

A film director's guide to ad effectiveness

Chuck Young gives some pointed advice on how ad pre-testing can influence commercials, and how research can be used constructively to make ads better

DEAR STEVEN, Just thought I'd drop you a note to follow up on the question you asked the other night about breaking into the TV ad biz. I must say you seemed a little downcast at the party – but, hey, remember box office isn't everything. I really think there's another Oscar waiting for you.

I talked to my friends at Unilever about the possibility of you directing some of their TV commercials in between feature films and needless to say they were thrilled! But, frankly, they were also a little concerned about how much you would cost. They said a big name director may help to open a film but nobody ever hears the name of the directors who make their commercials. They want to know the value they'll get from working with a star like you.

These guys are tough cookies when it comes to business. Very buttoned down. They research everything. And since in their business they can't get clean box office numbers showing how many product sales a new commercial produces, they measure how good a commercial is with a surrogate audience response score – the Millward Brown Ad Effectiveness Index.

The good news is that my group at Ameritest® has been working with the Brits to understand the contribution of

the film-maker's art to advertising effectiveness. In fact, we have just finished an analysis of 71 Unilever TV commercials that we tested in the US last year. So, when your agent gets ready to negotiate a sweet deal with Unilever I can give you a first-order estimate of what good film-making is worth. Bottom line: lots!

Picture sorts

As a master film-maker, Steven, you might be interested in how we found this out. Remember the 'card trick' I showed the other guests, sorting those decks of pictures taken from your movie? First, I had them sort the pictures into two piles based on what they remembered seeing – to measure the 'flow of attention' through the film. Then I asked them to sort the cards into five piles, from positive to negative, based on how they felt as they watched the images in the movie, to measure the 'flow of emotion' through the film.

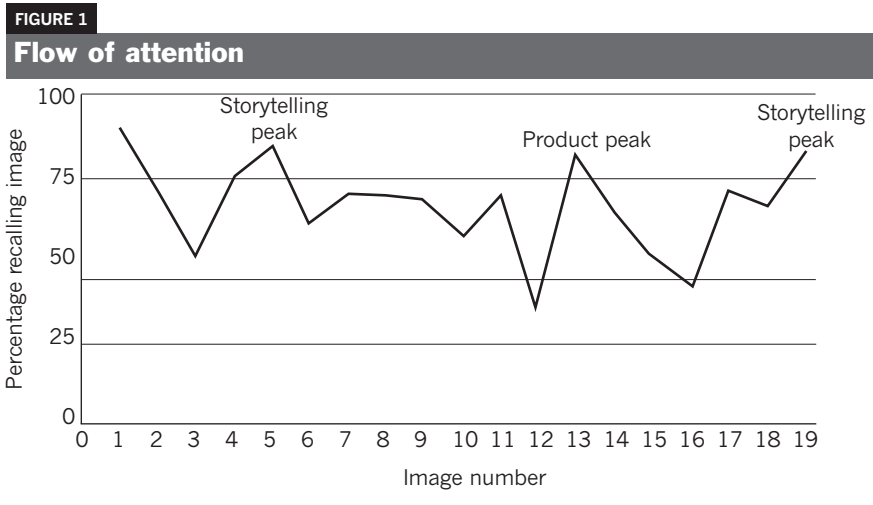
Think back to how surprised you were that those people who had just seen the preview of your movie didn't remember everything in the film. The images they focused on the most weren't exactly the ones you expected, were they? I could tell from the look on your face. And the strength of their feelings towards different scenes was also a little bit different to

what you'd planned. It almost made you want to go back into the editing room to do a new director's cut, didn't it?

The point is that an audience doesn't just watch a movie. An audience participates in a movie by choosing to focus more on some things than on others in the film.

Well, it turns out that using this visual 'language' taken from the film itself to probe an audience's participation in the film can provide very powerful insights into how commercials connect with the minds and hearts of consumers. Of course, the difference between movies and commercials is that commercials have to sell things. But that actually makes it easier to decide how good the film is – or whether it needs to be re-edited.

Let me show you what happens when you visually 'deconstruct' a commercial. I have enclosed a 'Flow of Attention' graph of a Unilever commercial for Degree deodorant that we tested some time ago, (Figure 1). As a whole, the ad was quite strong in terms of getting attention and making consumers want to buy the product. But you will notice that some images in the ad get more attention than others – those images that are higher on the graph are better remembered by the audience than images that are plotted low on the graph.



