Marketers know that emotional response plays an important role in consumer decision making, but many still push explicit messages in ads at the expense of emotional relevance and creative engagement. So, should marketers forget about trying to say anything and just make ads that entertain? No, but they need to be a lot smarter about how they convey functional benefits and evoke an emotional response.

Advertising works best when it makes a memorable and lasting impression.
In our connected world, the perception is that people are ‘always on’ but that doesn’t mean they’re always receiving. We know people actively block content on their digital devices, and that skipping ads has become second nature, especially among younger viewers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I skip ads whenever I can</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I installed an ad blocker/changed settings</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I look away from screen/do something else</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t mind ads</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kantar Millward Brown, AdReaction Gen X, Y and Z Study, 2017
We recently conducted research to explore a typical week's advertising across TV, pre-roll and social media. We found that almost two thirds of the ads reviewed delivered an explicit product message.

This seems at odds with the evidence from cognitive science that people rarely think through decisions, and that snap judgements and instinctive reactions are a key part of the brand decision making process.
Emotional relevance and creative engagement in advertising are critical to success. Kantar Millward Brown’s database shows that, when compared with ads that focus on a key message, ads with creative impact, driven by branded, emotional engagement, have a much clearer relationship with in-market sales effects. Failing to get the key message across in ads is associated with a lower likelihood of a sales response – but this is dwarfed in comparison to the problems caused by failing to engage viewers.

% OF ADS SHOWING A SHORT TERM SALES SHARE INCREASE

Source: Kantar Millward Brown Sales Validation
This includes the creative idea, what is said in the ad, the way the story is told, and the emotional tone. It’s time to stop selling product features and start building brands instead.

For many brands, making this change goes against the rules of conventional wisdom, and change may require taking a huge leap of faith.

To help make the leap, Kantar Millward Brown identified **five key creative development principles** used successfully by brands around the world.

MARKETERS NEED TO FIND A BALANCE BETWEEN ENTERTAINING, BRANDING AND COMMUNICATING.

So what’s the best approach? Brands which have clear meaning are more powerful and successful in the long term. Marketers should move beyond the message and focus on the impression they want the ad to leave behind as a whole.
Kantar Millward Brown established that brands that are meaningfully different have the greatest chance of financial success. These brands achieve greater share, and can command a higher price premium. We also know the importance of needs-based salience in helping to influence brand choice when the consumer is in a decision making stage.

While the relative importance of being meaningful, different and salient differs by category and country, all brands should set out to deliver impressions that are meaningfully different. Superior functional differentiation offers perhaps the best way to motivate people to buy, but too many ads try to tell people what the brand does instead of demonstrating the benefits for them as consumers. And, as we all know, functional differentiation is hard to maintain in today’s competitive world, so brands end up perpetually innovating to maintain position.

More sustainable competitive advantage that doesn’t require continuous innovation can come through building a brand’s emotional meaningful difference.
Emotional meaningfulness is about a brand being more liked by consumers than other brands, and emotional difference is about a brand behaving in a way that makes it seem more dynamic or progressive than other brands. The way a brand communicates can be valuable in conveying meaningful difference. Meaningful impressions are often suggested rather than claimed.

As we noted earlier, the majority of ads developed today continue to use an explicit approach to deliver a message. This is perhaps more understandable for new brands or products, where it’s important to quickly establish what the brand is and what it does. However, our research showed that nearly two thirds of brands are telling people what benefits they offer, even after being well established.

Emotional meaningful difference often comes from dramatising a brand’s purpose—what the brand stands for, its point of view, and its values. There are a number of good examples of brands whose ads are incredibly engaging and highly viewed in digital channels that also leave behind impressions which will support the brand long term.

In 2013, feminine care brand, Always, moved away from the category norm of developing ads showing women happily getting on with life during their period—backed up with reassuring product demos. Instead, Always focused its attention on what the brand has long stood for, empowering girls through puberty education. Always built a new and more meaningful understanding of confidence which would resonate with the next generation of female consumers at a time when they may feel awkward and less confident. The ‘Like a girl’ campaign was born.

“...We really had to start thinking about a different way to elevate the brand to go from just functional superiority to what we call ‘emotional superiority’.”

