SJMC 345 · PRINCIPLES & PRACTICE OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

# The Media Plan Workbook

*A manual for media directors*

You have a budget and a calendar year. Your job is to turn the first into the second: to decide what to buy, how much of it, and when — and then to defend every one of those decisions to a client who did not make them and is not obliged to agree.

This workbook does the arithmetic so that you can spend your time on the argument. It will not tell you what to buy. It will tell you, immediately and without sympathy, what your choices cost, how many people they reach, how often, and whether the schedule you described in your narrative is the schedule you actually built.

## The three files

| FILE | WHAT IT IS |
|---|---|
| **J345 Media Plan Workbook — BLANK** | Yours. Twelve sheets and 78 open lines. This is what you hand in. |
| **WORKED EXAMPLE (Cheerios)** | A complete $40 million plan for a mature grocery brand. Every check green. |
| **WORKED EXAMPLE (Airbnb)** | A complete $40 million plan for a two-sided marketplace with a booking lead time. One check deliberately short — see section 4. |

Read both examples before you start. They are the same budget and they look nothing alike, which is the point: the shape of a plan is an argument about the brand, not a template.

## Colour tells you whose job a cell is

| COLOUR | MEANING |
|---|---|
| **Pale yellow** | You type here. Every input in the workbook is this colour. |
| **Pale blue** | The workbook calculates here. If you type over a blue cell you have broken something. |
| **Grey / white** | Labels and reference material. |

## 1. The arithmetic, once

Every medium in this workbook is priced on a cost per thousand impressions and converted into rating points against a single audience universe. That is the whole trick, and everything else follows from it. Learn these three lines and the rest of the manual is detail.

```
impressions  =  how many times the message was delivered

GRP  =  in-target impressions  ÷  universe  ×  100

CPP  =  CPM  ×  ( universe  ÷  100,000 )
```

A gross rating point is one per cent of your target audience, exposed once. Choose adults 25–54 and the universe is 125,680,000 people, so one rating point is 1,256,800 impressions and the CPP multiplier is 1,256.8. A vehicle with a $45 cost per thousand therefore costs $56,556 per rating point. The workbook prints your multiplier on the START HERE sheet.

### Why one currency matters

Until you put everything into rating points you cannot add a podcast to a billboard to a Super Bowl spot, which means you cannot say what the campaign reaches. The old version of this exercise kept impact media in units, digital in impressions and traditional media in rating points, and the three could never be summed. Here they can, so the flowchart adds up and reach and frequency are calculable for the entire plan rather than for the television portion of it.

### Delivered impressions and in-target impressions

These are different and the workbook shows both. Delivered impressions are everyone the vehicle reached. In-target impressions are the portion of them inside your audience. For most lines the two are the same, because the rate is quoted against the trading demo. For impact media they are not, because a Super Bowl spot or a parade is priced against its total audience and only some of that audience is yours.

The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade line in the worked example makes this concrete:

| | VALUE |
|---|---|
| **Cost of one :30** | $1,030,000 |
| **Delivered impressions** | 34,300,000 |
| **Target composition (adults 25–54)** | 34% |
| **In-target impressions** | 11,662,000 |
| **Rating points** | 9.28 |
| **Delivered CPM** | $30.03 |
| **Cost per point** | $111,002 |

> **Why this matters.** Thirty dollars a thousand looks cheap next to network primetime at forty-five. It is not: two thirds of the parade audience is outside the target, so the real cost of a rating point is double primetime's. Judge impact media on cost per point, never on the headline cost per thousand.

## 2. Sheet by sheet

### START HERE

Set the brand, the year, a written description of the target, then the target itself, then the money. The workbook subtracts the contingency, shows what share of the budget it is, and reports the working budget — the money you actually have to spend. Everything downstream is judged against that number, not against the headline budget. A $40,000,000 budget with $1,500,000 held back is a $38,500,000 plan.

#### The target buttons

Two rows of buttons: MEN and WOMEN, then the six age breaks. Click any of them and choose ON or OFF. On buttons go red. You can switch on both genders and as many age breaks as you like, and the age breaks do not have to be next to each other — men 18–24 plus men 45–54 is a legitimate target if you can defend it.