Selective playback

If you think about it, this really isn't that surprising. Sitting here writing this I can easily play back in my head my favourite scenes from *Jaws* or *ET* – but the next time I see those movies I will see many other scenes that I had forgotten were there. Well, for commercials, those peak moments or 'focal points' in the attention graph are the images that stick in your mind over time to build a brand's image – a point John Kastenholtz of Unilever demonstrated in a paper he presented at the Advertising Research Foundation conference in New York this year.

Movies are all about storytelling or creating an emotional experience. But for



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advertising, there are two types of visual information in every commercial: the storytelling images – the aesthetic content – and the images that contain product information. In the Degree example, you will notice that the audience's attention peaks in three places – two of the peaks are storytelling peaks (also known in our business as 'executional' peaks) and the third is a 'product' peak showing the brand icon.

The two storytelling peaks are interesting. The idea behind Degree deodorant is that when your body needs it more, the product kicks in and works harder. The first storytelling peak, which showed a man racing hurriedly up stairs to get to an important meeting, dramatises the kind of problem this product is going to solve. The second storytelling peak showed the benefit of using the product: the Degree user looking cool and calm on a speaker's platform in front of a large audience.

It turns out that these storytelling peaks are important for getting a good Millward Brown score. Figure 2 shows the correlation.

Attention matters

One of the key performance measures in the Millward Brown pre-testing system is the 'measure of attention', or the breakthrough power of the commercial in a cluttered world where lots of ads are competing for the attention of the viewer. Attention is a measure based on the viewers' 'active enjoyment' of the advertising.

As you can see from the verbal rating statements in Table 1, the attention-getting power of a commercial is a function of how clever or entertaining the creative concept is, and of how unique or different it is. No surprise here. But if you look at the film diagnostics – this is where you come in, maestro – the flow of attention, which is based on the first picture sort, explains nearly as much of the attention score as the verbal ratings.

► The first correlated variable is the number of frames used in the picture sorting deck. Keep in mind that the number of pictures in the deck is a measure of the visual complexity of the film – we grab pictures from the film not as a function of time but rather as a function of the rate of

visual information flow or visual complexity. This is why different commercials require different numbers of pictures to describe their visual content. What this says is that quick-cut, high-energy editing works in advertising as well as it does in movies. You know, as I write this, I can't help but flash back to that Omaha Beach sequence in *Saving Private Ryan* – boy, did that hold my attention.

► The second correlated variable is the number of storytelling peaks in the flow of attention. To borrow a literary metaphor, it is the poetry of experience, and not the prose that we attend to. That's why, when I think of an old movie favourite, only a few key scenes readily come to mind and the other parts I forget about until I see the movie again.

► The third correlated variable is the overall trend line of the visual consumption wave. In other words, an attention-getting commercial is one that builds viewer involvement over time and doesn't just capture attention briefly up front and then let it fade away like a bad James Bond movie.

Emotional power

Finally, to explain the attention-getting power of a commercial we can also look at the second picture sort: the flow of emotion. It turns out that negative emotion is positively correlated with attention. This is, in fact, where the 'active' part of the active enjoyment in the Millward Brown system comes from. Commercials that create dramatic tension between conflicting emotions are more likely to involve and engage the audience, and thus get good attention. Of course to you this is a no-brainer – just think how boring movies would be without a good villain! But I must warn you, a lot of advertisers are afraid to put negative emotions in their ads because they don't like to associate negative imagery with their brands – and so they end up with vanilla commercials.

In general, however, the first picture

TABLE 1

Correlation with Millward Brown key measures

	Attention	Communication effect
Verbal diagnostics		
Diagnostic ratings	(r)	(r)
The commercial is quite clever and quite entertaining	+0.61	+0.33
The commercial is different from other ads	+0.57	-0.04
The message is important to me	-0.08	+0.65
Film diagnostics		
Flow of attention®		
Number of frames in Picture Sorts®	+0.40	-0.19
Number of storytelling peak moments (executional peaks)	+0.48	-0.06
Overall trend of Flow of Attention®	+0.41	-0.16
Flow of Emotion®		
Positive Flow of Emotion® average	-0.17	+0.51
Negative Flow of Emotion® average	+0.33	-0.59

Note: N = 71 Unilever ads

Bold figures indicate significant > 99% confidence

sort, the flow of attention, explains the attention-getting power of the commercial, while the second sort, the flow of emotion, explains another key performance measure in the Millward Brown system: the communication effect measure. Indeed, one of the reasons Unilever are now using the picture-sort methodology instead of the old dial-a-meter approach (they called it 'Trace') was our discovery that you need multiple flow measures to gain insights into the multiple facets of commercial performance.