Karuna Rawal
EVP/Business Director, Arc Worldwide

In the 2016 ad, ‘Like a girl: keep playing’, Always encouraged girls to continue playing sports. The ad was based on the insight that 70% of girls don’t feel they belong, and half drop out of sports even though it can help them remain confident through puberty. While the “keep playing” message is quite overt, there is no product message.

Without saying a word about Always products, the ad positions the brand as different from its competitors. At an instinctive level, the ad makes viewers see the brand as a leader – confident and supportive.

Our research showed that the Always ad scored in the top third for Active Involvement. This was proven in market by achieving 28 million views on YouTube, and by being the seventh most watched ad on the platform, and second among women.

**ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT**
top third of ads

**POWER CONTRIBUTION**
top third of ads

28 million
**YOUTUBE VIEWS**

**INTUITIVE ASSOCIATIONS**
show the ad to convey Supportive, Leader, and Confident associations.
Another good example of emotional meaningful difference came from Amazon in 2016. Their ‘Priest and Imam’ ad celebrates interfaith friendship, and according to the company, is about “selflessness and thinking of other people”. In the ad, the two old friends meet and both realise they’re not quite as young as they once were. The priest has a great idea and orders knee pads from Amazon for his friend. The viewer soon sees that the imam has the same idea.

There are few overt product messages in the ad, instead we see the priest using the Amazon app and the emotional payoff of being able to order with one click and have a gift delivered the next day. The ad closes without an end line or use of the brand’s name. Instead, we just see the Amazon Smile.

The ‘Priest and the Imam’ aired on TV and then achieved viral fame. Twitter was filled with comments from people who said it was a beautiful ad that made them cry; others said it gave them hope. It wasn’t warmly received universally, and some criticised the ad for pushing an agenda of Islamic tolerance. When we researched the ad for this project, the response was very positive. It triggered very strong emotional responses, with enjoyment in the top 20% of ads tested in the UK, and the app usage drove strong linkage to the Amazon brand. Most importantly, the ad’s Power Contribution score, which is a Kantar Millward Brown measure of the ad’s likelihood to drive long term brand equity was in the top quarter of ads tested, showing that it gave people reasons to be predisposed to Amazon into the future.

THE STORY RESONATES WITH VIEWERS
Facial coding shows strong smiles were generated at key points throughout the ‘Priest and Imam’ ad.

“PRIEST AND IMAM”
Facial Coding (Smile by Enjoyment)

Source: Kantar Millward Brown, 2017

POWER CONTRIBUTION
Food quarter
ENJOYMENT
Food quarter
BRANDING
Food quarter
AFFINITY
Food 15%

KANTAR MILLWARD BROWN
Arguably, going down the path of more implicit impressions is even more important in digital ads, where brands have to overcome the viewer’s intended goal and get them to view the video (pre-roll). While we do see greater use of implicit delivery in digital ads than in TV, the majority of brand content is still explicit and focuses on message.

![Graph showing percentages of explicit and implicit content in TV, Social Media, and Pre-Roll](source: Kantar Millward Brown Global Database)

Even without purpose, it’s possible for a brand to communicate in a way that resonates with viewers: it may reflect their values, their experiences, their personality or their aspirations. It might be as simple as showing viewers things that they like, or that make them laugh. Some of the world’s strongest campaigns have been built on the platform of an idea that is personally relevant to viewers or on insights that reflect fundamental human truths.
WORK WITH THE BRAIN, NOT AGAINST IT

The uncomfortable truth for brand managers and advertisers is that people don’t care about brands or ads, so their brains filter them out. Ads which engage people creatively and emotionally tend to work better because they’re working with the brain, not against it.

Kantar Millward Brown tracks the way people feel about brands using an implicit measure of emotional response (a variation of the Harvard IAT), which shows that most brands prompt only a weakly positive instinctive response. Certainly nothing like the strength of feeling that truly emotive material, like images of large spiders, or sensual imagery creates.

Some marketers want to believe that their messages and brands are reaching people at an unconscious or implicit level. But unconscious processing only happens at a very low level – so most of the sensory stimulus people are bombarded with is filtered out before anything sticks.
This has real implications for the way marketers develop and measure advertising. Here are three steps to consider when developing content:

1. **SHOOT FOR INSTANT MEANING**

   Ads need to have ‘instant meaning’ to stand a chance, and marketers need to use measurement methods which assess this. Kantar Millward Brown’s database of ads shows that the more you try to say, the less you will get across. When developing ads based on an idea or feeling you want to communicate, make sure these can easily be grasped. An idea or impression has a better chance of landing, and influencing what are often superficial future purchase decisions. From a measurement point of view, marketers should look more at the broad impressions left by an ad and how effortlessly people can access those impressions.

