

'Testing' is the operative word.

A former Creative Director talks about ad testing.

During my 30 years as a copywriter and creative director, I spent more than my fair share of time behind the one-way glass, my limited self-restraint strained beyond reason as a party of housewives tore my concepts to shreds, usually in front of my client.

Sadly, this was only the beginning. Any of the respondents who were emotionally moved by my masterpiece or tempted to titter at the wit and whimsy I had so cunningly crafted into the concept would declare that they doubted anyone else would have their powers of perception.

But the worst was yet to come. Despite the valiant efforts of the moderator, the lady in the orthopedic shoes would have an idea. Understandably, the buxom school teacher would feel obliged to prove her 'creativity' and a frenzy of 'fantastic' ideas would ensue.

Now, if you're a reasonably experienced creative person, confident and self-assured, you can probably resist the temptation to bust through the glass and rip somebody's throat out — as long as your account director and/or client is quietly scoffing at each pathetic suggestion (although less stridently than you).

But when they begin to see merit in Lavinia's jingle that simply chants the brand name incessantly, any creative person (who's any good) finally has to be physically restrained.

TESTING WHAT?

Frequently, we would ask ourselves what exactly we were testing, other than our own pain thresholds. Often, we would test the advertisement's 'communication'.

Naturally, I would protest that if it was boring and undistinguished and nobody noticed it in the first place, it couldn't communicate anything. Even if it did 'communicate', if it was totally forgettable, its true communication potential was zero.

Nevertheless, I was dragged, kicking and screaming, to many such ill-conceived 'concept testing' sessions.

Not surprisingly, we hit upon a winning formula very early on.

The script that was really simple would invariably win. There was no vision, just a black screen. The voice over (no music or SFX to get in the way) consisted of the bullet-pointed key benefits copied and pasted from the client's brief.

With nothing to distract them, respondents could play back the key benefits with astounding accuracy.



INVISIBLE RABBITS

Of course, less formalised, spur-of-the-moment ad testing is very inexpensive, but it can be just as infuriating for the creative team.

To prove how sensitive creative people can be permanently scarred by these testing experiences, let me relate one such episode from 1972.

Neil Buckridge was marketing director of my client, Red Tulip Chocolates. Easter was incredibly important to Red Tulip, accounting for almost half of the year's total sales.



The script was simple, but kind of charming. A largish family are gathered together on Easter morning. Magically, one white rabbit appears after another — on a windowsill, lounge armrest and somebody's lap. Each time a family member makes a grab for it, the Easter Bunny turns into a (stunningly tasteful) Red Tulip Easter Surprise.

When we presented the finished commercial to Mr. Buckridge in his office, he astonished all of us by saying that he didn't believe that consumers would 'get it'.

What's not to get?

“The rabbit,” said Neil. “I don’t think they’ll see the rabbit.”

We couldn’t imagine why they wouldn’t. It was there to be seen — about 10 times! So when he suggested inviting 50 factory staff into the boardroom to test the commercial, we acceded rather too readily.

I hardly need to tell you what happened when the boardroom was invaded, for the first time ever, by an army of (largely non-English-speaking) factory folk in white coats with their hair in nets.

Neil began by asking a simple question of the terrified throng.

“Just watch this new television commercial and then I want you to tell me what you see.”

They were unanimous. They saw “nothing”. Nothing at all.

Forbidden from mentioning the “r” word, after possibly the most agonising half hour of my entire life, we could not elicit the word “rabbit” out of a single respondent!

CAN YOU TRUST THE TEST RESULTS?

Ultimately, most client and agency people worth their salt have the guts to go with their gut reaction, if the test results just don’t seem to make sense. If you think about those who don’t, you’d have to wonder what they’re being paid for.



Focus groups, especially those that are tied to rigid formulae that score your ad or concept against known norms, can be the most misleading of all. Aha, now you think I’m being harsh?

TRY THIS SIMPLE TEST

At the end of your next formulaic-focus-group-ad-scoring-session, have the moderator ask if the respondents would pay \$20 for that product (or whatever the price is).

Then have the moderator try to collect the money from each respondent who answered yes. After all these years — after galvanic skin response, pupilmeter, brain imaging, eye-tracking, voice pitch analysis, focus groups and a host of scoring systems, I believe more than ever that gut reaction - how people feel about your concept or ad - is by far the most important element to measure in evaluating potential effectiveness. It’s hard enough cutting through the clutter.

Expecting the audience at home to give us anything more than an instinctive response to a 30-second intrusion is a brand manager’s fantasy.

Pushing a button to score an ad or an element out of 10 does not measure people’s feelings. They have to look at the buttons instead of the idea, then make comparative decisions. They are thinking and analysing. I never wanted them doing that over my stuff. And you shouldn’t let them do it over yours.

