



WFA guide to
choosing and using
a media auditor

Second edition

In association with:





WFA guide to **choosing** and **using** a media auditor

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The media spend of any advertiser company is typically one of its highest outgoings and it is for this reason that most companies wish to assess this spend regularly to ensure that maximum effectiveness and efficiency are being achieved. One way to do this is to employ an independent media auditor to evaluate how its media budgets are being deployed and the level of value being delivered by its media planning and buying agency.
- 1.2 Although these auditing companies are sometimes referred to as media consultants, the functions can be separated. Media auditing involves assessments of media buying performance, usually comparative, whereas media consultancy – such as the evaluation of media strategies and planning – usually implies more custom-made, subjective project work. This guide concerns itself mainly with the auditing practice.
- 1.3 The media auditor has become an important figure in assessing the performance of media agencies since the early 1990's. There are different approaches to auditing media value, including:
 - performance can be compared to a pool of comparable data;
 - it can be tracked year-on-year after adjustment against prevailing media (and general) cost changes i.e. inflation or deflation;
 - it can be analysed in comparison with whatever market data is available to the auditor, within the same or other countries;
 - or, finally, benchmarked against 'market prices' estimated from all the above through econometric modeling procedures.

It is not the purpose of this guide to express a preference for one route over others – indeed, different solutions, or combinations of them, may be suitable for different categories, media, markets, countries.

- 1.4 While many advertisers may now employ auditors, the need has arisen for a comprehensive guide, international in its perspective, describing and defining the advertisers' needs and objectives, the auditors' working methods and operating principles, and making recommendations on how they should work together.

This paper is designed to address this, and is intended to help the client – and also its agency partners – to obtain optimum value from the audit process. It is intended to apply to assignments where an independent media auditor is analyzing media performance data. It doesn't pretend to be prescriptive and refers to best practice principles, which should be borne in mind by all parties involved in a media audit.

Similar documents, more or less detailed, exist in some countries (see: Bibliography). In case of conflicts or discrepancies, the existing national codes – if published with the participation or the official agreement of the local advertiser association – shall prevail over this international guide.



2 OBJECTIVITY AND INDEPENDENCE

2.1 The choice of the auditor is the exclusive role of the advertiser, although it may choose to consider input and advice from its agency.

2.2 In choosing the auditor, the advertiser will obviously take into account its integrity, expertise and reputation, sector-specific experience but also the particular purpose of the assignment:

- auditing of media buying performance, whether on a permanent or ‘ad-hoc’ basis; or
- a more a complex task, such as the assistance in an agency review, or the selection of a new agency.

Depending upon the geographic scope of the services it is seeking, the advertiser will carefully consider the extent, nature and composition of the auditing company’s offices:

- are the local offices fully owned?
- do they have the appropriate size and set of competencies?
- if they are not fully owned, what is the nature of the relationship, is it exclusive or not, what controls the central office is entitled to make, how and how often these controls are actually made?
- if the relationship is not exclusive, what legal protocols are in place to ensure the absolute confidentiality of the advertiser’s data?
- are the staff of sufficient professional media expertise to ensure a collaborative relationship with the advertiser’s media agency, should the advertiser require this?

2.3 Advertisers generally use the services of auditors for one or more of the following controls and/or tasks¹:

A) Services provided by the agency:

- actual delivery by the agency of the best possible (or promised by contract) media buying conditions, in terms of cost, quality, and respect of agreed strategic and tactical specifications;
- clarity and compliance of financial streams (invoicing, payments, bonuses, discounts);
- did the media companies execute the orders transmitted by the agency on behalf of the client, accurately and in compliance with the agreed specifications (prices, units, dates, sizes, positions...), for all media, including – and particularly – the digital ones.

B) When the advertiser works with more than one agency, locally and/or internationally:

- the consolidation, and comparison, of the various agencies’ buying performance, using data from audits of these agencies and/or provided by the advertiser.

¹ See WFA Media Auditing Survey Results 2009 (APAC, EMEA & LATAM – available on request to WFA members)



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- C) The relationship itself with the agency:
- actual delivery of the services: competency of personnel, actual use of available media research and tools, respect of work processes, according to best practices and/or as agreed in the contract;
 - compensation systems: their set-up, and on-going implementation. Monitoring of models and KPI's, especially when incentives are included in the system;
 - review of the relationship: overall evaluation of the incumbent, new agency selection process (pitch), assistance in the negotiation, choice of a compensation system, and establishment of the contract.