   ![TV: Communication of key messages relating to how many messages were in the ad](source: Kantar Millward Brown Global Database)

2. **MAKE PEOPLE ‘FEEL’ SOMETHING**

   People feel first and think second, so ads which take an emotional route have a better chance of breaking through the brain’s filters. Emotional cues are often processed automatically and can make a powerful contribution to the essence of an ad even if people are only engaged superficially. And emotional responses send a signal to the brain telling us to pay attention. This is why ads which generate emotional responses (as measured by people’s facial expressions), are more likely to generate sales effects.

   ![Clear relationship between expressiveness and sales shifts](source: Kantar Millward Brown Global Database)

3. **EARLY BRANDING IS IMPORTANT FOR ONLINE AND MOBILE VIDEO**

   People will often partially engage with an ad but won’t watch it to the end. This is why early branding is important. There are two good ways to do this: make the brand essential to an emotionally powerful storyline, or use easily recognisable brand cues which require no effort to register with viewers. In video advertising, don’t leave branding to the end because viewers shut down and are distracted by the content that follows. And, although branding early on is important in digital ads, simply showing the brand on screen or as a super isn’t enough unless it plays a role in the narrative.
GOOD STORYTELLING LEAVES AN IMPRESSION

Stories can be very powerful for brands. They present the opportunity to engage audiences, to leave lasting memories, and to provoke emotional (and rational) responses.

Ads that use storytelling are more involving, more noticeable and more memorable, all of which contribute to sales. They are more likely to generate smiles; and we’ve seen that ads that make people show emotion on their face generate more short-term sales than ads that don’t.
Yet, relatively few ads tell a story. We looked at ads in 14 countries across channels and platforms and only four in 10 were ‘story’ ads. This varied widely by country. In Kenya, USA, and India 50% of the ads included stories. In Australia and China it was under 30%.

And, the majority of ads that did use storytelling still included an explicit delivery of information. Perhaps some marketers who are brave enough use storytelling to generate engagement, but think they need to end with an explicit message to ensure the ad has the intended effect. We have seen many cases where this has been successful so we’re not suggesting that it’s wrong. However, as we saw with Amazon’s ‘Priest and Imam’ ad, a well told story doesn’t require any explanation.

The most viewed and most viral ads of 2016 provided many examples of great storytelling that benefit the brand.
One such ad was UK retailer, John Lewis’ Christmas ad, ‘Buster the Boxer’, in which we see a little girl’s Christmas present, a trampoline, enjoyed by wild animals, and then by her dog, Buster, on Christmas day.

This story works so well for John Lewis on a number of levels. It is thoroughly enjoyable, easy to understand, and differentiates the brand from other retailers. It has the ability not only to generate short term sales, but also to support the brand’s longer term equity. Facial coding shows the ad has a high positive valence, with a gradual build in smiles, peaking at the end of the ad.

JOHN LEWIS STORY TRIGGERS A STRONG POSITIVE INTUITIVE RESPONSE

“Buster the Boxer” - Facial Coding (Smile & Frown)

Source: Kantar Millward Brown, 2017

ENJOYMENT
top 5% of ads

SHORT TERM SALES LIKELIHOOD
top quarter of ads

POWER CONTRIBUTION
top 15% of ads

1.95 million YOUTUBE SHARES
Another good technique used to deliver brand impressions is the filming of a staged event. One of the most viral ads from 2016, from Volkswagen in Norway, showed a driver backing up his car and trailer at high speed—through parking lots, roundabouts and intersections—to demonstrate the trailer assist feature. Much of the ad focuses on the reaction of other drivers and pedestrians.

In the UK, the Volkswagen ad is seen as very highly involving and facial coding reveals that emotional response builds during the ad, particularly towards the end when the secret is revealed. The ad clearly delivers the message of reversing with ease but the focus is on the trailer not the car. Despite the logo appearing on screen for the duration of the film, branding is poor, so the ad has limited ability to build impressions.

Another Volkswagen ad used a more conventional storytelling approach, in which horses in a field laugh hysterically as one man fails to reverse park his horse trailer, but the horses are quickly silenced when another driver with trailer assist does it perfectly the first time.

