

# ANOTHER DULL WHITEPAPER

**THE  
EXTRAORDINARY  
COST OF DULL**

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# DULL IS EVERYWHERE

In 2023, Adam Morgan, founder of eatbigfish, had been noticing a worrying trend.

**A trend for the vanilla, the bland, the beige in our culture, and in our work.**

**He was so concerned about this that, as part of his ongoing Challenger Project work, he set up a podcast called “Let’s Make This More Interesting”. The aim was to find the world’s specialists in taking a dull subject or mission and making it better... much better...in order that it may be more effective in its objective.**

**Adam interviewed experts from primary school teachers, to challenger brands, to CMOs, to Oscar-winning directors, to one of the Sesame Street writers – all people on a mission to find brilliant ways to make dull subjects fascinating.**

As part of his endeavour, Adam reached out to his friend and former colleague Peter Field to see if he had noticed the same shift in today’s advertising and what impact that was having on effectiveness.

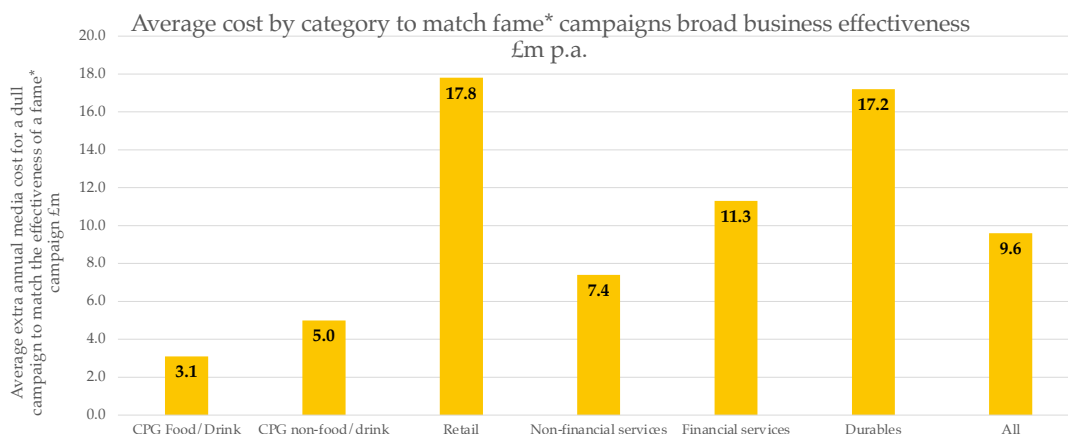
Yes - in fact, Peter had compiled IPA data to prove it, separating rational, salesmanship advertising from emotional, showmanship advertising. He saw a strong correlation that the more the industry leaned into short-term, sales-orientated messages, the less effective overall the industry became.

## QUITE WORRYING INDEED



Adam and Peter sought to explain this further. Was there an economic impact of this penchant for the bland? Using the IPA data, they looked at the business effects of the rational and most emotional campaigns (fame campaigns) – each about a quarter of the sample – noting a marked difference between the two types. The issue became even clearer after Peter overlaid the level of extra media spend a single campaign would need (extra share of voice) to be as effective as the most emotionally engaging, least dull ads.

## THE COST OF DULL TO UK BRANDS (GB£)



Base: IPA effectiveness databank, 2010-2022 cases

\*These are emotional ads that successfully inspire people to share or talk about them

**Peter Field**  
Marketing & Communications Strategy

### THUS, THE COST OF DULL WAS BORN.

Knowing that emotion drives commercial success, Adam and Peter wanted to go further to prove that dullness is the biggest threat facing our industry...and then share that warning far and wide. After all, brands spend the same money putting a boring advert out in the world as they do an interesting one. But the impact of the dull ad, and that money, is a great deal less.

This is where Jon Evans comes in. As Chief Customer Officer at System1 and host of the Uncensored CMO podcast, Jon has access to over 100,000 ads in the Test Your Ad platform and numerous interviews with experts on how to make advertising interesting. System1's Test Your Ad platform measures how people feel about ads to predict their long- and short-term potential. And when Jon and System1 cut the database by emotion, something very interesting emerged.

The most common emotion wasn't Happiness, Surprise or even Anger.

### IT WAS NEUTRALITY - THE ABSENCE OF AN EMOTION.

To what extent would the lack of emotion impact creativity's business effects?

This whitepaper combines the cultural work from eatbigfish, Peter Field, the IPA and System1 to put a price on the cost of Dull advertising. We reveal its opportunity costs by looking closely at the media spend levels and business impact of different degrees of advertising dullness, from the Non-Dull to the Extremely Dull.

### WE PROMISE THE INSIGHTS WILL BE FAR FROM BORING.

# THE EXTRAORDINARY COST OF DULL

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**JON EVANS**  
UNCENSORED CMO

**eatbigfish.**

**Peter Field**  
Marketing & Communications Strategy



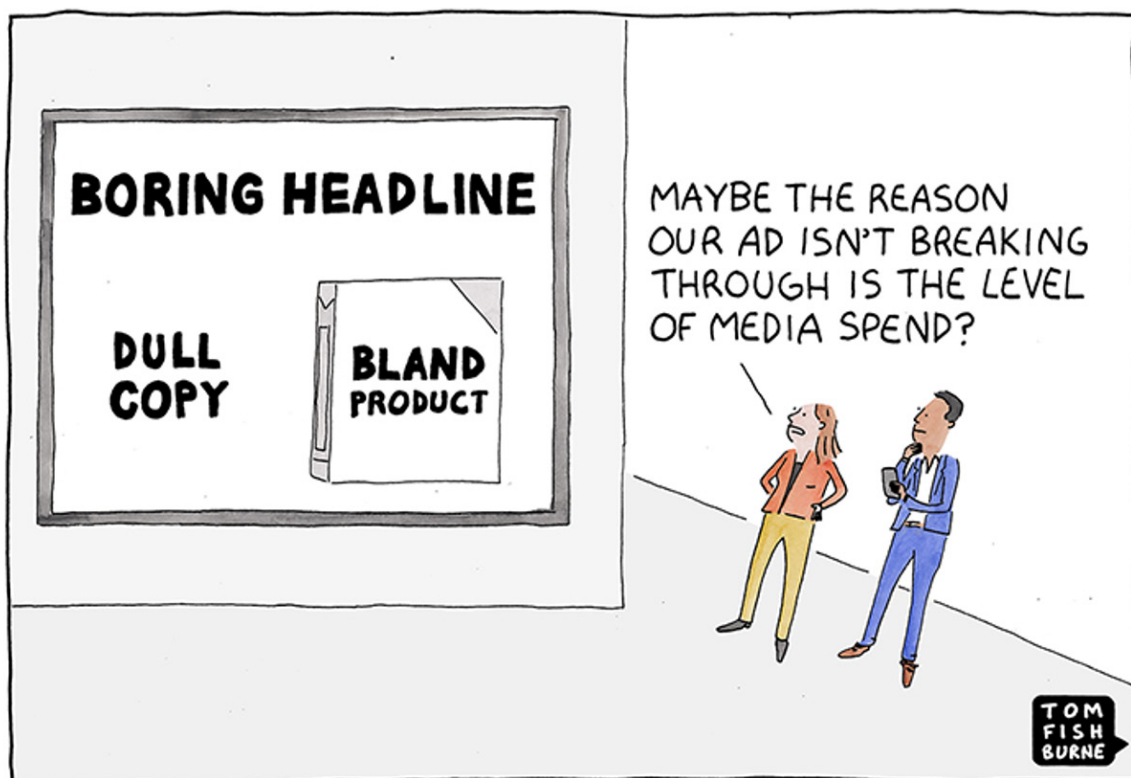


# THERE'S SOME GOOD NEWS FOR THE INDUSTRY.

Nobody is trying to make a boring ad, and it turns out marketers know when they've made one that isn't dull, and they invest accordingly in extra share of voice. But the duller half of advertising still sees a lot of spend for little return. Marketers are paying a tedium tax every time they put a boring ad out in the world - something we'd like to help them avoid.

It doesn't have to be that way. This report also looks at the elements that make advertising dull, and how to avoid them. Product messages and branding don't have to send audiences to sleep - there's not a trade off between excitement and effectiveness. Dull advertising is a problem that can be solved.

