

Word-count matters in audio



The Audiotrack/Colourtext whitepaper

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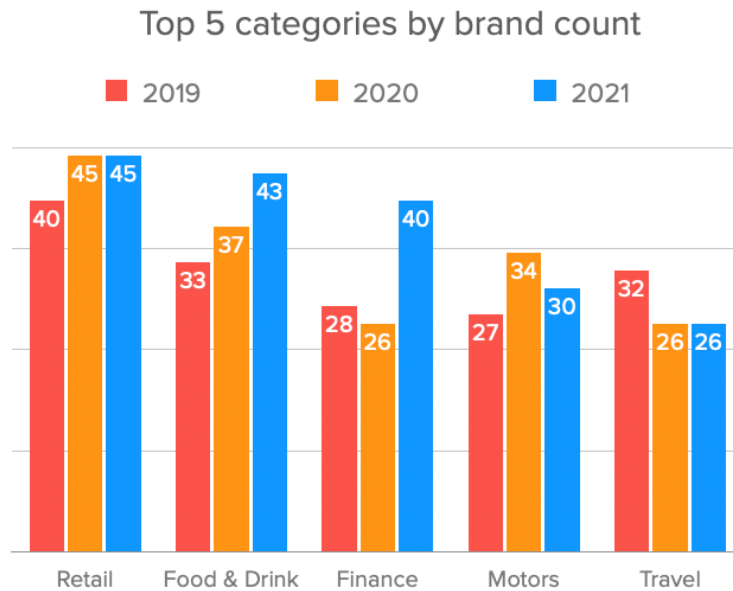
Introduction

Audiotrack is an audio distribution service which delivers audio adverts ready for play out directly from creative agencies to the audio platforms listed on a campaign schedule. Audiotrack currently delivers audio copy files to all UK and Republic of Ireland linear radio stations, community radio stations, DAB stations, digital streaming and podcast platforms.

Colourtext has taken this never-before-seen dataset and analysed it to discover new insights into the quality and effectiveness of audio advertising. We crunched the numbers for over 10,000 campaigns broadcast between 2019 and 2021, which included activity for 615 national brands across 22 advertiser categories using over 13,000 pieces of audio ad copy. Uniquely, Audiotrack has also text-transcribed approximately 70% of these advertisements, which has yielded new campaign data points that have proved to be incredibly useful.

Evolution in audio advertising

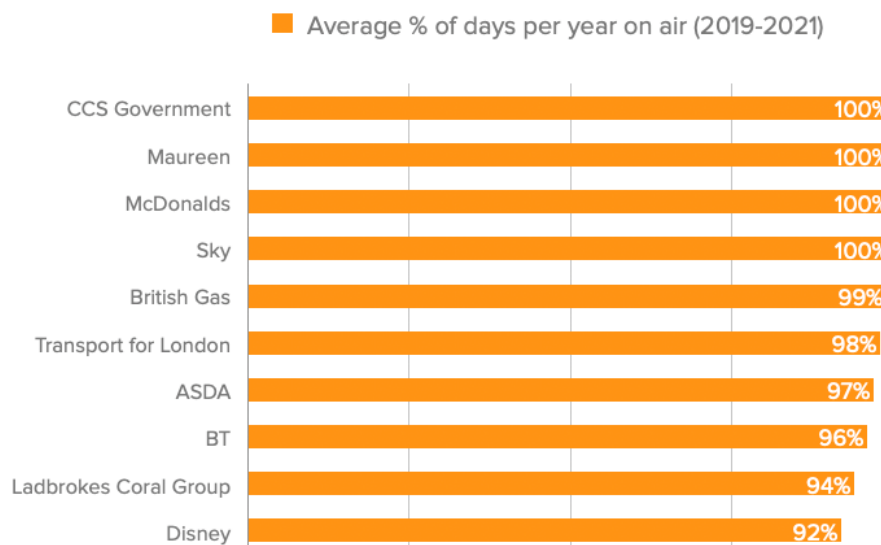
The general vibe around audio is that it's pretty hot right now, and a brief look at the top-line stats within our analysis bears out this perception. Retail, Food & Drink, Finance, Motors and Travel are the Top 5 audio advertiser categories in terms of brand count. Despite the shock of Covid in 2020-21 categories like Food & Drink and Finance have increased their brand counts significantly since 2019.



