

# NASCAR COMMERCIAL BREAKS

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## ABSTRACT

NASCAR is one of the few sports in the world where live action is cut away from in order to show commercials. I formed a hypothesis that the average audience is lower than it could be because people change the channel during commercial breaks. In order to test this, I surveyed NASCAR fans about behavior during full screen commercial breaks. About half of fans keep the channel on and stay in the room, while the other half either leave the room, change the channel, or fast forward through the ads because they record the race. In order to keep more fans watching and to get more eyes on advertisements, NASCAR and the networks should consider more side-by-side commercials.

## INTRODUCTION

NASCAR is a sport that runs on advertisements. Everywhere you turn, there is an ad: on the car, on a driver's firesuit, painted on the track, as the name of the race, and more. Simply put, NASCAR runs on ad sponsorships. The fans know that without sponsors, their driver wouldn't be racing, which is why [NASCAR fans are the most loyal consumers](#).

However, there is one type of advertisement that NASCAR fans hate: the TV advertisement.

TV advertisements, especially on broadcast networks like FOX and NBC, [make the networks money](#). According to Fit Small Business, [the average 30-second ad on a broadcast network costs around \\$100k](#). The 2022 Spring Phoenix Cup race had [38 minutes of full-screen ads](#), or 76 30-second ads. That's \$7.6 million worth of ads! (And that's using the \$100k metric, which may be an underestimate, and does not include side-by-side ads.)

While that is certainly good for the network, NASCAR fans do have a legitimate complaint about the amount of ads broadcasted. Unlike other sports, which have built-in breaks and referee stoppages that allow for TV commercials to air, NASCAR's only built-in breaks come during stage breaks, which happens twice a race. Caution periods also allow for a natural break in the race, but those are unpredictable, as a race can have anywhere from no incident cautions to a dozen. Due to this, ads are usually placed in the middle of live coverage, and as a result, a lot of racing action is missed.

According to [CawsnJaws](#), the 2022 Spring Phoenix Cup race had 205 minutes of race broadcast. 38 minutes (18.5%) were full-screen ads, and 9 minutes (4.4%) were side-by-side ads. While not all of those ads cut into green flag coverage, the ones that did broke the flow of the race.

I've been analyzing NASCAR viewership trends on my Twitter account for the last year. Due to the complaints I've seen about commercials on Twitter and Reddit, I formed a hypothesis that

the average audience is lower than it could be because people change the channel during commercial breaks.

There are studies that back up this hypothesis. For example, a [1995 study](#) noted that viewership dropped 5% during ad breaks. Any TV network can also see that [viewership drops during a commercial break](#) (in this example, it shows that viewership drops during halftime of a soccer game).

NASCAR races are a bit different from the typical television show, though, since commercials are played during live action of a race. So, I decided to craft a NASCAR-specific survey to determine viewership habits during NASCAR commercial breaks.

## METHOD

I originally posted a [poll on Twitter](#) with just one question: What do you do during commercial breaks of a NASCAR race? (Full screen ads, non-stage break. Can be green flag or caution.) The answer choices were: change the channel (12.3%), leave FOX on but leave (36.3%), and stay in the room with FOX on (51.5%). There was also an option for respondents to leave a reply to elaborate on their answer. There were 546 votes on this poll.

Upon reading the replies, it was clear that a simple poll on Twitter (which was limited to 3 options of 25 characters each) was not enough to encompass the nuance of this question. So, I created a longer version on Google Forms and [shared the survey](#) on Twitter. This survey was retweeted by Jayski.

This survey started with one mandatory question asking “For the majority of full-screen commercial breaks during a NASCAR race (non-stage break), what do you do?” Based on the answer chosen, respondents were asked 1-2 more mandatory questions and an optional freeform response question.

The questions were as follows:

1. For the majority of full-screen commercial breaks during a NASCAR race (non-stage break), what do you do?
  - a. I change the channel
  - b. I keep the channel on and leave the room
  - c. I keep the channel on and stay in the room
  - d. I record the race so I fast forward

The next set of questions were based on how the first question was answered.

For those who change the channel:

2. What do you usually change the channel to?

- a. Another sports game
  - b. A movie
  - c. The news
  - d. I just channel surf for a few minutes
  - e. Other (open response)
3. How do you know when to turn back to NASCAR?
- a. I switch back after about 3 minutes
  - b. I go back when the channel I'm watching goes to commercial
  - c. Other (open response)

For those who keep the channel on and leave the room:

2. When do you usually come back into the room?
- a. Before the commercial break is over
  - b. Right when the race comes back on
  - c. After the race has been back from commercial break for a few minutes
3. When do you know when to come back?
- a. I can hear the TV and I come back as soon as I hear the race again
  - b. I come back whenever I'm done with my stuff
  - c. Someone lets me know the break is over
  - d. Other (open response)

