7

Creating the Best Impression

A man receives only what he is ready to receive, whether physically or intellectually or morally… we hear and apprehend only what we already half know.

Henry David Thoreau, 1851

In his 2017 book Robert Heath, an expert on emotion in advertising, said that regardless of having worked in nine different advertising agencies over a period of 23 years, he still believes that chance, serendipity, and stabbing in the dark is involved with great advertising campaigns. While we can safely attest to the fact that we don't know everything, there are a few vital creative characteristics that we find linked to advertising success. A few simple things that make ads stand out and stick. Bottom-up attention grabbers if you like. Welcome to my evidence-based stab in the dark and also to Professor Jared Horvath who explains the power of unexpectedness.

7.1 Attention Grabbers for Advertisers

7.1.1 Attention and Sales are Cousins, not Siblings

I need to make an announcement. To mid-2019, in analysing more than a total of 85,000 test ad views, 52 studies, 3 countries and 9 platforms with

K. Nelson-Field, *The Attention Economy and How Media Works*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1540-8_7

our system over the past few years, I can see that while there is a relationship between attention and sales, this relationship is not perfectly linear. The notion of attention always directly leading to cognition and then a sale is misguided.

If I said the two variables were perfectly related, you should question my thinking.

Why? Because there are other mediating factors at play. Some of them we can explain with our research, some of them we can't. But what we can tell you is that the direction of the relationship is positive (they move together) meaning more attention does mean more sales (overall). In fact, our regression show that for every 1% unit reduction in eyes *off* screen/ad, the odds of the test brand being chosen increases by a factor of 1.5. When attention increases, the probability of a sale increases. But this is a baseline, and advertisers can improve these odds. This chapter is about the things we know that do move the needle. It's not dark and we're not stabbing.

REMEMBER THIS SIMPLE TRUTH

Attention and sales are cousins, not siblings. They are related, but there are mediating factors that a marketer should know about.

7.1.2 Unexpectedness: Breaking Predictions

By Professor Jared Horvath

Recently, Ben Jones (creative director at Google) dug into the nature of attention by attempting to create the 'Most Skippable Ad' ever. He wanted to see what, exactly, drives people away from digital advertisements. His initial thought was…nothing! If he was to run a 30-second advertisement on YouTube that was simply a black screen—no visuals, no audio, no nothing—then surely everyone would skip past it and he would have a clear baseline upon which to start building a more comprehensive picture of elements required to grab attention.

So, he aired his 30-second black screen advertisement.

To his surprise, almost nobody skipped it. In fact, significantly more people were willing to sit through 30 seconds of a black screen than were willing to sit through the sexier, flashier, more 'attention-grabbing' ads. Oddly, Ben interpreted these incredibly high view-to-completion rates as evidence for the importance of storytelling in advertising (?). What he failed to recognise was that his black screen actually tapped into one of the deepest principles of attention and how to grab it.

We oftentimes speak about the human brain as being a *passive processor*: the world enters our body via the senses, these signals are analysed by the brain, and a relevant response is generated. This picture of the brain, however, is far from accurate. Rather than passively processing the world, the brain is always fighting to stay one step ahead of the world in order to *actively forecast* what is about to occur. This is why many neuroscientists now refer to the brain as an Advanced Prediction Machine.

Believe it or not, you are not actually reading these words. Right now, your brain is about one second into the future simply *predicting* what this sentence says. So long as these words are even remotely close to what your brain thinks they should be, you experience the prediction and not reality. This ability of the brain to make effective predictions is why we're easily able to judge the flight of a baseball, why we're easily able to follow storylines from lengthy books, and why we're easily able to drive home while singing along to our favourite radio songs.

If you ever want to truly and completely grab an individual's attention, then you must *break their prediction*.

When a prediction fails, the brain leaps into the present moment, attention becomes highly focused, and memory networks kick into overdrive. In other words, when a prediction fails, the brain becomes primed to *take in* and *hold onto* new information.

