

Thoughts on Creative Testing

By Bruce McTague

The Consumer and Creative Development

Great work

We are in business to create great work. But. “We don’t want to be known as the people who create brilliantly crafted failures.” Great work builds our client’s brand and sells our client’s stuff. Great work makes consumers sit up and go “WOW.” Its work that makes clients money through greater ‘full revenue’ volume and it makes us proud to say, “Yeah, we did that.”

As agencies work at making great advertising, it’s sometimes easy to get distracted; an agency can begin focusing on simply trying to make the client happy or, at the other end of the spectrum, winning creative awards. And somewhere in the middle of both of these paths, the consumer is neglected.

The Consumer

We believe that all great work is relevant.

What you are saying must actually matter to the end user. The work can achieve this relevance in different ways:

- Is there a true point of difference? A benefit that can be uniquely delivered by our brand? Can it *solve a problem* for the customer?
- In the absence of a product point of difference, can the brand be made more *meaningful* to the customer? Can *we show what the brand and the customer’s values have in common?*
- Can we make the brand be “a lighthouse brand,” one that redefines its category?

All of these can help us solve the dreaded “So what?” question, around which most advertising fails.

Given this need for relevance, it only makes sense that finding out what matters to people is instrumental to the process of creating great work. That’s why we spend so much time searching for that “human truth”. Those key values that reside in the soul of the brand: truths that can be dramatized in a way that will be compelling enough to drive people to pay attention to what our clients have to say.

Luke Sullivan, author of [“Hey Whipple, Squeeze This”](#) put it this way: “If you don’t have something relevant to say, tell your clients to put their wallets away. Because no matter how you execute it, any unimportant message has no receiver.”

Tapping into the consumer

We believe in using research to inform decisions, not to make them.

We use consumer research at the beginning of the whole advertising process to find out *what* to say, not how to say it.

Depending on the scope of the project, this may be *strategic* development research or *positioning* research. And this is where an innovative thinking team is invaluable. Because ‘research’ shouldn’t be defined by all the old traditional tools, but rather by uncovering the best way to truly find out what the potential customer thinks.

The plan of action should do something very simple very well. Talk to customers and consumers. We use the information we get from these early meetings to develop our communications brief: to identify the objectives of the work, the key idea to be communicated, and to maybe set some guidelines on just the right brand personality. We also mix what we learn from these conversations with what we know about our client’s marketing problems, and the dynamics of their business

Using all this observation, all this hard and soft research, as well as our own personal experiences, we then turn it into insight and inspiration. We synthesize some core truths about the brand.

These, research-guided truths become the foundation for our creative solutions.

We also use research to find out *if* we are saying what we intended to say. You can call this “creative development research.” Yes, this *is* evaluative research but our purpose here is only to develop and nurture work, not to kill it. Not to “ask permission” of customers or clients to go with the work.

Although we do not in principle object to using research to inform our decisions, we do not believe in using research alone to *judge* the validity or effectiveness of our work. We know that the critical deconstruction that takes place doesn’t happen with exposure in real life.

We don’t ask consumers to “share their expertise” in advertising, but we do believe in making sure the work we’re showing to them is on strategy. Are we really saying what we *think* we’re saying? Are we saying what we *need* to be saying? Is the message clear?

Communications Checks

To be clear, while we do not believe in asking customers for permission for whether the ads being tested should run, we do understand our clients’ need for testing and are ready to determine and effectively work through an appropriate qualitative or quantitative testing process with them.

There are a number of reasons why clients want to test the work:

- It’s simply company policy, especially true when millions of dollars are at stake.
- To resolve disagreements, between the agency and the client, or within the client’s ranks.
- To choose between one campaign and another.
- To address executional questions about how the ads will actually work, or how the tone will come across to customers. Does it match the desired brand personality?
- As a reaction to prior campaign shortcomings (perhaps from other agencies).

In short, as our clients' partner, we always respect their need to know if they are heading in the right direction. No one wants to waste money, time or energy.

So, we conduct qualitative communications checks prior to production, to ensure that the work we recommend to our clients is on strategy. Sometimes, it's just what clients call a "disaster check" to make sure that there isn't something we have missed that will pop up a big red flag. Consumer research is tricky because it is not a science. Ultimately, it is subjective, but if used correctly it can inspire great work.

