

Brands aren't science projects

ADVERTISING DIGITAL EDINBURGH

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Culturally, we're at risk of treating brands like science projects, experimenting with their media investments because we can, instead of for the right reasons.

Brands have forecasts and objectives to hit, first and foremost. Experimentation can be part of the route to success, but not the only answer. This was the sentiment of the owner of an up-and-coming retailer I spoke with. They were frustrated with how willing their team was to experiment with their media investment, relegating their immediate revenue target to an afterthought.

Arguably, the experimental culture associated with "test & learn" or "growth hacking" has lost sight of its core meaning: doing what's asked of you, first, then looking to develop further – always moving forward. Instead, there's a growing habit of experimenting with brands like

science projects because of all the wrong reasons: cultural norms, personal development and category pressure.

New media planners and buyers are entering the workplace (agency and client-side) with unrealistic expectations of the custody it takes to grow a brand, and it's not their fault. Experienced brands have a strategy for experimenting with their media investment summarised by Daft Punk as: harder, better, faster.

Make your media work harder

Experimenting feels good. Barnes & Noble College conducted research ([PDF](#)) into Gen-Z, finding "...their preference for self-learning fuels a curiosity and concern about personal fulfilment and social impact.". It's become a cultural norm to self-learn to make us feel like we're developing, personally.

Our need for personal development and gratification should continue but be redirected into identifying ways to accrue experimental investment, first. Identifying how to make your existing media work harder for less will free-up investment to experiment with. If you prioritise earning your experimental investment, you'll have developed ways to make your existing media work better – achieving your primary goal, first.

Better ways to deliver media

Technology has revolutionised the role digital plays in how media is delivered. Millions of people have grown up with 'online' as their main source content. It's therefore, no wonder that it's seen as an advancement to give an algorithm control over our media; automation is huge, fraught with employment [futurism](#) (YouTube). Experienced brand custodians know that experimenting with the scientific delivery of media over the suitability of context comes with risk, for example.

Context isn't always as it seems to be: "Media users will less likely recognize or recall advertisements placed in violent, sexual, or suspenseful contexts or in content that is humorous or highly arousing." as reported in Journal of Advertising Research, Vol. 59, No.

1, 2019. We're fast to blacklist "gay" context ([Vice](#)), but "humorous or highly arousing" can equally have brand safety concerns: think comedian Frankie Boyle.

The "Total Impression of a Brand" represents a brand's name, packaging, price, history, reputation, to name a few, abstract and physical attributes that contribute to what consumers think about a brand. Algorithms are a great way to better deliver media, but only if you are conscious of how it may impact the wider brand impression.

Faster results aren't smarter

In an age where we're able to search for anything and learn about everything, with almost instant immediacy, a self-learning attitude is now engrained in our lives. We've learned to "fail fast" and if you do not experiment, you'll end up like Kodak, not Netflix – a clear story with a binary outcome – do or die.

Experimentation has changed how we invest media. There's more choice than ever and technology has given us easy, self-serve access to media on platforms. Digital has meant that results are often immediate, and this immediacy feeds our positive receptors. The "Like" button for experimentation, almost.

Brands are built over years, not experiments. You must consider what's in their "head" as well in their "actions" when looking to gauge success. Ghost ads are emerging as a more accurate way to measure effectiveness ([American Marketing Association](#) covers research from dataxu).

When leaning into science, start by arguing against yourself. "Good judgement is the result of experience and experience the result of bad judgement." Gain invaluable experience without the need for bad judgement by fighting fiercely for a viewpoint other than your own. Fight fiercely against your experiment. Use your oppositions to refine and improve your experiments, ensuring you're not just going after the most convenient answer – I don't know how my audience feels, for example. When you are good at maths, you'll get good at maths grades, and a job using maths. Science requires you to remove yourself from your

own assumptions.

Respect science

Science is an important way for helping to grow a brand, but without respect for its limitations, you run the risk of investing energy in areas that are easier to deliver immediacy rather than solving the problem. Be a strong brand custodian and place your brands business purpose over your own. Let Daft Punk's motto of: harder, better, faster guide your learn, develop and trial new technologies.

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