Three things change the moment you do it:

| WHAT CHANGES | WHY |
|---|---|
| **The universe** | The number of people in your target, added up from the age and gender you switched on. Every rating point in the plan is one per cent of this number. |
| **The cost per point multiplier** | Universe ÷ 100,000. A smaller target means fewer people per point, so a point costs less in cash and means less in reach. |
| **The demo cost index** | How much more, or less, a thousand impressions of your target costs than a thousand of adults 25–54. This reprices every CPM line in the workbook. |

### Why a narrow target costs more

The rate card is quoted for adults 25–54, the standard national trading demo, so that target has an index of exactly 1.00. Everything else is priced relative to it, on two grounds. A smaller slice of the population is harder to buy without waste, so the index rises as the target narrows. And some demos cost more because advertisers want them regardless of size — young adults carry a premium, and people over 65 are cheap relative to their numbers because advertisers under-invest in them.

| TARGET | UNIVERSE | INDEX | A $45 CPM BECOMES |
|---|---:|---:|---:|
| **Adults 18+ — everyone** | 253,680,000 | 0.71 | $32.08 |
| **Adults 55+** | 99,500,000 | 0.77 | $34.79 |
| **Adults 65+** | 58,500,000 | 0.86 | $38.50 |
| **Adults 18–49** | 154,180,000 | 0.97 | $43.56 |
| **Adults 25–54 — the card demo** | 125,680,000 | 1.00 | $45.00 |
| **Men 25–54** | 62,580,000 | 1.30 | $58.63 |
| **Women 25–54** | 63,100,000 | 1.32 | $59.52 |
| **Adults 18–34** | 71,500,000 | 1.41 | $63.56 |
| **Men 18–34** | 35,980,000 | 1.83 | $82.46 |
| **Women 18–34** | 35,520,000 | 1.88 | $84.44 |
| **Adults 18–24** | 28,500,000 | 2.04 | $91.96 |

> **A fixed-price spot is not repriced — its composition is.** The index applies to lines bought on a cost per thousand or a monthly cap, because that is where you are buying in-target impressions and a narrow demo genuinely costs more per thousand. A Super Bowl unit, a takeover day or an out-of-home market-month has a price that does not care who you are after: it costs what it costs. What changes there is how many of the people it delivers are yours, so the workbook scales the composition instead. Switch the Macy's parade line from adults 25–54 to women 18–34 and the price stays $1,030,000 while the in-target impressions fall from 11.7 million to 3.3 million.
>
> **Set the target before you buy anything, and leave it alone.** Changing it later changes every rate, every rating point and every reach figure in the plan at once. If you want to compare two targets, save two copies.

One warning about comparing across targets: rating points are a percentage of YOUR universe, so a plan against women 18–34 and a plan against adults 25–54 cannot be compared on rating points or on cost per point at all. Forty points of women 18–34 is fourteen million people; forty points of adults 25–54 is fifty million. Compare them on reach, on impressions, or on cost per thousand — never on GRPs.

The bottom of this sheet carries the plan at a glance — committed, remaining, total rating points, campaign cost per point, reach — and the two charts of budget and rating points by planning group. Those charts are the ones that belong in your deck.

## RATE CARD

191 things you may buy, in 19 categories, grouped into seven planning groups. Read it before you plan. You cannot buy anything that is not on it, and you cannot buy anything at a rate other than the one printed here.

| COLUMN | WHAT IT TELLS YOU |
|---|---|
| **PLANNING GROUP** | Which of the seven groups this line rolls up into on every summary and chart. |
| **CATEGORY** | The dropdown value you pick on the BUDGET sheet to filter to this line. |
| **BASIS** | UNIT, CPM or MONTH. This determines what QUANTITY means. See section 3. |
| **RATE** | Cost per unit, per thousand impressions, or per month, depending on basis. |
| **DELIVERED IMPS PER UNIT (000)** | Thousands of impressions one unit delivers. Always 1 on CPM lines, because there the quantity is the impressions. |
| **TARGET COMPOSITION** | The share of delivered impressions inside your target. Below 100% only on impact lines. |
| **MINIMUM PURCHASE** | The smallest buy the seller will accept. Going under it is not a rounding matter; the buy does not exist. |
| **TARGET INDEX** | MRI/Simmons style. 100 is average; 128 means the vehicle over-delivers your audience by 28%. This is the number the manual asks you to cite in your selection rationale. |
| **TIER** | A or B. See below. |
| **SOURCE** | Where the figure came from. |
| **MONTHS AVAILABLE** | When the property actually happens. Most lines read "any month". Sixty-six tentpoles are tied to the month they occur, and the flowchart enforces it. |

