

WARC

Understanding the “triple jeopardy” threat of advertising attention

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Summary

Advertising effectiveness faces a “triple jeopardy” threat as brands fall short on a trio of criteria related to consumer attention.

- Short-termism, such as an emphasis on performance marketing, neglects the type of brand building that requires meaningful consumer attention and emotional engagement.
- Most media strategies fail to include attention in their calculations, and thus can only understand proxies for interaction, not actual human behaviour.
- Creative strategies have embraced features associated with an immediate response, but are not premised on best practices for attention, emotion and, in turn, growth.



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Watch the related session from the Cannes Lions festival [here](http://www.warc.com//content/article/warc-exclusive/the-triple-jeopardy-of-attention/146935) (<http://www.warc.com//content/article/warc-exclusive/the-triple-jeopardy-of-attention/146935>).

Why it matters

The digitally-driven advertising ecosystem often embraces near-term thinking and supply-side performance indicators, like viewability, rather than understanding what drives long-term growth. Measuring the level and quality of real-life attention can help remedy many of these issues.

Takeaways

- Brands need to rethink current strategies, and get back to the core principles of effectiveness, in order to position themselves for enduring growth.
- That will require a level of innovation, especially when it comes to making sure media planning and buying are based on actual human attention, not proxy metrics.
- Attention scores vary significantly by platform, so media owners could also benefit from explaining this terrain.

Ad effectiveness faces a “triple jeopardy” threat of short-termism, failing to include real-life human behaviour in media strategies, and creative that appeals to the wrong side of the brain.

Peter Field, a marketing consultant who has produced [several](http://www.warc.com//content/article/event-reports/binet-and-fields-lessons-for-digital-startups-disruptors-and-advertising-refuseniks/126942) (<http://www.warc.com//content/article/event-reports/binet-and-fields-lessons-for-digital-startups-disruptors-and-advertising-refuseniks/126942>) [groundbreaking](http://www.warc.com//content/article/event-reports/the-true-effectiveness-of-brand-purpose/139612) (<http://www.warc.com//content/article/event-reports/the-true-effectiveness-of-brand-purpose/139612>) [pieces](http://www.warc.com//content/article/warc-research/the-5-principles-of-growth-in-b2b-marketing-empirical-observations-on-b2b-effectiveness/136353) (<http://www.warc.com//content/article/warc-research/the-5-principles-of-growth-in-b2b-marketing-empirical-observations-on-b2b-effectiveness/136353>) of effectiveness research based on case studies in the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising’s (IPA) extensive database, noted this trio of problems share a key characteristic.

“They all, in a sense, have a common starting point, which is the tendency of marketing these days to undervalue the importance of the attention that advertising gets,” he said at a session, entitled “The triple jeopardy of attention”, held by WARC at the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity 2022.

And Field urged marketers to not only treat this issue with the utmost seriousness, but to rethink strategies that have now become mainstream practice. “This triple jeopardy has played out really badly over the last ten to 15 years,” he said.

“We need to take account of it.”

1) Short-termism challenges effectiveness

Elaborating on the short-termism trap, Field referenced the ascendancy of performance marketing – an approach that uses functional claims to obtain instant returns rather than building brands, where emotion and long-term thinking is the priority.

“We’ve seen, over the last ten years, a dramatic rise in the proportion of budgets being siphoned off from long-term demand generation to short-term sales activation,” he said. Even among the cases in the IPA’s database, the industry’s gold standard in terms of effectiveness, performance budgets are double those for brand building.

Near-term activation – say, direct marketing or sales promotion – does have a role within the advertising toolkit, Field added, as such initiatives primarily “nudge” a consumer towards making a purchase in the immediate future. But they are generally premised on faulty assumptions.

“They rely for their effectiveness on the heightened level of attention and interest for people that are in the market right now – and only them. And they are, in most situations, the minority of category purchasers,” Field said.