Source: Audiotrack / Colourtext 2022

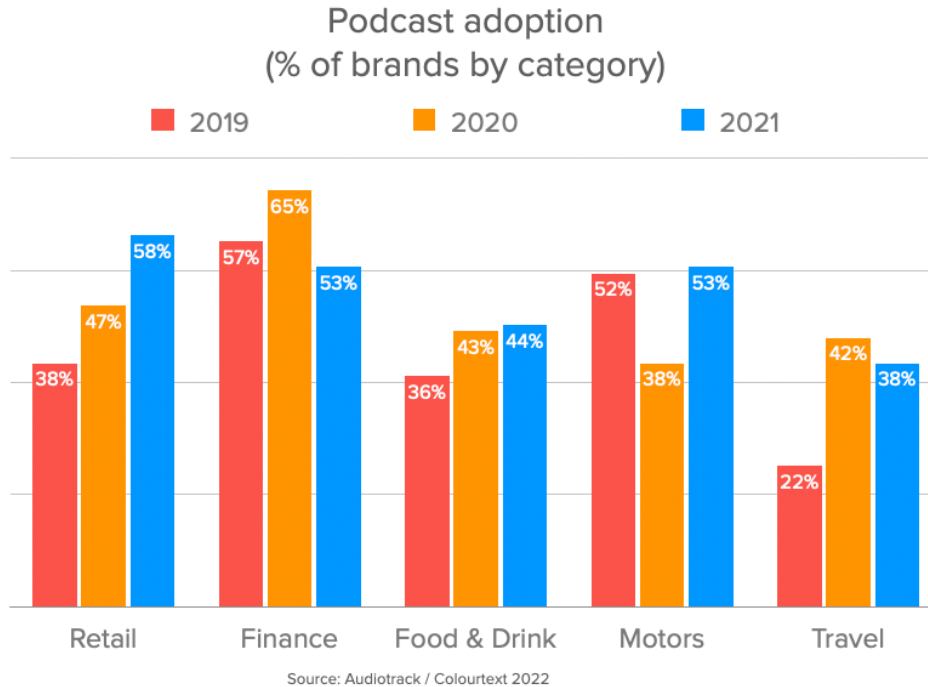
Audiotrack also enables us to look at the amount of time that advertisers spend on air over a year. Here are the Top 10 'always on' brands for the last three years. Collectively, these brands are spending 98% of all days in a year on air on audio, which we think is a huge vote of confidence in audio as an advertising channel.

Top 10 'always on' brands

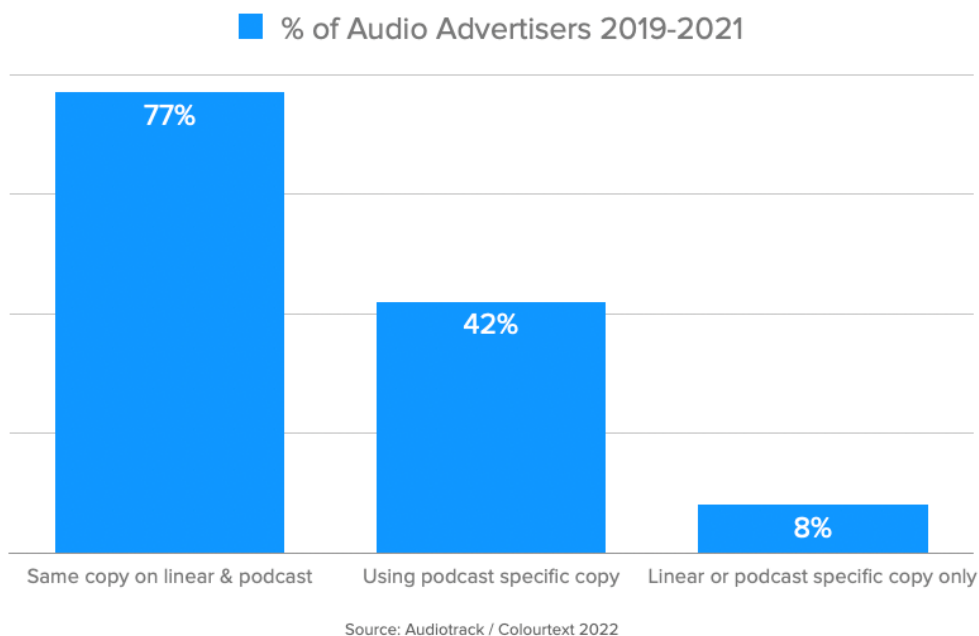


Source: Audiotrack / Colourtext 2022

If audio is hot it's fair to say that podcasts are even hotter. More and more brands have begun to adopt podcasts as part of their audio advertising mix. In 2021 47% of major audio advertisers were using podcasts, up from 43% in 2019. On average we found that audio advertisers within the Top 5 categories by brand count are deploying podcasts on 97% of their active audio days. In other words, when these brands are on audio they're also on podcasts. We think this signifies the degree to which podcasts have become an established channel within the media landscape.



Audiotrack can also tell us how many brands are making podcast specific ad copy. Podcast listeners who experience ads playing at a far higher volume than surrounding content will tell you how important this is. Such ads are usually mastered for linear radio play-out and they tend to sit uncomfortably within the more intimate context of a podcast.