Solving that problem is about to become more urgent. The AI revolution means it's easier than ever to make an ad. Which means it's easier than ever to make a dull ad. Dodging the cost of Dull is going to be a vital imperative in an era where average is just a click away.



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By Tom Fishburne created exclusively for the presentation at Cannes

**THE  
EXTRAORDINARY  
COST OF DULL**

**PART 1**  
**THE PROBLEM  
OF DULL**

# PART 1 THE PROBLEM OF DULL

This paper is in two parts. First, we're going to explore the problem of Dull - how common it is for people to feel nothing about ads, and how much this Neutral response is costing brands and businesses.

Then, we're going to try and find some solutions. We'll look at Adam Morgan and eatbigfish's work on the causes of dullness and how to avoid them. eatbigfish have drawn here on their ongoing study and work with challenger brands whose ambitions and budgets mean they simply can't afford to bore their audience. We'll tap into System1's Test Your Ad database in search of ads we see as shining examples in dull categories.

When we decided to write about dull advertising, though, we knew we didn't want to call advertisers out. This paper is about learning, and nobody goes into the difficult process of making an ad hoping it won't be too interesting.

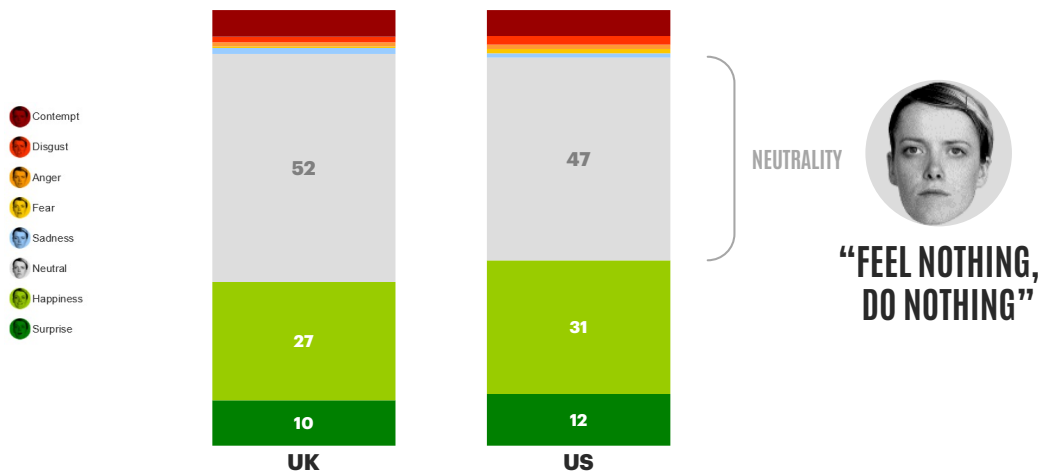


Well, almost nobody. One ad in our database literally involves watching paint dry! And another shows cows grazing. That's all you get: 20 seconds of cows gently munching in a field.

Even an ad like that, in which nothing happens, scores in line with the average TV ad for effectiveness.

While most of the cow ad's audience (56%) feel nothing, that actually is not enough Neutrality to put it at the bottom of our study, in the "Extremely Dull" advertising quartile. Yes, you heard us right, more than 1 in 4 ads create even less response than a 20' film of a cow in a field.

## EMOTION BUILDS BRANDS BUT NEUTRALITY - FEELING NOTHING - IS THE MAIN RESPONSE TO TV ADVERTISING



UK: Average Emotional Response of All Commercial Category UK TV ads (n>27,000) tested in Test Your Ad Premium since 2017, >4million nationally representative respondent ratings  
 US: Average Emotional Response of All Commercial Category US TV ads (n>55,000) tested in Test Your Ad Premium since 2017, from 7.6 million nationally representative respondent ratings

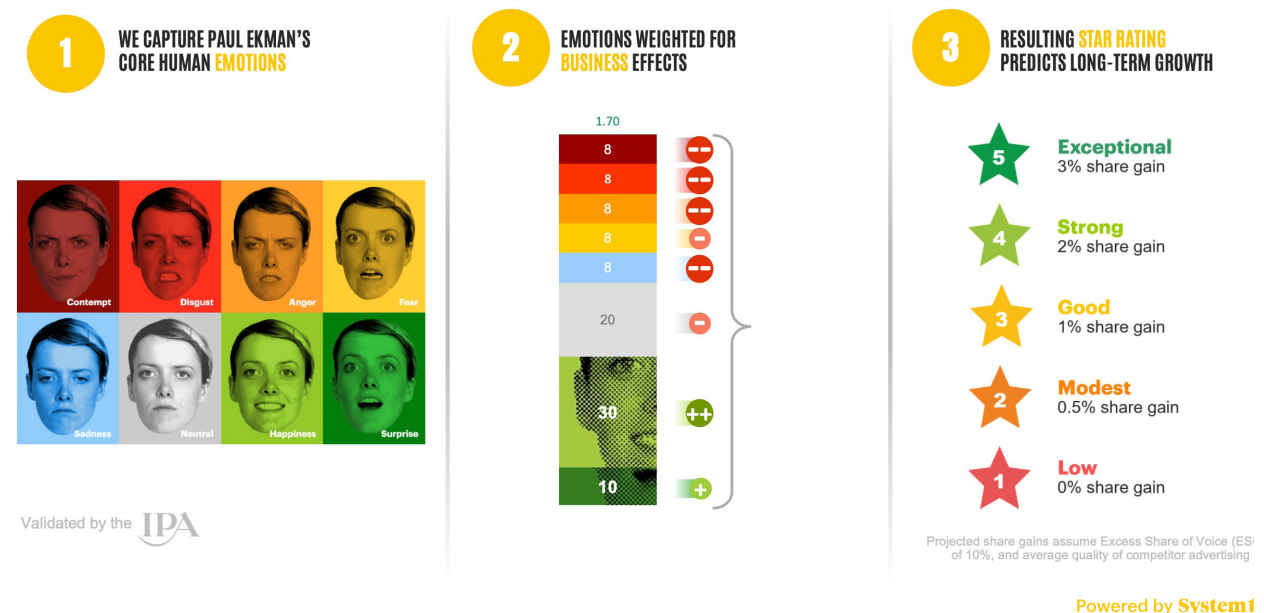
Powered by System1

# PART 1 THE PROBLEM OF DULL

## DEFINING DULL

While you're chewing on that idea, let's have a look at how we're defining Dull, in order to understand the scope of the problem.

System1's Test Your Ad platform measures emotional response to ads, because emotion is what builds brands. We ask people about 7 different emotions - the positive ones of Happiness and Surprise, and the negative ones (Anger, Fear, Sadness, Disgust and Contempt).



These emotional responses predict the short- and long-term potential of an ad. The positive feelings, especially Happiness, help drive long-term response. If an ad makes people feel good, it's more memorable and more effective at building positive associations with a brand. Negative emotions make that far less likely.

Meanwhile, all 7 emotions, and the intensity with which audiences feel them, play a part in predicting short-term sales response to an ad. Intense emotion of any kind draws attention, cuts through, and increases the salience of a brand for people in the 'buying window' for a category.