- D) (Sometimes) the strategic and tactical output of the agency:

- advice on, and evaluation of, the agency's strategic and tactical recommendations: media mix, intensities, timing, scheduling, choice of vehicles, post evaluation.

In this last case, generally the advertiser is not looking for an 'audit', but for alternative advice – the auditing company providing a subjective consultancy, not an objective audit (see also below, § 7.2).

The advertiser may decide to use the services of a media auditor either on a permanent basis, or occasionally to benchmark periodically (e.g. every 3-4 years) the work of the media agency, or in exceptional situation only (e.g. a media agency review, or the selection of a new agency). The decision about how often the services of a media auditor should be used depends essentially upon the situation and needs of the advertiser: for example if it has some kind of internal auditing resource or not, if it has consolidated its budgets with only one agency, or it works with more than one agency. In the latter case, the comparison of the 2-3 agencies' strategies and buying performance provides useful benchmarks, even if there are differences in the targets and media mix.

- 2.4 In the interests of best practice and transparency, when circumstances allow it, the advertiser would normally choose to involve the Agency in selected phases of the auditing process. This will protect the quality of relationship with the agency, ensure total alignment, transparency and collaboration and make easier to bring into action the audit's outcome.
- 2.5 To ensure the objectivity of its advice, the media auditor should have no business connections, either itself or through any subsidiary or associated company, with any media owner or advertising or media agency or agency holding company.
- 2.6 Any other business relationship between the auditor and agencies or media companies, such as consulting or other assignments constituting a potential source of conflict of interest, should be disclosed to the advertiser or agency holding company.



3 CONFIDENTIALITY

- 3.1 It is the responsibility of the media auditor always to ensure the absolute confidentiality of every client's individual data and other information. This applies before and during the audit, as well as following its completion.
- 3.2 The media auditor should ensure that any data pools or databases used in the course of delivering its services are of an adequate size to protect the absolute confidentiality of each individual client's data (see also 5.3). Wherever circumstances justify this, a client can ask to have its data not included in the database.
- 3.3 The media auditor should not pass any information about the media agency's activities to any third party without specific prior consent of the client and agency, nor should it pass on any other market data, research findings, or research methodology, which are exclusive to the client and/or the agency.
- 3.4 It is recommended that the media auditor's undertaking to keep all client and agency data confidential, is reinforced by a non-disclosure agreement which binds the three parties.
- 3.5 Client disclosure may sometimes present a difficult issue. On the one hand, existing clients' wishes for their custom not to be disclosed must be respected. On the other, it is reasonable for an advertiser considering using an auditor to request a current client list, particularly those in the same sector. Within these opposing constraints, providing prior consent has been sought from existing clients, auditors should therefore make every effort fully and transparently to provide such data on request.
- 3.6 Subject to their mutual agreement, an advertiser may ask a media auditor to work exclusively for them and not accept any work for any named competitor². If an advertiser requests exclusivity but a named competitor is already client to the auditor, then he is bound to inform the advertiser he cannot accept this clause though he need not divulge the identity of the conflicting advertiser. The advertiser will then retain the right to choose whether to engage the auditor in the knowledge that they also work for a competitor.

If an auditor has already agreed to work for a client on an exclusive basis, it must decline any subsequent approach from a competing client.

- 3.7 When the auditor provides its service for more than one country, using a network of local partner entities (fully owned or affiliate), all the considerations about confidentiality apply to each and every entity. Each of them should underwrite non-disclosure agreements (see above § 3.4)

² Exclusive arrangements may in certain circumstances infringe competition law. Advertisers should seek legal advice before entering into such arrangements.



