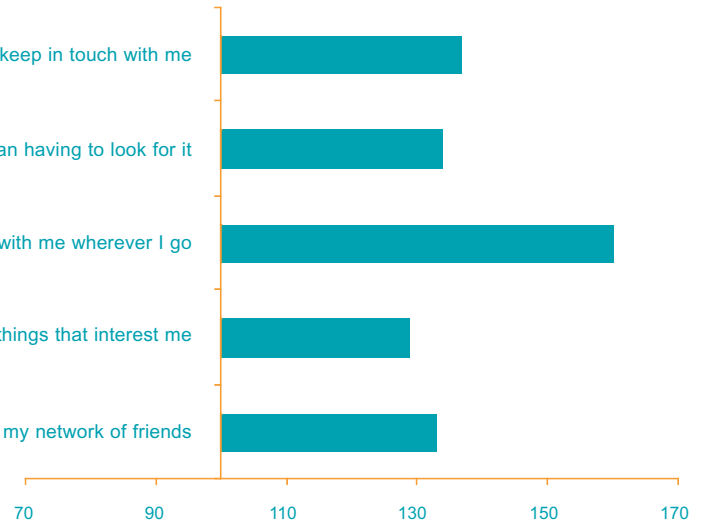
Once I have made a purchase, I am happy for the company to keep in touch with me

I like to receive information about products and services I am interested in, rather than having to look for it

I like to take my entertainment (e.g. music, video, games) with me wherever I go

I like to feel that I am constantly up-to-date with things that interest me

I like to feel that I am constantly connected to my network of friends



Source: MEC Sensor CPA study

Index versus total sample (Base = 100)

Fig. 3

## Networkers: in control of information and the world around them

*“At work I am open to interruptions that are relevant to any of my projects, even if they are not directly relevant to the task I’m working on when I am interrupted... I do not deliberately ignore any distractions, as they could be important.”*

When compared to the general population, Networkers are more likely to be found either in senior management positions or within the 18-34 year old age bracket. They are always alert to ‘need-to-know’ information, so they like to be constantly connected to their social and professional network, as can be seen in **Fig. 3**.

Even more interesting is the amount of time Networkers spend consuming media, and the resulting communication opportunities that this offers. **Fig. 4** shows the dramatic jump in consumption from that of the general population: more than three hours extra on a typical weekday. In percentage terms, this equates to their spending over 22% more time than other people consuming media.

This additional consumption is not focused on particular channels, but is spread across a wide range of channels, with all uses of the internet being most affected.

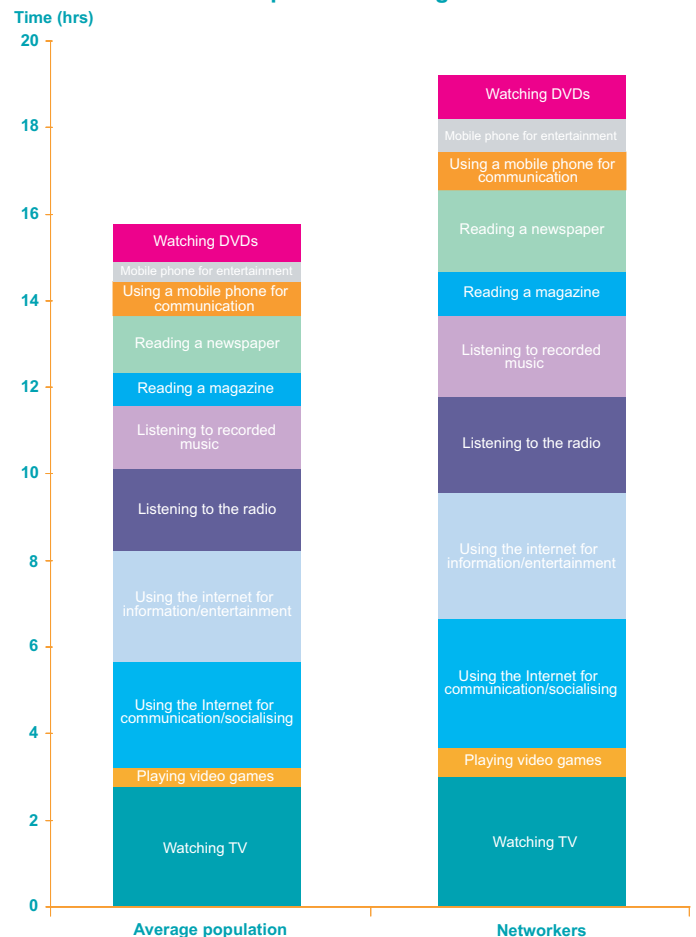
Networkers are a breed whose defining communication behaviour – multi-tasking, and the management of different networks simultaneously – has only been made possible by the internet. It is no surprise then that the internet offers such a good opportunity to connect with them, because of the amount of time they spend using it in comparison to other channels (**Fig. 4**).

But an effective, engaging interruption is a difficult task to pull off for brands online. Networkers’ use of the internet appears purposeful, and interrupting purposeful behaviour with communication that is too ‘traditionally interruptive’ in its approach – such as pop-ups – should be a big no-no for most brands. Networkers would be more likely to welcome relevant rich media content (e.g. animated banners that have a direct link to the content published on the site).

Networkers manage their higher media consumption by ‘media multi-tasking’ significantly more than the average person.