For those who keep the channel on and stay in the room:

2. During commercial breaks do you mute the TV?
- a. I mute my TV
  - b. I keep the sound on
3. What do you do during the commercial break when you stay in the room? (check all that apply)
- a. I watch/listen to the ads
  - b. I go on NASCAR Twitter
  - c. I go on r/NASCAR (Reddit)
  - d. I go on a social media site not listed
  - e. I play a game on my phone
  - f. I listen to a radio broadcast
  - g. I listen to driver radio (scanner)
  - h. Other (open response)

For those who record the race and fast forward:

2. What is the main reason you record the race?
- a. I'm busy during the race and can't watch live
  - b. I don't want to watch the race for 3-4 hours straight
  - c. I hate the ads

d. Other (open response)

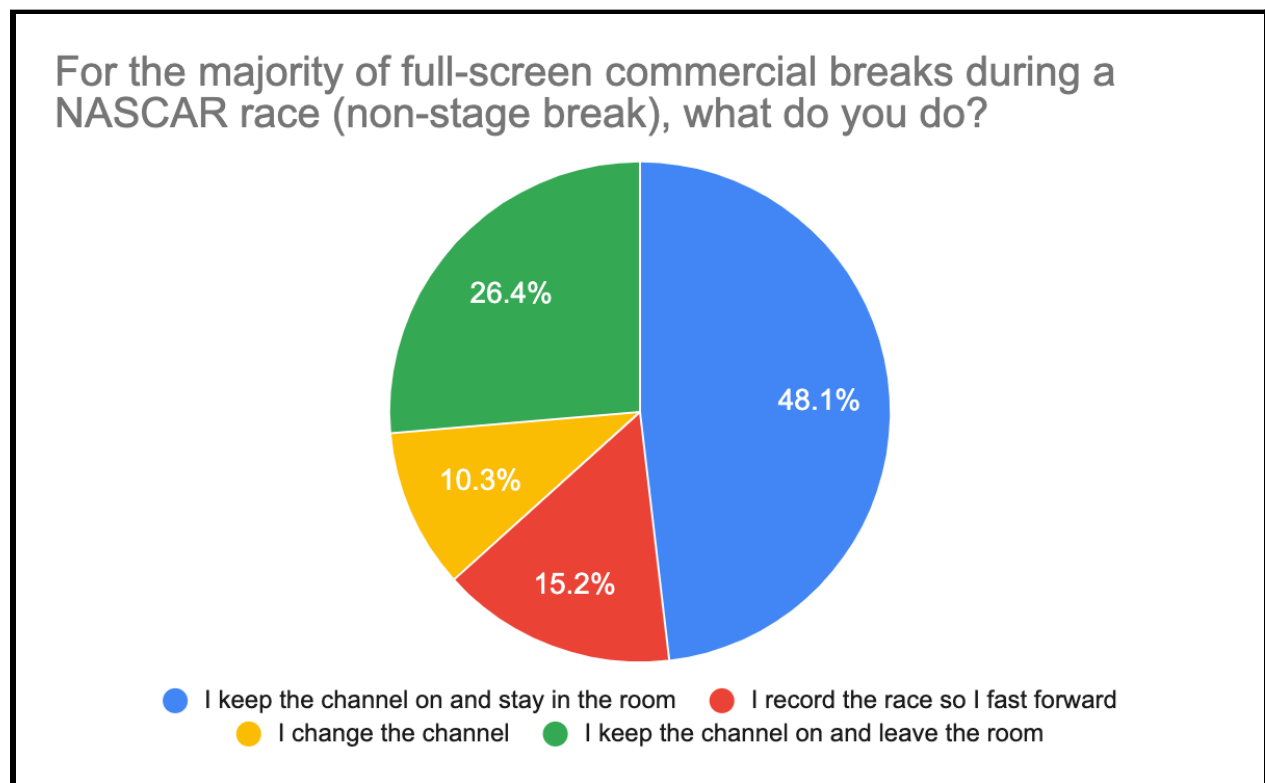
The last question for each section was “Anything you want to elaborate on?” This was an optional free response question.

## RESULTS

The Google Forms survey received 349 responses.

Please note that this survey was only shared on Twitter and was not tweeted out during a race to avoid any bias towards people who actively check Twitter during a race. As such, key audiences such as fans who do not have Twitter accounts are not accounted for in this survey.

The first question asked was, “For the majority of full-screen commercial breaks during a NASCAR race (non-stage break), what do you do?”