### Tier A and Tier B — the most important column on the card

Media rates are not public the way share prices are. Some are reported; most are private. Rather than presenting every number with the same false confidence, each line is marked.

| TIER | MEANING | HOW TO USE IT |
|---|---|---|
| **A** | Reported or published by a named source — a trade-press report of what a unit actually sold for, a platform rate card, a benchmark study, a Nielsen audience. | Cite it. State the source in your rationale. |
| **B** | Illustrative. No public rate exists, so the figure is the most recent reported audience multiplied by a cost per thousand benchmarked against comparable properties whose price is reported. | You may buy it. You must describe it in the narrative as an estimate, and say what it is built from. |

72 lines are Tier A, 119 are Tier B. The CHECKS sheet counts how many of each your plan uses. Presenting a Tier B number as though someone quoted it to you is the single easiest way to lose credibility in the presentation, and it is the mistake most often made.

## BUDGET

Where you buy. Four things to type per line; everything else is computed.

| # | YOU TYPE | IN COLUMN |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | CATEGORY — pick from the dropdown | C |
| 2 | VEHICLE — the dropdown now shows only that category's vehicles | D |
| 3 | QUANTITY — meaning depends on the basis; see section 3 | H |
| 4 | RATIONALE — one or two sentences, written now, not the night before | U |

> **Pick the category first.** The vehicle dropdown is driven by the category cell beside it. If you try to choose a vehicle before a category, the list will be empty and the workbook will tell you so.

The computed columns, left to right:

| COLUMN | MEANING |
|---|---|
| **BASIS · RATE · RATE UNIT** | Pulled from the rate card the moment you choose a vehicle. |
| **MINIMUM · MIN OK?** | Turns red and reads BELOW if your quantity is under the minimum. Fix it; do not ignore it. |
| **COST** | Quantity × rate. The same formula on every line in the workbook. |
| **DELIVERED IMPS (000) · IN-TARGET IMPS (000)** | Thousands of impressions, before and after target composition. |
| **GRPs** | In-target impressions expressed as a share of your universe. |
| **CPM DELIVERED · CPM IN-TARGET** | What you paid per thousand of everyone, and per thousand of your audience. |
| **CPP** | Cost per rating point. The number that lets you compare a billboard to a podcast to a parade. |
| **TARGET INDEX · TIER** | Carried through from the card so you can see them while you buy. |
| **% OF BUDGET** | This line as a share of the working budget. |

Seventy-eight open lines. Below them, the campaign total and the rollup by planning group that feeds every chart in the workbook.

## Out-of-home: what a unit is

Outdoor is not bought by the billboard. It is bought by the showing — a package of faces sized to deliver a given number of rating points a day in a given market. Every out-of-home line on the card is one #50 showing, in one market, for one four-week cycle. So the quantity you type is market-months.

| YOU WANT | QUANTITY |
|---|---|
| **Twelve medium markets, two four-week cycles** | 24 |
| **Four large markets, three cycles** | 12 |
| **Forty small markets, one cycle** | 40 |

Market size is built into the line you choose — large is roughly the top ten DMAs, medium the next forty, small everything below. A large-market month costs about five times a medium-market month and delivers about two and a half times the impressions, which is the whole argument about where outdoor money should go.

> **Production is a separate line, and it delivers nothing.** Printing and posting outdoor costs real money and buys no impressions at all. The card carries it as its own line so that you can see it: in the worked example it is $440,000 of the budget at zero rating points. Every plan has some of this. Knowing how much is the point.

## FLOWCHART

Every line you bought appears here automatically with its spend and rating points already attached. Your only job is to spread each line across the twelve months as percentages. Each row must total 100 per cent; the CHECK column says OK or FIX.

The grid is heat-mapped, so the shape of your campaign is visible before any chart is drawn. And the last column names the scheduling pattern you actually bought:

| PATTERN | TRIGGERED BY |
|---|---|
| **CONTINUITY** | All twelve months active, and the heaviest month is within 1.25× the average |
| **PULSING** | All twelve months active, heaviest month above 1.25× the average |

| PATTERN | TRIGGERED BY |
|---|---|
| **FLIGHTING** | Some months dark |
| **BURST** | Two months or fewer |

> **This column is not decoration.** If your narrative claims a pulsing strategy and this column says CONTINUITY, one of the two is wrong, and it is visible to anyone reading your workbook. Write the narrative from what the flowchart says, or change the flowchart until it says what you meant.