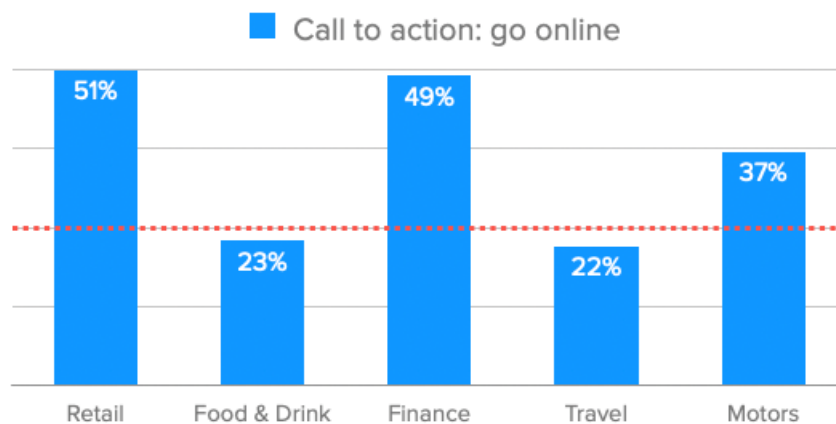
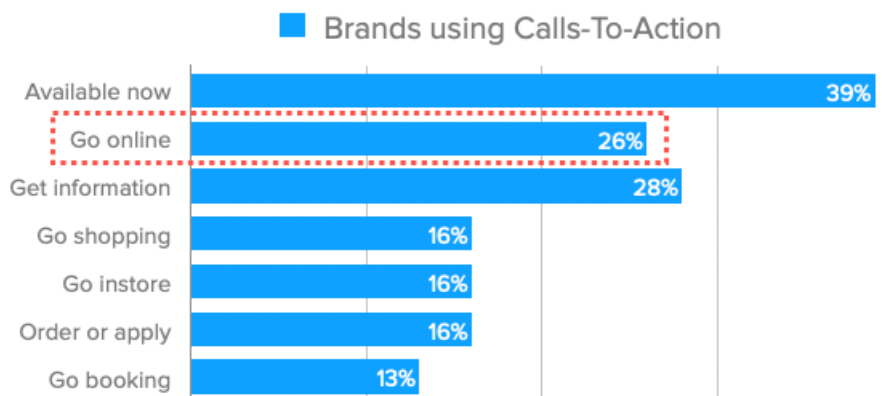


Over the 2019-2021 period we found that 42% of brands are making podcast specific copy, but perhaps not exclusively. We also found that 77% of brands, which is the majority, will also use the same copy for both linear radio and podcasts. In fact, only 8% of brands are making tailored ads for both platforms and many people in the industry would advocate this number should be somewhat higher.

Analysing audio ad copy

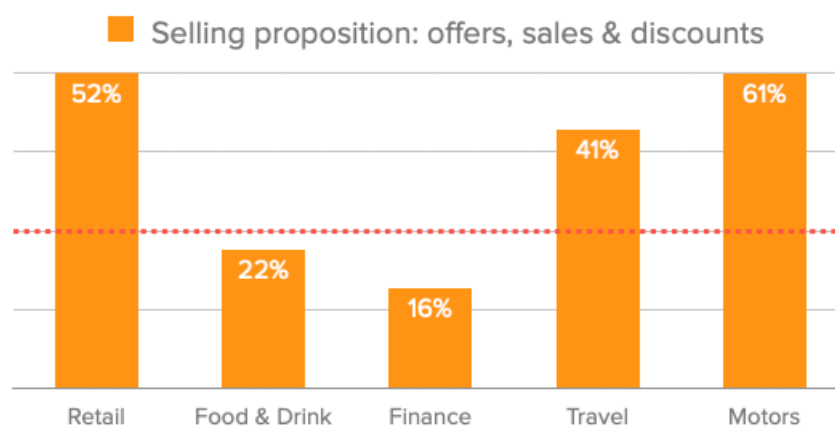
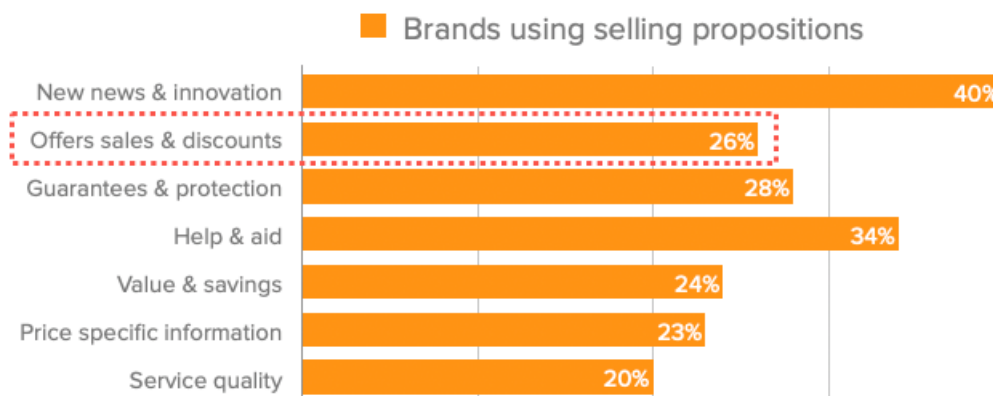
Another stand-out feature of Audiotrack is that it generates a massive natural language dataset via auto-transcription of every ad that's passed through the system since the beginning of 2020. Colourtext has used Quant Semiotics to analyse this unique data resource to gain new insights into the content and structure of audio brand messages in the UK and Ireland.

For instance, we can detect specific types of call-to-action. Some 39% of brands use ads that prompt consumers to respond quickly to products or offers that are 'available now', which reflects both the immediacy and temporal nature of audio. We can also found that 26% of brands urge listeners to go online to either buy or to get more information. This allows us to profile advertiser categories by call-to-action patterns e.g. Retail, Finance and Motor brands audio ads are far more likely to push people to respond online.