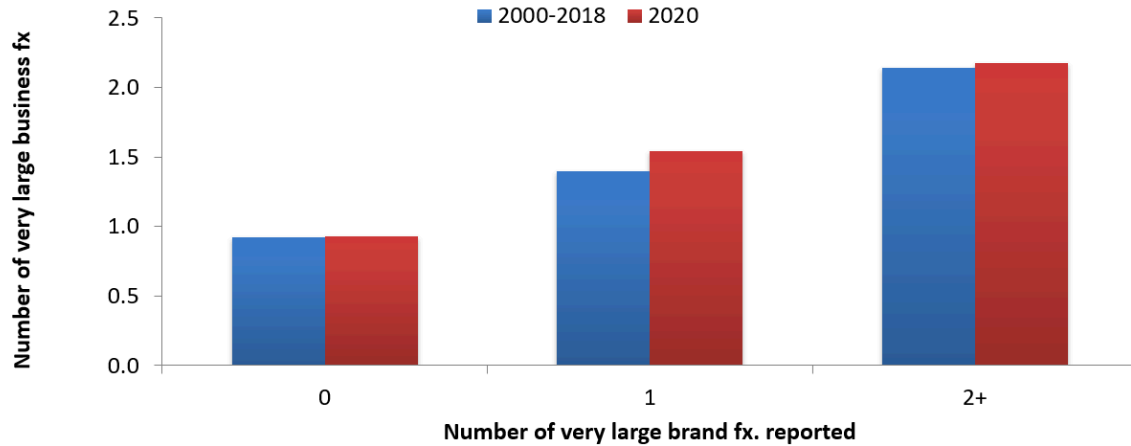
While these programs can deliver a rapid sales bump, they rarely have an enduring impact on the underlying foundations that inform consumer decision-making for the longer term, as “we just don’t remember these kinds of messages,” he continued.

Consequently, short-term activation must strike a nuanced balance with ads that are focused on fostering long-term connections with the target audience. In grounding that argument, Field turned to the idea of “[mental availability](http://www.warc.com/content/article/warc-evidence/how-do-i-plan-for-mental-physical-and-digital-availability/146721)”, as pioneered by the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for Marketing Science, an academic institution located in Adelaide, Australia.

Mental availability, he explained, can be defined as “the extent to which a brand comes automatically to mind when a consumer finds themselves in a purchase situation.” And [success in this regard](http://www.warc.com/content/article/warc-exclusive/linking-attention-to-mental-availability-early-findings/137854) ultimately correlates with brand growth and upticks in a range of other vital business metrics.

Field’s IPA database analysis, for instance, discovered a “very strong relationship between the mental availability of brands and the profits that we can drive off them.” Equivalent trends were noticeable across other metrics, too, including penetration growth.

Mental availability isn't losing importance



Source: IPA Databank 2000-2020 for-profit cases



“If we’re in their business of long-term demand growth, we have to be using brand-building advertising that works at the top of the funnel, creating emotional priming effects that make us interested in that brand whether or not we are in the market right now,” Field said. “They have a very strong impact on mental availability.”

The bad news? “We’re seeing excessive spend on short-term advertising that doesn’t build mental availability, way ahead of [the] optimum. It has its role, but we are spending too much on it,” he said.

Undermining the power of excess share of voice

Field’s analysis of the IPA database highlighted a wider issue, too, as it showed that digital platforms often struggle to generate the kind of mental availability that is essential to building brands.

One reason for this is the variability in attention recorded by individual platforms, and, indeed, among the users of each service. An impression on one digital property, for example, can exert a very different impact on attention and mental availability than the same ad when it is served on another online destination.