If you've ever miscounted the number of stairs and tumbled forward at the bottom of a staircase, you know this feeling. If you've ever reached for your mug only to knock it over and spill coffee all over your desk, you know this feeling. If you've ever had an animal jump in front of your car while driving, you know this feeling. This process makes perfect sense as inaccurate predictions could prove fatal. As such, when a prediction fails, the brain enters a state that allows for quick and effective prediction updating in order to avoid this failure in the future.

Do you now understand why Ben Jones' black box was such a powerful attention grabber?

When people are surfing YouTube, they have a very specific prediction about what digital ads entail—flashing images, thumping music, a loud announcer, etc. As such, when an ad contains *absolutely nothing* (simply a black screen), this prediction fails and attention is triggered.

This is why view-to-completion rates soared: seeing as viewers were uncertain as to what was occurring, what it meant, or how it would conclude, they were forced to engage and build a new prediction for what YouTube ads entail. Put simply, if you want to grab attention, you must understand your audiences' predictions and break them. In so doing, you will not only trigger

attention, but you have a great chance of becoming the baseline upon which a new prediction is built (and all future experiences must refer back to).

But beware: a prediction can only be broken once. Once a new prediction is formed, you cannot break it again using the same material. For instance, now that many viewers have built a new prediction for YouTube ads, a black screen will no longer have the same attention-grabbing power as before.

Keep them uncertain, keep them guessing, and you will keep them paying attention.

But remember, it takes more than attention! Once you've got an audience's attention, you still must teach them in a manner that leads to deep, durable, accurate memories.

REMEMBER THIS SIMPLE TRUTH

If you ever want to truly and completely grab an individual's attention, then you must *break their prediction*. When a prediction fails, the brain becomes primed to *take in* and *hold onto* new information.

7.1.3 Unexpected Emotions

There is an absolute abundance of literature around which creative devices are linked to outcome measures (such as recall, recognition, likability, brand choice), but very few that show creative devices linked to attention. Of the few that do, these 'attention-getting creative devices' include faces, colour, motion, animals, emotion and sound (see Quick Explainer: I can hear you). Although the results are mixed and the measures, at times, questionable, the one single creative device that is consistently linked with attention (and many other outcome measures over the years) is emotion.

The research on emotion spans across a range of marketing efforts, including: video diffusion (viral content), passing down of folklore (i.e. rumours, urban legends, chain letters), email (most reached), word-of-mouth (most shared), and TV viewing (brand favourability). All of which arrives at a common point, that emotions are key in driving further behavioural outcomes. Even more specifically, that *arousal*, an established construct of emotion, underpins this. Arousal is a physiological approach to measuring the strength of an emotional response. It is characterised by 'activation of the autonomic nervous system' or 'heightened sensory awareness'. Arousal occurs during events that, for example, cause laughing or tears, take your breath away, make you sick in the stomach, make you gasp or give you goose pimples.

The idea that arousal is linked to successful advertising (however you define success) is also aligned to the psychology literature that refers to social sharing. In this context, researchers suggest that emotional experiences are shared shortly after they occur, typically in the course of a conversation. It is suggested that the extent of social sharing is directly related to the strength of the emotion felt. What is less agreed upon is the role that positive or negative emotions play (valence). Researchers say that valence plays an important role in advertising success but those in psychology disagree, concluding that in comparison to positive experiences, episodes of negatively valanced high-arousal emotions are equally likely to be shared.

QUICK EXPLAINER

I can hear you

While our early results on sound are promising, our ability to generalise the results is limited. This is largely due to the substantial differences between online platforms in whether advertising is experienced with or without sound, reflecting the default position of the platforms. For example, very few Facebook ads are experienced with sound on, while the larger majority of YouTube ads are. For any cross-platform research project that is collected naturally (i.e. not in a lab), this means it takes time to collect enough sound on and sound off data.

Our early results do suggest a difference in average attention when sound is on versus when sound is off, but without replication this means little. Watch out for more to come on this.

Over the course of the past several years we have done three large-scale and very different studies on emotion and attention metrics. The first two were in 2012 during my post doc years at UniSA and before we had access to scalable and passive gaze-tracking, so recall was the default measure of attention (accepting its limitations to report explicit memory not low-attention processing). The last study was done in 2017 with our own gaze technology (described in Chapter 2).