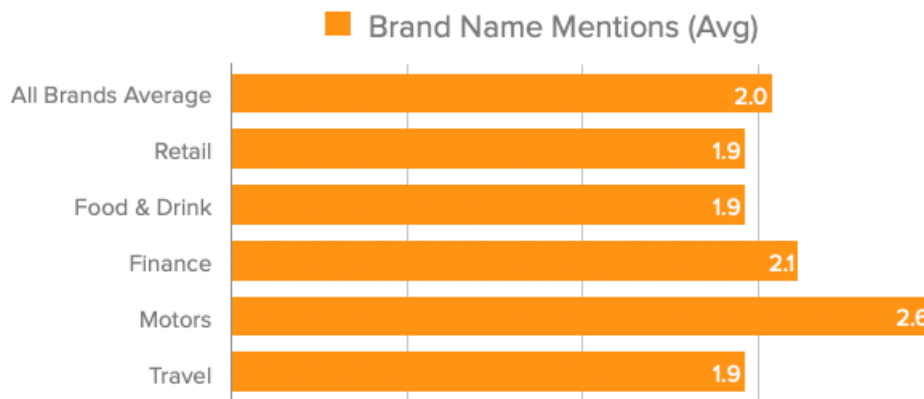
Source: Audiotrack / Colourtext 2022

Something else the quant semiotics can reveal is the kind of selling propositions that brands use in their audio copy. For instance, 47% of brands are delivering messages about 'new news and innovation' to gain people's attention e.g. It's fresh; It's now; it's new; never seen before etc. Also, more than a quarter of brands (26%) use 'offers, sales and discounts' in their audio copy. The data shows that brands in the Retail, Travel and Motors categories are far more likely to use discounting and special offers to drive interest and response.



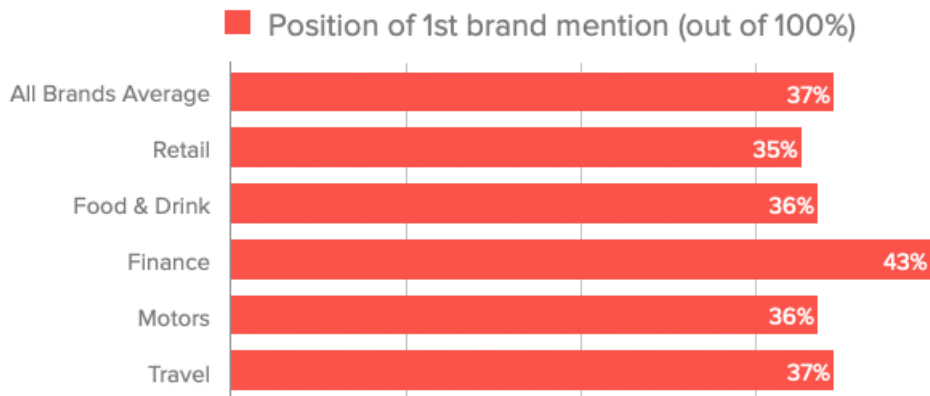
Source: Audiotrack / Colourtext 2022

The quant semiotics analysis has also been very useful for answering some very common questions that brands making audio commercials often ask. One common question is how many times brands should mention their names in an audio ad? The data reveals the average number of brand mentions is two with only a small amount of variance across categories.



Source: Audiotrack / Colourtext 2022

The data also has something to say on the question of whether brands should mention their names at the beginning or towards the end of audio commercials. On average, first brand name mentions tend to occur at 37% of the way into an ad. Again, there isn't a huge amount of variance across categories, although Finance brands (43% of the way in) leave it a little longer than other categories before mentioning their names.

