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## ***Direct Response Mechanisms in Billboard Advertising***

### ***Abstract***

This study examined billboard advertising along major highways in two major metropolitan markets – Philadelphia (the 4<sup>th</sup> ranked DMA in the US) and San Diego (the 26<sup>th</sup> ranked DMA in the US). Researchers gathered data on advertiser, advertisement telephone number information, Internet address information, and local business address information, and also compiled data on advertiser industry segments. A total of 358 billboards were surveyed in the course of the study.

Highlights of the findings include the fact that approximately 50% of the surveyed billboards displayed either a telephone number or an Internet address. Of the billboards with telephone numbers, toll-free numbers predominated, making up over 70% of the total telephone numbers. Advertisers that included a toll-free number in their billboards preferred vanity numbers as a response device. Vanity numbers made up over 75% of the total toll-free numbers.

### ***800 Response***

800 Response, based in Burlington, Vermont, specializes in direct response marketing. Principals at Response have over 40 years of experience in the industry and have been featured in major industry publications including *Advertising Age*, *DM News*, and *American Demographics* as authors and subjects of articles on direct marketing and innovative ways for businesses to market their products and services. A previous study conducted by the organization, 'Direct Response in Radio Advertising,' is cited in the DMA's **2002 Statistical Fact Book**<sup>1</sup>.

### ***Date Published***

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## **Introduction**

Outdoor advertising, as pointed out by the industry's trade association, is a 'pure' advertising medium, not encumbered by editorial or entertainment messages as are print, broadcast and online mediums. Outdoor has enjoyed a recent resurgence as major advertisers have recognized the medium's unique benefits, which include unparalleled creative opportunities and the ability to reach a mass audience relatively inexpensively. According to the OAAA, over \$5 billion was spent on outdoor media in 2002, a slight increase over the previous year<sup>2</sup>.

This study examines telephone numbers as a response mechanism in billboard advertising, particularly vanity toll-free numbers. Vanity numbers – numbers that spell words, like 800-MY-SUCCESS or 800-NEXTEL9 – have been repeatedly proven to increase advertising response rates in a variety of media.

Vanity numbers would seem to be particularly appropriate for use in an outdoor advertising context, given that consumers' exposure to outdoor advertisements is generally brief. A **Designing for Out-of-Home** creative guide published by Clear Channel Outdoor, the largest outdoor firm in the United States, makes the point that 'viewing time for most out-of-home messages is only a few seconds' and also suggests that 'the most effective out-of-home designs *contain six words or less*' (emphasis added)<sup>3</sup>.

In this context, where an advertising message must be very concise and make an impression in the mind of a viewer in a matter of seconds, the advantages of using an easily recalled number as a response device are readily apparent.

This study also examines the prevalence of other direct response mechanisms in billboard advertising, specifically billboards that included either an Internet address or a local business address.

## **Findings**

The study data reveals that almost 30% of the surveyed billboard advertising in the two markets included a telephone number. Toll-free numbers made up the largest percentage – approximately 71% – of the telephone numbers included in the advertisements. Vanity numbers predominated, making up 76% of the total toll-free numbers. If an advertiser included a toll-free number on a billboard, the number was displayed prominently over 80% of the time.

Of the toll-free numbers, the '800' prefix, which is the oldest and most widely recognized of the current toll-free prefixes, was used in over half of the numbers. Using the 800 prefix offers advertisers significant advantages as consumers strongly associate 'toll-free' with '800', sometimes to the point where callers will reflexively dial '800' after viewing a toll-free number with one of the newer toll-free prefixes.

Internet addresses were included in 30% of the advertisements. Internet addresses, however, were displayed prominently only 40% of the time. Advertisers included both a toll-free number and an Internet address on slightly more than 10% of the billboards surveyed. Local business addresses were included in 14% of the billboards. There was a significant disparity in the two surveyed markets: Only 3% of billboards in San Diego included a local address, versus 15% in Philadelphia.

