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# The Value of TV: A Behavioural Science Perspective

By Richard Shotton



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**ASTROTEN**

Richard Shotton specialises in applying behavioural science to marketing. He has worked in marketing for 24 years and helps brands such as Google, Mondelez and Meta with their challenges.

He is the author of *The Choice Factory*, a best-selling book available in 15 languages, which explains how behavioural science can solve business challenges.

His latest book, *The Illusion of Choice*, came out in March 2023. In 2021 he became an associate of the Moller Institute, Churchill College, Cambridge University and an honorary fellow of the IPA.

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Many econometric studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of TV advertising. But why, exactly, does TV produce such strong results?

This paper offers a behavioural science take on what makes TV such an effective advertising medium, as well as some tips on achieving media and creative success by aligning with the human mind.

After all, advertising is all about persuading, and this works much better when we connect with people's natural motivations and actions.

Specifically, this paper will cover five cognitive and behavioural biases that help explain why TV advertising is so uniquely powerful.

From a behavioural science perspective, TV is so effective because it:

- Is public, and claims made in public are more believable
- Is relatively costly, which signals quality
- Places ads close to other quality ads, which boosts appeal
- Reaches people in a relaxed mood, so they notice more
- Reaches people when they're happy, boosting likeability

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## Claims made in public are more believable

We are far more likely to trust a promise if it's made publicly. TV, as a medium that reaches huge numbers of people, is a perfect fit for this.

Evidence for the impact of public statements comes from research I conducted a few years ago. I asked participants to imagine their local MP making a spending pledge. Sometimes I told them it was made during a one-to-one conversation, sometimes at a public meeting. In the private setting, roughly 40% didn't trust the promise. In the public setting, that figure dropped to 20%.

This happens because we intuitively understand there will be more severe consequences if a publicly stated promise is broken, compared to a private one. The risk of reputational damage compels MPs to be a little more truthful.

If you have a campaign where you need to bolster trust, make sure you harness this insight. The same statement will be more believable if people know others have heard it. So in this situation use a mass medium, like TV or radio, rather than a one-to-one medium, like email or search.

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**Costly signalling builds trust**

Trust in a brand is connected to the perceived expense of its marketing. One study highlighting this comes from Amna Kirmani at Duke University in 1989.

For her study, she gave 214 participants a magazine article describing the launch of a new trainer. The editorial included how much the brand was spending on ads. Sometimes the piece said the brand was spending \$2m, sometimes \$10m, \$20m, or even \$40m.

The psychologists asked the participants to estimate the quality of the shoes on a nine-point scale. Interestingly, the scores generally increased with perceived spend. Those who read that the campaign cost \$20m rated the brand 14% higher than those who saw a \$2m spend.

The psychologists argued that the credibility of a communication is in proportion to its perceived expense. Surely, they said, only marketers who genuinely believe in the quality and long-term success of their product would invest so heavily. This is relevant to media selection as viewers instinctively understand – or at least believe – that TV advertising has higher capital costs than media such as radio or print.

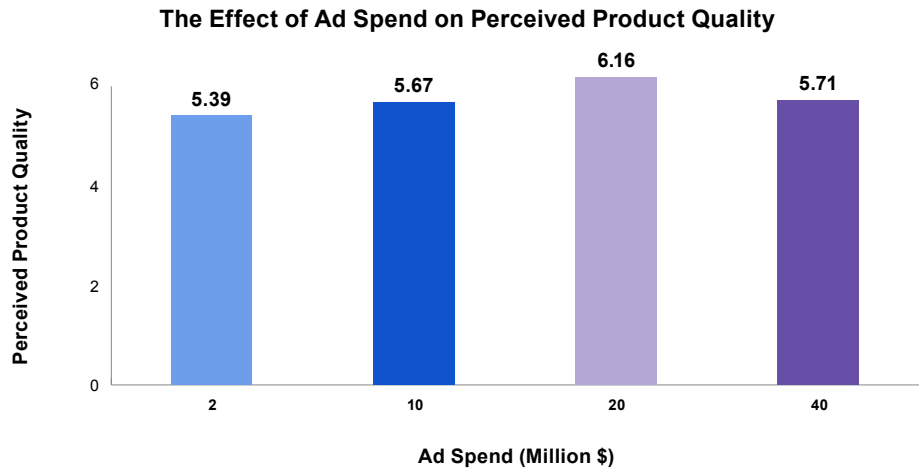


Fig 1 Source: Adapted from Kirmani & Wright (1989)

