

SEEING THROUGH THE EYES OF THE CONSUMER.

A Submission for the Market Research Society Awards

From Euro RSCG and Eye-Mind Research Ltd

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SUMMARY

Ad campaigns are a long time in the making and don't come cheap. For the brand team it can be professionally devastating when research announces that the final execution of a much-anticipated advert has not delivered; a trauma made worse by research failing to explain why the ad is under-performing and providing no remedy.

Neuroscience is increasingly influential in the design of consumer research as advertisers have come to recognise its ability to provide objectivity and superior insight into the performance and mechanisms of their advertising. An essence of this revolution is acknowledging that the consumer is an unreliable witness and to stop appointing them as judge and jury.

Understanding how the mind directs the eye to make split second judgements led to the development of the innovative eye-tracking tool presented here, which literally shows the advertiser exactly how the consumer is viewing their commercial; thereby providing objective evidence of when and – crucially - *why* the viewer fails to consume the message optimally, and what corrections are needed.

A case history demonstrates how this new tool saved a good creative idea that otherwise could have been lost to traditional research methods that condemn out of hand for lack of understanding.

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SYNOPSIS

The Problem

Established research methods are able to alert advertisers to TV ads that fail to deliver on traditional measures such as recall, engagement, comprehension or branding. Attempting to understand exactly why an ad is under-performing against such measures has depended on the self-reporting of respondents; or it's been left to the brand team to speculate on what remedial action can be taken to make further investment behind their ailing ad commercially worthwhile. Often such diagnosis fails to identify remedies that can restore an ad to health, with the consequence that expensively produced copy is laid to rest with the nagging concern its demise was unduly premature for lack of simple surgery in the editing suite.

The problem for both research respondent and brand team is that it's impossible to deconstruct and rationally analyse exactly how we visually consume, in real time, a TV ad or any other visual experience. It simply happens too fast; we're not even conscious of how we are mentally/visually engaging. This is because in everyday life we typically make 2 to 3 eye movements (saccades) every second in order to orient the focal point of our retinas towards a specific area of an overall scene. This way we sequentially focus the brain's limited processing resources on small regions of a visual field. Once a saccade has been made our eyes fixate on an area for a short time then move again; it's only during these fixations that we truly 'see'; during the saccades our visual system effectively shuts down in order to prevent blurring (Ross, Burr & Morrone, 1996).

The more saccades we make, the less time we have for fixations, so the brain has developed an automatic mechanism to determine whether the cost of any given saccade is "worth it". In other words, our brain establishes not just where to look, but whether (given all the possible places we could be looking) it's worth our while looking there at all. Academic research has shown that this decision is based on a trade-off between 'bottom up' factors (e.g. the position, size and luminance of objects in the visual field) and 'top down' factors (e.g. our goals, intentions and expectations).

The Solution

Such neurological insight demonstrates that to genuinely diagnose why an ad is failing, and to be able to recommend an effective cure, it's essential for the researcher to see exactly what viewers' see, as they see it, in real time.

Knowing the precise pattern of split-second saccades and fixations people make will reveal exactly how well they are consuming the selling narrative and what is eye-catching to good or bad end.

In response to this science, Eye-mind Research developed an eye-tracking tool that provides advertisers with a version of their TV ad blacked out except for the area of the image that their target audience is actually paying attention to. The advertiser is therefore able to see the keyhole view of the mind's eye move around the screen over time, informing them as to how successfully their audience has engaged with and comprehended the creative narrative to take out a branded sell.

A Case History:

The commercial value of this new tool was proven to a client of Euro RSCG who ran two TV ads to change the image of their client's brand from price-led to added value.

To break with the past a very different style of advertising was developed that avoided familiar cues, improving the likelihood that the commercials would signal a shift in the brand's positioning; but equally it meant that, aside from the company logo, established elements associated with the brand could not be employed in the usual way to aid branding.