The first two studies set up a conceptual background for future emotions testing, with our matrix being well cited and applied in content measurement. Table 7.1 shows how our emotions matrix is based on positive/negative (valence) and high/low arousal (emotion intensity) pairs. For example, *hilarity* is the high arousal pair of *amusement* which is low arousal (both levels of humour). Pairs are known to reduce the subjectivity that is often apparent in scaled responses. Two large data sets were used, one of non-commercial video content (n400) and one of branded video content (n400). The ser-generated videos were collected randomly at the time from

Table 7.1 Arousal and valence emotions pairs

Positive		Negative	
High arousal	Low arousal	High arousal	Low arousal
Hilarity	Amusement	Disgust	Discomfort
Inspiration	Calmness	Sadness	Boredom
Astonishment	Surprise	Shock	Irritation
Exhilaration	Happiness	Anger	Frustration

an aggregator site, while the commercial videos were supplied by Unruly (a NewsCorp business). While marketers would be more interested in the outcomes of the commercial data set, having a second set of data with very different boundary conditions adds generalisability to the results.

All videos were double coded, where human coders indicated the emotions they felt in response. We achieved average 89% intercoder agreement suggesting that a wider audience would have a similar reaction to the same videos. From this, we ended up with 1600 data points in our study.

The main take-outs were that videos that evoke high arousal emotions are the most likely to be shared. These findings are both consistent across commercial or non-commercial data and with previous literature. The key contributors to this finding are hilarity, exhilaration and anger. When we look at the combined effect of *arousal* (high, low) and *valence* (positive, negative) on average shares per day, the main effect of arousal is stronger than that of valence. This means that high arousal videos (alone) are shared twice as often as those that draw a *low arousal emotional response* (as compared with only 30% more when valence is present).

REMEMBER THIS SIMPLE TRUTH

Videos that evoke high arousal, positive emotions are shared more than videos that evoke high arousal, negative emotions.

The second part of this study comprises the attention results. Around two weeks after exposure, all coders were asked to recall which videos they remembered seeing. We then matched recall with the individual coder's emotional response. This ensured the emotion experienced by the individual coder was directly related to the video being remembered.

Arousal, as a construct in itself, is likened to high energy and attention. So it's no surprise that overall we find that videos evoking *high arousal* emotions, in both positive and negative form, are the most remembered. In fact, they are remembered around three times more than videos of low arousing content. This is consistent across both sets of data. Again, exhilaration,

hilarity and anger are the most successful in memory retention. Although we can see that high arousal negative emotions perform better on recall than they do on sharing. So negative ads are remembered more than they are shared.

The knowledge that high arousal negative videos are remembered is consistent with research on norm violations. Norm violation describes advertising which is considered offensive and outside acceptable behaviour. You could argue content incorporating anger, shock and sadness might be classified as unexpected given the typically positive emotional appeals in ads. But brand risk needs to be considered if norm violations are going to be used.

REMEMBER THIS SIMPLE TRUTH

Videos that elicit high arousal emotions cut through the clutter and are remembered the most.

I've made my stand on recall and intent metrics pretty clear, and it was for this reason alone that I started looking for a better way. The attention and emotions research that follows from here draws from new data where attention is not self-claimed, rather it is collected via our gaze technology. We used 140 coders to classify the 15 test ads in our study base, using the same emotions matrix. The intercoder agreement averaged 92%. Then we collected gaze (and choice) from a much larger sample. The viewing occurred across 3 different viewing platforms (TV, Facebook and YouTube) and 4 different devices (TV screen, PC, mobile and tablet). Our overall sample consisted of 2723 viewer sessions (people) and 20,319 test ad exposures.

We then compared views of high and low, and negative and positive executions with the sales and attention impact that they garnered from the broader sample within our study. Table 7.2 shows the difference between attention and STAS on high and low arousal ads.