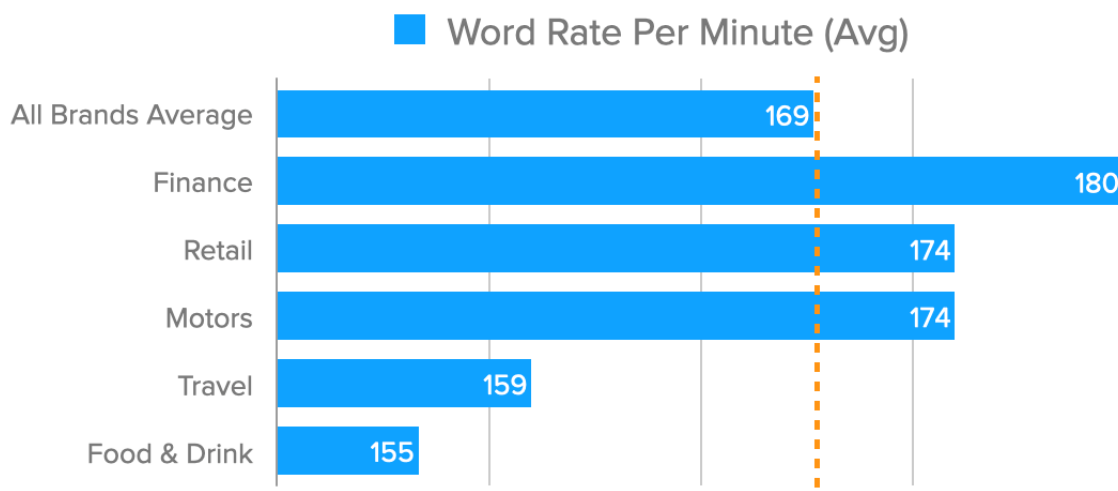


Source: Audiotrack / Colourtext 2022

Key finding—word count matters in audio

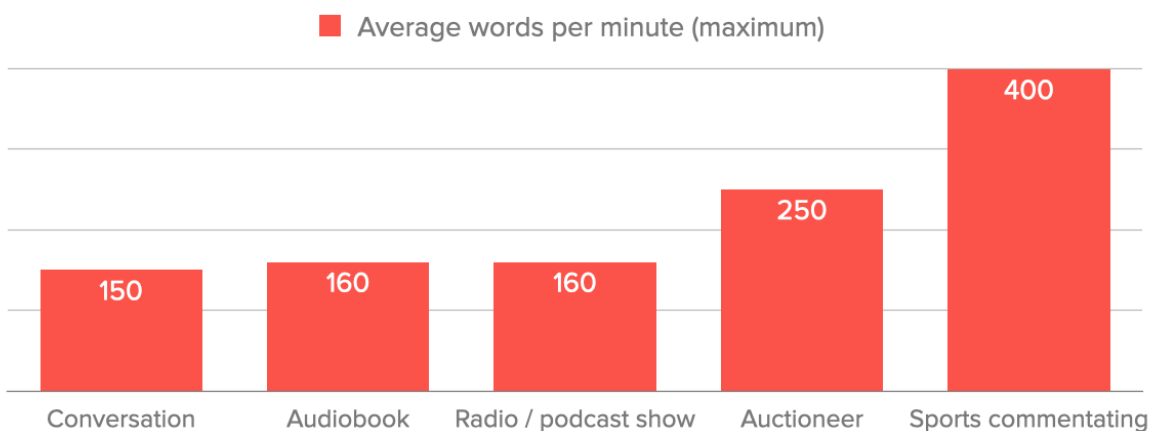
The standout finding of our study has been the impact of word count, or word density (expressed as words-per-minute (wpm)), on the effectiveness of audio ads. We anticipate this will change the way brands think about the role of audio advertising and how it is created.

Our data revealed the average number of words per minute used in audio commercials is 169. This can vary widely from just 155 wpm in the Food & Drink sector, to 180 wpm on average for Financial brands. We wanted to know if there was an optimum word density rate.



Source: Audiotrack / Colourtext / Radiocentre 2022

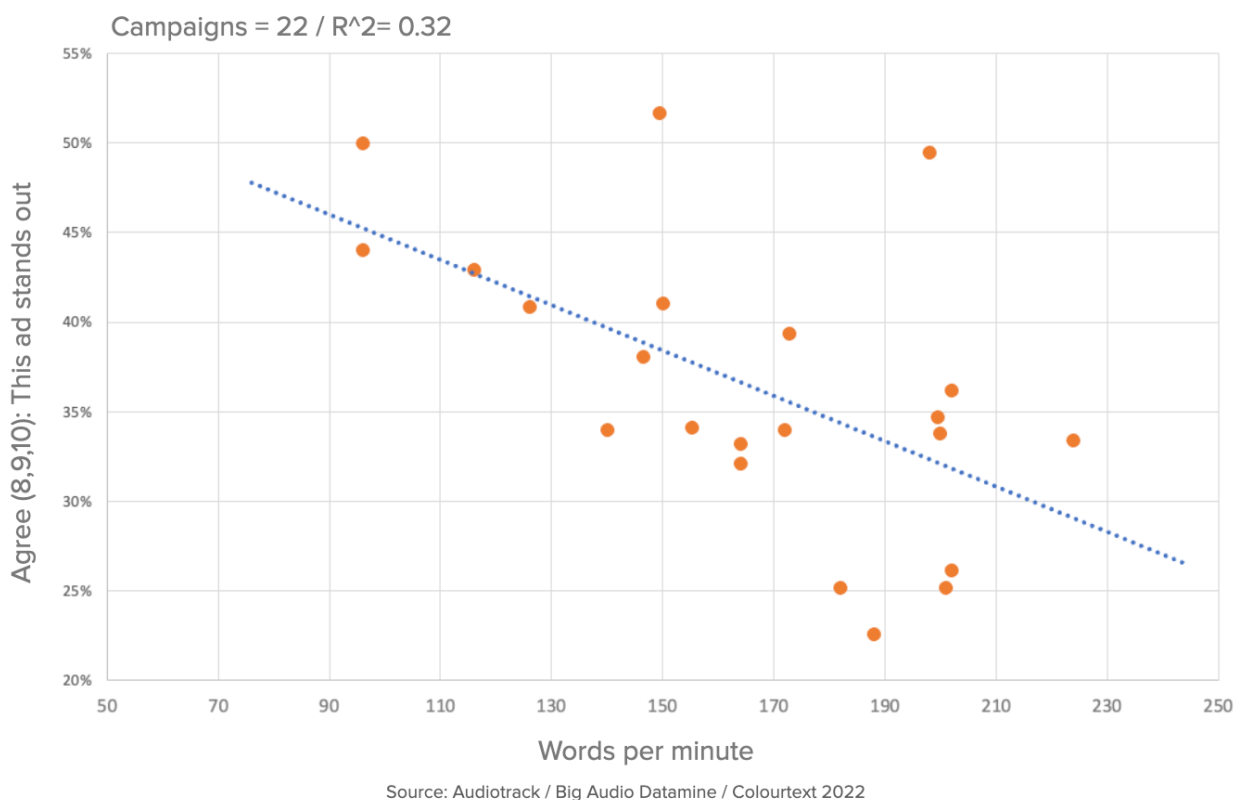
Surprisingly, there is very little evidenced information available to guide either brands or advertising creatives on this issue. The best data we found was within the context of effective public speaking, as illustrated by the chart below that shows average word rates per minute for a range of speech-orientated contexts.