This is highly engaging, and generated the highest levels of smiles in the ads we covered in this project. The ad is well branded and communicates the message about the ease of reversing more strongly than the previous example, making the ad far more likely to be seen as different.
We have argued that great advertising can focus less on an explicit message and more on the implicit building of impressions. This is the start of a ‘virtuous circle’: without facts or functional messages, ads can be more engaging, and the means of engagement can be part of the impressions left behind.

Kantar Millward Brown has found the single best predictor of in-market effects for ads is branding. Creating an engaging film without branding won’t add value to the brand.

**HIGH BRANDING SCORES RELATE TO STRONGER SALES EFFECTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Short Term Sales Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Branding</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium Branding</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Branding</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kantar Millward Brown Global Database
This is also consistent with evidence from Ehrenberg-Bass on the importance of ‘mental availability’ for brands. Ads with weak branding have no chance to boost the ease with which brands come to mind at the point of decision. Kantar Millward Brown evidence shows that ads with a strong narrative only result in motivation if they are also well branded.

We often talk about the importance of strong integration of brand throughout the story line, the use of distinctive brand assets, or the development of a distinctive creative style. These elements are equally important in digital channels. If people like the brand, there’s a good chance they’ll stop to look at brand content in social channels.

**THIS IS WHY, FOR DIGITAL VIDEO, IT’S WORTH BRANDING EARLY ON. IT PROVIDES A CHANCE OF BRAND EXPOSURE EVEN IN VIDEOS PEOPLE SKIP.**
The Skittles 2016 Super bowl ad, ‘Portrait’, achieves strong branding in a number of ways. The action in the ad revolves around a portrait of singer-songwriter, Steven Tyler, of Aerosmith fame, that is made of Skittles. This is done in Skittle’s unmistakable, quirky style and tone of voice. The ad closes with the line, “taste the rainbow".
One rule that hasn’t changed for marketers is the importance of starting with the right creative, reaching the right people, in the right channel, on the right platform, and at the right time. That’s a lot to get right but it’s critical to delivering the right impressions.
THE RIGHT CHANNEL

A good place to begin with getting the channel right is by understanding where people’s eyeballs are. Kantar Millward Brown’s *AdReaction: Gen X, Y and Z* study found that 65% of people claim to watch traditional TV for at least an hour a day. Meanwhile 79% say they are using the internet on a desktop or laptop for at least an hour a day, and 69% are using a mobile device.

Learning from Kantar Millward Brown’s Cross Media studies, and other independent studies, tends to show that digital channels offer small, but helpful, incremental reach over TV. However, digital does help to build frequency, and effect per reach can be more cost effective than TV. UK industry think tank, Thinkbox, summed this up in a statement, “TV and other forms of video are the dream team. TV may be the most effective form of video, but it is made even more effective when used in conjunction with other forms of video.”

**TV AND ONLINE VIDEO WORK IN SYNERGY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TV ONLY</th>
<th>BOTH</th>
<th>ONLINE VIDEO ONLY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% increase in avg. no. VL business effects from adding</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IPA Database, 2014 - 2016 Cases

Today, there is a temptation to think only of video as a means of building impressions with people. *AdReaction: Gen X, Y and Z* reminds us that ‘traditional advertising’ – outdoor and print – continues to be perceived favourably and should not be discounted from media plans.

*Thinkbox, TV in the Video World*
Ads that are emotionally engaging, and build memorable and lasting impressions are more effective. By working with people’s brains engaging advertising can seed ideas, associations and feelings that are triggered during the purchase process, even long after the ad was last seen.

Ads that deliver an explicit message won’t benefit brands to the same degree as an ad focused on building impressions. When there is a need to reinforce functional benefits, deliver the message in a creative way. In general, ‘show’ don’t ‘tell’. People tend not to remember explicit messages without lots of repetition but a creative demonstration will help improve memorability. We aren’t advocating ‘dumping’ the message in ads altogether; there will be situations, such as product launches, where specific product messages will be beneficial but in the majority of cases they may be a hindrance rather than a help.

But whatever the format used, it is essential for the ad to be harnessed to the brand; the brand needs to be integrated into the ad for the ad to benefit the brand.

Following our 5 principles of creative development is a good start to looking at the ad development process with a fresh perspective and a focus on delivering LASTING IMPRESSIONS TO GROW YOUR BRAND.