

# Optimizing Ads: Is Less Always More?

It's the relentless imperative of our age: Do everything better, but also faster and at lower cost. Marketers confront this challenge as their own discipline becomes ever more difficult. Not only are their financial resources limited, but the consumer attention they seek is scattered and fragmented across a myriad of media. Therefore, advertising practitioners are understandably eager to explore any option that might help them reach consumers with maximum effectiveness and minimal expense.



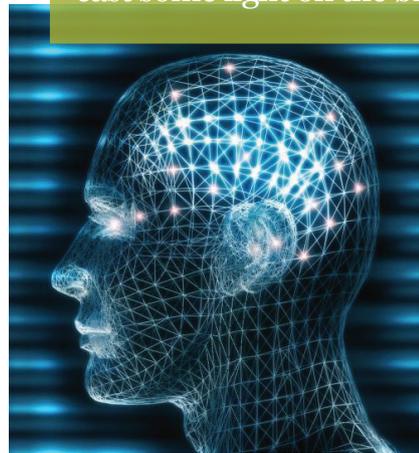
**Dede Fitch**  
Editor, Global Solutions

Since faster, cheaper, and better is the goal, it's not surprising that last summer's release from Nielsen describing their neuro-compression technology generated a flurry of articles in the North American research press. According to the release, "This proprietary technology enables the most effective scenes within a TV spot to be identified and edited into a shorter and often more neurologically impactful version."

It certainly sounded good—the promise of ads that would be shorter (and therefore cheaper) and "more impactful" (according to brain activity recorded on an EEG). The problem is, making ads shorter and "more impactful" does not necessarily make them more effective. The goal of advertising is to build brands. Advertising is effective when it creates or reinforces positive brand associations in consumers' minds, and that can happen only when the attention generated by an ad is linked to a brand. So it's not enough to just light up the brain; an effective ad must cast some light on the brand too.

Millward Brown has been helping clients optimize their creative for more than three decades. Our work is based on our empirical understanding of how advertising works, which we have developed through years of in-market observation, testing, and validation. Originally we relied on traditional research that asked direct questions to elicit conscious and introspective reactions from respondents, but in recent years, we have extended our approach to reflect new understanding of how the brain works. We now

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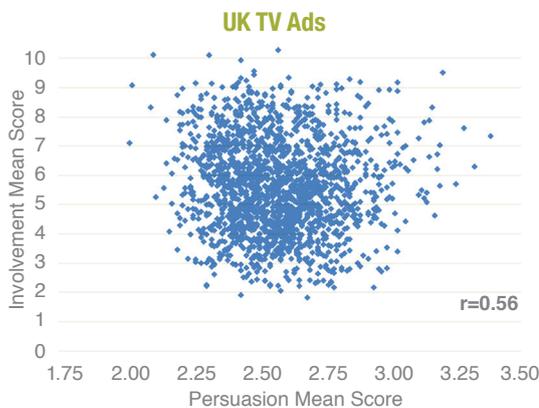
incorporate a variety of indirect measurement techniques, including some with roots in neuroscience, when they can add depth and nuance to our assessment. But whenever we have advised clients on optimizing any aspect of their communications, including ad length, our recommendations have always been based on a holistic understanding of how an ad is intended to work against its specific objectives.

## ATTENTION IS JUST THE BEGINNING

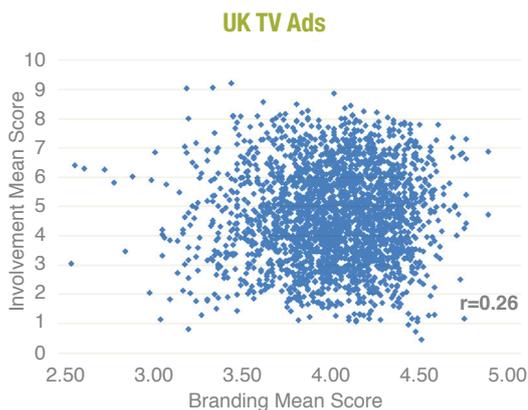
Of course, the first thing an ad has to do is capture the attention of viewers. Advertisers are right to focus on this necessity. But an ad can capture all kinds of attention—and be highly