### Tentpoles can only be scheduled when they happen

The Super Bowl is in February. The Macy's parade is in November. March Madness is in March. Sixty-six properties on the rate card are tied to the month they occur, and the flowchart will not let you put weight against them in any other month — it refuses the entry, turns the cell red if you paste one in, and reports it on the CHECKS sheet.

The MONTHS AVAILABLE column on the flowchart tells you the window for each line you bought. Most lines read "any month"; the ones that do not read something like NOV, or SEP–DEC for a season-long package. Nothing else in the workbook is enforced this strictly, because nothing else in the workbook is a fact about the calendar rather than a judgement about the brand.

## FLOW — GRPs and FLOW — SPEND

The same grid converted into rating points and into dollars, line by line, rolled up to the seven planning groups, each with a stacked column chart of monthly delivery.

FLOW — GRPs is the flowchart a media director reads: it shows the shape of the campaign in the currency reach is calculated from. FLOW — SPEND is what you check against a client's fiscal calendar, and where you catch a month carrying a share of the budget nobody can defend.

## FLOWCHART VISUAL

The whole plan on one page: nineteen media categories down the left, twelve months across the top, rating points in the cells. Group rows carry the colour of their planning group; category rows are shaded by weight. It is set up to print on one landscape page with its legend, and it is the flowchart that belongs in your deck.

> **Read the shading across, not down.** Each row is shaded against its own heaviest month, so every medium shows its own flight pattern. That is deliberate: out-of-home delivers so many more rating points than anything else that a single shared scale would wash every other row to white. To compare weight between media, read the TOTAL GRPs column, not the colour.

Two legends sit underneath: the shading bands, and the seven planning-group colours. Those colours are the same on every chart in the workbook, so a colour means one thing everywhere — red is impact, blue is television, teal is streaming and online video, amber is audio, purple is print and out-of-home, green is digital and social, grey is creator and direct.

## CHARTS

Five live charts, each with a caption saying what it shows and how to read it:

| CHART | WHAT IT ANSWERS |
|---|---|
| **Share of budget by media type** | Where the money went, in seven slices. |

| CHART | WHAT IT ANSWERS |
|---|---|
| **Budget by media category** | The same money in nineteen bars — a pie with nineteen slices cannot be read, which is why this one is a bar. |
| **Rating points by media type** | Where the weight came from. Read it against the pie: a group that is a big slice here and a small slice there is buying cheap points. |
| **Spend by month** | The shape of the year in cash. |
| **Spend by month and media type** | The two combined — usually the single most useful slide in a media presentation. |

## CATEGORY VIEW

One yellow cell at the top. Choose a planning group or a single media category and the flowchart and its chart redraw for that slice alone. Use it when you present — nobody can read a 78-line flowchart from the back of a lecture hall, and "here is our streaming schedule" is a slide, whereas "here is everything" is a wall.

## REACH & FREQ

Rating points tell you how much weight you bought. They do not tell you how many different people saw it. Three hundred rating points might be a hundred per cent of the audience three times, or thirty per cent of it ten times, and those are entirely different campaigns.

The workbook models the exposure distribution for each planning group and for the campaign, and reports 1+ reach, average frequency and 3+ effective reach. Two assumptions are yours to set and to defend:

| ASSUMPTION | WHAT IT MEANS | TYPICAL |
|---|---|---|
| **Reach ceiling** | The most of your target this medium could ever reach, however much you spend. Television is high, impact media is low because it is a handful of programmes. | 40–85 |
| **Concentration k** | How unevenly the impressions land. Low k means a few heavy users absorb most of the delivery; high k means it is spread evenly. | 1.2–2.6 |

### Read the four-week rows, not the annual row

The sheet reports the full year, the average four-week period and the heaviest four-week period. Only the last two are useful. Spread thinly enough over twelve months, almost any national budget appears to reach almost everyone three times — which is why the annual figure flatters every plan and distinguishes none of them. In the Cheerios example:

| PERIOD | GRPs | 1+ REACH | AVG FREQUENCY | 3+ EFFECTIVE REACH |
|---|---:|---:|---:|---:|
| **Full year** | 2,692.5 | 94.6 | 26.46 | 92.6 |
| **Average four weeks** | 208.5 | 73.6 | 2.83 | 33.1 |
| **Heaviest four weeks** | 518.5 | 88.3 | 5.87 | 67.5 |

The annual row says the campaign reached 94.6 per cent of adults 25–54 more than three times. True, and useless — so would almost any plan. The average four-week row says 73.6 reach at a frequency of 2.83, which is a claim somebody can argue with. Your goals are set and checked against the four-week period for that reason.

