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LIVING WITH COMMERCIALS

BY

JOHN F. ALLEN

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Let me begin by candidly stating that I am personally with those who wish that one could go to a theatre without having to sit through a collection of commercial advertisements before a movie begins. Not only are the ads annoying and too often devoid of what I would consider entertainment value, they are often presented with poor audio and at such loud levels that I want to get up and leave the theatre. By the time the show actually starts, I feel angry and insulted. While I haven't taken any on-the-spot surveys when this happens, I suspect that there are many in the audience, if not most, that would feel the same way.

That being said, I think it's only fair to mention that some have made the effort to make this part of the show as entertaining as possible. But there is still the fact that the moviegoing patrons are paying money to see a movie and are being subjected to commercials from which they have no escape. From a business model point of view, many find this very troubling. No wonder. If it is indeed true that exhibition now requires advertising revenue, how healthy can it be when the ads themselves and/or their presentations might drive customers away?

No one in any kind of business (perhaps with the exception of the airline business) wants to annoy their customers.

Advertising in movie theatres is, of course, nothing new. Indeed it has been common practice in many theatres around the world for decades. But theatregoers in the

United States have, until recent years, been spared. Declining movie theatre attendance has now been in the news for about a year. Some people claim that movie theatres are all but finished, while others simply say that we just need better movies. Yet when patrons are questioned, among the complaints we hear over and over are high prices, rude audiences as well as those terrible commercials. If the ads were so entertaining that audiences really loved them, we wouldn't have any complaints. But that's not where we are.

If we must live with commercials, is there a way to do so that makes them more tolerable? I think there is -- lower the volume. In the 1970s I was in charge of the sound reinforcement at the Hatch Shell on Boston's Esplanade. Concerts there began in 1929 when Arthur Fiedler wanted to bring symphony concerts to music lovers who either

didn't or couldn't come to Boston Symphony Hall. Admission at the Esplanade was and remains free. During the years I was there, we had hundreds of events -- many quite large. None were bigger or more attended than the Boston Pops concerts on the Fourth of July. Audiences of 300,000 to 400,000 were typical. From my mixing position in the center of the audience, I was keenly aware at all times of their reactions, behavior and moods. One of the many things I learned was that the way to get -- *and keep* -- the attention of an audience was to lower the sound levels. When people need to quiet down to hear a program of any kind, they do indeed become quiet and pay closer attention. Could the same be true in movie theatres? Of course! Why not? In fact, motion picture sound engineers have known and used this technique for at least 50 years.

Last year, I attended a movie at a theatre equipped with one of our sound systems. While I had not set the levels for the preshow commercials, the technician who did had done an excellent job. The preshow sound levels were noticeably lower than the normal show levels. In order to hear what was going on, one had to stop talking and pay attention. To my amazement, there was a large percentage of patrons who were indeed doing just that. They were paying attention to the ads. Those ignoring the ads were generally carrying on casual conversations with their friends, but without the need to raise their voices. There was a noticeable lack of tension in the room. All in all, it was a very peaceful environment. But I had never experienced so many in an audience actually paying attention to the preshow commercials. As much as I might dislike the ads myself, I have to admit that I found them less offensive because I could ignore them if I wanted to. Played softly, they actually became more interesting. This came as a complete surprise.

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When the trailers began, they were played at a normal sound level setting for trailers, which is to say several dB below the feature sound level. So by the time the

feature began, I did not feel the anger and disappointment that I so often have. When the show ended and I left the theatre, I felt that I had been treated to a quality experience from beginning to end, including the commercials.

Last May, the Cinema Advertising Council issued recommendations for sound levels for commercials in movie theatres. They called for commercials to be produced so that their sound levels would be 3 dB below those of trailers as measured by the L-eqm method. The TASA standard for trailer sound levels at that time was 85 dB L-eqm. The National Association of Theatre Owners subsequently passed a resolution requesting that the TASA trailer standard be lowered to 84 dB L-eqm. The CAC recommendation for

playback levels states that the level should be 82 to 84 dB as measured by a “sound meter” in a theatre. Unfortunately, there is no mention of how this meter is to be set in terms of weighting or response. A lay person might look at this and think that it actually means something. Without a specific weighting (A weighting or C weighting) or response setting (fast, slow, impulse) a sound engineer would only be able to guess what it means. Whatever the recommendation may be or the measurement method chosen, I would recommend that it result in commercial sound levels being noticeably softer than either the trailers or the features -- soft enough to allow people to ignore them or enjoy them.

It's Easy To Do

Connecting the preshow audio feeds to the non sync inputs of the cinema processor, as is typically the case, allows us to independently set the preshow sound levels with the non sync level controls. Matching these levels from theatre to theatre can be done with pink noise and sound pressure level meter. To accomplish this, the first thing to do is note where the fader is set for normal feature films. Then play the preshow program. Using your ears, adjust the fader so that the preshow sound level is "soft" or where you think an audience would find comfortable and tolerable. Then either apply a pink noise generator to the input of the preshow audio distribution chain or if the preshow source is equipped with a pink noise function, simply turn it on.

Using a sound pressure level (SPL) meter -- set for C weighting and slow response, measure and note the sound level in the middle of the theatre. With the pink noise continuing, return the fader to the feature position. Now adjust the processor's non sync level controls so that the sound level in the center of the theatre is the same that was measured when the fader was turned down. If the processor has separate non sync level controls for the left and right channels, it is best to first match their settings by turning both fully counterclockwise to their minimum positions and then adjusting them EQUALLY clockwise until the desired sound level is reached.

If the fader is purposely set low for trailers and then is readjusted at the start of the feature to its normal feature setting, it makes more sense to set the commercial sound level with the fader at the trailer position.

No one in any kind of business (perhaps with the exception of the airline business) wants to annoy their customers. When it comes to sound levels for commercials, presenting ads softly is not only likely to be less offensive to those who dislike them, but rewards the advertisers with more people actually paying attention.

John F. Allen is the founder and president of High Performance Stereo in Newton, Mass. In addition, he serves as the sound director of the Boston Ballet. He is also the inventor of the HPS-4000® motion picture sound system and in 1984 was the first to bring digital sound to the cinema. John Allen can be reached by E-mail at johnfallen@hps4000.com. Mr. Allen's 26 year series of articles written for BOXOFFICE are available for download at <http://www.hps4000.com>.