4 **TRANSPARENCY AND BEST PRACTICE**

- 4.1 The media auditor should clearly identify in all reports all data sources used in the delivery of its services.
- 4.2 The agency is required to provide the media auditor with all information relevant to the assignment on request, in the respect of the pre-agreed timescales and processes.
- 4.3 Where databases or pools are used, the media auditor should make clear to the advertiser the size and scope of any such database, the age of the data where relevant, the composition by media and product/service categories, and the methods of calculation used in the delivery of its services. Under normal circumstances, only the most relevant and up to date data will be used. In the interests of best practice, the auditor would normally choose to keep both the advertiser and agency informed on these issues. In cases where the database is to be shared with other auditors, the terms of such sharing must be disclosed to the client.
- 4.4 Media auditors should allow clients the right to commission an examination of data and methodology used, subject to this being carried out by an agreed, neutral expert and being subject to absolute confidentiality on all matters relating to individual client companies and individual media agencies.
- 4.5 Ensuring that all the relevant audit results and analyses, describing an agency's performance, are visible to that agency can help make the process more transparent. It is recommended practice, at the client's exclusive discretion and initiative, to share these analyses with the media agency.
- 4.6 If the advertiser decides that the media auditor's results are to be discussed in a meeting with the media agency, the media auditor should send his report to the media agency in advance of the meeting to allow the agency a reasonable opportunity to review the findings. The objective of such meetings will be to achieve the best quality verification, learnings and actionable points, as such it will be preferable to circulate all relevant material at least one week in advance in order to give all parties adequate time for preparation. No information should be sent to the agency, before the client has reviewed it, and approved it for sharing.
- 4.7 Where a media agency's contract with an advertiser includes an incentive element linked to media planning/buying performance, the media auditor should consult with the advertiser to ensure that the agency is evaluated specifically against the pre-agreed objectives. Any deviation should be subject to previous, mutual agreement, between the agency and the advertiser.
- 4.8 Media auditors should under no circumstances seek or call for media buying economies which would be to the detriment of the effectiveness of the media plan, or in conflict with the brief or agreed guidelines. In the latter situation, they may recommend to the client to modify the brief and/or the guidelines.



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- 4.9** The media auditor should demonstrate absolute integrity and independence throughout the audit process, as stated earlier, § 2.5 and 2.6. If the audit involves any media strategy or schedule in which the auditor or any associated company has had any involvement in planning or buying, it must be clearly disclosed to all parties. The methods and processes involved should be also adequately disclosed.
- 4.10** In the event of being appointed to evaluate an agency's performance and consequently recommending an agency review, the media auditor must provide the advertiser with a full breakdown of the basis for that recommendation and the reasons for suggesting such a review. The advertiser should first and foremost consider giving the agency appropriate opportunity to address its perceived shortcomings and avoid a review unless absolutely necessary under the circumstances.
- 4.11** The client may choose to enlist a media auditor to advise them on any review of their media arrangements, and/or the selection of a new media agency. In which case – as in all others – the choice of which media auditor will perform this task, remains with the client. It is the responsibility of the auditor to full disclose any potential conflicts of interest in the accomplishment of this specific assignment. Where a review is deemed necessary, the advertisers' representative body can contribute expertise to this process in most markets.
- 4.12** The client may seek advice about the agency's remuneration: the system, amount or both. In this case the auditor must be given access – by the agency and the client – to all relevant client specific information, necessary to prepare and justify a recommendation. The agency should be given the opportunity to challenge the auditor's conclusions, either with the client and auditor together, or confidentially with the client, at the client's discretion. In any event, all shared information must be treated in total confidence by all parties.
- 4.13** If clients wish for further guidance in this area, then they may ask the agency to make all appropriate data available to an independent financial auditor, whose confidentiality is mutually recognized. However, it should be noted that whilst such parties might offer further objectivity, they may not be as close to media and related issues of specific detail.
- Again, the local advertiser representative body may be able to offer further advice and assistance in this area.
- 4.14** Whichever the kind of assignment, all the auditor's requests for data from agencies should be specific to clients' needs and operate to a fair and reasonable timescale, but one which is also relevant to the client's business needs.
- 4.15** In some circumstances the work to be carried out by the media agency in order to comply with the requirements of the media auditor will be extensive and supplementary to the usual workload carried out in the normal course of servicing the client. Where this is the case, the agency will reserve the right to raise any concerns with the advertiser and media auditor prior to the commencement of the audit in order to identify workload implications, and agree upon solutions.



5 PROFESSIONALISM

- 5.1 The media auditor should provide to the client full CV's of all relevant personnel working on the business, in order to demonstrate the qualifications, experience, ability and in-depth craft skills necessary to the media auditing process. This experience should be appropriate for each market and country in which services are offered.
- 5.2 Whichever technique or combination of techniques a media auditor uses to perform the media audit, it should be able to demonstrate the robustness and sensitivity of their approach and/or methodology in its application to the individual advertiser's requirements.
- 5.3 If data pools are used, they should be of sufficient size and relevance to offer a meaningful benchmark and to conceal the identity and data of individual constituents. They should therefore ideally comprise no less than four pieces of activity in the same medium, running at broadly similar weights across a closely-comparable period of time and aimed at the same target group. Local circumstances may also mean that attention should be given to each constituent's media mix. The media auditor must always be able to defend the robustness of any data pool/base they use and the client should be provided with details regarding the size, structure, and methodology behind the benchmarking pool though, for reasons of competition law compliance, not regarding the identity or data of individual constituents to the pool.

