

Dull TV ads cost billions in wasted spend for US brands

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WARC

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Summary

Dull TV advertising could have substantial costs for US brands, adding up to billions of dollars in extra TV ad spend that is needed to achieve the desired results, according to a study.

- The analysis looked at consumers' emotional response to 57,000 television ads, as this metric has been correlated with an ad's growth potential.
- A neutral response was the most common reaction that consumers had to these TV spots, the analysis found.
- Dull advertising falls short on various performance metrics, and thus causes brands to necessarily increase their spend as they strive to make a tangible impact in-market.



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Why it matters

Brands often favor functional and rational messaging in their ads – an approach that can convey information but is unlikely to move consumers. More creative techniques, by contrast, are better at capturing attention, driving engagement, and making an emotional impression – an outcome associated with brand-building effects that last.

Takeaways

- It would cost \$228bn in extra spend for dull TV ads to generate the market share growth achieved by the most impactful spots.
- This problem is a consequence of brands running spots that do not stimulate an emotional response from consumers.
- Addressing such an issue will require a concerted effort by marketers to avoid derivative or uninspiring ads.

Television spots which are dull, and fail to obtain an emotional response from viewers, would require \$228bn in extra spending from US advertisers to generate the market share growth delivered by the most impactful ads.

Such an insight emerged from an international research project led by creative measurement firm System1, strategic consultancy eatbigfish, and marketing effectiveness guru Peter Field.

And the latest installment of this work-in-progress study drew on the emotional reactions – that is, contempt, disgust, anger, fear, sadness, neutrality, happiness and surprise – of American consumers to 57,000 TV ads run in the US since 2017.

“It ranges from negative emotions – disgust, fear and contempt – all the way down to very positive emotions, like happiness and surprise,” said Adam Morgan, eatbigfish’s founder, while presenting the research findings alongside Orlando Wood, System1’s chief innovation officer, at WARC’s Creative Impact NYC 2024 event.

“And in the middle is what they call ‘neutrality.’”

This emotion was the most common response to TV ads among System1’s panel, with the average ad eliciting a neutral response from 47% of viewers. “Neutrality means my predominant feeling after watching this ad was nothing at all,” Morgan said. “So, we are using neutrality as a proxy for ‘dull.’”

Drawing on System1’s [star-rating system \(http://www.warc.com//SubscriberContent/article/event-reports/why-literal-factual-repetitive-tv-ads-are-leading-to-a-decline-in-effectiveness/en-gb/130373?\)](http://www.warc.com//SubscriberContent/article/event-reports/why-literal-factual-repetitive-tv-ads-are-leading-to-a-decline-in-effectiveness/en-gb/130373?), which scores ads in terms of predicted growth based on viewers’ emotional reactions, the analysis divided the TV spots into four buckets, and looked at the volume of spend on each of these categories:

- **Non-dull**, known as the lowest quartile neutral (or the most interesting ads), with a 32% neutrality rating on average. Ad spend for these commercials was \$20.6bn.
- **Moderately dull**, known as third quartile neutral, with a 43% average neutrality score, and backed by \$18.8bn in ad expenditure.
- **Very dull**, known as second quartile neutral, with a 51% average neutrality response, and supported by \$16.2bn worth of ad expenditure.
- **Extremely dull**, known as top quartile neutral, with a 61% dullness score and \$11bn in ad spend.

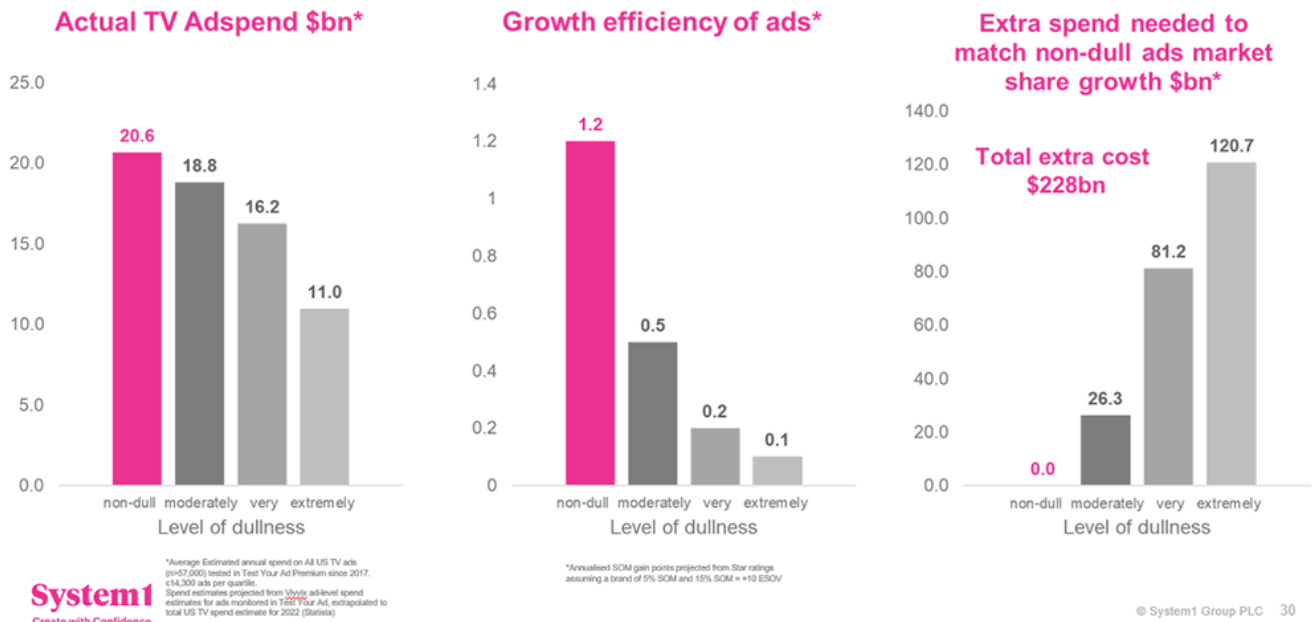
Based on the learning that non-dull (or [fame-building \(http://www.warc.com//newsandopinion/opinion/the-long-and-short-of-it-measuring-campaign-effectiveness-over-time/en-gb/1727\)](http://www.warc.com//newsandopinion/opinion/the-long-and-short-of-it-measuring-campaign-effectiveness-over-time/en-gb/1727)) ads outperform in terms of both emotional impact and growth effects, the study then estimated the level of extra spend that was needed for dull ads to match the in-market impact of the top-ranked (or non-dull) commercials. This extra spend came in at:

- \$26.3bn for moderately dull ads;
- \$81.2bn for very dull ads;
- \$120.7bn for extremely dull ads;
- \$228.2bn for these ads in total.

Turning to growth efficiency – defined in terms of a brand’s annualized gains in share of market – the study found that:

- Non-dull ads had a growth efficiency of 1.2;
- Moderately dull ads logged a score of 0.5 on this metric;
- Very dull (0.2) and extremely dull (0.1) barely moved the needle.

The cost of Dull TV advertising to US Brands (WIP)



Collectively, these findings (<http://www.warc.com/content/feed/the-10m-cost-of-dull-advertising/en-GB/8691>) built on research in the UK, based on case studies in the IPA Effectiveness Awards database, found that campaigns with dull advertising have far larger budgets than campaigns with ads that are not dull.

“We’re not saying dull campaigns are ineffective. It’s just they do not work very hard. And you get a much, much bigger performance out of these more exciting campaigns. It can be six or seven times greater for every euro, dollar or pound you put behind them,” Field said when discussing these results in September 2023.

Tips for defeating dullness

Addressing the Creative Impact 2024 conference attendees, Morgan highlighted several reasons why dull TV spots fail to make an impression with viewers:

- They cover a topic the viewer isn’t interested in;
- The ad’s viewpoint addresses something consumers are already familiar with;
- Commercials are presented in such a familiar way they can’t be told apart;
- The presentation and delivery style have neutral undertones and don’t engage users.

“The reality, of course, is our audience out there are not half as interested in our brand or category as we typically are,” Morgan said. “We don’t make enough of an effort to meet them where they are, and speak in their language.”

Alongside resolving that issue, three best practices could help increase the level of ad engagement:

- Leverage elements of surprise and avoid making assumptions about the target audience;

- Reject a one-size-fits-all approach and adopt a strategy that is distinct from other brands;
- Embrace emotion, drama and storytelling.

Considering these guidelines as a whole, Morgan underscored that the best ads are not stale or predictable. “The reason that the ones that have become popular, and adopted and still spoken about, is not because they’re true, but because they are interesting. And what makes them interesting is that they deny a key assumption of your audience,” he said.

Morgan also reemphasized the role that emotion and distinctiveness play in telling a story that connects with viewers. “Communication success is not about messages. It’s about emotion,” he said. “I love looking at small brands really driving distinctiveness and differentiation because the solution to this obviously is distinctiveness.”

As these challenger brands that deliver breakthrough ads have shown, being dull is not inevitable or a result of budgetary limitations. “Dull is inherently a choice,” Morgan said. “Nothing is intrinsic. We make it that way – or we choose and allow it to be that way.”

The infographic is titled "How to tell if we're dull" and is set against a black background. On the left side, there is a vertical white line with the text "The Cost of Dull" at the top and "eatbigfish." at the bottom. The main content consists of four numbered columns, each with a white top section and a colored bottom section. The numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 are in orange, red, purple, and blue respectively. Each column contains a description of a sign of dullness and a corresponding question.

1	2	3	4
It's a subject they think they don't care about	It's a subject they think they already know	It's presented in the same way as everyone else	It's presented in an un-involving way
Are we meeting them where they care, and speaking to them in their language?	Are we denying assumptions, surprising them?	Are we showing real distinctiveness and character?	Are we using emotion, drama and storytelling?

About the author

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Compares WARC's ROI database to System1's Star and Spike Rating metrics, to continue the research into what role creative quality plays in driving Return on Marketing Investment (ROMI).

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In this webinar, WARC and Marketing Architects set out key effectiveness principles for TV advertising, sharing new insights into the industry.

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(<http://www.warc.com/content/article/warc-research/the-state-of-the-influencers-china-2023/150871>)

This is an overview from PJDaren of China's influencer marketing industry featuring insights from 951 influencers across the KOL and KOC tiers, as well as 103 brands and agencies.

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(<http://www.warc.com/content/article/warc-awards-effectiveness/hero-destini-turning-the-luck-around-for-hero-destini/137376>)

Hero Motocorp, a motorcycle company in India, increased the sales of their scooters through a campaign championing their new Destini scooter.

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