Communication effect is a measure of the viewer's response to the advertising once they have decided to pay attention to it. It is made up of a rational component – how important the message is to the viewer – but it is just as strongly driven by the emotions you evoke with the film, both positive and negative.

To keep life simple, Unilever usually combine these commercial performance variables (including a third one called Branding, though the relationship between that and the picture sort is another story) into a single overall measure of commercial performance called the Effectiveness Index. This also makes our life simple because we can use that one measure to provide a first-order estimate of the value that good film-making brings to the party.

Three key roles

Like movie-making, advertising is a collaborative art form. In general, there are three key roles that must be performed well in order to make an effective commercial.

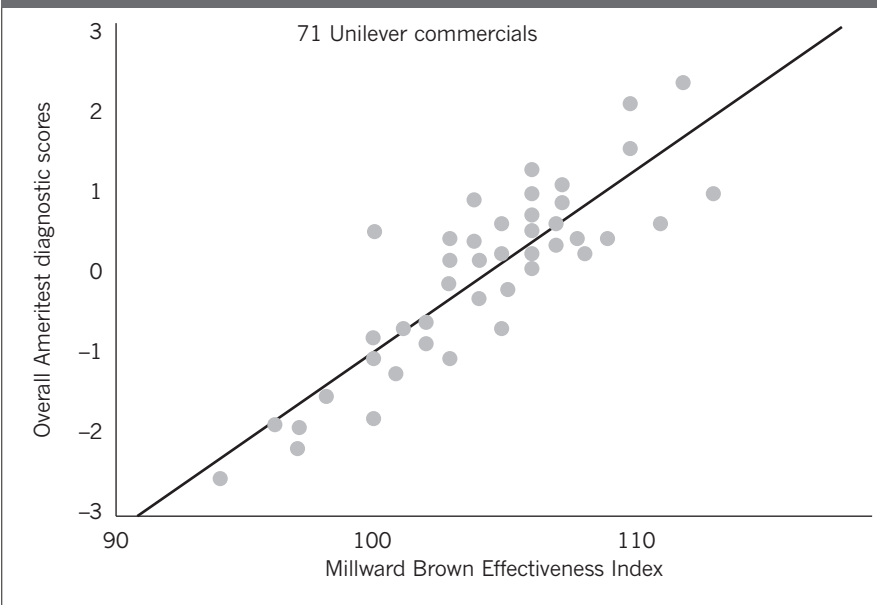
The client, or brand manager, must come up with an important idea to communicate. In the advertising business this is called a 'strategy'. For any given commercial we can estimate the power of the strategy by looking at the ratings for 'the message is important to me'.

The advertising agency must come up with a clever idea for turning that strategy into advertising. In other words, its job is to come up with the script. We can estimate how well it has done this by looking at the ratings for 'the ad is clever and quite entertaining'.

The client and the agency hire someone like you to breathe life into their

FIGURE 2

Contribution of the film-maker's art to the Millward Brown Index



ideas – to direct a short movie! Since picture-sort variables are all about the film-maker's art, we can now use the flow variables we described above to estimate how well the film-maker did his job.

When we put all of these variables into a mathematical regression model to explain the effectiveness scores of the 71 Unilever commercials (Figure 2), we find that these simple diagnostic measures can explain three-quarters of the variance in commercial performance. And, of course, this does not even take into account other creative factors like music, or the synergy between words and imagery, or several other variables that we would normally look at in deconstructing the strengths and weaknesses of an ad.

So, looking at our model, we see that having a good strategy explains nearly half, or 40%, of commercial effectiveness. That is the single most important variable.

Then, taking account of the cleverness of the creative concept improves our understanding of commercial effectiveness significantly, increasing the fit of the model from 40% to 54%.

Finally, looking at the film variables improves our understanding even more. The 'goodness of fit' of the model as we

add the non-verbal to the verbal measures goes from 54% to 75%. That is nearly a third of the total variance explained. In short, we can now quantitatively prove that good movie-making has a great deal of impact on the bottom line. (I know what you are thinking – leave it to researchers to prove the obvious.)

Steven, here's where the money is. To figure out what to charge Unilever to film their advertising, we now have research numbers to bolster your negotiations. The strategy is quite simple. First, ask them what they paid their advertising agency for the advertising idea. And then charge them a little bit more than that!

As always, your best fan,

Chuck

Further reading

J Kastenholz and C Young: How Recall Misses the Emotion in Advertising that Builds Brands. Transcript Proceedings, Advertising Research Foundation, New York, 2003.

C E Young: Brain Waves, Picture Sorts® and Branding Moments. Journal of Advertising Research, July/August 2002.

C E Young: The Visual Language of Global Brand Building. Admap, April 2003.

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