Planners and creatives alike have been conditioned by clients and researchers to accept ‘scores’. Seventy for a rugby score isn’t bad at all, not much for a cricket team, and meaningless on the tennis court. How come most ad tests have a scoring system that’s uniform across retail, pharmaceuticals, cars, cosmetics, or cement for that

matter? What ever happened to commonsense and the professional ability to appreciate the feelings of the people we’re supposed to be appealing to?

GREAT IDEAS VS NO IDEA

I’ve met plenty of clients and too many advertising people who proclaim loudly that they don’t care whether consumers like their advertising or not. As long as - you guessed it - it works.

Almost without exception, they were advertising people incapable of creating great ads and clients who wouldn’t know the difference.

From my experience, the problem with concept and ad testing has always been the same infuriating inability to tell us the one essential thing we were testing to find out: is it a good ad?

Most of the creative teams I hired in my agencies got the gig on the strength of the concept stuff (mainly rejected campaigns) that I asked them to bring, rather than the pale, inoffensive, emaciated ideas on their expensive reels and in their glossy portfolios.

Why? Because a lot of the best advertising ideas are concept tested out of existence.

The ‘systems’ don’t credit (and can’t really measure) the emotional appeal of the ad or concept. Ads that are totally boring but say ‘all the right things’, like “buy this now”, seem to sail through without anyone seeming concerned that it will never really be noticed in the first place, let alone remembered.

NATURAL REACTIONS

People don't just blurt out their emotional responses to anything. If you want to find out how they really feel, you have to be very sensitive to every emotional nuance.

in our own lounge rooms. I love to see the graph climb steadily, as an engaging 30-second story unfolds.

Best of all, you'll love to see the blips of recognition for that special

THE ONLINE REACTOR DELIVERS NEW IMMEDIACY

We could upload your TVC (or animatic, newspaper or magazine ad) to the Online *Reactor* today (along with your competitors' ads if you wish) and start delivering the results within a couple of days.

If you want to know how respondents really feel about your advertising, The Online *Reactor* will show you, second by second, even frame by frame.

THE WORLD'S LARGEST CONSUMER DATABASE

Because we generally recruit *Reactors* from Roy Morgan Single Source (the world's largest single consumer database), we can provide the most valuable insights — simultaneous *Reactor* graphs by virtually any criteria you can think of: high or low consumers of the product category, users of one brand versus a competitor, media habits, credit card usage, demographics, zipcodes, if you like, or Roy Morgan Values Segments*.

The Reactor can tell you if your concept is turning on the right people, or the wrong people.

Marcus Tarrant was a creative director for over 30 years at JWT, Saatchi (Compton) and his own agencies, 'Them' and 'Us'. He was a director of the Advertising Federation Australia, a founder of the AFA Training Scheme and founder & principal of The Copschool for 20 years.

Marcus is now Chief Reactor at Roy Morgan International.

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When I first saw *The Reactor* at Roy Morgan International, the first thing that struck me was its unflinching ability to credit good ideas. It was obvious that *The Reactor* was an ad/concept testing tool that could help creative people sell bold, outstanding ideas instead of squashing them.



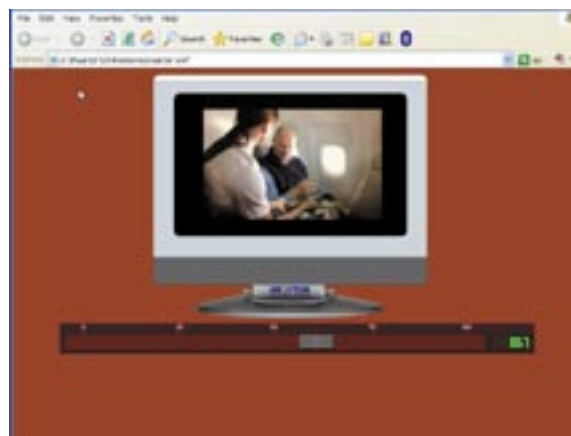
Since accepting the lofty position of *Chief Reactor* with Roy Morgan International, I have tested consumer reactions to elections, TV programs, personalities, magazines, newspapers, web sites, SMS messages, pack designs and hundreds of ad concepts and TV commercials.

It still gives me a buzz to see *The Reactor* graph take a vertical dive when some rude, arrogant retailer starts barking at us

look you finally got on take 39, or the end-gag that took longer to write than the rest of the campaign.

At last there's an ad testing system that rewards great ideas.

For agencies and clients with global brand managers demanding ad test results based on guidelines mandated from HQ, the realtime, visual, instinctive responses recorded by *The Reactor* talk a universal language that's easy to understand, without a dependence on some arbitrary score.



* Roy Morgan Values Segments in conjunction with Colin Benjamin of the Horizons Network.

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