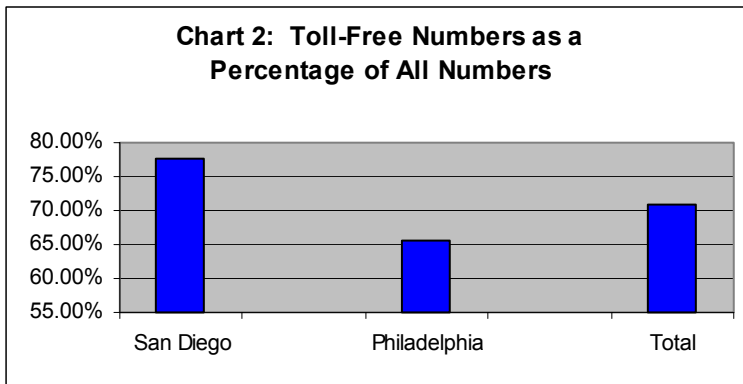
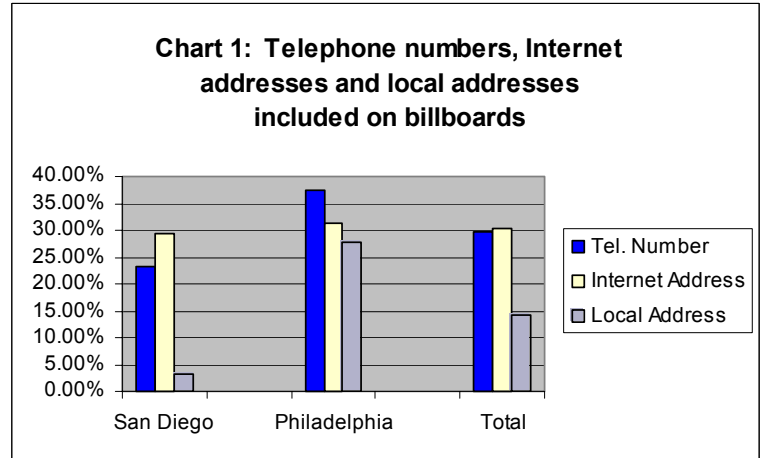
Among all advertisements surveyed, the most common industry groups included alcoholic beverages (12%), the automotive sector (12%), entertainment (10%), and credit/financial (7%). Public service announcements and travel/recreation also were prominent. Among the billboards that included a toll-free number, prominent industry groups included the automotive sector, healthcare, telecommunications and credit/finance.

### ***Methodology***

Separate teams of researchers surveyed billboards along major highways in the greater Philadelphia and greater San Diego areas in the spring of 2003. In Philadelphia, research was conducted along Interstates 95 and 676. San Diego research was conducted along Interstate 5 and major through streets and highways in and around the downtown area. A total of 358 billboards were surveyed, examining 195 billboards in San Diego and 163 billboards in Philadelphia. For the purposes of this study, a vanity number was defined as a toll-free number partially or entirely made up of words or phrases.

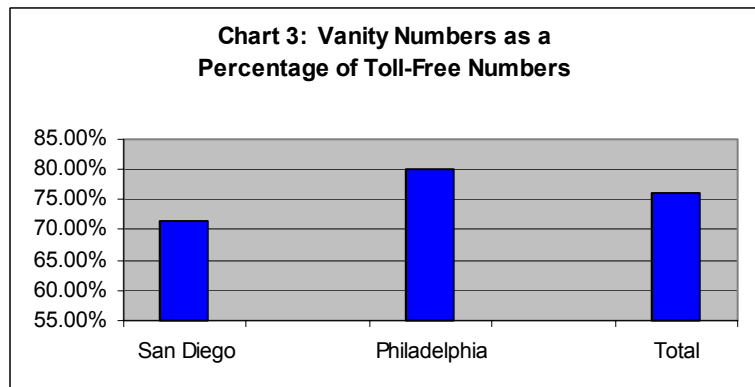
**Charts**

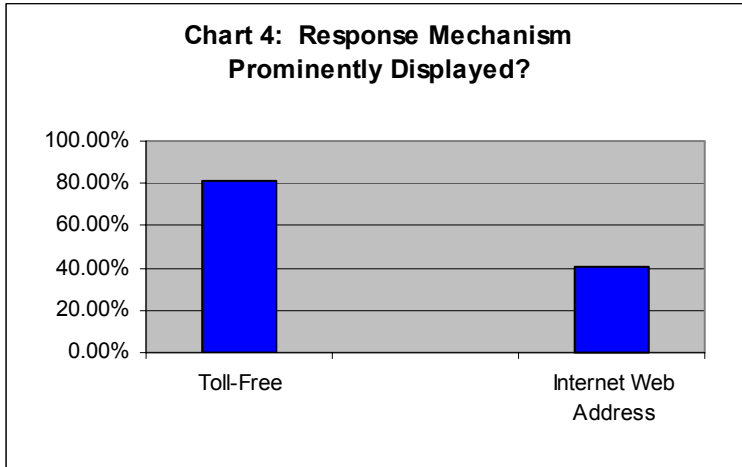
**Chart 1:** This chart reveals some of the regional discrepancies in billboard advertising in the two markets studied. This was most pronounced in local business addresses, which were included on only 3% of San Diego billboards.