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**Proximity to quality boosts appeal**

The image of a brand is influenced by what surrounds it – it’s called the mere proximity effect. If a brand advertises alongside high-status companies, it’ll be perceived as more appealing.

In 2022, Heeyon Kim from Cornell University carried out a study to illustrate this. She showed a magazine featuring an ad for a clothing brand to over 1,000 participants. Sometimes the ad was just surrounded by editorial, and sometimes it was surrounded by high-end brand ads (e.g. Chanel, Dior, Hermes) as well.

Participants rated the appeal of the test brands in the first scenario at 3.2 out of 5. When surrounded by high-end brands they were rated at around 3.75. This represents an uplift in appeal of 17%.

Compared to social media, TV requires a relatively large up-front investment. There’s little risk of being surrounded by cheap products – so TV can be effective simply because of the company a brand keeps.

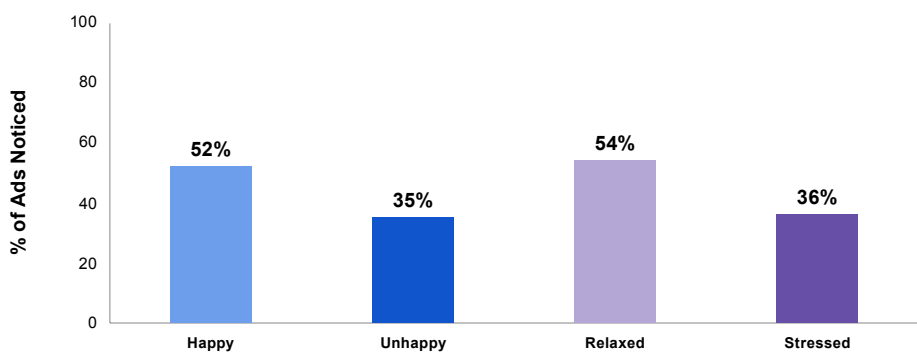
**Good mood makes people notice**

Reaching customers when they’re happy means they’ll notice more. Evidence for this comes from a study by Fred Bronner, a professor of advertising at the University of Amsterdam. He asked 1,287 participants to flick through a newspaper and then answer questions about the ads they remembered.

When the data was split by the readers’ mood, Bronner noticed that those who were happy recalled 52% of ads, whereas those who were unhappy noticed just 35%.

Stress levels were important too: relaxed participants noticed 54% of ads; those who were stressed remembered just 36%.

**The Effect of Mood and Stress Levels on Ad Awareness**



**Fig 2** Results from Bronner (2007)

So brands that reach people as they lounge on the sofa with a cup of tea and a comedy will naturally find a receptive audience.

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### Happiness promotes liking

Mood affects more than recall though: a good mood also makes customers like you more.

I conducted an experiment to test this, showing 2,035 people an ad and asking how much they liked it. They also rated their mood in that moment on a scale from 0 - miserable, to 10 - very happy.

The results were significant. When consumers were happy, 21% of them liked the ad. In contrast, only 13% of unhappy people liked the same ad. That's a 62% swing in the liking of the ad.

So, if viewers are feeling generally happy, as can often be the case when watching TV, they will be inclined to think positively of the brands they see.