engaging for viewers—without being effective. As Figure 1 clearly shows, there is no correlation between involvement and persuasion. But what is more telling (because not all ads have direct and immediate persuasion as an objective) is what Figure 2 shows: There is no relationship between involvement and branding.<sup>1</sup> So advertisers should not be satisfied with maximizing attention, whether they measure it by brain scanning or direct questioning. They should set their sights on maximizing branding.

**FIGURE 1: INVOLVEMENT vs PERSUASION**



**FIGURE 2: INVOLVEMENT vs BRANDING**



**BRANDING BASICS**

Good branding ensures that people will connect an ad with the brand being advertised. But branding cannot be accomplished by brute force. “Brand early, brand often” is not a winning strategy. We know that there is no relationship between the first appearance of a brand in an ad

and how well-branded the ad is. Neither is there a correlation between the branding score and how often the brand appears in the ad.

The fact is, there are no general rules about branding that apply to all ads. There are no formulas to be applied. But that doesn’t mean that any branding approach can work in any ad. Rather, it means that the critical elements of branding—the *when*, *where*, and *how*—must be optimized for each individual execution. The way in which these crucial factors are handled will depend on the style of the creative, the communication objectives, and the history and personality of the brand being advertised.

Poor branding not only limits the power of an ad to build associations, but can also impede understanding. Fortunately, when copy testing points up subpar branding, even on finished film, there are a number of post-production fixes that can be applied. Voiceover can be added or changed. Music can be added or changed. Pack shots, brand logos, and other brand cues can be added. And film can be re-edited to increase the emphasis on key story elements, including the brand.

**WHAT’S THE BEST APPROACH TO BRANDING? THE ONE THAT WORKS.**

The appropriate action to take to improve branding depends on the style of the ad. Sometimes the brand needs to be introduced earlier. Sometimes just a hint about the brand provides the necessary cue. And sometimes the brand needs to be held back until later in the ad. It all depends on the role of the brand in the story.

**WHEN THE BRAND IS THE OBJECT OF DESIRE**

An action-packed ad for a large, established carbonated soft drink in Canada intended to highlight the brand as an object of desire, but was ineffective because the brand was not shown early enough. In the ad, a dehydrated man races across a bleak, sun-scorched urban landscape looking for a drink. Viewer engagement was high, but the absence of brand cues prevented viewers from taking away the key message: that only Brand X would slake his thirst.

The ad was improved by adding the product and the logo to the action early in the ad. Engagement

<sup>1</sup> The data shown is from the United Kingdom, but all regions we have tested show the same lack of correlation between involvement and either branding or persuasion.

## POINT OF VIEW

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declined for the revised version (from above average to average), but branding and advertising efficiency were 100 percent improved.

### WHEN THE BRAND TIES IDEAS TOGETHER

Some ads work by making the brand tie the story together. A UK ad for Sure with Fine Fragrances (a new brand variant in the Sure line of women's antiperspirants<sup>2</sup>) used this approach to explain the inspiration behind the product, which was the realization by a creator of fine perfumes that his fragrances were useless if busy, active women were going to "sweat them out."

For this style of ad to be effective, viewers must appreciate the significance of the brand to the story, but the first version of the Sure ad did not make the brand's role clear. Though viewers were intrigued and involved with the scenes of the designer being chauffeured to Paris, branding and understanding were low.

To strengthen the connection between perfume and antiperspirants, the ad was revised in two important ways. First, signposting was improved. A voiceover of a title card reading "The Story Behind Sure with Fine Fragrance" set the stage, while an application shot near the end reminded viewers of the functional benefit. Second, the voiceover was stripped down to sharpen the focus on the essential points.