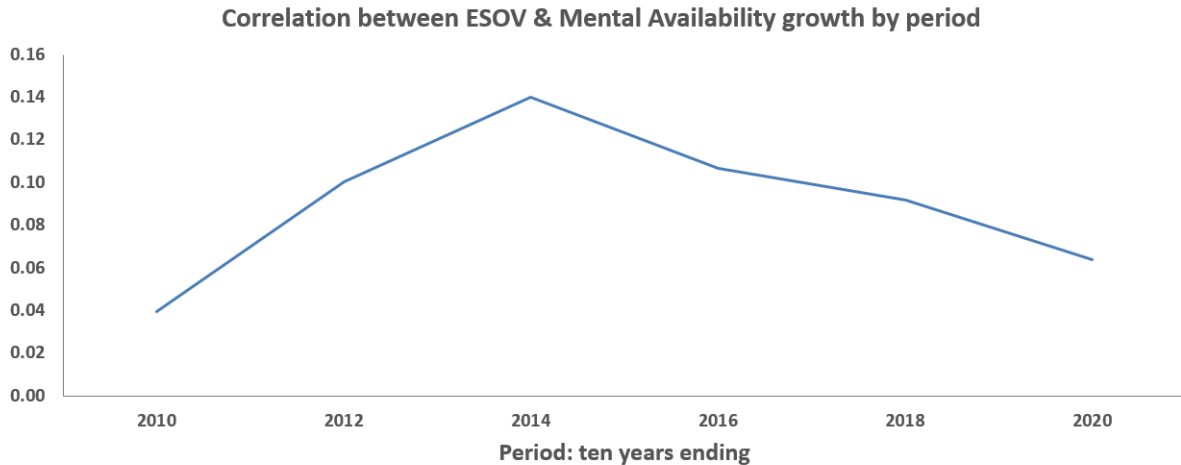
“This is all ‘new news’. We haven’t been able to factor this into our planning up until now,” Field said.

Doing so, Field said, brought him to a long-standing effectiveness principle: Namely, that a brand’s share of market (SOM) correlates with its share of voice (SOV). (<http://www.warc.com/content/article/ipa-datamine/budget-setting-in-the-era-of-accountability/90602>), defined as its proportion of advertising in a given category. In turn, having a greater. (<http://www.warc.com/content/article/event-reports/marketing-in-the-digital-age-binet-and-field-on-how-media-choices-impact-effectiveness/109330>) SOV than SOM, known as “excess share of voice”, traditionally corresponds with growth.

This “classic pattern” was extremely visible in the early-2000s. Equally, up to 2007/08, the linkage between SOV and mental availability, Field said, was “easily significant at the 99% level; you can bank on it.”

The SOM/SOV model, however, is predicated on being able to apply a “reliable and equitable value across radically different media,” Field said. Put another way, the precise impact of an ad exposure on each channel needs to be incorporated into the cost that advertisers pay for inventory both in that specific location, and then throughout the media ecosystem as a whole.

Purely financial measures of SOV are increasingly unreliable predictors of mental availability