We find that, in line with existing literature, ads that are considered high arousal drew more attention and brand choice than low arousal ads. More specifically:

a. Ads which generated a strong emotional reaction (high arousal), irrespective of whether or not the reaction was positive or negative, garnered 16% more attention than ads which elicited weak emotional reactions (low arousal).
b. Ads which generated a strong emotional reaction (high arousal) had a 2.4 times greater sales impact than ads which elicited weak emotional reactions (low arousal).

Table 7.2 Impact by test ad type (attention)

	Low arousal	High arousal
Average attention	50	58
STAS	128	167
Total (%)	78	22

REMEMBER THIS SIMPLE TRUTH

Videos that elicit high arousal emotions get more eyes-on attention.

7.1.4 Not All Cats Trigger Unexpectedness

A really quick, but important note here goes out to creative devices, such as babies, animals, celebrities and sexual appeals—some of the most assumed attention getting devices. Some research will suggest that these creative devices can drive greater behavioural outcomes, and this is a little bit right and a little bit wrong. One of the biggest myths we uncovered in our work, is that it is not so much about the device itself rather the level of emotional arousal that the device, and its context, delivers. For example, dogs simply sitting on a lounge doing nothing versus a dog begging for food due to starvation causes a different emotional reaction. A baby in a crib asleep versus a baby on roller-skates and dancing (remember Evian c.2009) causes a different emotional reaction. So, when a baby or animal video evokes low arousal emotions it has no more impact than any others with different devices.

The exceptions to this rule are political, social or religious messages which do not need to be high arousal to drive behavioural outcomes. For instance, low arousal political/religious/community message videos are shared about twice as often as high arousal videos using these same creative devices. Potentially, this is due to the niche audience segment that finds these videos relevant and appealing. In comparison to general content, which may appeal to a very broad audience, these types of low arousal videos are of interest to a more specific audience. If that video were to hit a mainstream audience, we might expect the level of behavioural outcomes to fall in line with low arousal rates, matching our expectation of a mass audience.

REMEMBER THIS SIMPLE TRUTH

Animals do outperform many other creative devices but only when the video evokes high arousal emotions.

7.1.5 Attention, Memory and the ABC Song

The importance of Professor Horvath's advice cannot be underestimated. Attention is not enough. Once you have an audience's attention, you must still *teach* them in a manner that leads to deep, durable, accurate memories.

But please don't confuse teaching with persuasion. This is about teaching someone how to remember your brand. A very different and vital distinction. It is not teaching them *why* they should know your brand (i.e. brand USP), it is about *how* they might remember the brand at all.

Don't worry about any complicated neuro-marketing that may have been thrown your way, Professor Horvath says long-term memory building is relatively simple. Memory is about associations to context and that these associations need to be rock solid because the brain can easily take you on the wrong path. He says that the more associations, the more rock solid the memory becomes.

This is why attention is not enough on its own. When most of us want to retrieve which letter comes after *N* in the alphabet, we naturally default in our mind to singing out the ABC song we learned as children. We didn't learn about the letter *N* in isolation, we learned about it in the context of 25 other letters that occurred in chronological order. Professor Horvath would bet that you are literally singing the ABC song in your mind right now.

Does this all sound familiar? In Chapter 3, I talked about the importance of building Mental Availability, and here's why. Because attention and memory are not the same thing.

Unexpectedness, or attention grabbers, should always link the brand to an associated cue or set of cues. Cues that bring their brand to the surface of memory on different occasions and, ideally, the buying situation.

This is how we teach the consumer to think of Coke, Vegemite and a thumping De Beers diamond when we are thinking of proposing to our sweetheart at sunrise on an Australian beach. And this why the concept of Mental Availability, and its importance to a brand's long-term survival, is real.

REMEMBER THIS SIMPLE TRUTH

If you understand why we were taught the ABC song in primary school, you know how *Mental Availability* works.

7.1.6 Branding Brings the Family Closer

Logic alone tells us that we shouldn't expect advertising to have an impact on its audience if the brand being promoted is not clear. Yet literature suggests more than half of all advertisements fail to make this advertisement-brand linkage. The content may be attention grabbing, but unless the audience can easily identify the brand being promoted, the material will have no hope of having any impact (let alone increasing buying propensities).