But there's an eighth emotion audiences can pick in our model - Neutrality. Neutrality has no emotional intensity; it's the absence of emotion. **Neutrality in our model is like dark matter in physics - it leaves no trace, it doesn't interact with anything else, but in many cases it represents more of the audience response than all the emotions combined.**

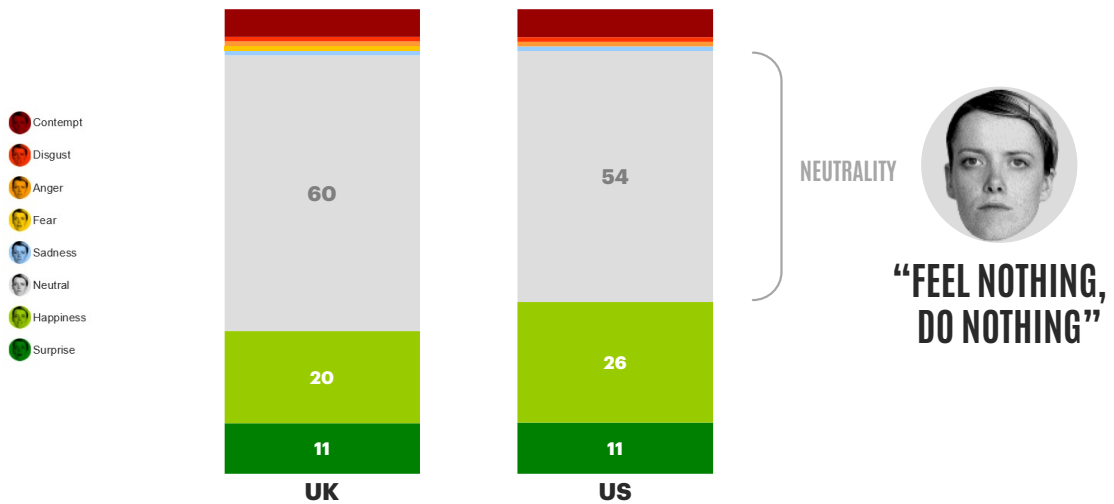


# PART 1 THE PROBLEM OF DULL

For the average UK TV ad, 52% of responses are Neutral. In the US, the situation's a little better, but at 47% Neutrality is still by far the most common response to an ad.

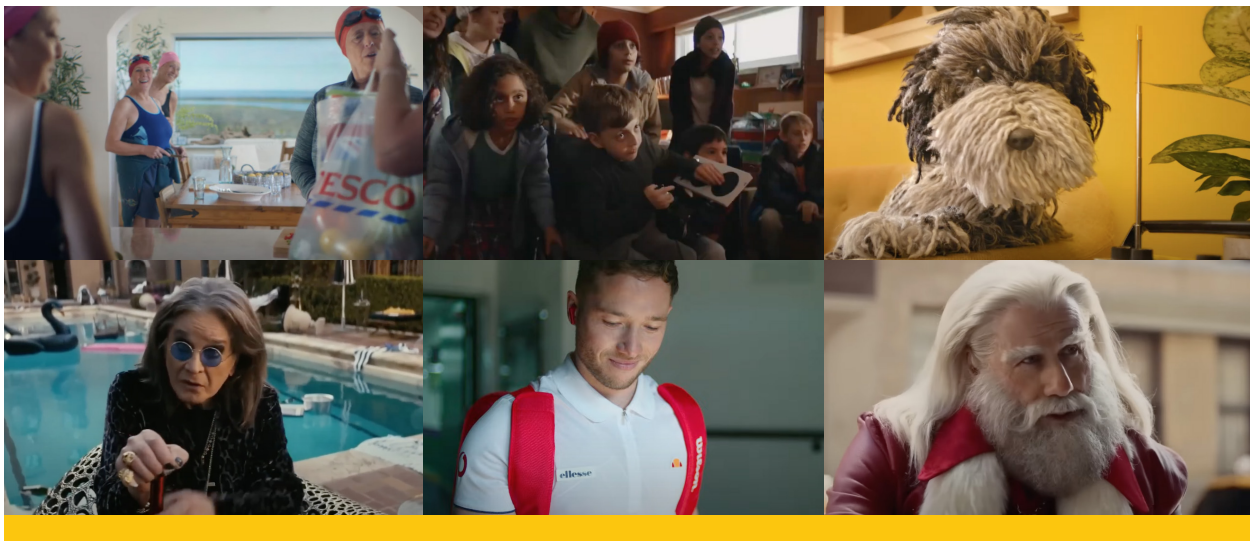
**With B2B ads, the situation is even worse.** Neutrality rules, covering 60% of UK B2B response and 54% of US response. Emotion is just as important in B2B ads, and emotional ads in the sector can stand out even more, but most brands play it safe and adopt a tone of voice that leads to a Neutral reaction.

## EMOTION BUILDS BRANDS BUT NEUTRALITY - FEELING NOTHING - IS THE MAIN RESPONSE TO B2B TV ADVERTISING



UK: Average Emotional Response of All Commercial Category UK TV ads (n>400) tested in Test Your Ad Premium since 2017.  
 US: Average Emotional Response of US B2B TV ads (n>2,600) tested in Test Your Ad Premium since 2017, from 370,000 nationally representative respondent ratings

Powered by **System1**

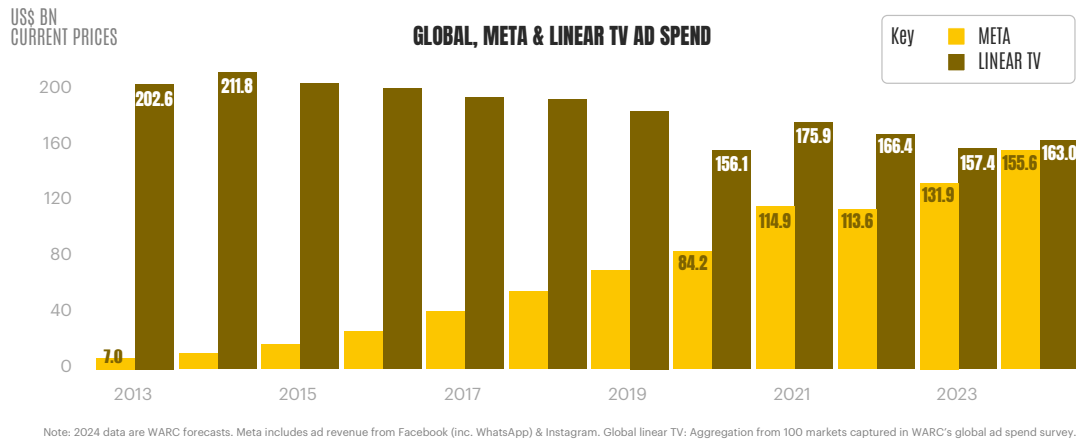




# PART 1 THE PROBLEM OF DULL

The problem is made more urgent by the direction in which money is flowing right now. Most spend is going to digital channels - WARC data shows that Meta spend is now almost in line with Linear TV- and the proportion is only increasing. Ads on those channels tend to be more short-termist, more transactional and hence more neutral emotionally.

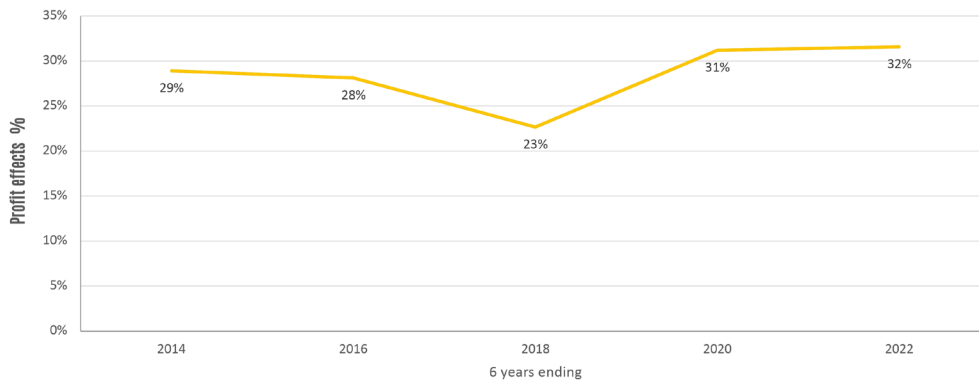
## ALL THE MONEY IS HEADED TOWARDS DULL DIGITAL [FINALLY] KILLED THE TV STAR



Peter Field's recent presentation at the Future of TV Advertising conference showed that although TV was becoming more effective in terms of boosting brand profitability, most advertisers were under-investing in the channel. He argued that TV's continued pre-eminent effectiveness was due to the greater attention it gets, the bigger emotional punch it has and the stronger trust it earns.

## TV'S IMPACT ON PROFIT

% TV users reporting very large profit effects



Source: IPA Databank 2010-2022 for profit cases

**Peter Field**  
Marketing & Communications Strategy

Some Neutrality is inevitable. Even the happiest, funniest, or most gut-wrenching ad will leave a few people unmoved. But when most of your audience isn't responding at all to an ad, that's a problem.

Before we look more closely at Neutrality, though, we need to explain *why* it's a problem. After all, neutral ads don't directly harm brands. An ad that's purely informational and drives no emotion can still work to raise Brand Fluency, increase mental availability, and trigger sales for those already in buying mode.