## CHECKS

Ten checks. Green is fine, red is not. Clear every red line before you submit — each of them is something a client would catch in the room.

Two of the ten are counts rather than pass-or-fail: how many Tier B rates you used, and how many planning groups. Neither is an error. Both are things you should be ready to be asked about.

### SOURCES

Where the numbers came from, and two warnings you would otherwise walk into: Nielsen changed measurement twice between 2023 and 2026, so audience comparisons across that break are not like for like; and streaming services publish global "views" rather than Nielsen US average audience, so a comparison between the two is not a comparison.

## 3. Quantity means three different things

This is the one place students reliably go wrong. QUANTITY is not dollars. What you type in column H depends on the basis of the line you chose.

| BASIS | QUANTITY IS | COST | IMPRESSIONS |
|---|---|---|---|
| **UNIT** | Number of units — a :30 spot, an insertion, a takeover day, a creator post | QTY × RATE | QTY × impressions per unit |
| **CPM** | THOUSANDS of impressions you are buying. Type 60000 to buy 60 million. | QTY × RATE | QTY |
| **MONTH** | Number of months at the cap or retainer | QTY × RATE | QTY × impressions per month |

Out-of-home is a UNIT line where one unit is a #50 showing in one market for four weeks, so its quantity is market-months. Twelve markets across two cycles is 24.

### Four worked purchases from the Cheerios plan

#### A UNIT line — Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade

One :30 in the parade. Type 1.

| STEP | ARITHMETIC | RESULT |
|---|---|---|
| **Cost** | `1 unit × $1,030,000` | $1,030,000 |
| **Delivered impressions** | `1 × 34,300 thousand` | 34,300,000 |
| **In-target impressions** | `34,300,000 × 34%` | 11,662,000 |
| **Rating points** | `11,662,000 ÷ 125,680,000 × 100` | 9.28 |
| **Cost per point** | `$1,030,000 ÷ 9.28` | $111,002 |

#### A CPM line — network primetime entertainment

Sixty million impressions of national primetime. Type 60000 — sixty thousand thousands.

| STEP | ARITHMETIC | RESULT |
|---|---|---|
| **Cost** | `60,000 × $45.00` | $2,700,000 |
| **Impressions** | `quantity is the impressions` | 60,000,000 |
| **Rating points** | `60,000,000 ÷ 125,680,000 × 100` | 47.74 |
| **Cost per point** | `$2,700,000 ÷ 47.74` | $56,556 |

#### A MONTH line — Google Ads

Three months at the monthly cap. Type 3.

| STEP | ARITHMETIC | RESULT |
|---|---|---|
| **Cost** | `3 months × $500,000` | $1,500,000 |
| **Impressions** | `3 × 55,000 thousand per month` | 165,000,000 |
| **Rating points** | `165,000,000 ÷ 125,680,000 × 100` | 131.29 |
| **Cost per point** | `$1,500,000 ÷ 131.29` | $11,425 |

### An out-of-home line — a #50 bulletin showing in the medium markets

Twelve medium markets across two four-week cycles. Type 24.

| STEP | ARITHMETIC | RESULT |
|---|---|---|
| **Cost** | `24 market-months × $57,400` | $1,377,600 |
| **Impressions** | `24 × 15,820 thousand` | 379,680,000 |
| **Rating points** | `379,680,000 ÷ 125,680,000 × 100` | 302.10 |
| **Cost per thousand** | `$1,377,600 ÷ 379,680` | $3.63 |
| **Cost per point** | `$1,377,600 ÷ 302.10` | $4,560 |

Set that against the network primetime line above: outdoor bought six times the rating points for less than half the money. The next section is about why the plan does not therefore consist entirely of billboards.

## 4. Reading your own plan

Once the workbook balances, it starts telling you things. Here is what the Cheerios example says about itself, and what you should look for in yours.