Remember, attention alone is not enough. This is one of those moments where the viewer needs to be taught *how* they might remember the brand. People often assume that the popularity of an advertisement's content aids memory, but it doesn't. Research has showed that highly popular content does not ensure the audience can link it to the brand being promoted.

We wanted to re-test this thinking: to reconsider, with newer data, newer collection processes and newer measures, whether branding quality has an influence on advertising effectiveness. First, we had to code all of our test ads by known branding quality elements. The most notable being, brand frequency, entry timing and prominence. In our analysis, we operationalised these as the following:

Metric 1: Brand prominence—average size of the brand within the ad (%)
Metric 2: Brand duration—total number of seconds with visual brand appearance (%)
Metric 3: Entry timing—first brand appearance in the first 2 seconds (yes/no).

In collecting these metrics, we used object detection software to annotate our test ads for branding elements. Artificial object detection removes the guess work within an ad across all frames. Once annotated, the machine returns answers to any queries or combination of queries the user has.

Figure 7.1 demonstrates our annotation process in action.

Once the test ads were coded we split the sample into two groups by the STAS that each individual ad was able to achieve (based on 14,904 ad views on a TV platform both on TV screen and on mobile). We then considered whether branding quality differed between these high and low performing groups. We found, in line with previous literature, that ads that gain more sales impact (i.e. higher STAS) do all the right things in terms of building good branding quality. Higher performing ads, also:

a. showed the brand at twice the size (100%)
b. showed the brand for almost twice as long (96%)
c. were 25% more likely to display the brand early.

Fig. 7.1 Example brand annotation

REMEMBER THIS SIMPLE TRUTH

Brand size, frequency and entry time all improve ad performance significantly. And it is the combination of the three branding elements that contribute to performance

While these numbers were for our overall sample, when we split the results by device we saw that branding quality makes the biggest impact on a mobile screen. In fact, the improvement in impact of quality branding (combination of all three) on a mobile device is 23% greater than the improvement on a TV screen. Suggesting that where the size of the screen is smaller the greater the importance of prominent, clear and readable branding. Or put another way, the fingerprint of the brand should be relative to the size of the screen, not the size of the ad frame.

REMEMBER THIS SIMPLE TRUTH

The fingerprint of the brand should be relative to the size of the screen, not the size of the ad frame.

But what we did next is even more interesting.

Here are a few truths to set the scene. Remember attention is precious, but it is fleeting, viewers dip in and out of levels of attention across an ad (Chapter 5). And we know attention spikes can be triggered by emotion (and other unexpectedness), but not all attention translates to a sale. We also know that quality branding is related to a sale but it is not related to attention. We don't see visual branding being an attention trigger, but

Fig. 7.2 Attention sales differential

neither is it an attention deterrent (something we have observed over many years in this work).

At five frames per second our technology allows us to dig deeper into the exact attention-grabbing moments to understand what else might be happening in the content. Plus, because our data is individual level, we can overlay brand choice for those who did/did not pay any attention. In essence we transposed our aggregated STAS to a second-by-second sales differential against attention.

Our question therefore becomes: what was happening when this sales differential was greatest? Looking at Fig. 7.2 we can see that attention spikes occur right across the ad, but sales remain flat until the last 15 seconds. What is in the last 15 seconds that nudges the sale?

The answer is the brand.

We found this pattern consistently across many of our test ads. Attention without branding still increases the chance of buying, but adding the brand at attention spikes significantly improves the sales opportunity. So mere presence of branding at attention peaks increases the chance of buying (Fig. 7.3).

REMEMBER THIS SIMPLE TRUTH

Attention alone is not enough. Sales are amplified when attention peaks and branding are aligned.