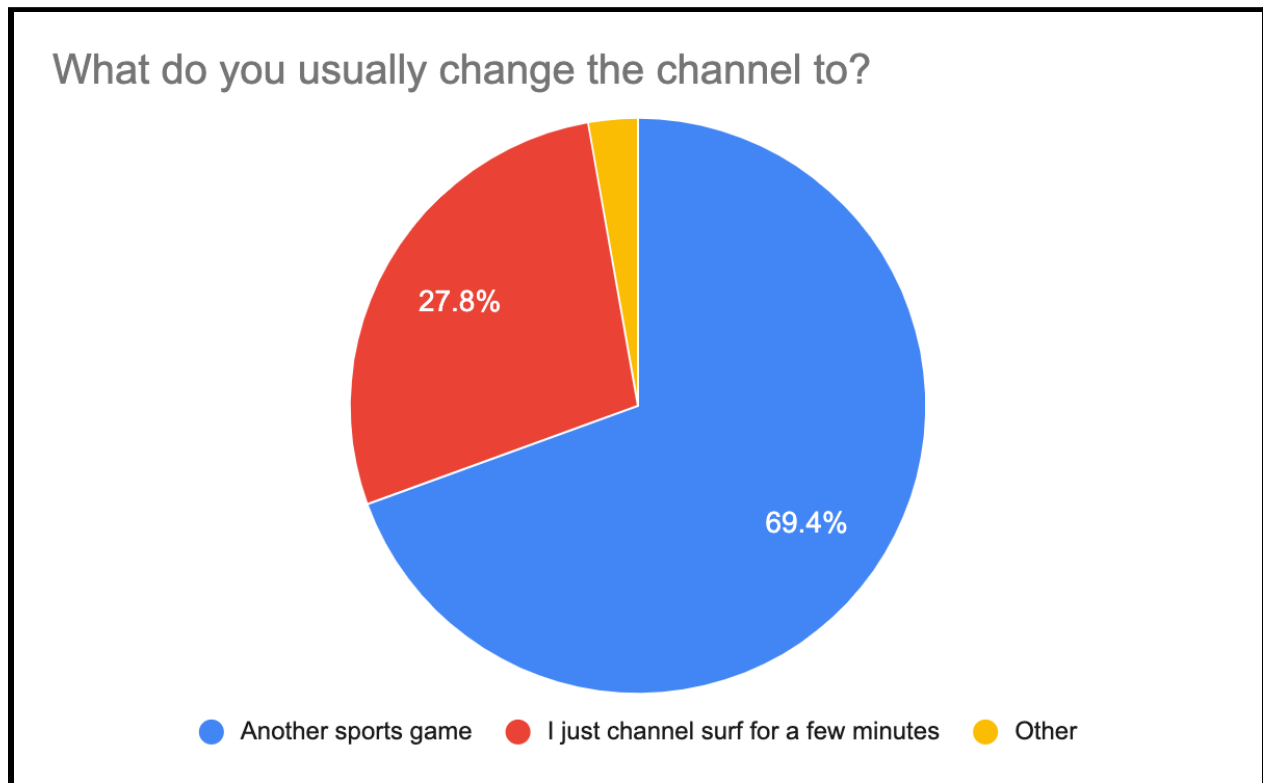
The answer breakdown was as follows:

- I change the channel: 10.3% (36/349)
- I keep the channel on and leave the room: 26.4% (92/349)
- I keep the channel on and stay in the room: 48.1% (168/349)
- I record the race so I fast forward: 15.2% (53/349)