# PART 1 THE PROBLEM OF DULL

But it will be less effective at doing those things than an ad which sparks positive emotional response or one with high emotional intensity. Even if you are after short-term results. And that means spending on a neutral ad will be less efficient.

As we'll see in part 2, one of the ways ads end up with high Neutrality is when a brand tries to cram too much information into a small space, leaving audiences bored or confused. In looking for an efficient use of runtime, and making a dull ad, they end up with a less effective, and therefore inefficient, ad.

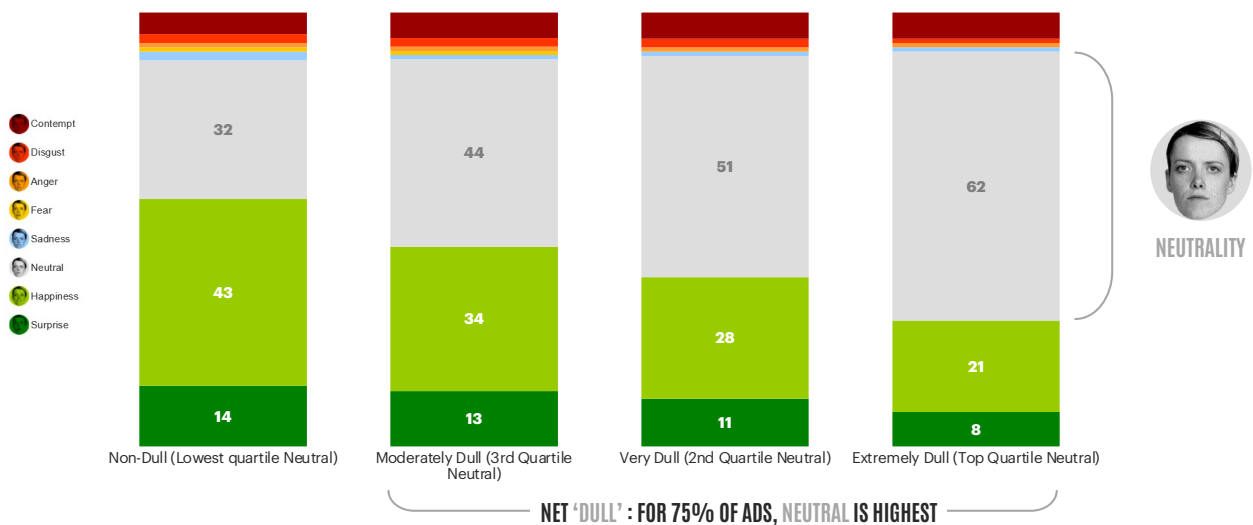
The problem of dull isn't damage. It's waste. It costs more - sometimes a lot more - to get the same business impact with a dull ad as with an interesting one.

## LEVELS OF DULL

To understand the Cost of Dull, we analysed the Test Your Ad database in a new way, looking only at levels of Neutral response to a commercial.

We split the data into four equal quartiles to illustrate the progressively increasing cost of making dull advertising.

### GROUPING US TV ADS INTO DULLNESS QUARTILES, HAPPINESS AND SURPRISE ARE THE TWO ACTIVE EMOTIONS THAT SUFFER MOST AS NEUTRALITY RISES



Average Emotional Response of All Commercial Category US TV ads (n>55,000) tested in Test Your Ad Premium since 2017. c13,900 ads per quartile.

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# PART 1 THE PROBLEM OF DULL



## NON-DULL

advertising is the top quartile. Despite the name these ads still generate plenty of Neutral response - on average 39% of responses in the UK, and 32% in the US..



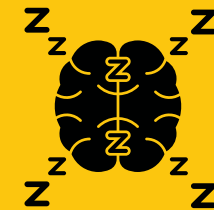
## MODERATELY DULL

ads are the second quartile. As Neutrality rises, Happiness and Surprise start to suffer, and with 49% Neutrality (UK) and 44% (US) we're seeing that happening in this group of ads.



## VERY DULL

ads are the third quartile. By this point, Neutrality is the typical response to an ad - 56% in the UK and 51% in the US, with Happiness and Surprise dipping yet further. The "grazing cows" ad we mentioned earlier sits here.



## EXTREMELY DULL

ads are the lowest quartile on Neutrality. For these ads, any response other than Neutrality is unusual - the average Extremely Dull UK ad attracts 65% Neutrality, and in the US it's 62%, barely an improvement. Happiness and Surprise, meanwhile, have shrunk to levels where the ad stands no chance of driving growth or sales effects beyond raw share of voice.

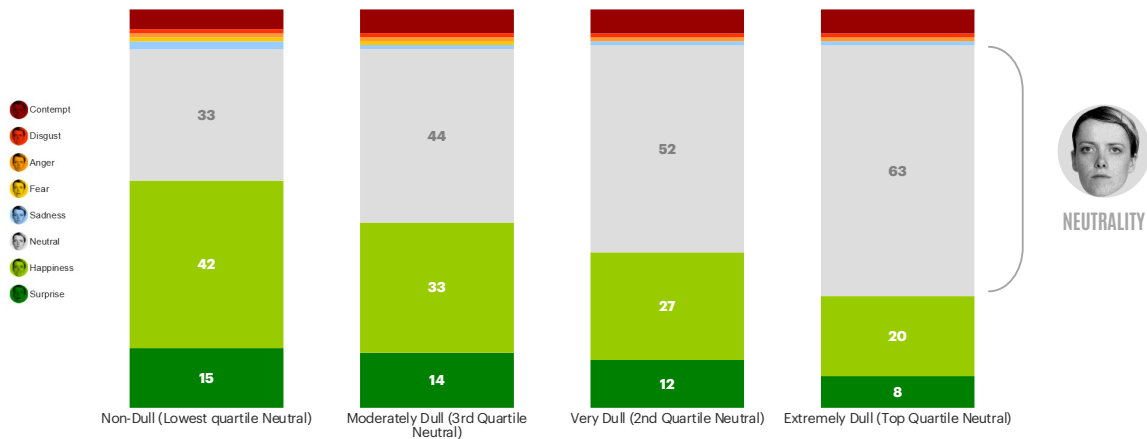
**When you look at the levels of emotion for each quartile, one thing is obvious. Higher Neutrality only really has an impact on positive emotions - Happiness and Surprise. The level of negative emotion, including Anger, Contempt, Disgust, stays constant. A boring ad is as likely to trigger that negativity as an interesting one.**

# PART 1 THE PROBLEM OF DULL

## SAFE IS A POOR STRATEGY

This is important because it tells us that playing safe is a poor strategy. Especially in an age of polarised opinions, brands may be tempted to make ads less interesting, risky or edgy so as not to cause perceived offense. But the old saying “you can’t please everyone”, is true of ads. On average, all ads, whatever their Neutrality level, generate some negative feeling. You can’t avoid it, and if you try, you risk increasing Neutral response and killing off positive emotion.

### GROUPING US B2B TV ADS INTO THE TOTAL MARKET DULLNESS QUARTILES, HAPPINESS AND SURPRISE ARE THE TWO ACTIVE EMOTIONS THAT SUFFER MOST AS NEUTRALITY RISES



Average Emotional Response of US B2B TV ads (n>2,600) tested in Test Your Ad Premium since 2017 (256-1,289 B2B ads per total US Commercial quartile).

Powered by System1

When we split B2B ads into dullness quartiles, we see exactly the same pattern - sharp falls in Happiness and Surprise as Neutrality increases, while negative emotions remain steady. And so the same lesson applies. If you're worried about negative response to your B2B ad, making it duller is not the way to reduce that.



# PART 1 THE PROBLEM OF DULL

## THE EXTRAORDINARY COST OF DULL - YOU HAVE A CHOICE



Making interesting, emotional ads saves you money. An interesting ad is more effective, more memorable, and so its media spend goes further. When you invest in an ordinary ad, you're paying an extraordinary cost - you need to spend more to get the same results.

Although dull ads can work as well or slightly better in the short term they lose out massively to emotional ads in the long term - a cost of Dull that is clearly not worth paying.

Although dull ads can work as well or

In this section, we're going to break that down, and find out exactly how much money dull ads are leaving on the table.