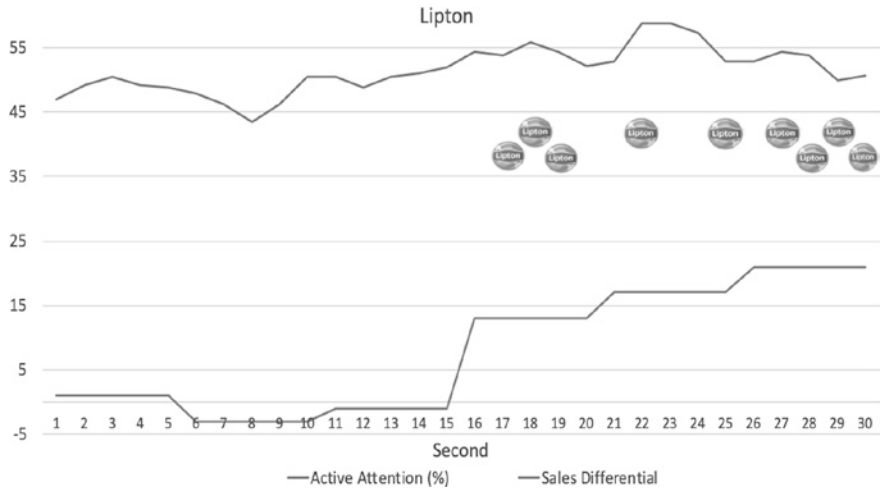

Fig. 7.3 Attention sales differential with branding

7.1.7 The Wrap up

In this book, I and my trusty band of contributors have explained some things that get in the way of the sales/attention relationship. As marketers, some are in your control and others simply are not.

Out of the marketer's control:

- **Attention is fleeting**. Our human capacity is low, we are overloaded and spend little time on decision-making, operating in a default state of zombie (Chapter 5).
- **Advertising is incidental**. Advertising is a small part of our big lives, it is incidental to us and as such we are less inclined to look at it (Chapter 5).
- **Advertising is not a persuasive force and we buy habitually**. So even when we do look at (and process) advertising, the likelihood of influencing an outcome is low (Chapter 3).

In the marketer's control:

- **Top-down triggers**. When something is relevant it improves the chance we will pay some attention (Chapter 5 and this chapter).
- **Bottom-up triggers**. Unexpectedness improves the chance we will pay some attention (Chapter 5 and this chapter).

– **Viewability**. When ad viewability is low, attention will be low and have less chance of influencing an outcome (non-human impressions is another story) (Chapter 6).
– **Brand Quality**. Attention alone, regardless of which level, is not enough. Sales and memory are amplified when attention peaks and branding are aligned and when the brand is prominent and early (this chapter).

Attention in any form is linked to the outcomes a marketer wants, high or low, fleeting or sustained. While attention and sales might be cousins, at least they are still related, and they can improve their relationship with a few media buying and creative rules. With these rules, attention and sales have a chance at being more like siblings.

MEANWHILE IN THE REAL WORLD

Blankety Blanks and the hilarity of prediction

Blankety Blanks was an Australian game show in the 1970s based on the American game show *Match Game*. There was also a UK version called *Lily Savage's Blankety Blank* which ran for 11 years on BBC1. The Australian *Blankety Blanks* was hosted by Graham Kennedy on Network Ten from 1977–1978. It only ran for two seasons, but its legacy lives on in Australia today. Apart from its classic 1970s colourful, yet cringe-worthy displays of sexual innuendo, blue eye-shadow and smoking on stage, *Blankety Blanks* was essentially a comedy program with a game format built around it. The host read a short scenario (often laced with double entendre) which, at some point, contained the word BLANK. The contestants and celebrity panellists then had to fill the BLANK with a word of their own. The BLANKS often lead to scenes of hysteria.

This is a comedic example of what Professor Horvath says in his book, *Stop Talking Start Influencing*, about filling in the blanks. That as humans we try to forecast what is about to occur. He gives an example of how the brain is wired to fill in the blanks when someone is talking to you or when you are reading words on a page:

> Aicvtaion of poragmrs taht fit wtih your prictdeion is the reosan you can raed this sntecne with mimanil eforft – that and yrou'e Pterty Sarmt!

Horvath says that when a prediction fails attention kicks in. Just one of the reasons *Blankety Blanks* was enjoyed by so many and why partners get cross with each other during arguments (although let's be clear, Professor Horvath doesn't confirm the latter).

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