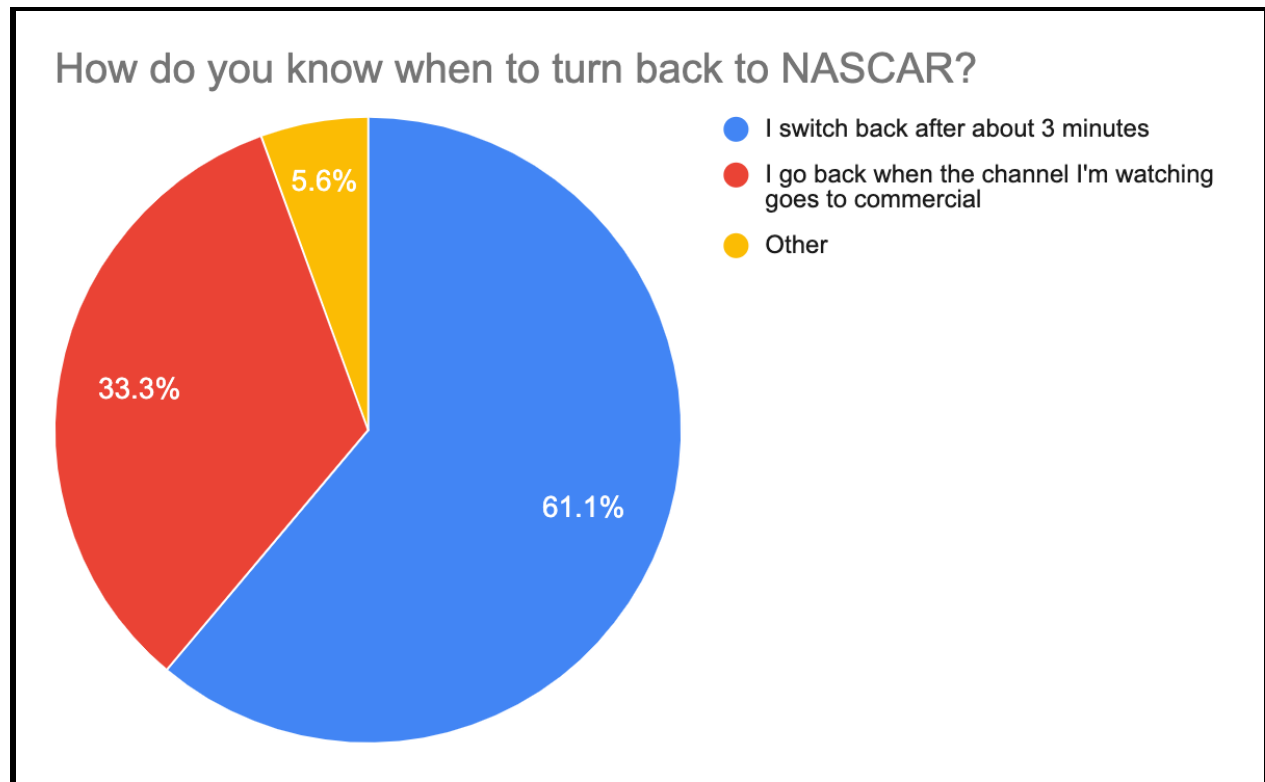
Respondents were then shown a question depending on their answer.

36 respondents (10.3%) said they change the channel during a commercial break.

Another sports game was the most common programming that was changed to.



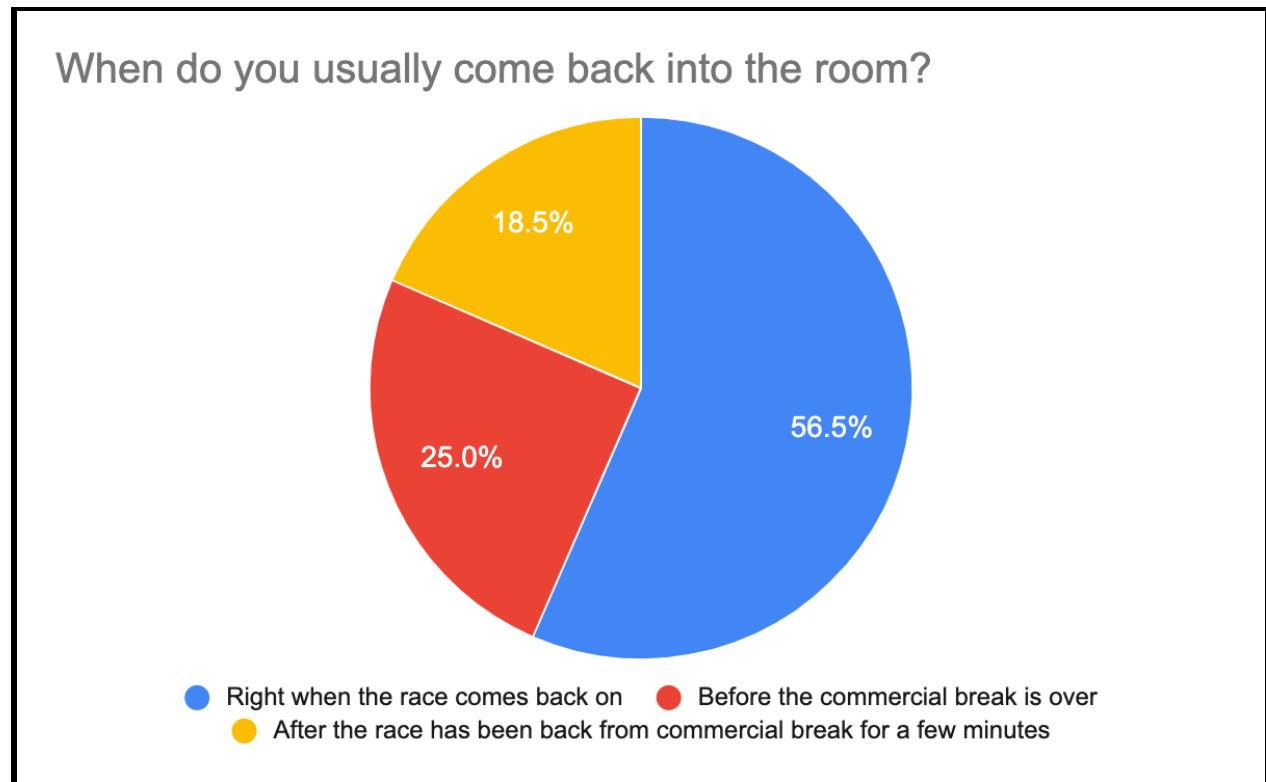
Most viewers said they switched back to NASCAR after about three minutes, which is about the length of an ad break.