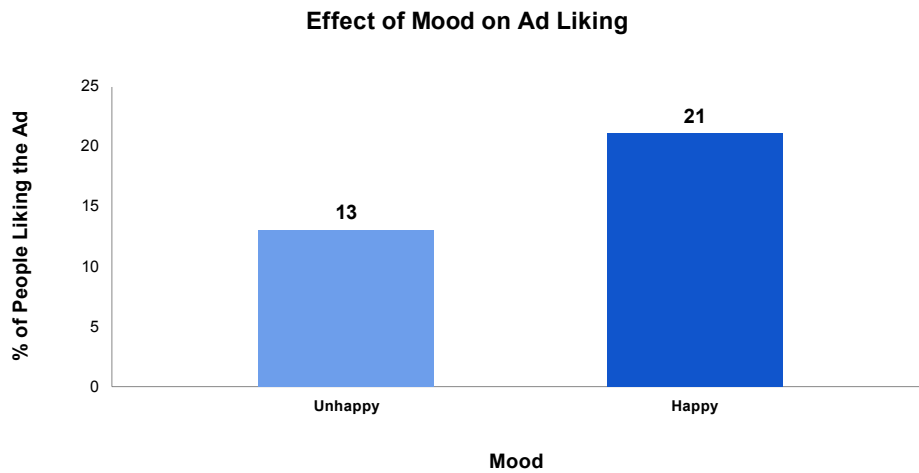


Fig 3 Source: Astroten own research

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## Target happiness

We noted above that being in a good mood increases the chance of a person liking a brand. Media agencies can use this knowledge strategically.

Rather than simply using TV-viewing as a predictor of positive mood, why not specifically target channels or programming that makes us relaxed? Light entertainment on a Saturday night might work better than Monday night news.

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## Harness the group effect

We tend to respond more strongly to a message when we're in a group. Evidence for this comes from 2014 research by Garriy Shteynberg at the University of Tennessee, and colleagues. For the study, 121 participants saw images on a TV, sitting on their own or in pairs, and rated each picture.

Viewers in a group experienced more extreme emotional reactions: happy images made them happier and sad images made them sadder. A similar effect was observed with scary ads and sad or happy videos.

So, to elicit a bigger response, think about programming that's viewed in groups, like sporting events.



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## Leverage laughter

Given the effects of group viewing on emotional response, it's perhaps not surprising that we find things more amusing when surrounded by others. This can be seen in work by University of Houston psychologists Yong Zhang and George Zinkhan in 1991.

They recruited 216 students to view amusing soft drink commercials. Sometimes people watched the ads on their own, sometimes in groups. The psychologists found that those watching in groups judged the ads as 16% funnier than those who watched solo. It seems that humour is contagious, if one person starts laughing at an ad others begin to find it a bit more amusing.

It makes sense, then, to showcase humorous ads in particular during group events, when they'll go down especially well.

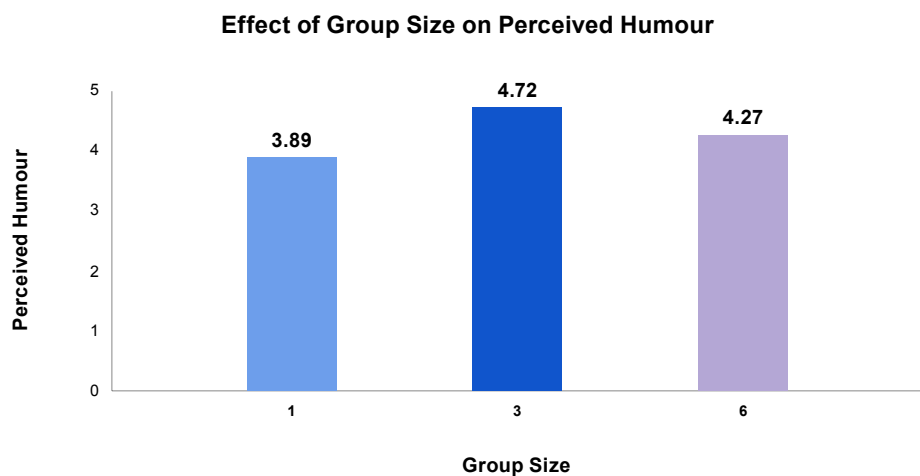


Fig 4 Source: Adapted from Zhang and Zinkhan (1991)

## Use distraction to overcome confirmation bias

Confirmation bias is the idea that we look for information that fits our beliefs and ignore what doesn't. But when distracted, we're more likely to change our minds.