After the first burst, online research assessed take-out and impact on brand image. Respondents who recognised a series of un-branded images from the ads were asked which brand was being advertised. The ads were delivering the desired message and instigating a shift in brand image, but only 10% of people were able to identify the brand advertised – below reasonable expectations.

The online research could not explain why the branding wasn't stronger, or how brand linkage could be increased. This left the ads vulnerable to the accusation that the creative was therefore fundamentally flawed.

Research Method

A preliminary eye-tracking study confirmed that the target audience were following the overall ad narratives, but identified two key issues that were inhibiting brand identification and one opportunity to enhance branding. First, in one of the ads, viewers' attention was distracted away from the critical branded information of logo and web address by background objects that remained visible on screen. Second, the two branding elements appeared simultaneously and gave the viewer insufficient time to register both. An additional opportunity to enhance branding was identified, namely to incorporate the brand name into the line of copy that appeared on screen two-thirds of the way through the commercial.

New versions of the ads were created. The action scene behind the brand information was replaced with a plain background so that the logo and web address were no longer competing with background objects. The web address was animated to draw the viewer's attention to it, and appeared earlier so as to avoid competing with the logo. The copy line was re-written to include the brand name.

To establish whether these changes increased branding a study was designed to test these hypotheses:

H1: Attention (as indexed by the number of fixations) to the branded information would be greater in the modified advertisements compared to the original advertisements.

H2: As a result, subsequent brand recall and recognition would be superior for the modified advertisements compared to the original advertisements.

Sample:

48 AB male/female, evenly split, aged 20 to 55 and all naïve to the purpose of the experiment.

Stimuli:

The two original and two amended versions of the ads were each edited into a mock “ad break” containing six other ads similar to those shown in the original broadcast ad breaks.

Design & Procedure:

A between subjects design, with 12 participants each viewing one of the four ad breaks. The independent variable was the advert (old vs. new) and the dependent variables were the total fixation duration to branded information during the advert and brand recall.

Under the guise of assisting in testing a new eye tracker, participants were shown one of the four ad breaks on a domestic television and their eye movements were recorded by an Eyelink 1000 remote eye tracker (SR-Research, Ontario). This consists of a small digital camera placed just beneath and in front of the television, which records eye position 1000 times a second, and is spatially accurate to less than 0.25 of a degree. The participant doesn't wear a headset or have their head movements restrained in any way.

Participants were then deliberately distracted for 5 minutes with a series of questions about business travel. They were then asked if they could recall any details of the ads that they had seen earlier. By design, this study adopted the same explicit memory measures used in the original online research.

The Results

60% of participants gazed at the branding elements in the original advertisements compared to 80% of the participants who viewed the amended ad. The amount of time spent gazing at branded information increased from 11.1% and 12.8% of overall viewing time in the original ads to 19.6% and 18.5% of overall time in the new ads. This difference was highly significant ($p < 0.01$). The increase in visual attention to brand information was accompanied by an increase in brand recall of the new ads (96%) compared to the old ads (83%).

Given the evidence of these findings the altered adverts were broadcast and a repeat of the previous online research found that branding had increased substantially, with 58% of those who recognised de-branded images of the ad correctly attributing the commercials to the brand - a highly significant increase on the previous 10%, and very respectable result for a new campaign taking the brand in a new direction.

In Conclusion

The use of innovate eye-tracking films, informed by an understanding of the way the mind directs the eye, provided objective evidence of how the advertising was actually being visually consumed. This is in contrast to traditional research techniques which provide accounts of how people have reported consuming the ad, along with subjectively constructed implications for the creative.

The objective evidence this new approach provided enabled the advertising agency to adapt the films easily, ensuring they pointed the consumer to all the necessary parts of the message, whilst maintaining the creative integrity of the executions. The creative team avoided being told how to direct their ads by the consumer, or indeed a research moderator. The client avoided losing what was essentially good advertising (either through traditional heavy-handed attempts to improve branding or through pressure to start again).

Ads that were conceptually and creatively strong – on brief and capable of doing the job - were saved from an early demise by the appliance of science.