**Chart 2:** Toll-free numbers made up over 70% of telephone numbers included on billboards. Advertisers recognize that consumers have come to expect toll-free numbers in advertisements where direct response is encouraged.

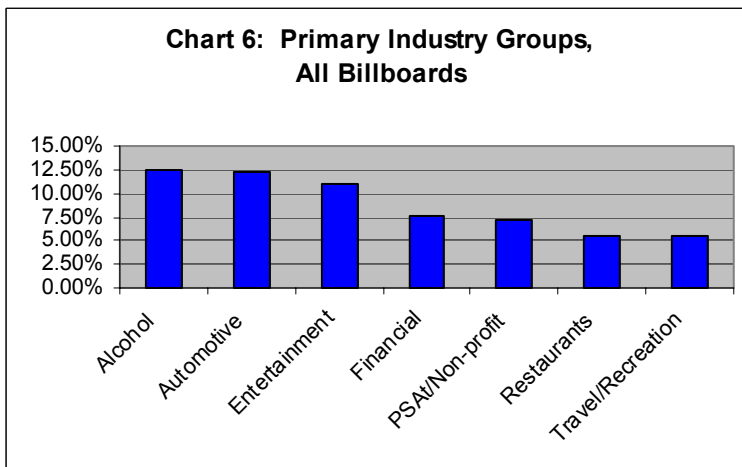
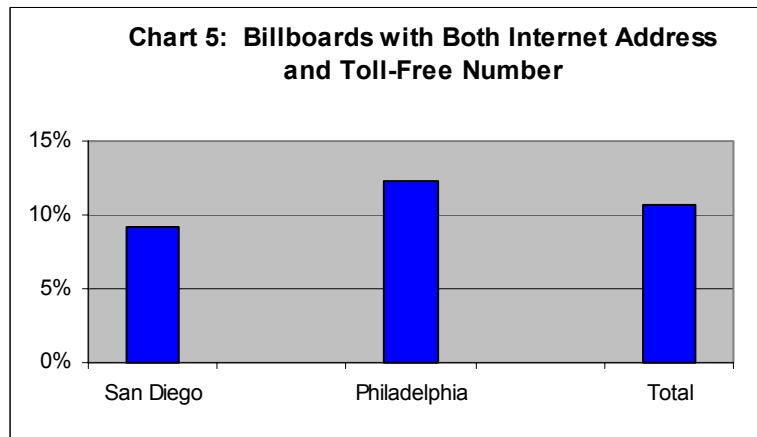
**Chart 3:** Vanity numbers made up over 75% of the toll-free numbers on the studied billboards.





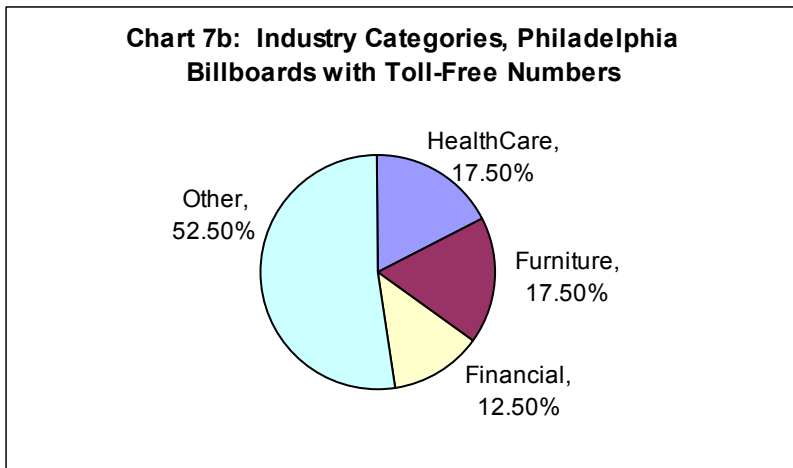
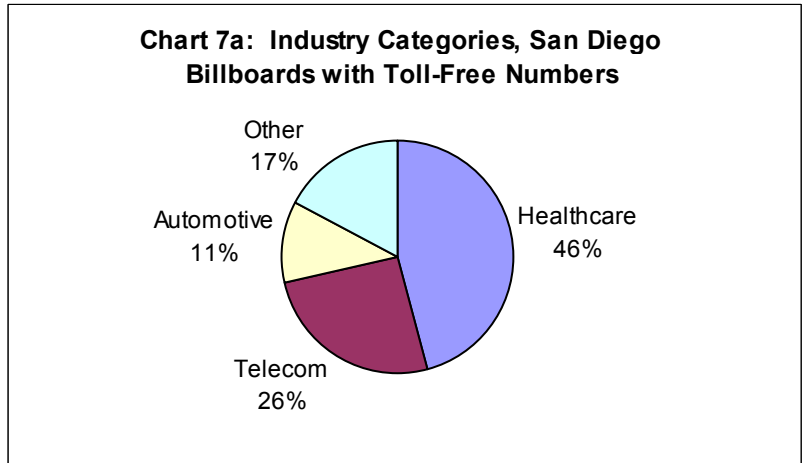
**Chart 4:** Prominence of either telephone number or Internet address. 80% of the telephone numbers were displayed prominently, versus only 40% of Internet addresses.