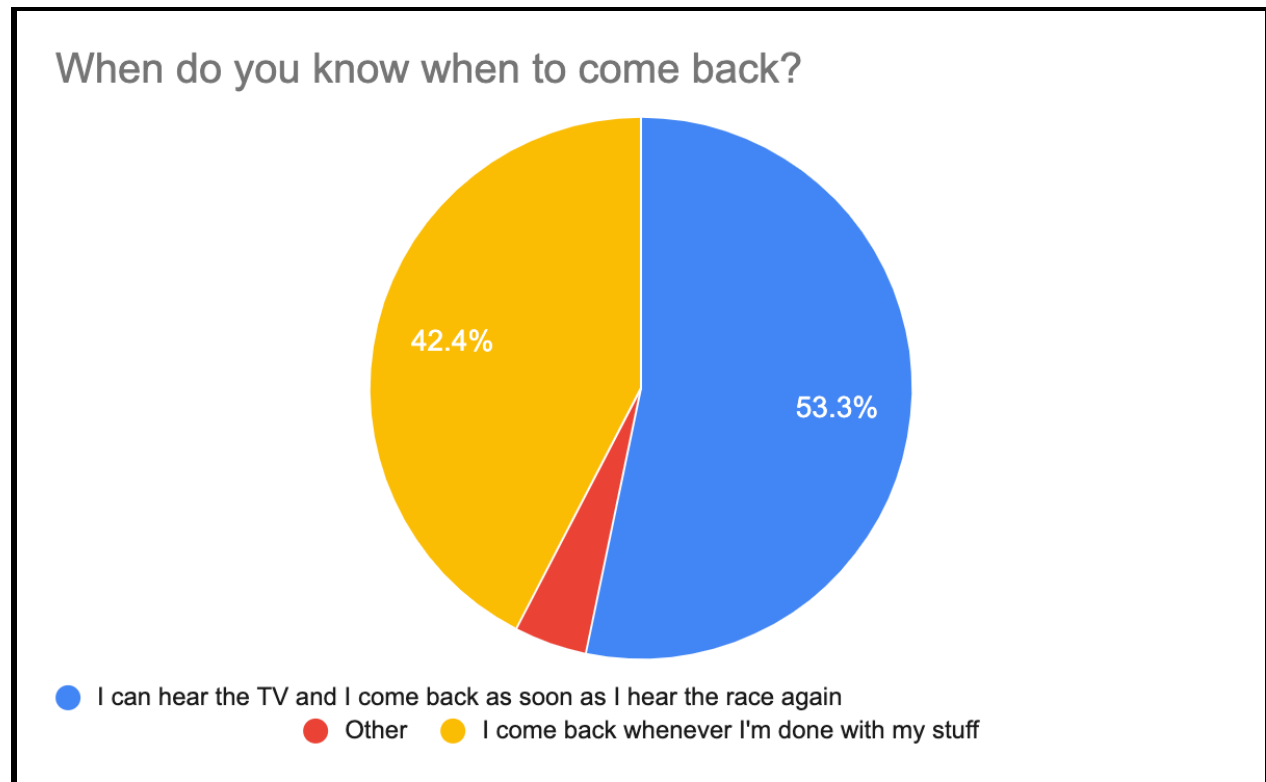
The last question in this series asked if respondents wanted to elaborate on any of their answers. Two said they use the scanner to know if anything happened during the commercial break, and would switch back if there was something noteworthy.

92 (26.4%) respondents said they keep the channel on and leave the room.

18.5% of respondents said they usually come back into the room after the race has been back from break for a few minutes, meaning that they aren't only missing the ads, but they're also missing part of the action.