During these qualitative communications checks, our work is carefully presented to consumers. This is critical, because if we're not careful the research will test the quality of *stimulus* rather than the quality of the ideas. It will test the quality of the presenter, or the quality of the drawings on the storyboards, or any number of irrelevant details. We always want to protect our ideas and give them the best chance for survival, to keep the work from being "pecked to death by ducks." The simple fact is that bad research kills good ideas.

Here are some things to remember:

- Storyboards don't have the magic of finished commercials.
- Commercials that have a familiar feel often "score" better than commercials that are unique, strange, odd or new.
- Disagreement in groups can be a good thing, because great ideas are often polarizing.
- Individual opinions will often differ radically from opinions offered by groups. And one group often says one thing and the next group, another.
- We should not take what consumers say *literally*.
- Remember, we use research to inform our decisions, not to make them.
- We do not let the group become Copywriters and Art Directors.
- Clinical research settings often produce different responses than research done out in the field, in the bars, the malls, on the street.

Remember, the Agency must help interpret findings from consumer research. We must be open to learning. We listen, we learn, and then if possible, we make the work even better based upon customer feedback.

Quantitative Copy-Testing

Here we have to proceed with *particular* caution because using numbers can imply a degree of precision, and this can be very misleading.

It is important for us to know what is being communicated by the advertising, what is being remembered, and what strategic drivers our work is hitting, all variables measured with quantitative copy-testing.

But this metric has flaws. A frequent copy-testing measure is *impact*, the extent to which an ad is noticed in a "clutter reel" of advertising. This is grounded in the belief that recall, in this experiment, is a good proxy for what happens in the market. Market research expert Millward Brown's analysis demonstrates that performance in clutter reels is *not* correlated to subsequent marketplace recall.

Another common procedure is to determine “likes and dislikes” in an ad. This may produce some interesting findings, but relies on a huge leap of faith as to what balance of “likes and dislikes” is acceptable. What, for example, happens if 50% of respondents really like an ad, and 25% really dislike it? Is it a better ad than one liked by 30% of respondents, but disliked by just 15%? For all the implied science of such numbers, there’s a lot of guessing going on.

Here’s something else to bear in mind. Simple ads with a message that’s easy to verbalize (“It washes whiter.”) or with truly new-to-the-world claims, will often score better than ads with more complex imagery or emotional benefits, things that are hard to verbalize.

Our strongest concern is reserved for copy-testing suppliers who do not stop at diagnostic measures.

The danger is with researchers who promise predictive modeling that produces scores for “persuasion and purchase intent.” Forecasts of marketplace behavior grounded in a numerical rating of 75+ respondents shown a storyboard in a focus facility push the boundaries of belief.

In summary, we have to understand that: **“The way in which advertising influences customer choice is not a tidy, mechanistic process. It is an extremely untidy, often irrational, human process.”** (Jeremy Elliott, JWT)

One Last Thought

We believe the strategies we develop must be sound to produce effective work, and doing our due diligence will help us get there. But, advertising is not a science and we just don’t believe the end results of our labors can be produced by a formula. Good research, in our opinion, should inform our decisions – not make them.

Sources/References

Excerpt from [The Direct Marketing Handbook](#), by Edward Nash Testing of Creative Concepts

One of the most attractive aspects of the direct marketing business is that you do not have to rely on anyone’s opinion or guess as to whether offer A is better than offer B, whether it’s better to use a two-page letter or a four-page letter, or whether is better to position you product as being “fun” or “educational.” You can let the public tell you which is better by testing these alternative head to head in the marketplace.

Curiously, even some people who have been in the direct marketing field for years fail to fully appreciate the importance and value of a continual program of creative testing. They argue that testing costs too much or that most of the tests they made in the past did not work.

As a result, they miss out on the opportunity not only to get what could be a healthy or even spectacular increase in the response to a current promotion but also to gain information that can be of critical value in developing future promotions.

Of course, testing costs money. But if you think of it as comparable to the research and development department of a business, the expense of testing can be viewed not as a cost but as an investment in present and future profits.

A test doesn't have to "work" in order to tell you something of importance. Most direct marketing creative experts agree that they often learn as much from their failures as from their successes.

Two basic methods can be used to test creative concepts. (There are also many important noncreative things that can and should be tested: media, seasonality, etc.)