### The cost of a rating point varies by a factor of thirty

| PLANNING GROUP | SPEND | SHARE | GRPs | CPP |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Print & out-of-home** | $5,631,600 | 14.5% | 1,227.7 | $4,587 |
| **Digital, social & search** | $5,764,000 | 14.9% | 644.5 | $8,943 |
| **Audio** | $3,034,000 | 7.8% | 177.4 | $17,099 |
| **Television** | $8,485,000 | 21.9% | 282.5 | $30,039 |
| **Streaming & online video** | $9,575,000 | 24.7% | 306.3 | $31,257 |
| **Creator & direct** | $2,322,000 | 6.0% | 26.2 | $88,599 |
| **Impact & tentpole** | $4,000,000 | 10.3% | 27.9 | $143,339 |

An outdoor point costs $4,587 and a tentpole point costs $143,339 — thirty-one times as much. The obvious conclusion is that the plan should be all outdoor. It is the wrong conclusion, and understanding why is most of what this exercise is for.

### Why the cheapest points are not the best points

| PLANNING GROUP | GRPs | CEILING | 1+ REACH | AVG FREQ | 3+ REACH |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Print & out-of-home** | 1,227.7 | 68 | 67.7 | 18.14 | 65.9 |
| **Digital, social & search** | 644.5 | 85 | 79.3 | 8.13 | 64.7 |
| **Streaming & online video** | 306.3 | 72 | 65.3 | 4.69 | 45.2 |
| **Television** | 282.5 | 78 | 67.3 | 4.20 | 42.3 |

| PLANNING GROUP | GRPs | CEILING | 1+ REACH | AVG FREQ | 3+ REACH |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Audio** | 177.4 | 60 | 48.8 | 3.64 | 27.2 |
| **Impact & tentpole** | 27.9 | 45 | 18.1 | 1.54 | 2.2 |

Outdoor bought 1,227 rating points and reached 67.7 per cent of the target — at an average frequency of eighteen. Television bought less than a quarter as many points and reached 67.3 per cent, at a frequency of four. Outdoor's points were six times cheaper and bought no additional people at all, because outdoor has a ceiling: past a certain weight you are buying the same commuters again, and again.

That is the trade every media plan makes. Cheap points buy frequency. Expensive points buy the people the cheap points cannot get to. A plan built only on cost per point ends up shouting at a third of the country.

## Two groups, the same reach, very different money

Print and out-of-home reached 67.7 per cent of the target. Television reached 67.3 per cent. Within a rounding error, the same people. But look at what it took:

| | PRINT & OUT-OF-HOME | TELEVISION |
|---|---|---|
| **Rating points** | 1,227.7 | 282.5 |
| **Spend** | $5,631,600 | $8,485,000 |
| **Cost per point** | $4,587 | $30,039 |
| **1+ reach** | 67.7 | 67.3 |
| **Average frequency** | 18.14 | 4.20 |
| **Reach ceiling** | 68 | 78 |

Outdoor is sitting on its ceiling. It bought 1,227 rating points and has 67.7 reach against a ceiling of 68 — every additional point it buys from here reaches nobody new. Television is nowhere near its ceiling of 78, so the next television point still buys people. That is the whole trade, and it is why a plan built only on cost per point ends up shouting at two thirds of the country.

So why buy the expensive medium at all? Three answers, and your rationale needs at least one: reach the cheap medium cannot deliver at any price, an environment in which a thirty-second story can be told, and attention that a passing glance at a billboard does not represent. "Because it is cheaper per point" is an argument for the billboard. It is not, on its own, an argument for the plan.

## The shape of the year

The Cheerios plan is a two-peak cereal year: the New Year and American Heart Month in the winter, back-to-school in the late summer, and a deliberate trough in June and July when the school-morning routine stops.

| | JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY | JUN | JUL | AUG | SEP | OCT | NOV | DEC |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **GRPs** | 351 | 367 | 147 | 64 | 64 | 45 | 88 | 582 | 608 | 239 | 76 | 63 |
| **Spend ($M)** | 5.07 | 4.27 | 3.23 | 1.76 | 1.77 | 1.13 | 1.64 | 6.75 | 6.21 | 2.58 | 3.01 | 1.39 |

The heaviest month carries thirteen times the rating points of the lightest. That is a defensible claim for a product with a real seasonal pattern, and an indefensible one for a product without. Your flowchart should be able to survive the question "why is March different from April?" on every line.

