

# Ask Dr. Ed

## *Why do my monthly numbers jump around so much?*

**T**here are a couple of issues here. First, we have to define the word “jump,” and then there is the issue of “monthly” numbers.

When discussing the issue of jumping numbers, it’s always a good idea to stop for a moment and examine what might have happened in the market. Did a format change? Did some station do a major television campaign? Was there a new hyped morning team somewhere? In most of those cases, it’s not bounce—it’s real!

But let’s assume that there were no drastic changes in the market. What then? Well, the concept of “jumping numbers” has changed over the last few years. In most markets, the idea of a double-digit 12+ share has gone the way of the turntable. With more stations and far more competitive stations in every market, we now have another great term, “share compression.” In other words, give listeners more choices and believe it or not, many of them will use more choices. We’ve also seen more emphasis on rank when it comes to both buys and bonuses. Now, a movement of a small amount of audience results in what is perceived to be a major jump, far different from what might have been perceived a few years ago.

Next, we have the “slice and dice” issue. Programmers are looking at smaller demographic groups all the time, and Arbitron has given you the tools with which to do it. It is not at all unusual for a station to have a core audience that spans less than 10 years. Logically, the finer you cut the sample, the fewer respondents you have. As the base drops, the amount of variance will increase. In addition, most Arbitron users spend the vast majority of their time reviewing average quarter-hour estimates as compared to cume. As a rule, cumes will be more stable over time.

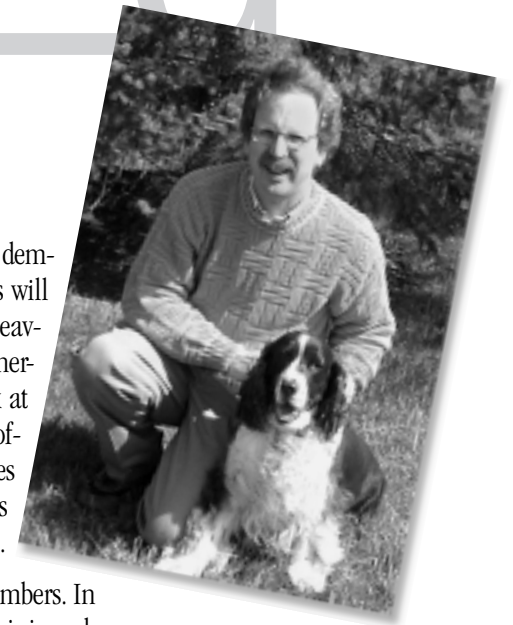
So, bounce has become a way of life especially when you cut the sample so narrowly. I can suggest that you use broader demos, but that will likely be ignored for

programming analysis. For the selling demos, you should find that the estimates will be fairly steady unless some major upheaval has taken place in the market. Otherwise, I’ve always advised users to look at the cumes along with the AQH. Quite often, the bounce in the AQH estimates doesn’t happen in the cumes, and this “second view” of the market is helpful.

Now, on to the question of monthly numbers. In the continuous markets, a trend report is issued every month that consists of a three-month rolling average (although there is a slightly different weighting scheme that is used for the trend reports compared to the quarterly). We have always suggested that users not try to pull out the individual monthly data. In other words, we (and the Arbitron Radio Advisory Council) are against extrapolations, otherwise known as “extraps.” However, getting radio people to avoid extraps is like telling a child that he really doesn’t want that candy bar. It doesn’t seem to work very well.

If you look at extraps for any market, you are likely to see more bounce. The sample is one-third of the target for the market, and while this may be a substantial number of diaries, there is a reason that Arbitron sets specific market sample size targets. That sample target is designed to accurately reflect the market’s listening. A one-third sample will have more error around the estimates and will always be subject to more fluctuation. Plus, there are still a number of markets that have not increased their sample size despite recommendations to do so. In these markets particularly, stretching an already thin sample can make the numbers jump even more dramatically.

The moral of the story is simple: The more you stretch the sample, whether through share compression, smaller samples (extraps) or a combination of the two, the more the numbers will jump around. ■



*Dr. Ed Cohen is director of Domestic Radio Research for Arbitron. A media industry veteran, he most recently worked as VP of Research for Clear Channel Communications before joining Arbitron last year.*

*Dr. Ed is pictured here with his dog Cume.*