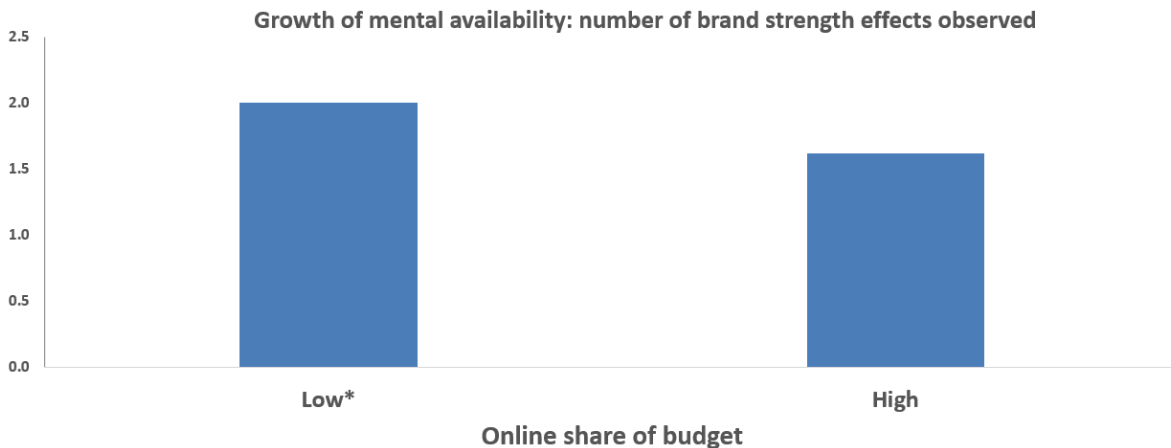
Base: IPA Databank, for-profit cases



But the advent of “walled gardens”, like social network Facebook and tech giant Apple, which jealously guard their advertising data, undermined this principle. Simultaneously, they encouraged a burgeoning emphasis on performance marketing – and the sidelining of efforts to build mental availability – and so placed further stress on the SOM/SOV paradigm.

“The walled gardens of the digital world have broken the feedback loop that this model depends on. And so we’re now actually jeopardising this wonderfully helpful law,” said Field. “The net upshot of all of that is it’s getting less likely, and much less predictable, that \$1 spent will build mental availability and so drive growth,” Field said.

2. Digital platforms have weaker and less certain impacts on mental availability



* Below median

Source: IPA Databank, for-profit cases 2008-2020



2) Media investments do not reflect real-life attention

Elaborating on this theme, Karen Nelson-Field, founder/CEO of measurement firm Amplified Intelligence, suggested a tipping point came with a shift from prioritising human behaviour, or “outward” data, in favour of “inward” data, like digital device metrics.

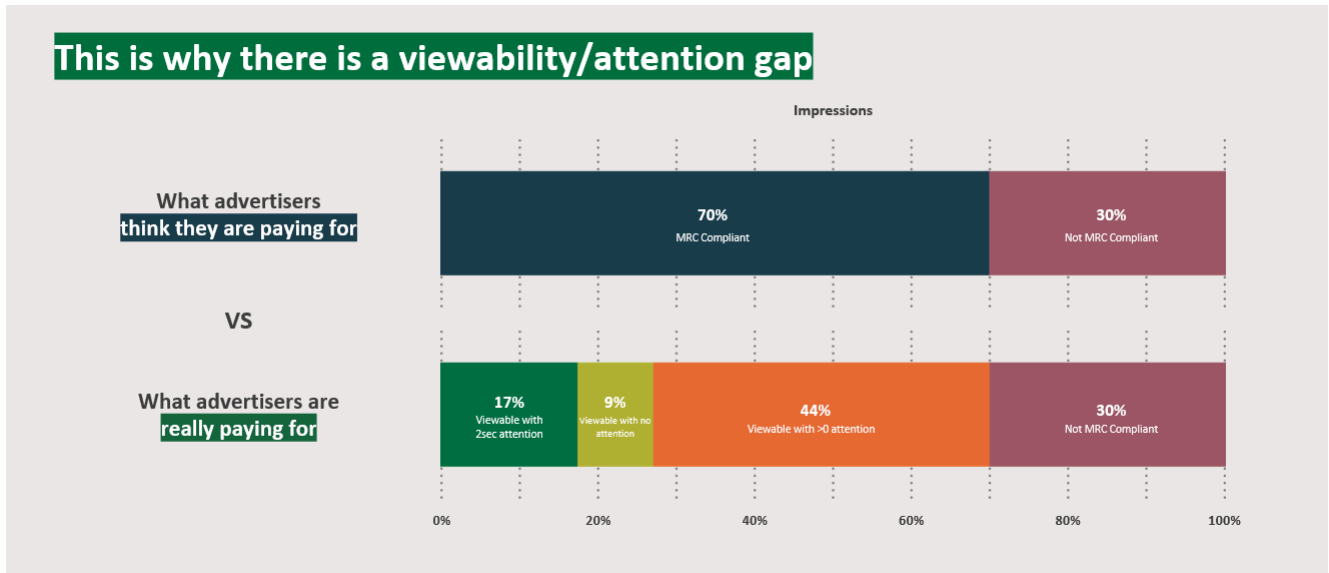
“We stopped measuring humans; we started measuring metadata and device data,” she said. “And the problem with that is that it makes the assumption that device metadata is actually quite an accurate predictor of human behavior. I can tell you it is – and it isn’t.”