If the advertiser is a large investor in the marketplace, and/or in any given media, additional attention should be devoted to the pool composition. In particular, regarding the size of the other advertisers included in the pool itself:

- a single advertiser shouldn't overly influence average cost levels;
 - in case a single advertiser represents more than a reasonable proportion of any relevant pool, this should be disclosed. The advertiser and the auditor then will agree if and how to use the pool. As a guideline such "reasonable proportion" could be set at around 10%;
 - meaningful comparisons can be made only if the pool contains enough advertisers of comparable size.
- 5.4 The media auditor should have the necessary contractual access to all relevant media research and audience measurement data and adequate software in those markets in which it sources original analysis. It should be noted that in certain circumstances, copyright regulations may prevent media agencies from passing some data to auditors or other third parties. It will be the agency's responsibility to gain all such necessary clearances, but where incremental access costs are incurred, these may need to be funded by the auditor as a component of the costs for providing the service. Any and all additional cost implications should be highlighted by the relevant party – agency, auditor or both – before the agreement between the client and the auditor is finalized.
- 5.5 To insure accurate and fair assessment and comparisons, the auditor must use audience data fully comparable with that used by the Agency for planning, buying and control of execution. This should be clearly highlighted to the advertiser (and, upon its request, to the agency) at all stages of the media audit.

In case data from other sources is used, at any level, for the assessment of an agency's performance, this should be clearly explained and justified to the advertiser (and, at its request, to the agency) and mentioned in all the documentation produced by the auditor.



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- 5.6 Beyond the control of performance and compliance of what has been done by the agency in the past, the key purpose of audits is to improve the overall performance and ROI of present and future media investments.

In addition to (or instead of) traditional, formal presentations, the output of the auditor's work should be delivered at times and in ways that maximize its immediate actionability (and ROI of its own cost), such as:

- use of internet/intranet communications and access to data
- clear summaries with conclusions and recommended actions
- presentation material, and conclusions, shared in advance with the advertiser and, at its request, other interested parties.

At the time of publication of this document (early 2010) it appears there is abundant room for improvement in this area, at the initiative of the auditing companies. With the support (and the input from) their clients, they should offer more innovative ways to deliver their work, as the tool of an effective partnership for the short and long term optimization of the media investment.

- 5.7 All parties, and in particular the client, should have a positive/constructive attitude towards the whole process, and remain fully open-minded regarding its outcome.

Initially and along the whole process, the auditor should be able to manage expectations, be and remain neutral and open minded regarding the possible outcome of its work, and avoid speculation or over-promising which could influence its objectivity.

The audit will not necessarily lead to a reduction of costs, if the agency is already providing professional, efficient and effective services. In this case, the audit's cost will be paid back by the increased trust and the strengthened quality of the client-agency partnership, in which both should be interested to further invest.

The existence of an ongoing monitoring and benchmarking procedure, performed by an independent 3rd party, is an additional incentive for the agency to deliver its commitments, provide the best possible cost efficiencies, and offer state-of-the-art service. This element will also contribute to pay back the cost of the auditing.

6 REMUNERATION AND DATA OWNERSHIP

- 6.1 It is strongly recommended that the media auditor's remuneration is independent of the client's delivered and assessed media buying performance (see also 4.8).
- 6.2 All reports and findings relating specifically to the advertiser's business should belong to the advertiser and should not be passed on beyond their organization or resold; ownership of generic data and benchmarking pools rests with the media auditor.



7 REPRESENTATION AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

- 7.1** Media auditing is a commercially-offered advertiser-focused service activity. Media auditors are not representative bodies, but should nevertheless stand for, and indeed promote, their advertiser customers' interests in at all times every area of their activities, including participation in industry issues and the public arena. This may involve consultation and/or liaison with the appropriate global or local advertiser and agency representative bodies.
- 7.2** Media auditing companies may have consultancy divisions which undertake work for media owners, agencies and advertisers – amongst other clients. This raises serious potential conflicts of interest:
- ideally, media auditing companies should therefore not undertake work for media owners. In those cases where a media auditing company, a division of it or an associated company, does undertake work for media owners, this work and its scope should be declared to its advertiser clients;
 - the same applies with regard to agencies and/or communication groups/ holding companies;
 - an advertiser may feel the need to hire a media consultancy service, to improve its media strategies and/or agency arrangements, as a result of a 'negative' audit. Conversely, if the current strategies and agency arrangements are audited as satisfactory, there is no need for further involvement of a third party. This can create a conflict of interest for the auditing-consulting organization. In most circumstances, the organization's professionalism and integrity are sufficient to control such risks. But it is important for all the involved parties, and especially the advertiser, to devote specific attention to this aspect of the relationship.