Note also what the plan did NOT do: not one of its 44 lines runs continuously at an even weight. The workbook reports 15 pulsing, 23 flighting and 6 burst. A plan of pure continuity is a plan that has not made a decision about timing.

## Two plans, one budget, nothing in common

The second worked example is Airbnb at the same $40 million, with $1,500,000 held back rather than $1,200,000. Set the two flowcharts side by side and the whole exercise is visible in one picture.

| | JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY | JUN | JUL | AUG | SEP | OCT | NOV | DEC |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Cheerios GRPs** | 351 | 367 | 147 | 64 | 64 | 45 | 88 | 582 | 608 | 239 | 76 | 63 |
| **Airbnb GRPs** | 342 | 327 | 453 | 425 | 253 | 164 | 20 | 20 | 44 | 50 | 48 | 36 |

Cheerios is loud when the product is eaten: the new year, and the return to school. Airbnb is loudest in March and April and goes almost silent in July and August — which is when its product is actually being used. That looks like an error and is not. Travel is booked months before it is taken, so the money has to arrive when the decision is made, not when the trip happens. A media plan follows the decision, not the consumption.

Everything else falls out of that one difference:

| | CHEERIOS | AIRBNB |
|---|---|---|
| **Working budget** | $38,800,000 | $38,500,000 |
| **Rating points** | 2,692.5 | 2,180.1 |
| **Campaign cost per point** | $14,415 | $17,659 |
| **Heaviest month** | 608 (September) | 453 (March) |
| **Lightest month** | 45 (June) | 20 (July and August) |
| **Biggest planning group** | Streaming & online video, 24.7% | Streaming & online video, 26.8% |
| **Television share** | 21.9% | 15.5% |
| **Impact & tentpole share** | 10.3% | 12.4% |
| **1+ reach, average four weeks** | 75.6 | 70.3 |
| **3+ effective reach, average four weeks** | 36.0 | 28.1 |

> **The Airbnb example fails one check on purpose.** Its 3+ effective reach goal is 30 and it delivers 28.1, so the CHECKS sheet reads SHORT BY 1.9 POINTS. That is not a mistake in the file. A plan concentrated into a four-month booking window buys a big peak — 62.8 effective reach in its heaviest four weeks — at the cost of a thinner average month. The team's job is to argue that trade, not to move the goal until it passes. Lowering a goal you set yourself, after seeing the result, is the one thing on this sheet that will always be noticed.

Cheerios spends 21.9% of its money on television and Airbnb 15.5%, because one is selling a habit to a household and the other is selling an idea to a traveller. Airbnb puts nearly twice as much into podcast, where a personal recommendation is the format rather than an interruption to it. Cheerios buys children's cable; Airbnb buys LinkedIn, because half of its problem is recruiting hosts rather than finding guests. None of those are rules. All of them are arguments, and every one of them is written into the rationale column of the workbook where you can read it.

# 5. Sixteen ways to lose marks

1. Typing dollars into the quantity column. Quantity is units, thousands of impressions, or months. Nothing in the workbook asks you for a dollar figure except the budget itself.
2. Ignoring a red BELOW flag. A buy under the minimum is not a small buy; it is a buy the seller would refuse. Raise the quantity or drop the vehicle.
3. Spending the total budget instead of the working budget. The contingency is held back. The workbook checks against the working figure.
4. Leaving flowchart rows that do not sum to 100 per cent. The money is then either spent on nothing or hidden.
5. Claiming a scheduling pattern the flowchart contradicts. The PATTERN column is right there, next to your own numbers.
6. Quoting the annual reach figure. It flatters every plan. Quote the four-week figures.
7. Presenting a Tier B rate as a quotation. Say it is an estimate and say what it is built from.
8. Buying the plan first and writing the rationale afterwards. You will not remember why, and it will show.
9. Chasing cheap rating points until the plan has enormous frequency and mediocre reach. Check the reach sheet before you fall in love with a cost per point.
10. Using two planning groups out of seven without saying why the other five are wrong for this brand. Concentration is a legitimate position; an unexamined one is not.
11. Claiming household-level targeting on a line the rate card describes as device-level or account-level. The categories are worded precisely for this reason.
12. Changing the target buttons halfway through. Every rate, rating point and reach figure moves at once, and the rationales you already wrote may no longer hold.
13. Comparing your plan to another team's on rating points when you are buying different targets. A point is one per cent of YOUR universe. Compare on reach or on cost per thousand.
14. Fighting the month window instead of reading it. If the flowchart refuses your entry, the property does not run that month — check the MONTHS AVAILABLE column and move the weight, or buy a different property.
15. Forgetting that out-of-home production buys no impressions. It is real money at zero rating points, and it should appear in your budget breakdown as such.
16. Lowering a reach goal after seeing the result. Set the goals before you build, and if the plan misses one, argue for the plan or change the plan. Moving the goal is the most visible thing you can do on the checks sheet.