The attention–viewability gap

Using “inward”-looking numbers – like online scroll speed, ad length, dwell time and viewability – as a proxy for real-life habits is flawed, in the first instance, as the recipe for success on each advertising platform is a distinct proposition.

A demonstration involves what Nelson-Field called the “attention–viewability” gap. “This is the difference between the currency that you trust to what you’re actually getting in terms of human engagement,” she said.

Breaking down this idea, Nelson-Field noted the fact an impression meets the viewability standards laid out by industry group the Media Rating Council (MRC) – that 50% of an online display ad is in view for one second, or two seconds for video – yields an “inward” insight about how an ad is served, but not “outward” data concerning whether it was really viewed.



Analysis by Amplified Intelligence, spanning five years and 11 countries, proved this out. “We know that about 70% of the ads that you buy using MRC-accredited metrics get zero attention,” she said.

This gap also varies substantially by platform, meaning it cannot be normalised in a reliable fashion in measurement models. “We know that this gap actually differs quite significantly between different platforms and different [ad] formats,” said Nelson-Field, who further observed it tends to be widest for the lowest-attention platforms.

And the vicissitudes in the real-life attention paid to ads offer a hint as to why the SOM/SOV paradigm is under strain, because “inward” data may indicate that two platforms have performed in a similar way, whereas the “outward” data may show a profound split in user attention.

“When a critical input variable fails, the accuracy of the output is anyone’s guess. So, you might think that you’re spending equally, or slightly more than, your competitors,” said Nelson-Field. “Say it was a million dollars, but your million dollars were on platforms or formats that actually got less attention, even though you didn’t know that.

“This is why that relationship is failing. And it all stems from the same time when we started to measure inward, not outward, [data].”

Different types of attention need to be measured

It is important to know that someone has verifiably seen an ad – and, then, to understand the type of attention they demonstrated.

A consumer who is actively attentive, for example, could be impacted by an ad in a far deeper way than someone paying partial attention – say, scrolling on their phone while also watching TV – or no attention at all.

Once again, the attention journey, and spectrum, will be distinct for each platform, ad format and user group. “Low-attention formats have more people who switch between active attention, which is looking directly at the ad, and passive attention, and non-attention more often,” said Nelson-Field.

“If you don't understand this then, again, you can't normalise for that. Inward-facing data doesn't capture this at all.”

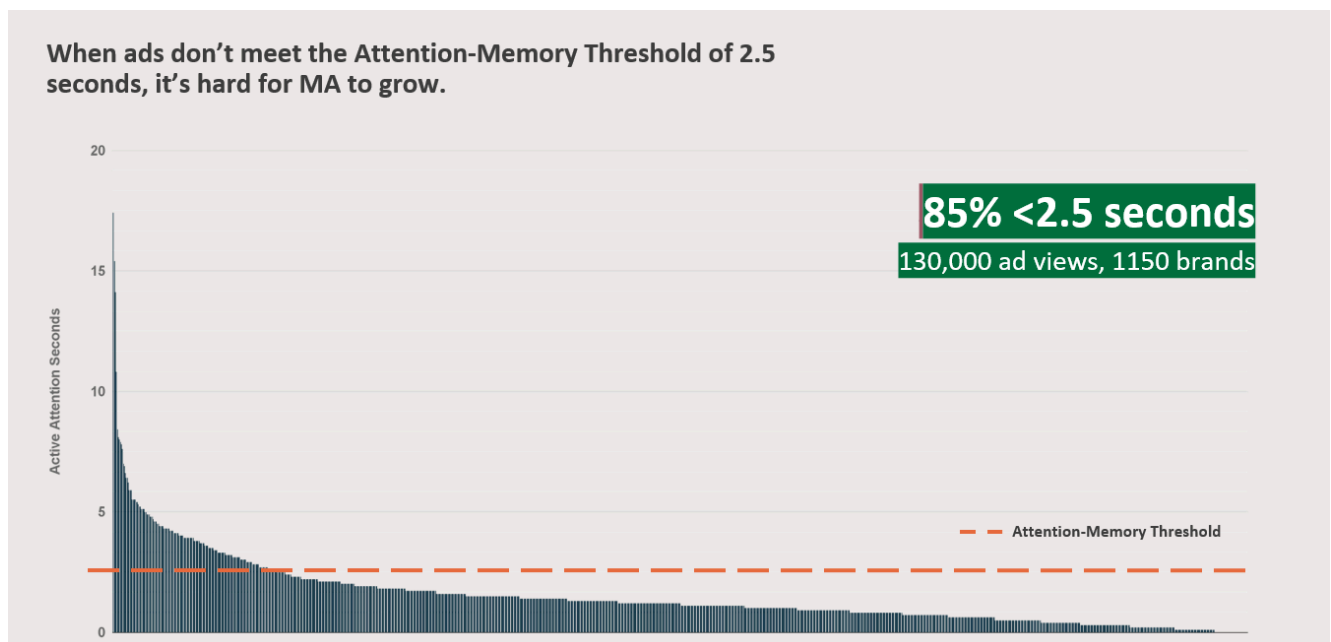
“Attention elasticity” is a critical indicator