**Fair warning - in a paper about dullness, this is the dullest part. We WILL be talking about ESOV and quartiles and shares. But it's also the most important part. Dullness is costing everyone money, and we need to know how much.**

To find out, we've analysed System1's Test Your Ad database, looking at two things. The first is the cumulative TV media spend on the four dull quartiles, to find out how much spend is being allocated to each level of advertising neutrality.

To get this, we've used Nielsen data on media spend for the ads in the Test Your Ad database, extrapolating the totals to the estimated figure for overall TV advertising spend for 2022 (source: Statista).

The second thing we've looked at is the Star Rating of each ad, which predicts the potential the creative has to drive long-term market share growth for brands. For the sake of a consistent model, we've given every brand an identical market share (5%) and assumed it has 15% share of voice, giving the +10 ESOV (Excess Share Of Voice) that Test Your Ad predictions are validated for.

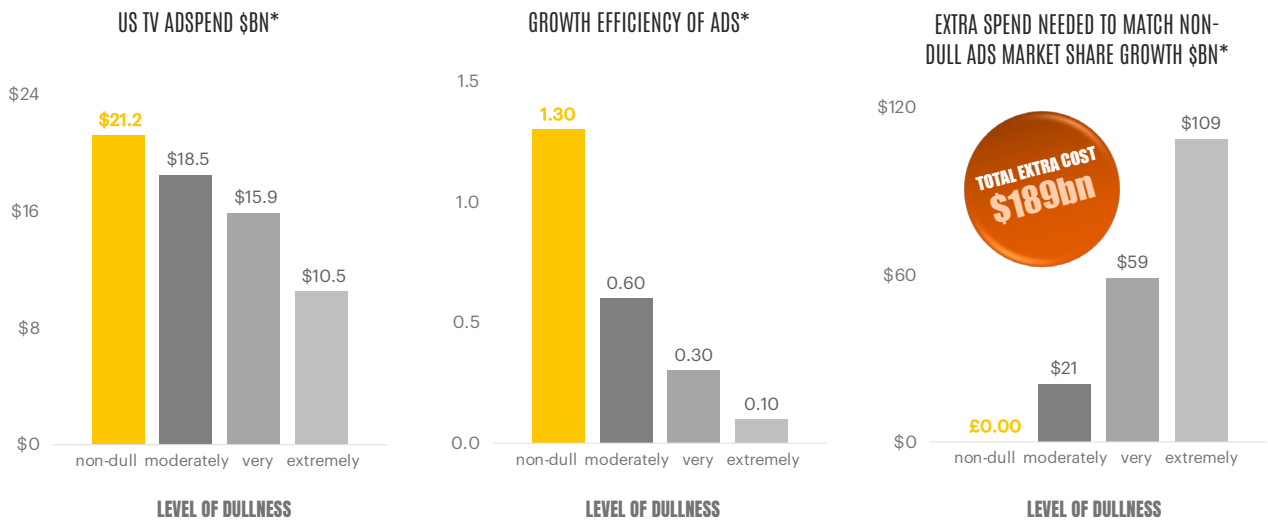
Not every ad will attract that level of ESOV or investment, but this lets us ask a really important question: how much extra money would brands need to spend to make a Moderately, Very or Extremely Dull ad match the performance of a Non-Dull one?



# PART 1 THE PROBLEM OF DULL

First the good news: marketers often know when they've got an interesting ad, and invest accordingly. In both the US and the UK, the Non-Dull quartile attracts the highest level of media spend.

## THE COST OF DULL TV ADVERTISING TO US BRANDS



\*Average Estimated annual spend on All US TV ads (n>55,000) tested in Test Your Ad Premium since 2017, c13,900 ads per quartile. Spend estimates projected from Vivix ad-level spend estimates for ads monitored in Test Your Ad, extrapolated to total US TV Commercial spend estimate for 2022 (Statista)

\*Annualised SOM gain points projected from Star ratings assuming a brand of 5% SOM and 15% SOM = +10 ESOV

\*Estimated extra annual spend over current levels needed to match forecast growth potential if non-dull

Powered by **System1**



# PART 1 THE PROBLEM OF DULL

**Our estimate for the total UK spend on TV ads is £5.11bn, and the Non-Dull quartile (25% of the ads) accounts for £1.61bn of that (31.5% of the spend). In the US, the proportions are similar - a total spend on TV of \$66.1bn, and \$21.2bn of that (32% of spend) goes on Non-Dull ads.**

Why do the most interesting ads attract the most spend overall in consumer categories? (As we'll see, the picture looks different for B2B). One hypothesis is that bigger brands have bigger budgets and are more likely to create more interesting ads - they can spend more screen time on entertainment and less on establishing themselves.

It's also good news that the proportion of spend drops as Neutrality increases, with Extremely Dull ads (the bottom quartile) attracting only £0.95bn (18%) of UK TV spend and \$10.5bn (15.8%) of US TV dollars.

But let's not mince words. 10 billion dollars and almost a billion pounds is a lot of money to spend on advertising that isn't engaging, interesting, or effective.

And when you look at the effectiveness gap between the Non-Dull and the Extremely Dull ads, the extraordinary Cost of Dull becomes even more clear.

Given the levels of share and ESOV outlined above (+10 points of ESOV), we'd predict a brand with 5% market share airing Non-Dull ads would see annualised gains of 1.3 points of share each year. That same brand making that same high investment into Extremely Dull ads - the lowest quartile - would see only 0.1 points of share gain each year. And lower investment - reduced ESOV - would see that marginal impact diminish even further.

In total, to get the same predicted results as the Non-Dull ads, brands showing Extremely Dull ads would need to invest a staggering \$109bn extra. That's considerably more than the entire annual spend on US TV advertising.

That's how much dull ads are holding brands back.

# PART 1 THE PROBLEM OF DULL

In the UK, the picture is no rosier. Where Non-Dull ads with +10 ESOV and 5% share might expect 1.26 points of annualised share gain, Extremely Dull ads with the same high investment would only see 0.13 points of share gain. The investment needed across the industry to bring those very tedious ads up to the effectiveness of the interesting ones? £7.94bn - again, higher than the entire industry's TV spend.

And that's just the Extremely Dull ads. Factor in the Very Dull (3rd quartile) and Moderately Dull (2nd quartile) commercials and the additional spend you'd need to have them all perform as well as Non-Dull ads rises to £13.29bn in the UK and \$189bn in the US. That's roughly as much as the GDP of Greece.

Fortunately, there's a cheaper option. Make interesting ads. Ultimately, it's a much wiser investment to put the creativity and effort in upfront and create an ad which would land in the current top quartile than it is to pay the extraordinary Cost of Dull, and try to squeeze effectiveness out of a boring commercial.

## THE EXTRAORDINARY COST OF B2B DULL

Too much media spend goes on dull consumer ads, but there's a silver lining: the best, most interesting commercials do get higher investment, and the very dullest ads don't attract as much spend.

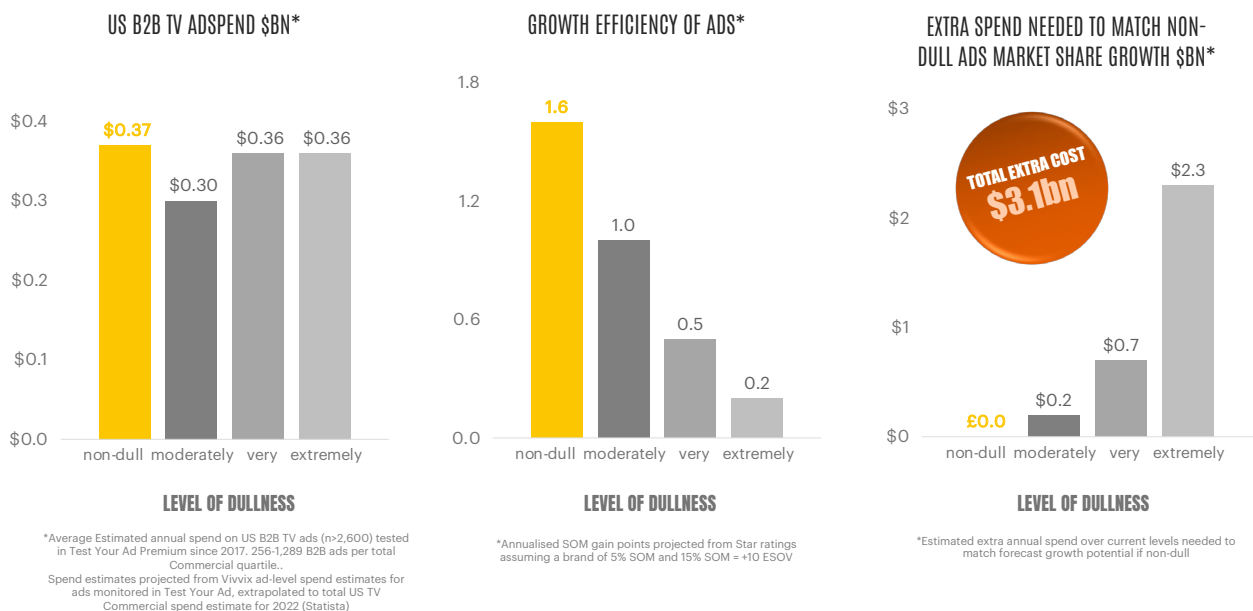
Unfortunately, when it comes to B2B ads, that isn't the case.