## 6. From workbook to deliverables

The workbook is not the assignment; it is the evidence for the assignment. Here is which sheet answers which requirement.

| WHAT THE BRIEF ASKS FOR | WHERE IT COMES FROM |
|---|---|
| **Reach and frequency goals, with intensity variations** | REACH & FREQ — set the goals before you plan, report the four-week figures |
| **Campaign duration and monthly emphasis** | FLOW — GRPs, the campaign total row and its chart |

| WHAT THE BRIEF ASKS FOR | WHERE IT COMES FROM |
|---|---|
| **Media scheduling strategy: pulsing, flighting or continuity** | FLOWCHART, the PATTERN column — per line and for the plan |
| **Regional emphasis** | The spot television and spot radio lines, and the large / medium / small market choice on every out-of-home line |
| **Daypart strategy** | The vehicle names themselves — morning show, daytime, drive time, primetime |
| **Selection rationale with index data** | BUDGET column U, written as you buy; TARGET INDEX in column R |
| **Spending distribution** | FLOW — SPEND, and the pie chart on START HERE |
| **Graphs illustrating budget allocation** | CHARTS — five publication-ready charts with captions. Also START HERE (two), FLOW — GRPs and FLOW — SPEND (one each), CATEGORY VIEW (one per selection) |
| **The flowchart itself, for the report** | FLOWCHART VISUAL — prints on one landscape page with both legends |
| **The spreadsheet itself** | One file. Budget and flowchart are the same workbook now. |

### For the presentation

- Use FLOWCHART VISUAL for the printed report and CATEGORY VIEW for the slides. Do not project the 78-line FLOWCHART sheet; it is a working surface, not a presentation.
- Lead with the shape of the year from the CHARTS sheet, not with the line items. The client wants to know when they will be loud, not what a poster costs.
- The colours are consistent across every chart. Say so once, early, and the audience will read the rest of your deck without being told again.
- Have the cost-per-point table by planning group ready. You will be asked why you did not spend it all on the cheapest medium, and the reach ceiling is the answer.
- Know which of your lines are Tier B before someone else finds out.

## 7. If something breaks

| SYMPTOM | CAUSE | FIX |
|---|---|---|
| **The vehicle dropdown is empty** | No category chosen in the cell to its left | Choose the category first |
| **A line shows no cost** | Quantity is blank, or the vehicle was typed rather than chosen | Re-pick the vehicle from the dropdown |
| **GRPs are zero on a bought line** | No gender or age break is switched on | Set the target buttons on START HERE |
| **Every rate looks wrong** | The target buttons changed the demo cost index | Check the index on START HERE — 1.00 is adults 25–54 |
| **A flowchart row reads FIX** | The twelve months do not total 100% | Adjust until the SUM column reads 100% |
| **A month cell refuses what you type** | That property does not run in that month | Check MONTHS AVAILABLE on the same row |
| **A month cell has gone red** | Weight was pasted into a month outside the property's window | Move it inside the window; CHECKS counts these |
| **An out-of-home line shows no CPM** | It is the production line, which delivers no impressions | Correct — production is cost without weight |
| **Reach seems impossibly high** | You are reading the annual row | Read the four-week rows |

| SYMPTOM | CAUSE | FIX |
|---|---|---|
| **A number changed by itself** | You typed over a blue calculated cell | Take a fresh copy of the blank workbook and re-enter your inputs |

*One last thing. The workbook will happily produce a plan that balances to the cent, sums to 100 per cent in every row and passes all ten checks — and is still a bad plan. It cannot tell whether buying children's cable for a cereal brand is clever or lazy, or whether your back-to-school weight arrives three weeks late. It only guarantees that your arithmetic is not what is wrong with your argument. The argument is still yours to make.*