Source: virtualspeech.com/blog/average-speaking-rate-words-per-minute

To examine the impact of word density we fused the Audiotrack database with Big Audio Datamine, Radiocentre's massive archive of 1000 Radiogauge advertising effectiveness studies conducted in the UK (disclaimer - Colourtext built the Big Audio Datamine on behalf of Radiocentre). We found 22 transcribed radio campaigns aired between 2020 and 2022 that are common to both datasets. Based on data from these campaigns we analysed the relationship between word density and audio advertising effectiveness.

Radiogauge campaign evaluation studies measure a wide range of brand equity and advertising creative diagnostics. Using regression analysis to examine each variable we discovered that Creative Standout is the metric that's most sensitive to variations in word count.

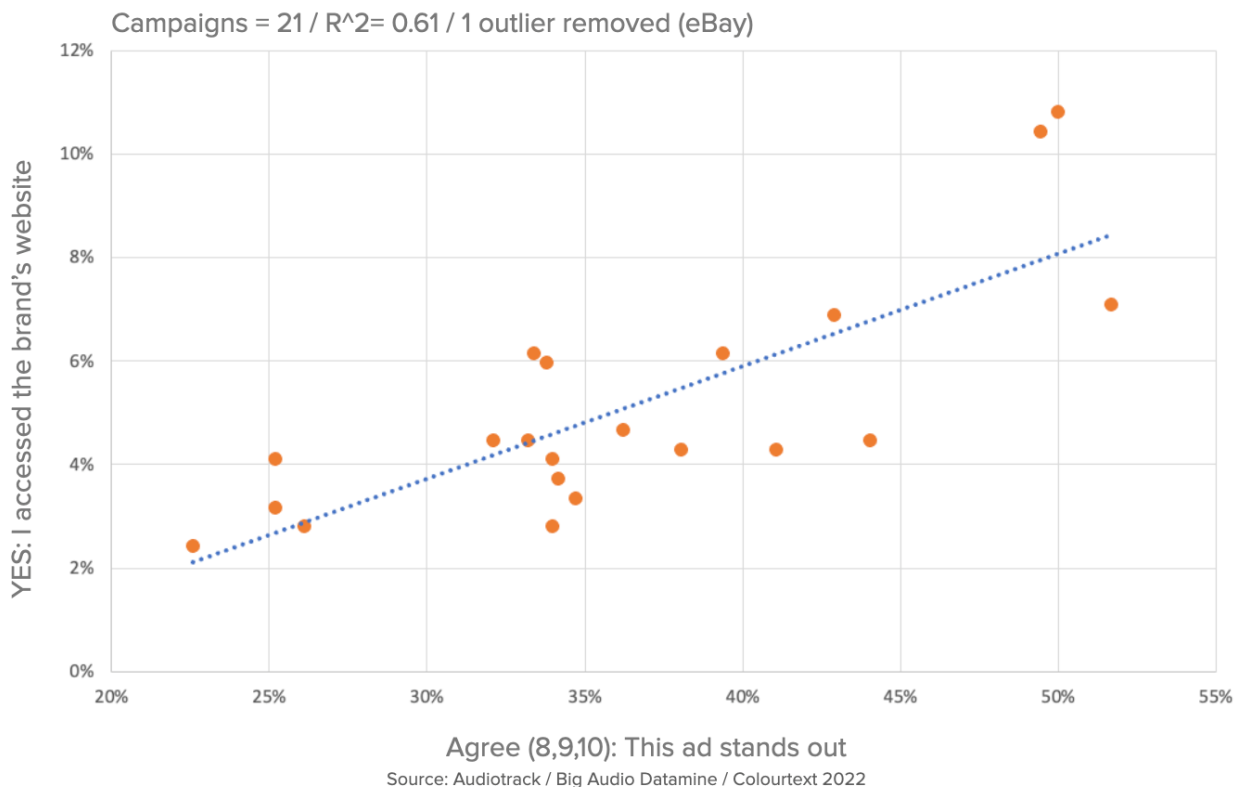


This scatterplot illustrates that as the word density (measured as words-per-minute) of an audio ad increases its creative standout, as perceived by listeners, falls. This model explains 32% of the variance in an audio ad's creative standout score, which in practical terms means that for every 10 extra words per minute we hear in an ad Creative Standout can be expected to fall by 1%.