While the number of B2B ads that air is far lower than consumer TV ads, we have enough of a sample to see patterns in spend emerge. In the UK, we estimate roughly £103m is spent on B2B ads annually. Of this, only £9m is spent on ads in the top, Non-Dull quartile. And over half - £53m - of B2B media spend is on ads which land in the lowest, Extremely Dull quartile. For all UK B2B ads to match the effectiveness of the Non-Dull examples, it would take an extra £267m of investment.

# PART 1 THE PROBLEM OF DULL

In the US, we see a more even allocation of spend. Roughly \$1.39bn is spent on airing B2B ads, and we found that \$0.37bn of that (26.6%) goes to the top, Non-Dull quartile. But almost as much (\$0.36bn each) is spent on both the Extremely and Very Dull quartiles. And the extra spend needed to match Non-Dull ads' share growth would be \$3.1bn. B2B media spend isn't quite as skewed as in the UK, but the Cost of Dull is still extremely high.

## THE COST OF DULL TV ADVERTISING TO US B2B BRANDS



Powered by **System1**

Why do duller B2B ads attract more investment than more interesting ones? B2B ads are often laden with information, which can easily make audiences tune out. It seems likely that B2B marketers are pursuing the false efficiency of getting info-rich ads in front of more people, even though these commercials don't lead to as much long-term growth as ads that make interest and entertainment a priority. And too often, B2B means Budget 2 Boredom.

# THE STORY SO FAR

So far in this paper we've outlined the problem of dull and the ways it's damaging the industry. Here are the key points.

**WE'RE MEASURING DULL BY USING A NEUTRAL EMOTIONAL REACTION AS A MEASURE - THE MOST COMMON RESPONSE ON OUR TEST YOUR AD DATABASE.**

**WE'VE SPLIT ADS UP INTO FOUR QUARTILES OF DULL, TO MEASURE HOW MUCH OF AN EFFECTIVENESS GAP DULL CREATES AND HOW MUCH MONEY IS BEING WASTED ON ADS THAT DON'T ENGAGE.**

**AS ADS GET DULLER, POSITIVE EMOTION FALLS BUT NEGATIVE REACTION STAYS STEADY. YOU CAN'T BORE YOUR WAY OUT OF NEGATIVE EMOTION.**

**THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT NON-DULL CONSUMER ADS ATTRACT THE MOST MEDIA SPEND OF THE FOUR QUARTILES - MARKETERS ARE BACKING INTERESTING ADS.**

**THE BAD NEWS IS THAT TENS OF BILLIONS ARE STILL BEING SPENT ON DULL ADS.**

**DULL ADS PAY A SEVERE EFFECTIVENESS PENALTY. TO MAKE ADS IN THE THREE DULL QUARTILES AS INTERESTING AS THE NON-DULL ONES, MARKETERS WOULD NEED TO SPEND \$189BN - AS MUCH AS THE GDP OF GREECE!**

**IN B2B ADS, THE SITUATION IS WORSE - THE LEAST DULL ADS GET THE SMALLEST, NOT LARGEST, SLICE OF SPEND.**



**THE  
EXTRAORDINARY  
COST OF DULL**

**PART 2**  
**DEFEATING  
DULL**

## PART 2 DEFEATING DULL

Dull ads are costing the industry billions. It's a problem we have to solve.

In this section, we're drawing on the work of System1 and of eatbigfish, to ask - **what are the factors behind the rise of dull advertising, and how do we push the balance back towards interesting ads again?**



### THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE DULLCALYPSE

So where did all these dull ads come from? Adam Morgan of eatbigfish laid out four major factors driving dullness - he calls them "The Four Horsemen Of The Dullocalypse". All of them are trends within branding, marketing and advertising that incentivise dull ads.

The first is **Performance** - the trend towards adspend going to performance channels like search, digital display, and social media advertising. There's nothing inherently less creative about any of these channels. But the metrics they are measured on are invariably short-term and transactional. Performance marketing channels don't directly aim to build brands or create long-term mental availability, they're aimed at people in the market now. Such ads tend to aim for Fluency - brand recognition - before emotional impact, which leads to higher Neutrality. In other words, dullness.

# PART 2 DEFEATING DULL

The second horseman is **OPTIMISATION**, which helps explain why Performance marketing advertising is so dull. Put simply, the more channels and media types you're advertising across, the simpler your assets need to be, in order to be optimised for as many different touchpoints as possible. That's why every logo these days seems to have moved from distinctive, colourful font choices and designs to a monotone, sans-serif typeface. Modern logos and brand identities will work at any size, on any screen, in any ad format. The price? They're a lot duller. That goes for every visual brand asset - they're being redesigned to be simpler, more flexible, but unfortunately less interesting.

## OPTIMISATION | TECH



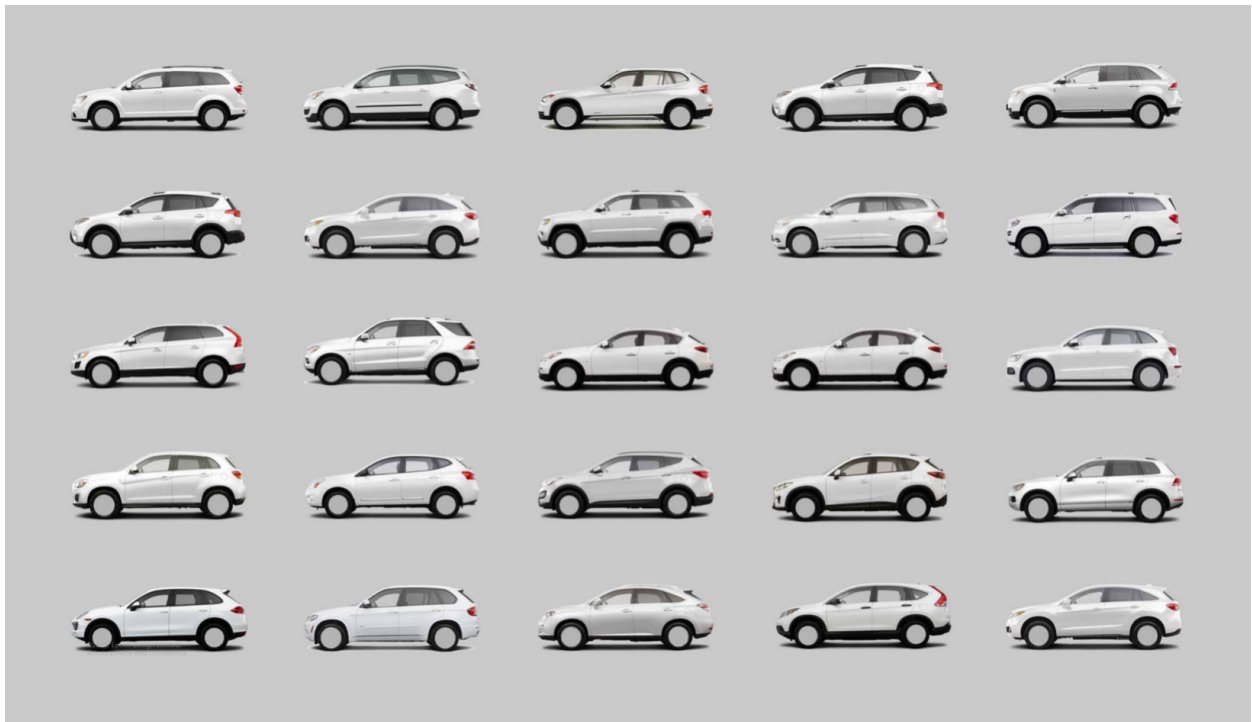
## OPTIMISATION | FASHION



Source: Velvet Shark

## PART 2 DEFEATING DULL

The third horseman of the Dullocalypse is **AVERAGING**. It's not just brand logos that look the same. Designs, colour schemes, tones of voice, even selfie poses are converging in what commentator Alex Murrell has called "The Age Of Average". This is a kind of optimisation effect too - individuals and brands copying what seems to be working for others, but at market scale the effect is to homogenise everything. Nothing looks bad - but nothing stands out, and that's a recipe for dullness.