**Chart 5:** 10% of surveyed billboards included both an Internet address and toll-free number.



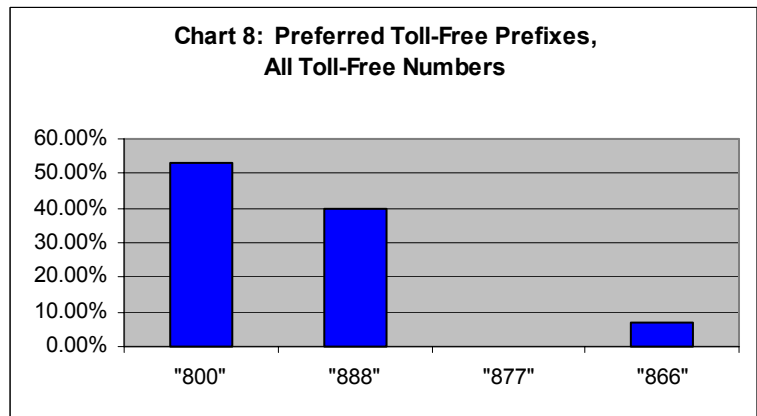
**Chart 6:** Chart showing the most common industry groups for all surveyed billboards.

**Chart 7a:** The California Dept. of Health was a large billboard advertiser, which accounts for the prominence of the healthcare category.



**Chart 7b:** Billboard advertisers in Philadelphia came from more diverse industry groups than San Diego; no single industry segment predominated.

**Chart 8:** The two most widely recognized toll-free prefixes, '800' and '888', were used most extensively. There were no instances of an advertiser using a number with the '877' prefix.



## **Conclusion**

Even though consumers' encounters with billboards are fleeting and momentary, advertisers frequently include a response device in their ads – almost half of the surveyed billboards included either a telephone number or an internet address. Telephone numbers were displayed prominently more often than Internet addresses, and vanity numbers were strongly preferred over either local numbers or 'numeric' toll-free numbers.

The surveyed billboards spanned a very wide range of industry groups and comprised both national and local advertisers. This pattern was also evident in the billboards that included a response device, where service industries such as telecommunications and healthcare, as well as durable goods such as the automotive sector and home furnishings, were all represented.

Of the billboard advertisements that included toll-free numbers, vanity numbers – numbers spelling out a company's name (like 1-800-4SUNOCO) or indicating its product or service (1-800-BAR-STOOL) predominated. Vanity numbers offer advertisers many advantages in an outdoor context, including greatly improved memorability, and for numbers that incorporate an organization's name, the ability to simultaneously present a call to action while increasing a firm's name recognition. On a billboard, where the 'medium is the message', a vanity number, where the number becomes an integral part of the message as well, can provide a powerful reinforcement.

One of the challenges facing the outdoor industry is a perceived lack of accurate audience measurement tools<sup>4</sup>. In this area, toll-free numbers, which typically include extensive call tracking packages, including information on where and when calls originate, flagging of cell phone calls, and call volume, can help advertisers gain a better measure of the effectiveness of their advertising efforts.

The fact that telephone numbers were more frequently displayed prominently than web addresses on the surveyed billboards may be attributed to the fact that many advertisers will include their Internet addresses on all marketing communications, even if it is fairly inconspicuous. There also may be some expectation by advertisers that consumers will call immediately from their vehicles after viewing a billboard.

Vanity numbers offer outdoor advertisers many advantages. In a medium where 'brevity is all', a strong vanity number provides a concise and easily recallable response device. If an advertiser is able to incorporate a vanity number into other media placements, this will only serve to reinforce these positive effects in the outdoor medium.

