



## Acting with voice technology for MSC Cruises

### Overview

Xaxis and Say It Now joined forces to design and execute a bespoke ‘actionable’ audio advertising campaign for MSC Cruises that harnessed the power of voice technology and smart speakers. In a UK first, the campaign enabled those listening to the MSC Cruises advert on a smart speaker to request an information link or a call back so they could make a booking. It increased consumer awareness of the MSC Virtuosa and generated booking leads: the advert led to 4 million brand impressions and 196 sales leads. 83% of these requested a call back and 17% requested a link. This innovative use of audio technology was recognised at the Wire Awards where it won two prizes: the Grand Prix and Best Use of Audio Technology.

### Objective


Briefed by MSC Cruises, Xaxis and Say It Now were tasked with driving awareness of the MSC brand to generate sales leads for the MSC Virtuosa – one of the two largest cruise ships in the MSC fleet – in the UK. This was to ensure MSC Cruises was front of mind amongst the target audience ahead of the summer holiday season.

Specifically, the campaign needed to target families with parents over the age of 35 and couples who might choose to cruise together. The campaign had to engage with this audience via digital radio and podcasts.

This was a strategically important marketing campaign for MSC, given the backdrop of the previous two years. The campaign came at a time when the travel industry was bouncing back from Covid-19, and travelers were looking forward to their first summer in two years with few – if any – travel restrictions to navigate.

Considering this, MSC Cruises wanted to make sure their brand was cutting through to target audiences as they planned their trips for the summer, ensuring their share of voice was maximised – and, most importantly, that they were outflanking their competitors and driving sales leads. In the context of the objectives, the campaign would be the first in the UK to use Send to Phone technology to enable those listening to it on a smart speaker to request a link with more information about the cruise or request a call back to make a booking.

The combination of voice technology and smart speaker advertising would play a vital role in elevating the performance of this campaign. It would enable MSC Cruises to transform the traditional playbook of digital audio advertising and start having an engaging conversation with their consumers while embedding the brand’s message in their minds. In fact, a recent research study



conducted by Neuro-Insight and commissioned by Octave Audio, Say It Now and Xaxis found that engaging in a conversation with an ad via a voice assistant makes branding moments 11% more memorable.

Smart speaker advertising, and the accompanying voice technology, would also improve the listener experience and add a sense of immediacy to the campaign; the consumer on the end of the smart speaker device could – using the power of voice – respond to the advert in the moment. This would create a seamless, frictionless campaign that meant the listener could complete the call to action on the spot, rather than having to remember it for later.

The Neuro-Insight study also found that branded smart speaker ads trigger a 25% increase in overall brain activity when compared to branding in standard audio ads. Voicing a brand's name back to a smart speaker generates a 30% uplift in overall levels of brain response compared to a standard audio ad, while interactive audio ads evoke 2.3x more left-brain memory peaks in comparison to standard audio ads. This means that these ads are more likely to drive greater retention of information and be remembered for a longer period of time.

Most importantly, this voice technology – deployed through the smart speaker – would bring the effectiveness of audio advertising in line with online advertising. The campaign envisaged that the voice command would become the equivalent of the online 'click'.

Not only would this result in a stronger, more effective call to action, but it meant having access to performance in real time. Using engagement data, it would be possible to see whether the intended audience was interacting with the campaign as planned. Based on this, adjustments and optimisations to campaign execution would also be carried out.

This meant maximising performance in real time, rather than waiting for the end of the campaign to evaluate the effectiveness. This would greatly improve cost efficiency.

## Solution


Xaxis and Say It Now's strategic approach for the MSC Cruises campaign, rooted in insights, came together in three beautifully simple and extremely effective steps: digital audio and podcasts, audience targeting, and 'actionable' smart speaker advertising that used voice technology.

### **The first step of the strategy was the channel of choice: digital audio and podcasts.**

Radio consumption continues to shift towards digital means every year. According to a 2021 survey by RAJA, 89% of the UK population tune into radio every week, and 74% of the UK population tune into digital audio.

This proliferation of digital audio offers greater access to a growing audience – particularly as listeners tune in at home and on the move, providing more digital touchpoints for brands.

An example of these touchpoints, which the campaign capitalised on, is podcasts. Rolling the MSC Virtuoso advert out to podcasts on Dax (Global), Acast and Podfront helped to attract an audience that is unique and multiplying. Podcasts offer a highly personal forum; they enable access to



audiences that can't be reached elsewhere (53% of listeners don't listen to on-demand music streaming, Midas Survey 2019). Plus, according to research from 4DC, podcast listeners outspend non-listeners in every consumer area too.