Involvement slipped slightly in the re-edited version but remained above average, while branding, understanding, appeal, and news all sharply increased. The short-term sales indicator increased from very low to very high, and its prediction was borne out in the market.

### WHEN THE BRAND IS THE SOLUTION

A third, very common type of ad presents the brand as the solution to a problem. In this style, the approach to branding will vary according to the needs of the story. We tested several versions of such an ad for Johnson & Johnson's 24 Hour Moisture Body Lotion in the UK. The story of the ad featured a woman floating in an underwater world where dry skin is never a problem, and offered 24 Hour Moisture Body Lotion as the real-world solution.

<sup>2</sup>In other countries, Sure is known as Degree, Rexona, Rexena, and Shield.



Branding was low for the passive and dreamlike execution, in part because the distinction between the fantasy sequence (a woman in an underwater world) and the real world (the woman in her bathtub) was not clear enough.

A revision made this scene change sharper by bringing the music to a climax as the woman's head emerged from the bath water. Distracting elements in the voiceover were eliminated, most notably the last line of the ad (which alluded to the fantasy "world of hydration" from the opening). The version which ended with viewers hearing the brand name while seeing the bottle on the side of the tub had the strongest branding score by far.

### A STORY NEEDS HIGHS AND LOWS

Maintaining the right degree of tension is a critical factor in effective storytelling. The trick is to hold back just enough information to maintain viewer interest, but not so much that viewers become confused. None of the ads we've described were improved by adding exciting, high-impact elements. Rather, their effectiveness was enhanced by relatively small modifications to scenes that would likely have registered as low-impact points on a neuro-compression test.

In two of our three examples, the ads were improved by reducing the number of words in the voiceover. The revised ads weren't shorter; they just included fewer words on the audio track. The fact that these changes were so effective points to the importance of something known as the brain's "attentional blink." As described by Professor Jane Raymond and Millward Brown EVP Graham Page in their award-winning 2006 paper,<sup>3</sup> attentional blink is a lapse in attention

<sup>3</sup><http://www.millwardbrown.com/Files/Blog/images/PageRaymondESOMARpaper.pdf>

that sometimes occurs as the brain is processing information. This can cause a highly compelling scene to dominate viewers’ attention to such an extent that the information in the subsequent scene does not register at all.

The existence of the attentional blink phenomenon would seem to be an argument for slowing an ad down, not speeding it up. The second of silence that accompanied the closing shot of the revised ad for 24 Hour Moisture Body Lotion contributed to stronger branding and enjoyment than did the busier, noisier ending of the earlier version.

### TIME IS MONEY, BUT ...

Clearly, advertisers face pressure to produce the shortest ads that can be effective. Not only does this save money on production and media costs, but it also makes it easier to repurpose ads for online and mobile settings. In analyzing over 90,000 ads, we have found that both long and short ads can be equally effective at generating brand-linked memorability and delivering on primary messages, but short ads are less effective against complex advertising objectives.



Ultimately, the optimal length of an ad will be a function of the communication task. Established brands can often benefit from increasing exposure by using shorter executions, as they often do by using cutdowns of previously aired ads. Cutdowns should include engaging material from the original ads, but must balance high engagement scenes with time for branding and communication points to register.

### IN THE END, THE STORY COMES FIRST

Just as there are no formulas for creating effective advertising, there are no shortcuts to optimizing an individual execution. While the idea of reducing cost by running shorter ads is appealing, optimization cannot be achieved by culling frames that appear to be less engaging.

Less can indeed be more—but don’t assume that it is the slow-moving or “boring” scenes that need to be cut. It might be that too much high-impact, high-excitement material is working to the detriment of an ad by impeding understanding and directing

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attention away from the brand. In those cases, branding and understanding may be improved by cutting back a cluttered voiceover or dropping superfluous messages.

Optimize your ad by putting the story first. Your brand has a unique part to play. By understanding its role and cueing it correctly, you will make the most of your chances for advertising success.

To read more about branding and optimizing ads, please visit [www.mb-blog.com](http://www.mb-blog.com).

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