



Brains in gear: How content drives brand growth

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Content can drive brand growth but only if it appeals to the needs of our primitive brains. Michael Consagra, Content Strategy Director, Mediacom Beyond Advertising, EMEA, explains.

If your creative goes unnoticed, everything else is irrelevant. As Harvard Business School professor [Thales Teixeira](#) of Harvard Business School aptly said: “*You need to have your customers’ attention to effectively communicate who you are, what you can offer, and why they should choose your products/services.*”

That’s increasingly difficult to achieve, as consumer attention has become more fragmented and fleeting. On Facebook, for example, users scroll through their feed at a speed of less than [2.5 seconds](#).

But, if you can get people to watch for three seconds, it significantly improves the likelihood they will watch for 10 seconds or even complete the video. In other words, videos that capture attention are most likely to receive a longer view.

The power of those extra seconds can be dramatic. Adverts seen for five seconds or more on [FT.com](https://www.ft.com) show up to 50% higher brand recall and familiarity than ads visible for a shorter period of time.

Today, we receive and translate more than 11 [million](#) bits of information every second. And we have to filter it to stop ourselves being overwhelmed. But most of this – 95% of daily decisions – are made instinctively or ‘on autopilot’.

[Only 5% of](#) the information we are presented with each day is given focused attention and ‘mental effort’. What guides our selective attention is the same as what kept our earliest ancestors alive: our instincts.

While ‘what is important’ will vary from person to person, or from moment to moment, the basic instinctive mechanism controlling what we choose to focus on is the same.

Advertisers need to develop their understanding of the three key intuitive drivers of attention:

The Relevant

Have you ever noticed, that when you’re hungry you notice more food advertising? If you learn a new word, you start hearing it everywhere?

Welcome to the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon, otherwise known as the “Frequency Illusion”. This phenomenon occurs when something you’ve recently experienced, been told or thought about suddenly crops up all around you. It gives you the feeling that out of nowhere, everyone is talking about the subject. Rather than blocking it out as noise, you’re allocating more of your attention bandwidth to it.

The advertising you notice offers a potential solution for your current needs or motivations. Every single purchase that we make is driven by at least one of our 'basic human needs'. Therefore, if you're in the market for it, you're more likely to notice something that meets that need. 'Relevant' content is less likely to be ignored.

The Unexpected

We are hard-wired to notice what is different or breaks convention. From the 7-foot tall man that passes us on the street, to the apple in a pile of oranges; anything that is not as we would expect it will draw our attention.

In [1933](#), a study at the University of Berlin gave participants a long list of three-letter combinations (e.g. jrm, tws, als) which was interrupted by a trio of numbers (e.g. 153). The participants were asked which they remembered. Unsurprisingly the numbers were most recalled.

Being unexpected drives attention and recall. In 2009, Comparethemarket.com broke the ranks of the UK comparison site category. Choosing a leftfield route, it created an anthropomorphic meerkat, Aleksandr Orlov, who owned 'Comparethemeerkat'. Thanks to this memorable ad, quotes increased by 83%.

The Familiar

When faced with multiple stimuli we're conversely drawn to that which is most familiar. In other words, we're likely to pay attention to things we recognise.

Branding allows us to call upon memories and everything we have learned or experienced around that brand. Strong brands allow the brain to make subconscious choices.

In a study into the neural decision making, German neuro-economist Professor Peter Kenning looked at brain scans of people who had been shown photographs of pairs of brands. These photos either included the person's stated favourite brand or did not. Every

time they were shown one of the photographs, each person was told to choose a brand to buy.

When a favourite brand was included, the brain areas activated were different to when two non-favourite brands were exposed, and the choice was made instantly.

Distinctiveness reduces the need to think – making life easier for consumers without them realising it. A distinctive element is anything that shows people what brand a product is. It could be a logo, a colour, a typeface, a recognisable character or ambassador, a sound, a slogan or a jingle.

Attention is the most crucial factor impacting advertising-driven growth and content that gains attention in the environment it will be used in is critical.

In an age of ‘continuous partial attention’, where consumers trade accuracy for speed and prioritise impulsive decision-making over deliberate judgement, the most effective content will be that which appeals to our brain’s intuitive drivers of attention.

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