Another component of attention for brands to address is the attention/viewability threshold.

This concept describes the duration of attention that is required over the long term for memories to form – and, therefore, represents the moment when “performance marketing ends and brand-building marketing starts,” Nelson-Field said.

Based on a study of 130,000 ads, Amplified Intelligence discovered this threshold usually kicks in at approximately 2.5 seconds. The main takeaway: Eighty-five percent of ads did not reach that critical benchmark – which harms their capacity to enhance mental availability.

“If you want to grow your brand, you need to hit the threshold,” Nelson-Field said.



The minimum and maximum levels of attention – or what Nelson-Field termed “attention elasticity (<http://www.warc.com/content/article/event-reports/what-brands-need-to-know-about-attention-elasticity/146564>)” – for each platform are also governed by “mathematical norms”. As such, there is an inherent floor and ceiling for the attention an ad can hope to receive on a given advertising destination, no matter how potent the creative execution or how compelling the message.

“Lower-attention platforms have smaller attention-elastic limits, so it's harder for creative to push around that,” Nelson-Field added. “There are exceptions, but they are rare.”

The rule of double jeopardy

Nelson-Field's final insight involved “double jeopardy”, a rule that states a brand with lower market share also has lower loyalty than its bigger rivals, and a smaller number of buyers in a given timeframe.

Lower-attention platforms delivered an important extension of this theme. On the one hand, they struggle to drive mental availability for smaller brands. On the other hand, they achieve stronger outcomes on this measure for the biggest players, which naturally possess a higher degree of familiarity among consumers.

Given the modest attention paid to the vast majority of ads, there simply “wasn’t enough time for people to grasp – if you’re number two or three in the marketplace – that you exist,” Nelson-Field said. “And this is why not all adspend builds mental availability.”

3) Creative strategies fall short

While even the most striking creative executions are unable to break the mathematical norms of platform performance for attention, they can ensure that advertisers generate the best possible impact.