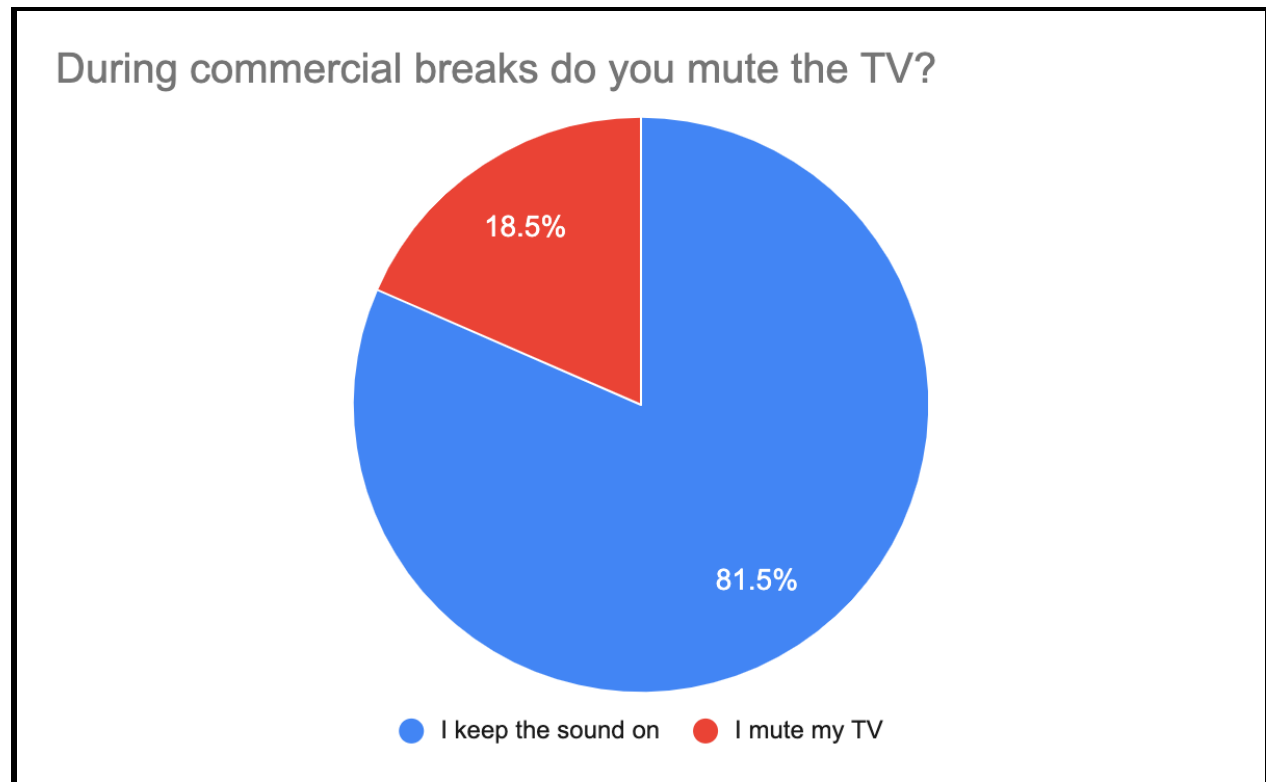
A majority of respondents know when to come back into the room because they can hear the TV and know that race coverage has started again. Four respondents in total responded "Other." Two of these respondents said they rely on the scanner to come back when the race goes green, and two said they wait about two to three minutes before coming back.



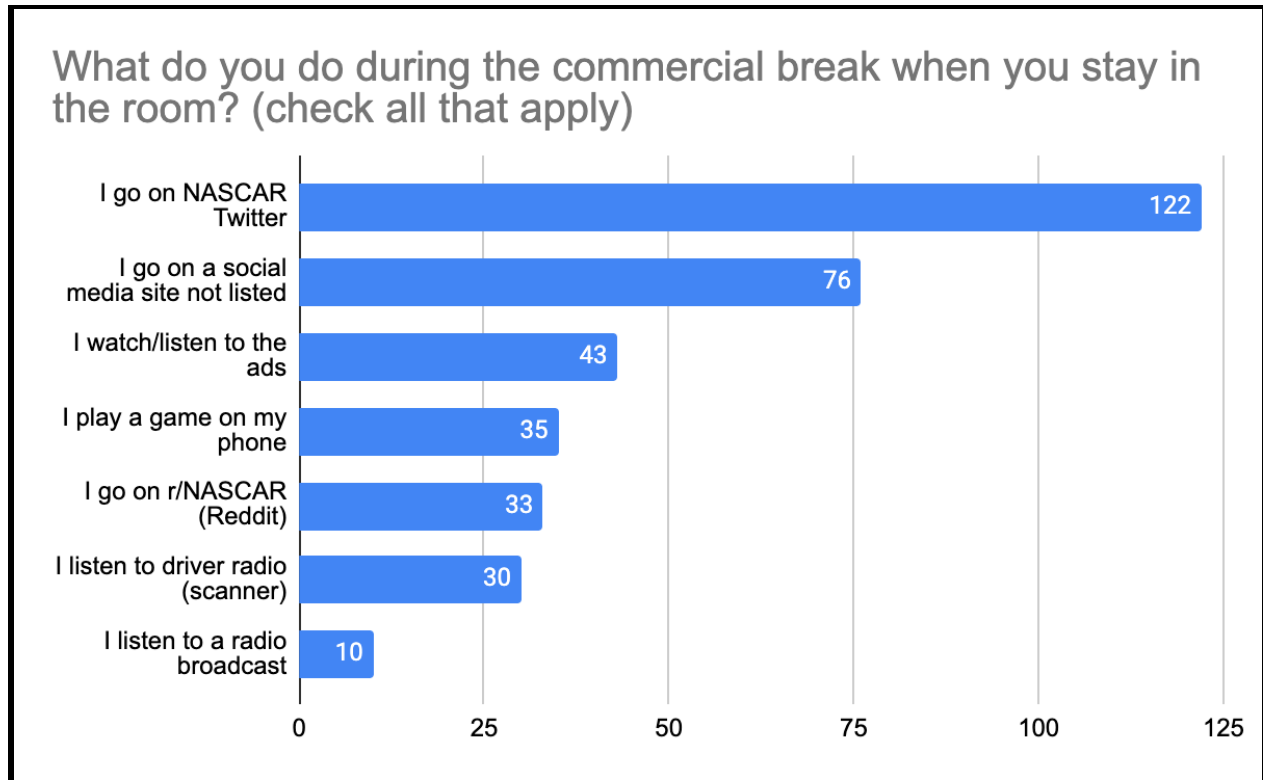
168 respondents (48.1%) said they keep the channel on and stay in the room.