Source: Adrian Hanft, Alex Murrell

From the most visible trend for consumers to the least - the fourth horseman is **PROCUREMENT**. Marketing decisions have long been subject to strict procurement processes but we live in an era of cascading budgeting cuts, with clients cutting marketing budgets and holding companies implementing cuts of their own in turn. The result is that creative directors are having to pay more attention than ever to the bottom line, and that agencies and clients have less time to work on a campaign and get from good to great. In those circumstances, it's no wonder repetitive or dull ads get through too often.

This takes us into a vicious declining cycle as the campaigns are less effective, and so next time there is even less money for creative.



## PART 2 DEFEATING DULL



**PERFORMANCE, OPTIMISATION, AVERAGING** and **PROCUREMENT**. All trends which are highly justifiable individually. Sensible, you might even say. But “sensible” isn’t always “interesting”, and taken together these factors are creating a toxic atmosphere for exciting, fresh, work.

Moreover, AI is making all these things go at warp speed.

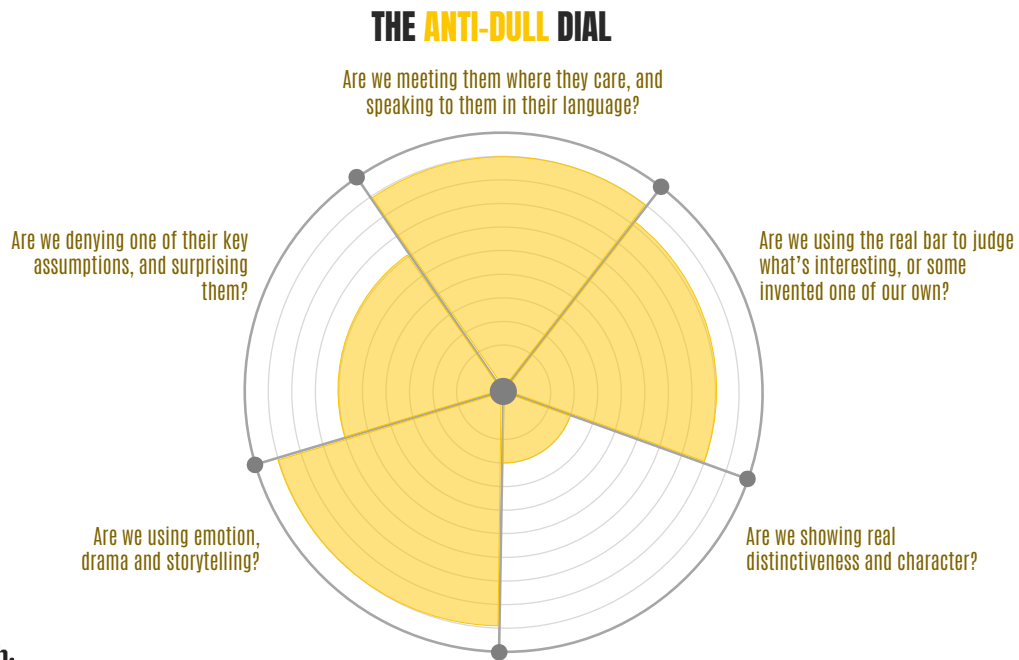
And even though there are incentives for each of the four trends, we’d humbly suggest these incentives are missing something important. As we saw in part one, Dull doesn’t save money. It wastes it. In the long term, it squanders investment and competitive advantage.

## DULL MUST BE DEFEATED. HOW DO WE START?



## HOW TO TELL IF YOU'RE BEING DULL - "THE ANTI DULL DIAL"

eatbigfish and Adam Morgan have a set of guidelines they call the Anti Dull Dial, which we're reproducing here. It's a set of five questions you can ask yourself honestly as you work on both strategy and advertising to try and prevent them turning out dull.



The questions are:

**1 Are we meeting them [the audience] where they care, and speaking to them in their language?**

People find ads interesting when the ads are about things they care about too, and aren't full of business-speak or jargon.

**2 Are we using the real bar to judge what's interesting, or some invented one of our own?**

As marketers we can't lie to ourselves, and pretend something's going to interest our audience when it really won't. Fortunately, there are ways of measuring these things - testing with System1's Test Your Ad platform, for example, will give a fast, objective measure of how interesting consumers find an ad.

**3 Are we showing real distinctiveness and character?**

Remember Averaging, the third horseman of the Dullocalypse? Here's where you take him on. Does your ad look and feel distinctive, and distinctively you? That might mean a recurring brand character or Fluent Device, or other colourful and entertaining assets.

**4 Are we using emotion, drama and storytelling?**

As we at System1 might put it, are we entertaining for commercial gain? Nothing beats dullness more thoroughly than an entertaining ad - particularly, as we'll see, a funny one.

**5 Are we denying one of their key assumptions, and surprising them?**

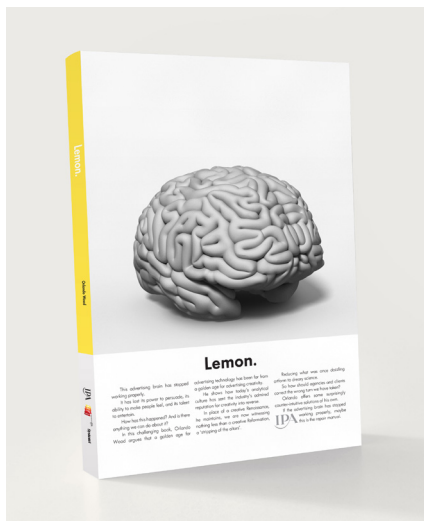
Happiness isn't the only beneficial emotion for advertising - Surprise plays a big part too, and dullness kills surprise. So it's worth deliberately aiming to go against some audience expectations and give them something that'll make people sit up, not snooze.

The more you can answer "Yes" to these five questions, the less dull your ad is going to be.

## THIS IS YOUR BRAIN ON DULL

What elements in advertising can prevent dullness from creeping into your commercials? As a creative, you might be tempted to make your ads as visually dynamic as possible, with multiple cuts, special effects, rhythmic movement and soundtracks, and other signifiers of excitement.

But there's evidence to suggest this could be a bad mistake.



In his books about advertising effectiveness and the way our brains pay attention, *Lemon* and *Look out*, Orlando Wood identifies different elements which appeal to the right- and left-hemispheres of the brain. As Wood says, it's a myth that the two sides of the brain do different things. But they do things differently. Your right- and left-brain attend to the world in different ways.