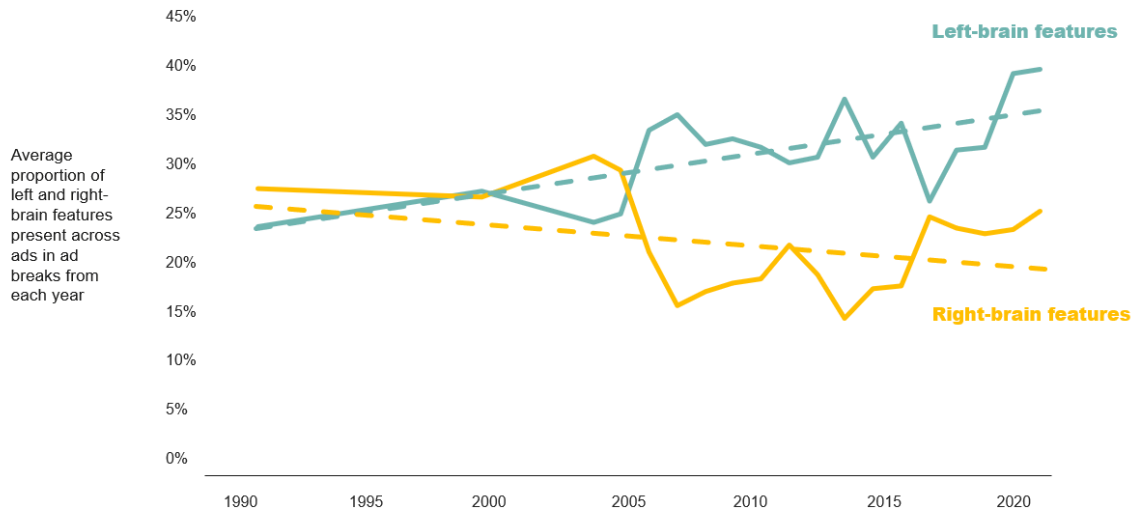
And there is another widespread failing in this regard, according to Orlando Wood, chief innovation officer at research firm System1. Brands, he explained, are currently biased. (<http://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/opinion/where-the-lemons-bloom-how-a-change-in-creative-style-is-undermining-marketing-effectiveness/3690>) towards ads that appeal to the “left brain” rather than the “right brain”, with deleterious consequences.

“Left-brain” ads are usually factual and literal, and feature products elements and body parts in close up, words overlaid on a screen, voiceovers and monologues, as well as repetitive visuals and soundtracks. And they tap into this brain hemisphere’s “narrow” mode of attention, which prefers clear, explicit statements to ambiguity.

“Right-brain” ads, by contrast, have a sense of story, place, and characters with agency. They frequently use dialogue, humour, parody, implicit communications – such as knowing glances – and melodic music. In doing so, they tap into this brain hemisphere’s nuanced, holistic and interconnected view of the world to secure a form of “broad-beam attention”

“In the last 15 years or so, as we’ve been increasingly looking downward and inward at our devices, I think we’ve been losing this broad-beam attention,” Wood said. “It happened around 2006, when we see this wholesale swing away from the whole-brain, or even slightly right-brained, advertising towards left-brained advertising in the ascendancy.

We are increasingly making advertising for narrow-beam attention



Source: Look out, Orlando Wood (IPA). Analysis of 729 ads appearing in Coronation Street ad breaks from week 40 2004-2020 from Nielsen, plus 29 ads from 1989, 1990, 1995 breaks (shown as 1992) and 38 ads from 1996, 1997, 1999 and 2003 breaks (shown as 2000) from YouTube ad breaks