8. OTHER KEY CONSIDERATIONS

8.1 Online, interactive media.

Given the importance of the online media, and their fluidity, it is recommended to the advertiser to devote special attention to the experience, expertise and equipment of the auditor:

- at the date of publication of this document (early 2010), most of the international auditing companies were still in the process of building their online-auditing operations;
- given the extreme fragmentation and segmentation of the media, is the size and composition of the pool suitable for comparisons with the media vehicles actually used by the advertiser?
- there are not (yet) standardized metrics to measure exposure to the interactive media, the advertiser should make sure that the one (or more) proposed really correspond to its needs, and are consistent across vehicles and, if applicable, countries. Cost comparisons may be meaningless, or misleading, if they don't refer to appropriate, consistent units of count.



8.2 Auditing expertise across the globe

Media auditing is a profession that started in Europe (first the UK, then other Countries) and is still in development: mature in some countries, it is in its infancy or non-existent in others. While the direct knowledge of the local marketplace is crucial for a reliable and meaningful audit, the companies' networks may be at different stages of their development and maturity.

If the needs of the advertiser encompass large geographies, special attention should be devoted to who actually will do the work on a country-by-country basis. In some cases it may be better to postpone the audit for a given country, if the conditions of accuracy, reliability and confidentiality are not met.

Where the appointed international auditor chooses to use a network of local affiliates, this should be clearly disclosed to the advertiser. In any case, it is the responsibility of that international auditor to ensure continuity in process, methodology and output, especially all ROI and media value calculations, when assessing an agency's media planning-buying performance.

Best practice dictates that where a composite of affiliate partners are used across a variety of companies to provide an advertiser with a regional validation of media planning/buying performance, the international auditor appointed to the advertiser's business should ensure consistency in process, methodology and output to reflect an agency's true performance. They should also ensure consistency in all ROI and media value calculations when pools are used.

8.3 Media inflation, deflation

Most evaluations of media buying performance include comparisons with the general evolution of media costs i.e. media inflation or deflation. The assessment of the work of the media agency is largely influenced by the outcome of such comparison.

In most markets there is no official, or even generally accepted, source for obtaining and tracking media cost trends. Most of the time, they result from estimates. Auditors should pay particular attention to the cost trends data they use, or produce. They should explain and justify to the clients the sources and methodologies, and check as much as possible their accuracy against historical data and other meaningful indicators (e.g. general inflation, GDP trends, client's prices and general economic data).

The assessment of the inflation-deflation rates and trends used by the agency, is an integral component of the auditing process. If the auditor considers that such rates should have been different, the issue should be submitted immediately to the advertiser. Then, under its supervision, an agreement will be found with the agency, on which inflation-deflation data, finally, will be used.



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8.4 Who audits the auditors?

Literally “auditing” the work of an auditor doesn’t make practical sense and, in most circumstances, it is not needed.

Assessments of the quality and consistency of an auditor’s work can be provided by:

- first and foremost, the advertiser’s in house media expertise (media director, coordinators), informed by its interactions with media companies, media and other agencies, the input from local and international professional organizations, general trends and changes in the marketplace, opinions and perceptions of client referees and client partners;
- if the size of the advertiser allows, and the in-house media expertise is strong, it could be useful to work with more than one auditor (e.g. by geography, or broad categories/brands).

APPENDIX: BIBLIOGRAPHY

CANADA

ACA, CMDC, ICA, AAPQ

“Media Auditing, a guidebook on best practices for the Canadian Market”

70 pages – year 2008

FRANCE

UDA, UDECAM

«Guide des Relations Annonceur.Agence Media», chapters on Auditing

100 pages (total) – May 2006

UNITED KINGDOM

ISBA in association with IPA

“Guide to Choosing and Using a Media Auditor”

5 pages, largely based upon the 2003 WFA 1st edition guide - June 2003

EUROPE

EACA and WFA

“European Guidelines on Client-Agency relationships and Best Practice in the Pitch process”.

16 pages, April 2009

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