Based on this evidence, digital and audio – when combined with powerful, feel-good audio content that transports the listener to a relaxing cruise – could help to drive brand frame and sales leads by cutting through to a growing audience.

### **The second step of the strategy was audience targeting.**

By leveraging listener data across suppliers, Xaxis boosts the effectiveness of audio campaigns and contextual strategies maximise campaign impact by reaching relevant, scalable categories without relying on addressable inventory. MSC Cruises was able to harness these curated packages that index towards key category types and interests for privacy-compliant, contextual targeting.

The world of digital and podcast advertising can feel cluttered, and the differences between different platforms are not always immediately obvious. However, Xaxis was able to bring the best of the market together to offer a viable cost-effective reach option and level the market to provide a consistent planning, targeting, and buying media mechanism. Relevant podcasts were targeted across the Dax, Acast and Podfront platforms.

### **The third step in the strategic approach was for Say It Now to power the campaign further by adding a voice technology element that could be built into the advert for smart speaker listeners – enabling them to respond immediately.**

50% of those who tune into digital audio every week do so via smart speakers and that 72% of households who have a smart speaker use it daily (RAJA, 2021 survey). Meanwhile, 75% of those who own a smart speaker are over the age of 30 (according to Voicebot.ai).

According to the research from Neuro Insights, the conversational concept behind smart speaker advertising can generate powerful responses in the human brain and build deeper connections between brands and consumers. Actually, it found that hearing a smart speaker reply elicits 24% higher levels of positive emotional response, suggesting that having a two-way conversation with a smart speaker is enjoyable to the listener.

These insights highlighted the untapped potential of using voice technology and smart speaker advertising for the MSC Cruises campaign and the difference it could make to engagement and awareness. So, the campaign rolled out the advert on smart speakers and gave listeners the option to “open MSC Cruises” and have a link sent to their mobile or receive a call back so they could get more information and book their summer cruise.

## **Results**

The whole team - across MSC, Xaxis and Say It Now - were delighted to see how well the MSC Cruises actionable audio advertising campaign performed during its live period. In fact, Xaxis, in



partnership with Say It Now and Wavemaker, took home the ‘Best use of Digital Audio Technology’ and the “Grand Prix” at the Wires Awards Global 2022. Zuzanna Gierlinska, Managing Director of Xaxis UK and Chief Commercial Growth officer at GroupM Nexus, said:

*“Our close collaboration with agency partner Wavemaker was an important factor in the success of the campaign, as it allowed us to truly understand what the client’s business goals were versus digital KPIs.”*

In total, the actionable audio advertising campaign delivered almost four million impressions. It saw that those engaging with the smart speaker advert continued to rise throughout the campaign; 440 listeners ‘used’ the advert and 93% of those showed a positive intent.

Most significantly, the voice technology embedded within the actionable audio advert helped lead to 196 conversions. 83% of these requested a call back and 17% of these requested a link that they could browse cruises with.

This part of the campaign was a UK first; ‘Send to Phone’ technology strengthened the call to action by directly making the advert ‘actionable’ in real time for the listener. It was a frictionless approach that provided a seamless experience for the listener – helping to drive long-term brand awareness, engagement and sales leads.

By blending innovative use of audio technology, creative, and programmatic precision, this digital audio advertising campaign achieved its objectives. It enticed people to use their voice to activate the skill on their smart speaker once they heard the call to action – helping to drive brand awareness and lead generation.

It shows how the power of smart speaker voice interaction, when combined with targeted advertising slots, creativity and a clear call to action, can come together to make elevated marketing campaigns that have real, meaningful impact with audiences.

Reflecting on the success of the campaign, Alessandra Pierleoni, Marketing & Direct Sales Director, MSC Cruises, said:

*“Committed to testing innovative ideas, we wanted to deploy actionable advertising to drive increase within brand awareness along with sales leads. This technology has been transformational in the way that it enables audio to offer a clear ‘call to action’, and the results from our MSC Virtuosa campaign - whether it be sales leads or brand impressions - speak volumes about the potential of this channel.*

*“Emerging digital technologies such as actionable smart speaker advertising are shaking up the traditional ways that brands speak to their customers. The actionable element has catapulted audio’s value as a marketing tool and we can’t wait to use it more. We are thrilled to be one of its first adopters.”*