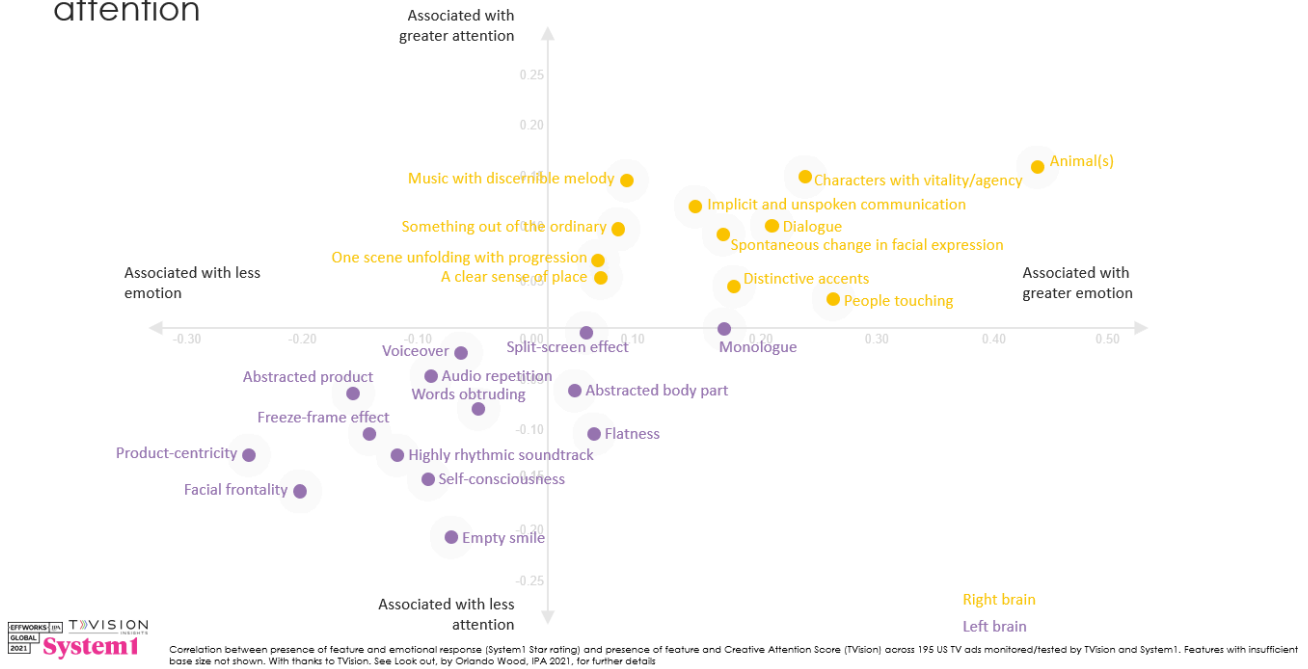
“We’ve been spending more and more time on this narrow-beam attention, bringing new habits of thinking into play, which certainly are in evidence in culture and society, but also in advertising and advertising style.”

To determine the main drivers of attention, System1 partnered with measurement company TVision to assess 200 television ads using facial-recognition data gathered directly from the living room. It then compared these findings with its own ad-testing insights regarding emotion.

And it learned right-brained features “are most likely to capture attention and to elicit emotion,” said Wood. “We found that it was the right-hemisphere features – characters, place, people doing things in the place that a scene unfolded – that were much more likely to engage people emotionally.

“Left-brain features are unable to do that.”

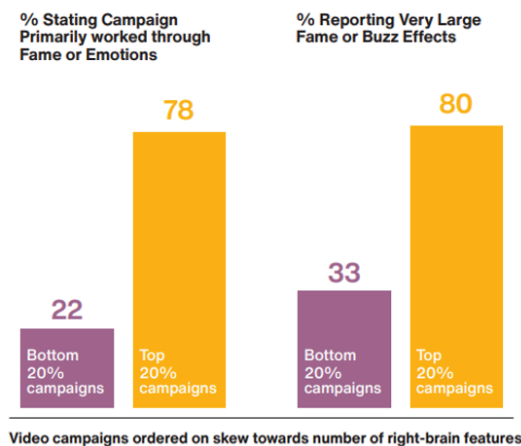
Right-brain features associated with greater emotion, which orientates attention



Working with Peter Field to analyse the “right-brained” and “left-brained” campaigns in the IPA case-study database corroborated this insight. “The right-brained campaigns generated sales effects, profit, share gain – these large, lasting effects,” said Wood.

“And they do it because they’re much better able to lodge the brand in long-term memory, much better able to make your brand jump to mind before any other ... The problem is, of course, this creative dividend is lost on poor-attention media.”

Right-brain campaigns more likely to lodge your brand in memory – to create brand fame



System1 | How Right-brain campaigns are more likely to be thought to work through fame or emotions by authors, and more likely to achieve fame and buzz effects. Base: 43 IPA campaigns (137 ads) 2014–2020 Note that the “Buzz Effects” field was only added in 2018, so the base is marginally lower for this analysis. See Look out, by Orlando Wood, IPA 2021, for further details

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