***Endnotes***

1. Chernis, Anna (editor) (2002). **Statistical Fact Book, 24<sup>th</sup> Edition**. The Direct Marketing Association, New York, New York. Pg. 27.
2. Outdoor Advertising Association of America, 'About Outdoor'  
<http://www.oaaa.org/outdoor/>
3. Clear Channel Outdoor, 'Designing Good Creative',  
<http://www.clearchanneloutdoor.com/resource/creative/goodCreative.asp>
4. Yin, Sandra. "Counting Eyes on Billboards", American Demographics, January 2003. Article electronically posted at  
[http://www.oaaa.org/news/release.asp?RELEASE\\_ID=1293](http://www.oaaa.org/news/release.asp?RELEASE_ID=1293)

**Researchers**

This study, *Direct Response Mechanisms in Billboard Advertising*, was conducted by 800 Response's Vice President of Marketing, Laura S. Noonan, and was written by Jeff Gauthier, Marketing Coordinator. Surveys in San Diego and Philadelphia were performed by independent contractors.

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Reprints of the study are available free of charge to members of the press, professional organizations, and clients of 800 Response.

**Appendix:** Toll-free numbers (vanity and 'numeric') appearing on surveyed billboards in Philadelphia and San Diego. The '# of billboards' column indicates how many times a particular advertiser's billboard appeared in the surveys.

<b>Advertiser</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b># of billboards</b>
21ST CENTURY INSURANCE	1-888-920-2121	San Diego	3
AT&T	1-800-634-3490	San Diego	1
AT&T	1-800-822-6143	San Diego	2
BLUE CROSS INDEPENDENCE	1-888-598-BABY	Philadelphia	4
CALIFORNIA DEPT OF HEALTH	1-866-FAMPACT	San Diego	2
CALIFORNIA DEPT OF HEALTH	1-888-50UPTOME	San Diego	11
CALIFORNIA DEPT OF HEALTH	1-888-UNAVIDA	San Diego	1
CAR STAR	1800-CAR-STAR	Philadelphia	1
DREXEL MEDICINE	1-888-745-CARE	Philadelphia	1
EAGLE'S FOOTBALL	1-888-332-CLUB	Philadelphia	1
FIXED TERM MORTGAGE	1-888-475-LEND	Philadelphia	1
FROG'S GYM	1-800-CLUBONE	San Diego	2
GIFT OF LIFE	1-800-438-5093	Philadelphia	1
HOLIDAY INN	1-800-HOLIDAY	Philadelphia	1
ING SAVINGS ACCOUNT	1-800-ING-DIRECT	Philadelphia	3
INGLIS	1-866-2INGLIS	Philadelphia	1
KIDNEY CARS VEHICLE DONATION	1-800-488-CARS	Philadelphia	1
KING RICHARD	1-800-NEXTCAR	San Diego	3
MACAFFERTY AUTO SALES	1-866-EASY-AUTO	Philadelphia	1
MARCH OF DIMES	1-800-525WALK	San Diego	1
MATTRESS COMPANY	1-888-604-0568	Philadelphia	1
MEETING HEIGHTS APTS	1-800-MEET-US	Philadelphia	1
METRO INTERCONNECT LD	1-888-591-0077	Philadelphia	1
MODELLS	1-800-ASK-MODELLS	Philadelphia	1
MR. BAR STOOLS	1-800-BAR-STOOL	Philadelphia	2
NEXTEL	1-800-NEXTEL9	San Diego	2
NEXTEL	1-800-NEXTEL9	Philadelphia	1
ONATUCCI	1-888-656-1212	Philadelphia	1
PAUL MITCHELL	1-800-SAVEAPET	San Diego	1
PIERCE UNIVERSITY	1-888-60-PIERCE	Philadelphia	1
PRUDENTIAL	1-800-THE-ROCK	Philadelphia	1
RICOH BUSINESS SYSTEMS	1-888-RICOH22	Philadelphia	2
RUG COMPANY	1-800-900-RUGS	Philadelphia	1
SANDALS RESORTS	1-800-SANDALS	Philadelphia	2
SBC	1-800-407-5555	San Diego	4
SOFA SOURCE	1-888-NEW-SOFA	Philadelphia	1
SPIRES LIT MAGAZINE	1-866-N-SPIRES	Philadelphia	1
SUNOCO GAS	1-800-4-SUNOCO	Philadelphia	1
SYCUAN CASINO & RESORT	1-800-2SYCUAN	San Diego	1
THOM. JEFFERSON UNIV. HOSP.	1-800-JEFFNOW	Philadelphia	1
UNIVERSITY OF PHOENIX	1-800-MY-SUCCESS	Philadelphia	1
WEED AUTO MALL	1-800-869-WEED	Philadelphia	1
WIDENER UNIVERSITY	1-888-WIDENER	Philadelphia	2
YAMAHA	1-800-88-YAMAHA	San Diego	1
YELLOW BOOK	1-800-YB-YELLOW	Philadelphia	1