18.5% said they mute the TV during ad breaks while staying in the room.





A majority of the 168 respondents consumed their phone during the commercial breaks. Only 25.6% of respondents said they watch or listen to the ads during commercial breaks.

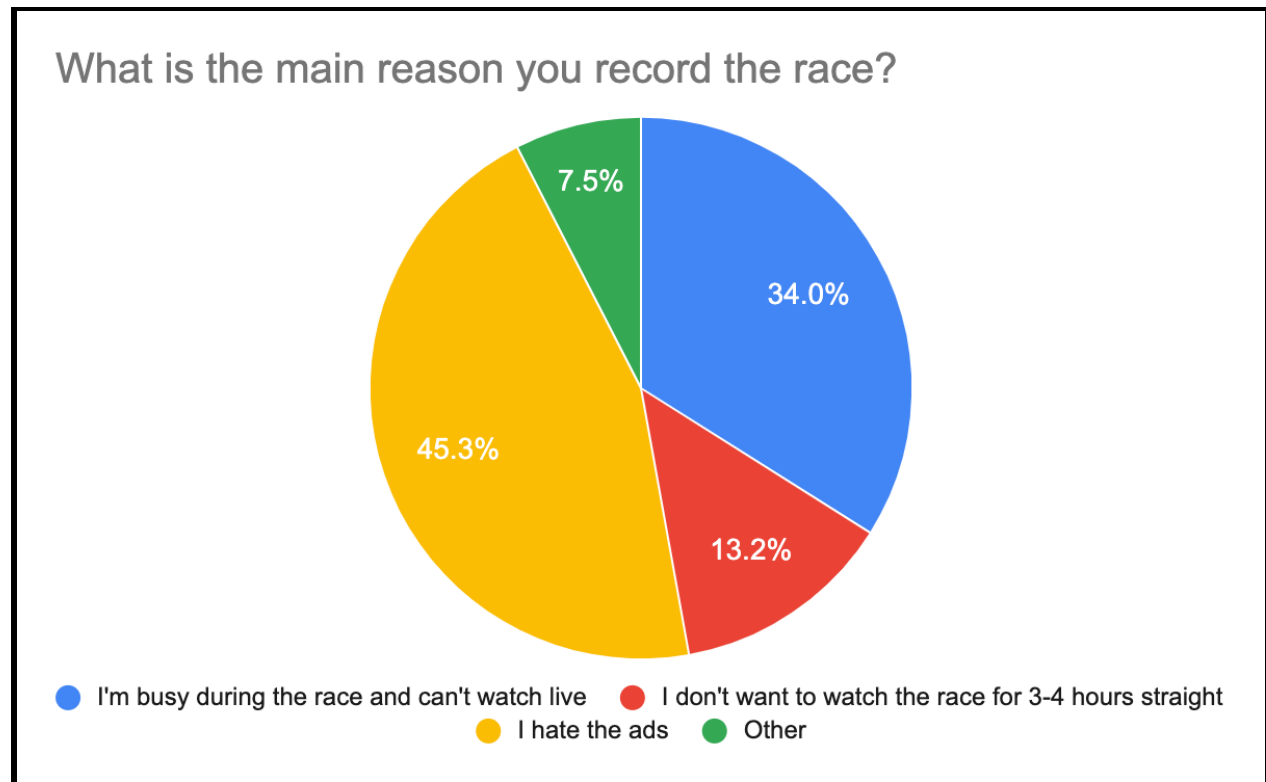


What do you do during the commercial break	COUNT	% of All Respondents
I go on NASCAR Twitter	122	72.62%
I go on a social media site not listed	76	45.24%
I watch/listen to the ads	43	25.60%
I play a game on my phone	35	20.83%
I go on r/NASCAR (Reddit)	33	19.64%
I listen to driver radio (scanner)	30	17.86%
I listen to a radio broadcast	10	5.95%

In addition to the choices given above, there were 28 “Other” responses. The most common free response answers were: follow live timing and scoring (3), check Draftkings (2), and read a book (2).