One method is to test only single elements. That is, only one thing in the control ad is changed: the price, the offer, the free gift, the headline, the music, the graphics, or some other key element. The changed version is then split tested directly against the unchanged control.

The special value of element testing is that it gives you a precise comparison between the pulling power of whatever key element is being tested. The information gained can be used to increase response to future promotions, and more element tests can be made against the new control. This way, over a period of time your overall response may be increased by 50 or 100 percent even though no one element test produced over, say, a 15 percent increase in response. In order to be able to read the test results accurately and with confidence, it's vital that only one element be tested in any one ad.

The danger of element testing is that you can get carried away and start testing things that have little or no chance of improving your response or profits to any significant degree, such as the color or a reply envelope.

The other method of creative testing is called breakthrough testing. Here the idea is to try a more or less completely new creative approach – a completely new graphics treatment, a totally different positioning, a whole new offer, and so on – in hope of finding a major new winner.

The special value of breakthrough testing is that it lets you strike out in new creative directions that can quickly result in major improvement in response compared with the usually slower and more modest improvement to be gained by element testing. However, your chances of success may not be all that good. In fact, you may produce a real loser since you're in effect starting from scratch. And you may learn little of value to use in future efforts.

The wise direct marketer will set up a testing program that combines both element and breakthrough tests: the element tests to virtually guarantee a steady increase in results and the breakthrough test to keep searching for the dynamite new approach that can pile up much bigger profits immediately.

From: [Direct Response - Digest of Direct Marketing](#)

by [Craig Huey](#) -- Mr. Huey is recognized as one of the world's leading experts in direct response marketing.

Creative Testing

Many marketers short-change themselves when they send out a direct mail package, run an ad, or do a commercial on TV or radio without testing significant variables. I don't know why, because those variables can have a significant effect on response.

I am constantly seeing examples where there is a 20%, 30% or even a 100% difference in response because of what might be thought of as insignificant variables.

I have seen reversed type significantly decrease response, a change in premiums dramatically affect returns and paragraphs added in the middle of a letter increase or decrease response.

The omission of testimonials will significantly impact returns. Another good example of "traditional" direct marketing hard at work is the lift note. These notes can increase response by as much as 30%.

Whenever I create a mailing package, advertisement or direct response commercial, I always create two versions and use a major variable. Normally, it is the creative premise of the theme test—like "fear" versus "greed." The envelope and lead-in of the letter copy, or the commercial theme, are the variables. With other projects, these variables can be pricing, premiums, the offer, a discount or any number of other items that might be important.

Unless you test with "A" and "B" versions, you could be losing a great opportunity to increase response.

Let me give you two examples:

1. Client #1 mailed 60,000 pieces. His Version A package produced .24%, while Version B produced .41%, or about twice the response!

The creative difference: the teaser copy on the carrier envelope and the first two pages of the letter. Everything else was identical.

If only Version A had been mailed, one could have said the offer was barely successful compared to a 0.15% objective. Version B was clearly more powerful, and is currently being rolled out to more than a million names. Is this a fluke? No.

2. Client #2 had a 1.96% response on Version A and a .92% response on Version B. Acceptable response was 1.1%. If only Version B had been mailed, the conclusion would have been that the project could not be successful in the mail. Because of the test, Version A continued to be mailed in large quantities.

To give another example, I recently changed only the testimonials in a TV commercial—nothing else. Response increased so dramatically, that the cost-per-lead dropped by over 30%!

Direct marketing is not just an art and not just a science, but a little of both. To presume one creative approach or offer is better than another can be a costly mistake. It's best to test and let the marketplace decide.

Pragmatic marketers constantly test new creative approaches against their current “king of the response hill,” looking for even greater response rates and lower costs-per-lead.

About Bruce McTague:

In a career spanning over 20 years, I've been involved with a wide range of industries including packaged goods, restaurant, pharmaceutical, retail, business-to-business and tourism. I won't bore you with all the details, but the bottom line is I have touched so many businesses across so many categories the headline for my career should probably be “Collector of experiences and knowledge.”

If you would like some additional work experience details and see what a number of people have said about me, visit my [LinkedIn Profile](#) my blog, brucemctague.com or contact me directly by [email](mailto:bruce@brucemctague.com) at bruce@brucemctague.com.