We see this in a 1964 study by Stanford psychologist Leon Festinger. He recruited members of college fraternities and played them an audio argument about why fraternities were morally wrong. The recording was either played on its own or accompanied by an unrelated silent film.

When asked how far their views had shifted, students who'd heard the argument at the same time as the silent film were more likely to have changed their mind. Festinger argued that the human brain is brilliant at conjuring up counter-arguments to help it maintain its existing point of view. However, when people are busy doing something else, that ability is hampered meaning they're a bit more open to persuasion.

So if you're ever trying to win over rejecters of your brand, running ads when attention is divided can work well. How about daytime TV while people do housework?

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## Have a laugh

As we saw above, mood really matters. One of the important principles of behavioural science is the need to make your desired behaviour attractive. So, build a bit of levity into your campaigns and you'll be on to a winner, because people instinctively turn towards things that give pleasure.

If you need convincing, a 2009 meta-analysis by Martin Eisend at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt, assessed 38 high-quality papers on the topic.

Humorous ads had significant beneficial correlations with (in descending strength):

- Attention
- Attitudes towards the ad
- A reduction in negative emotion
- Positive emotions
- Purchase intent
- Attitudes towards the brand

It seems like common sense, yet so many ads are devoid of wit. It's an underused opportunity to boost ad impact.

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**Make it concrete**

Things are more memorable when we can picture them in our mind's eye. The classic study demonstrating this had some methodological flaws, so I reran it, along with Mike Treharne from Leo Burnett, to see if it holds true today.

We recruited 425 consumers and gave them a list of 10 phrases, some abstract and some concrete:

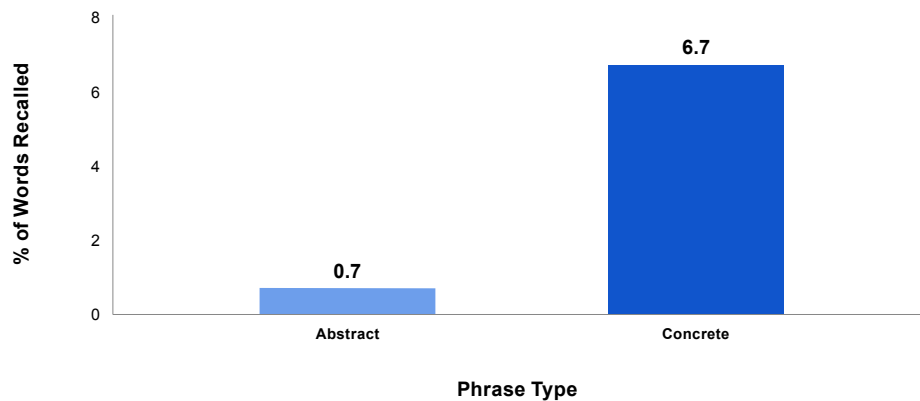
Concrete	Abstract
<i>fast car, skinny jeans, cashew nut, money in your pocket and happy hens</i>	<i>Innovative quality, trusted provenance, central purpose, wholesome nutrition and ethical vision</i>

We waited 5 minutes and asked people to recall as many as possible. The results were pronounced: participants remembered almost 10 times more concrete phrases than abstract ones (6.7% vs 0.7%). Since vision is the most powerful of our senses, we're far more likely to remember phrases that we can picture than those we can't.

To harness concreteness for TV ads, brands should consider using a 'fluent device' – defined by System1, as "characters or scenarios that repeat across ads, driving the creative each time". A prime example is the Compare the Market meerkats. Because it's much, much easier to imagine and remember a cute meerkat in a smoking jacket than it is the abstract idea of 'value for money'.

So if you're devising a campaign – especially if you're selling something intangible – do what you can to build concrete language into your creative.

**Percentage of Abstract vs. Concrete Words Recalled**



**Fig 5** Source: Astroten own research

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In summary, certain tactics in TV marketing that seem instinctively right actually have a solid behavioural science evidence base to explain why they may be effective. Understanding this research can give you confidence that your approach works in alignment with your audience.