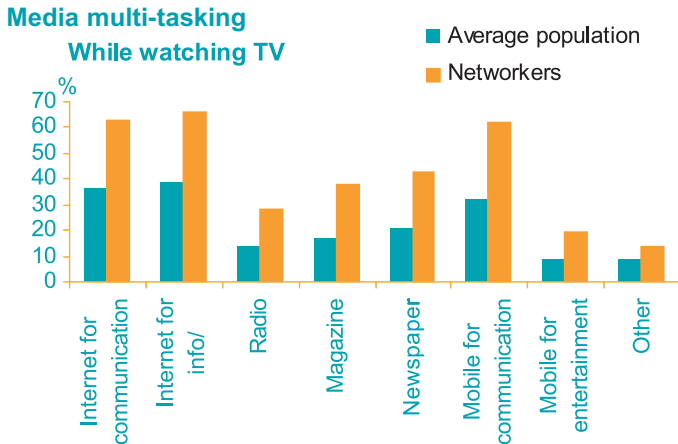
Accordingly, they only have a limited amount of attention to give to an interruption, and a non-engaging one will be quickly skated over because their attention is already fragmented across multiple sources when advertisers are trying to reach them (**Figs. 5 and 6**).

## Time spent consuming media



Source: MEC Sensor CPA study

Fig. 4

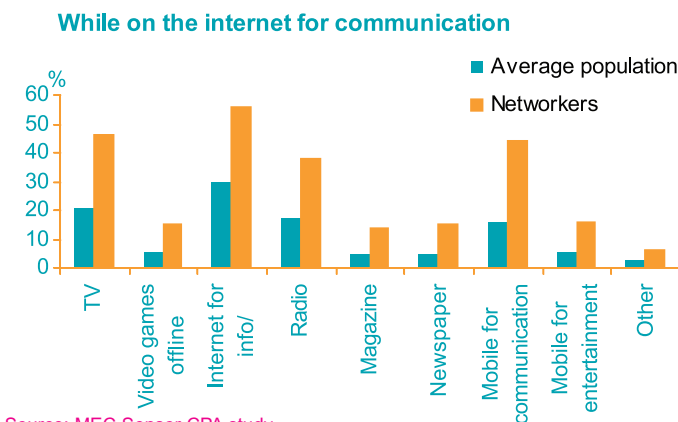


Source: MEC Sensor CPA study

Fig. 5

## A guide to Networker interruption etiquette

- Consider the target audience's likely state of attention when exposed to a particular touch point: the more focused someone is on a particular task or stimulus, the more likely they will be to reject an interruption. An interruption is more likely to be welcomed in Active, Passive or Diffuse attention
- Brands should avoid targeting Networkers when they are in Single focus unless they have something that is highly contextually relevant
- Consider the target audience's motivation to consume media and their definition of a 'good interruption' – are they alert to important information or are they hoping to be entertained? This should inform the content you use to interrupt them
- Use interruption communication that encourages co-active media consumption rather than concurrent media consumption
- Make the interruption the beginning or continuation of an engaging dialogue with the target audience, not a random interjection



Source: MEC Sensor CPA study

Fig. 6

Among Networkers who multi-task whilst watching television, the most popular accompanying media are the internet or a mobile phone. 63% of Networkers will often or always use the internet for communication whilst they are watching TV compared to only 36% of the wider population. Similarly, 56% of Networkers use the internet to search for information while they are watching TV, compared to only 30% of the wider population.

Networkers' multi-tasking behaviour has a simple purpose: it ensures that they remain what former Microsoft researcher Linda Stone calls a "live node" on their different networks. But staying 'live', and constantly in-the-know means their state of attention is in constant flux as they juggle different tasks that require different levels of focus. Engaging Networkers therefore requires a delicate touch from advertisers.

### Opportunities for engaging Networkers

In spite of their dynamic state of attention, Networkers present advertisers with a greater number of engaging opportunities than other consumers because:

- They actively seek to be kept up-to-date and connected, so cannot ignore interruptions for fear they could be important
- They present advertisers with a greater number of touch points than the average population owing to their higher media consumption
- They are more likely to be found in a state of attention where people welcome positive interruptions (Active, Passive and Diffuse states)

However, such opportunities to catch this audience's attention do not guarantee engagement.

This conversion – from interruption to engagement – is more challenging for Networkers because of their hunger for need-to-know information: the golden rule of relevancy is doubly true for Networkers.

Furthermore, communication should encourage co-active media consumption, where attention is focused on a single objective across different media – for example, shifting attention between different magazines, articles, and websites while researching a single topic, such as buying a new car. This differs from concurrent media consumption, where different media are consumed simultaneously with no common objective, which works against advertisers.

*The Interruptibles* was written by MEC MediaLab, Mediaedge:cia's consumer insight and ROI division.

Quantitative research was conducted on behalf of Mediaedge:cia by GMI. 22,255 adults were surveyed across 23 countries: Brazil, Canada, China, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, Italy, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Russia, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, the UK and the US.

Ethnographic research was conducted in the UK by ESRO. Unless otherwise stated, all of the quotes within this report were taken from a study using our online qualitative research method, DigiFaces.

<sup>1</sup>Permission Marketing, [www.fastcompany.com](http://www.fastcompany.com)

<sup>2</sup>For further information on the attention states identified by Mediaedge:cia, please request a copy of our earlier report, *Pay attention, please!*

## Contact

If you would like to know more about this Sensor study, please visit [www.mecglobal.com](http://www.mecglobal.com), or contact:

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