So what?

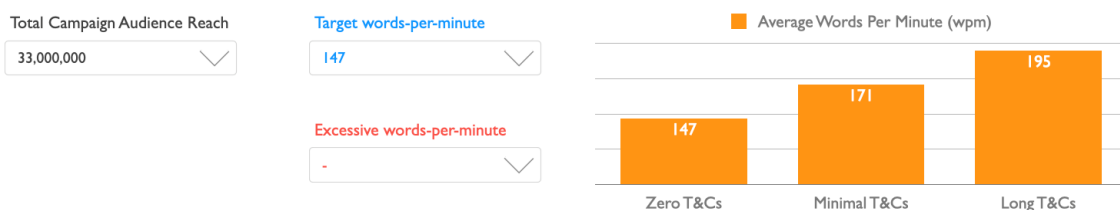
The obvious next question is, does this matter? Should we care that an audio ad's ability to stand out will fall if its word density rises?

Turning once again to Big Audio Datamine and campaign effectiveness results from Radiogauge, we undertook a further regression analysis that found Creative Standout in audio advertising is very strongly linked to ad response in the form of website visits. This regression plot demonstrates that for each 1% rise in Creative Standout achieved by an audio ad we can expect its web response rate to increase by 0.25%.



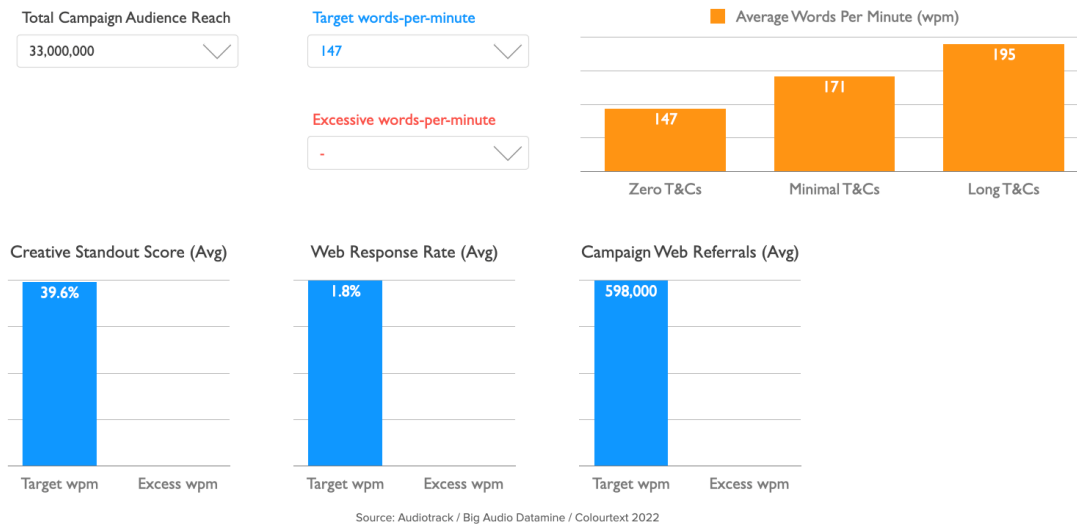
To put this finding in context we built a data model to understand the practical effects of the interplay between word density and creative standout in audio advertising. The model is based upon the same data from the 22 campaigns common to both Audiotrack and Big Audio Datamine. The average Total Audience Reach for these audio campaigns was 33 million adults age 15+, which can be plugged into the model as the first input.

Audio WPM data model



The next number we can input is a target or desired word rate for an ad. In this instance we've selected 147 words-per-minute, which happens to be the average wpm rate for audio ads that contain zero Terms & Conditions. The model then generates the average Creative Standout Score and Web Response Rate for ads with this word rate, which in turn generates an estimate for Campaign Web Referrals based on the campaign audience reach we plugged in at the beginning (33 million).