53 respondents (15.2%) said they record the race and fast forward during the ads.

45.3% of these respondents said they record the race because they hate the ads and want to fast-forward through them.



Each question section ended with the same question: “Anything you want to elaborate on?” This was an optional question.

In total, there were 91 free-response answers. 17 of these answers called for side-by-side commercials. Other common themes included comments about the broadcast commentators and comments about how there are too many commercials.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the responses, it does seem that my hypothesis was correct in that the audience drops during ad breaks (since people change the channel). One comment in the survey revealed, “Anecdotally, my friends who may tune in turn away at commercials, and they don’t come back.”

However, a bigger problem for advertisers was revealed during my analysis. Not only are advertisers not getting views from those who skip commercials due to recording the race, but they are also missing those who walk away from the TV, mute the TV, and don’t pay attention during ad breaks. As one respondent put it, “If I don’t leave the room I’m looking down at my phone at NASCAR twitter accounts giving news, or listening to scanner audio. It’s rare [that] I actually consume the advertisements.” As a result, advertisers may be overestimating the reach and audience that their ads are getting.

(After doing this research, I found some additional evidence corroborating this. A [2021 survey from Sharethrough](#) concluded that “more than one third [of viewers] mute the TV during Ads, 21% switch to another channel and 15% leave the room or do something else.” Cornell University also [shared an article](#) this year stating that 30% of TV ads play to empty rooms.)

Based on the responses to the survey and the amount of people who actively will do other things to not consume the ads, it is clear that NASCAR fans want to consume as few TV commercials as possible. However, NASCAR still needs to make money. So what are some ways NASCAR could provide an enjoyable race viewing experience with as few ads as possible while still making the networks and the sanctioning body money?

One option that NASCAR fans have been clamoring for is a standalone app such as F1's app. Unfortunately, a stand-alone NASCAR ad-free app does not seem like an option due to the size and business models of NASCAR and American broadcasting networks. F1 is able to charge [\\$80 a year for their F1 TVPro app](#) that shows all races, practices, and qualifying ad-free, plus telemetry, because of the size of the worldwide F1 fanbase. Across all TV and streaming, F1 got an average of [70.3 million viewers per race](#). NASCAR could never hit anything like that.

Another option would be to have the race still air on a FOX or NBC streaming app, but with an ad-free purchase option. (NASCAR has [experimented with broadcasting races on Peacock](#), NBC's streaming service, however these broadcasts contained ads and were a copy of the regular broadcast on NBC.)

However, the viability of getting NASCAR on its own app similar to F1 or even broadcasting ad-free coverage on another streaming service is dependent on how the next broadcasting deals work out. [NASCAR is in the middle of a contract deal with FOX and NBC](#) until 2024, so the earliest they could provide any changes in race broadcasting is 2025. Providing an ad-free premium streaming option would most likely require a smaller new contract with the broadcast networks, and NASCAR would most likely need to split the profits from this service with the broadcast networks.

Even reducing the number of commercials during a race broadcast would be unviable. As noted earlier, FOX and NBC make money by selling TV ad inventory to companies because these networks are free. (FS1 and USA are channels you have to pay for, but the networks only [get a dollar and a half per month](#).) This is unlike F1, which doesn't have commercials during their race because their network Sky Sports makes money off of a premium subscription fee - [25 pounds a month for all 8 sports channels on top of the regular cable package](#), or around \$33 a month. (It's important to note, Sky Sports does show ads during other programming.)

In order to keep more eyes on the screen for advertisers and keep fans engaged with the race, the most viable option for NASCAR right now is to work with the networks to increase the amount of [side-by-side commercials](#) and limit full-screen commercials to stage breaks. In 2013, according to Sports Business Journal, [advertisers received 18% more engagement on double-box ads than full-screen ads](#) despite both types of ads being the same price.

Fans also seem to be a big fan of side-by-side commercials. 17 out of the 91 free responses alluded to how they wanted more side-by-side commercials. As one respondent put it, "Side By Side does a great job of keeping me engaged to the screen during commercial breaks while fullscreen almost always makes me divert all my attention to Twitter, MRN/PRN, and/or Scanner Audio."

I believe that if this survey was repeated but a question about side-by-side was added, more respondents would say that they would actively watch the TV during these types of breaks. I hope to repeat this survey soon with this new question. Additionally, FOX, NBC, and NASCAR also have the ability to look at minute-by-minute viewership and see if less viewers leave during side-by-side ads than they do during full-screen ads. These results can help curate the next steps in NASCAR TV advertisement.