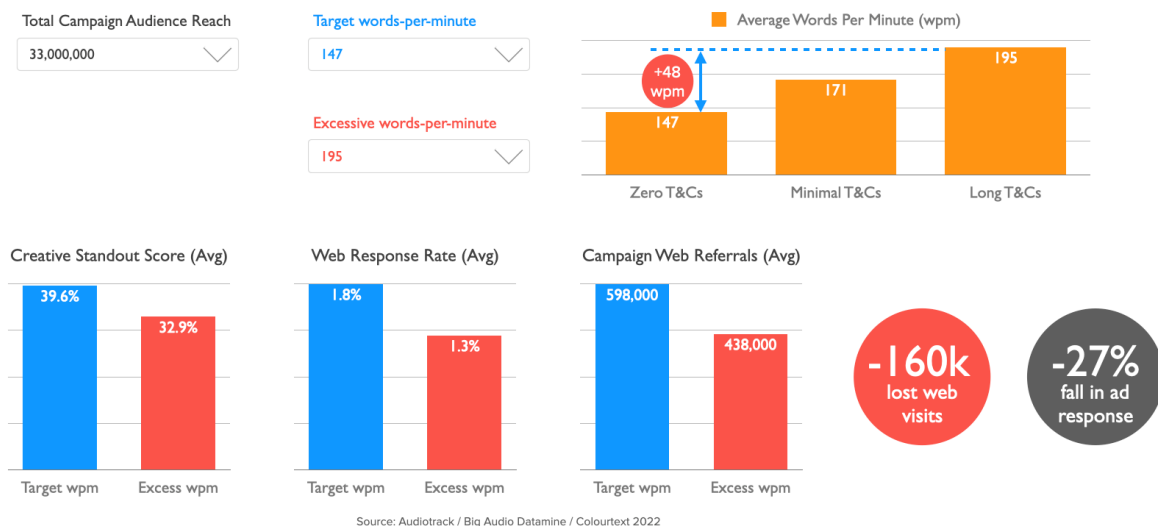
Audio WPM data model



Next we can enter a value for an ad that contains excessive words-per-minute. In this case we've selected 195 wpm, which is the average for audio ads that contain long Terms & Conditions. This immediately reveals that increasing an ad's word rate by 48 wpm (+32%) degrades the average Creative Standout score from 39.6% to 32.9%. This in turn degrades the average Web Response Rate from 1.8% to 1.3%.

The practical effect is that if we add just 24 extra words into a standard 30 second ad we can expect our audio campaign to generate 160,000 fewer web visitors than it potentially might otherwise have done. That equates to a 27% fall in ad response, which for some brands could represent a lost revenue opportunity that's similar in scale to the gross cost of their audio campaign.

Audio WPM data model



Conclusion

Unlike in television, where production costs have always been very high, making a bad audio commercial is rarely a career-limiting move for brand marketers or ad creatives. Even today audio is often planned as a low cost after-thought and the quality of some audio creative often reflects this.

However, thanks to the rise of addressable media platforms like podcasting and music streaming, audio in all its variants is a hot property once again amongst advertisers. This means a lot of new people with little experience of audio creativity are coming into the space and asking a lot of questions. Interestingly, the impact of word count on audio ad response is rarely one of those questions and, frankly, we weren't thinking much about this issue either.

But now we can see the problem, thanks to this analysis of Audiotrack and Radiocentre data, it seems obvious. Audio is a time-based medium that delivers speech-based information at a rate of 39 bits per second in a linear and sequential fashion (a factoid sourced from this interesting scientific [paper](#)). This means there's a natural limit to what we humans can take in and retain. Stuffing ads with verbalised information swamps our ability to receive and engage with brand messages - that's why gabbled ads sound so confusing.

However, audio conveys a second, entirely different and non-linear channel of information, which is emotional in nature. Humans are incredibly sensitive to variances in audible tonality, pitch, timbre and cadence. We can perceive and feel the fine-grained texture of sound just as well as we can read the emotional state of another person's face.

The information-transmission capacity of this emotional 'carrier wave' is far denser and richer than what can be conveyed through verbalised text information. Yet many of the ads we analysed in this study over-rely upon verbalised text information to create positive campaign effects.

Low category involvement and poor creative standout are twin issues for many brands across a range of market sectors. This is where an appreciation of word density within audio ads can help reduce the risk of low-performance campaigns.

Our word density analysis shows that upping the word count to convey more information is a weak creative strategy for audio. High word counts tend to overwhelm, and then bore, people's ability to listen with pleasure or interest. Working towards lower word density in audio ads can help brands leverage the emotive and narrative virtues of audio that drive creative standout, which in turn boosts ad response, especially in the form of website visits.

To conclude, reducing word density is not a magic creative bullet. However, word density can be a good proxy for an ad's ability to let the other emotional, non-linear qualities of audio communication perform their magic. Our study shows that when it comes to creativity in audio advertising, it's usually better to say more with less.

About the authors

Jason Brownlee is the founder of Colourtext, a UK-based audience research and consumer insights company established in 2009 that has deep expertise in audio, advertising effectiveness and big data analytics. Jason's career began at Emap (now Bauer Media) where he became Head of Audience Insight for a stable of famous media brands such as Kiss 100, Magic FM, Kerrang! and FHM. During a 27 year media career Jason has worked with a diverse range of audio brands such as the BBC, Bauer Media, Disney, Global, ITV, Spotify and Sony. In 2008 Jason designed Radiogauge for the U.K's Radiocentre, which has since become the global currency for measuring radio advertising effectiveness. This was followed up in 2021 with Big Audio Datamine, a meta analysis of 1000 Radiogauge effectiveness studies, which now powers Radiocentre's Radio Planning Optimiser tool.



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Anne Tucker currently heads up Mediatel Connected's research division for Adwanted UK and has held roles across the company overseeing data, news and AV. Before joining Mediatel in 2005, she was Research Manager at The Allmond Partnership media agency, having spent several years prior to that in retail and change management.



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Further information

Analysis of the Audiotrack dataset is a new research project partnership between Colourtext and Mediatel Connected as part of Adwanted UK, and we expect further insights to be released over the next few months.

If you are interested in further analysis or specific areas of research within this dataset, please contact help@mediatel.co.uk for further discussion.

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