The left brain is narrowly focused and goal-oriented - it responds to elements like abstracted body parts and actions, text onscreen, and regular rhythms. The right-brain is more contextually aware, responding to relationships between people, and to the place and time

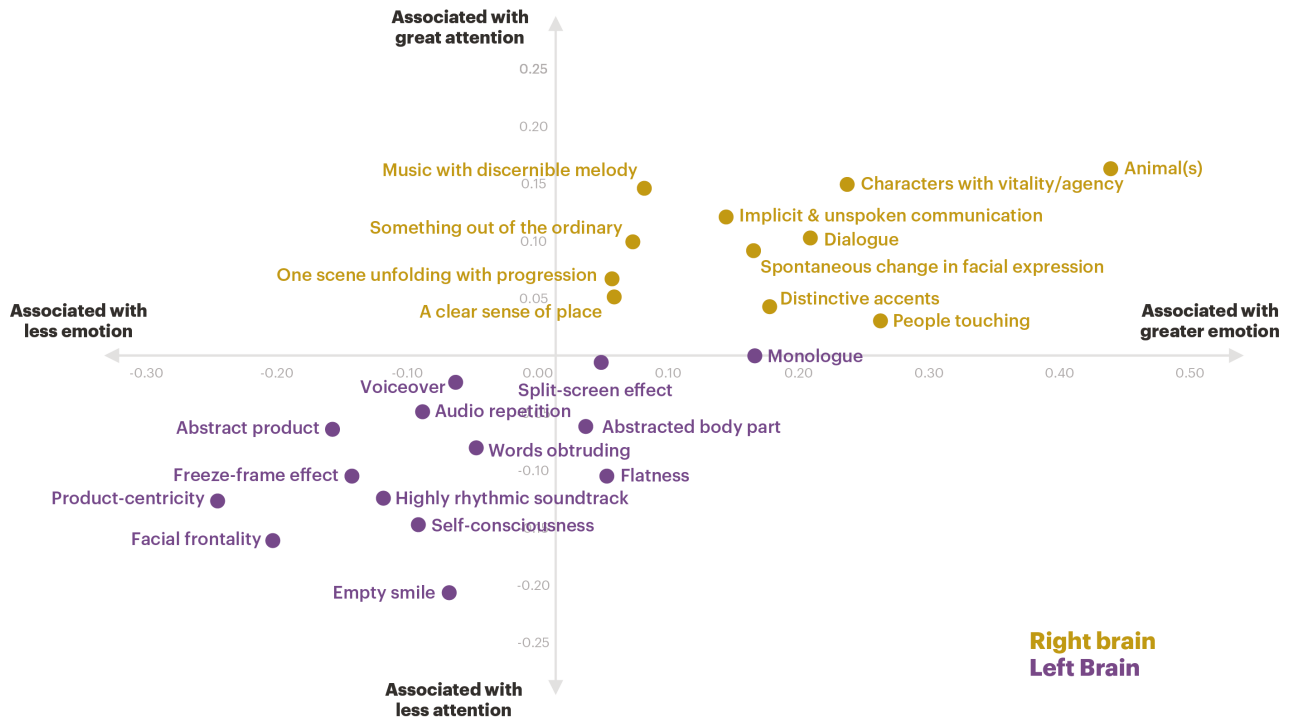
they're in. It is alert to incongruous and unexpected elements in its surroundings, which is why it notices humour, for instance.

What Wood does in his books is to demonstrate that the elements which appeal to the right brain are also associated with higher effectiveness and attention given to ads. Elements that are vivid and alive - like animals, strong characters, dialogue, a narrative, and a strong sense of place - drive both higher attention and more emotion. Left-brained elements like freeze-frames, words onscreen, rhythmic soundtracks and abstracted body parts are associated with lower attention and less emotion.



# PART 2 DEFEATING DULL

## THIS IS YOUR BRAIN ON DULL



Attention & emotion left/right brain quadrant chart from **Look out** by **Orlando Wood**.

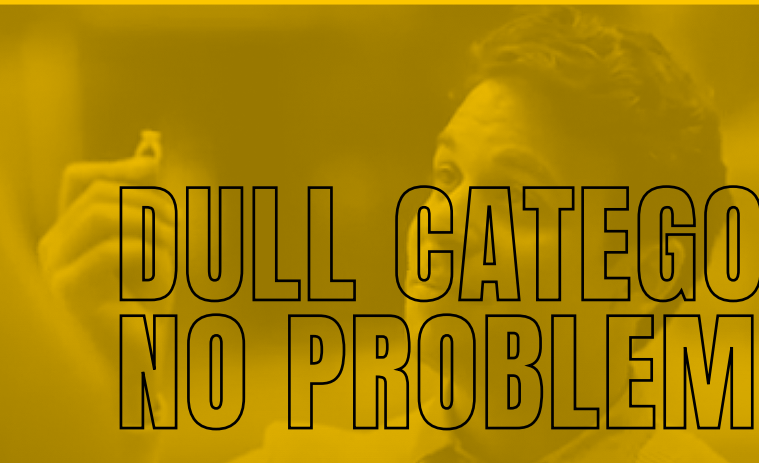
What has this got to do with the Cost of Dull? We're defining dullness as the absence of emotional response. So the left-brained elements which Wood finds drive lower emotional response are by definition more dull.

Which means that taking the path of least resistance and trying to make an ad less dull by putting in lots of flat colours, big words on screen and a banging rhythmic soundtrack might be the worst decision you could make!

The alternative is to make ads with a sense of showmanship. Showmanship - the desire to entertain your audience, to give them something to look at - is the kryptonite of dull. Humour, story, vivid characters, and other right-brained elements can help to drive dullness away from your creative work.



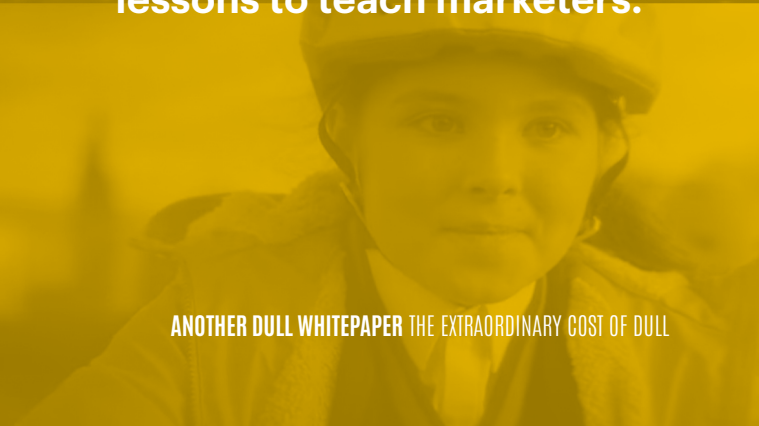
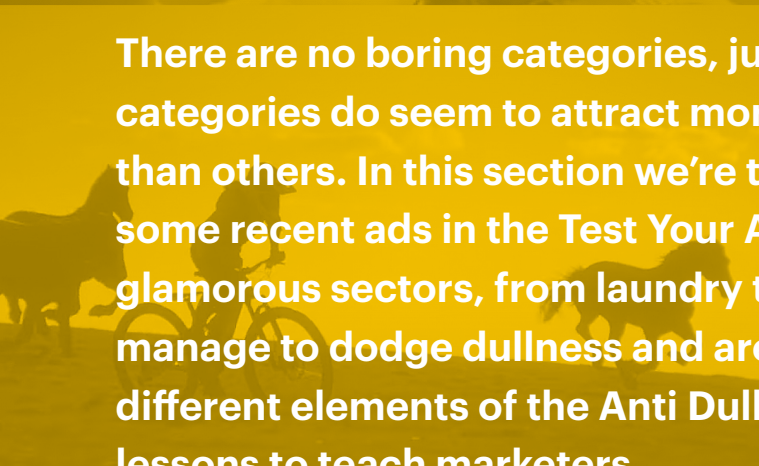
# DEFEATING DULL



# DULL CATEGORY? NO PROBLEM



There are no boring categories, just boring ads. But some categories do seem to attract more of those boring ads than others. In this section we're taking a closer look at some recent ads in the Test Your Ad database from less glamorous sectors, from laundry to banking. All these ads manage to dodge dullness and are great examples of the different elements of the Anti Dull Dial. All of them have lessons to teach marketers.



# CHALLENGING A KEY ASSUMPTION

## MOBILE NETWORKS – ORANGE

(MARCEL)



Star Rating  
Strong



Every four years, the World Cup tournaments bring audiences inspiring displays of athleticism on the field and entertaining adverts. But very few campaigns pull a bait and switch on viewers. For the 2023 Women’s World Cup, French telco Orange, a partner of the French Football Federation (FFF), released a 2-minute ad to address the lack of visibility of women’s football compared to men’s and the negative attitudes and biases that many still hold about women’s sports.

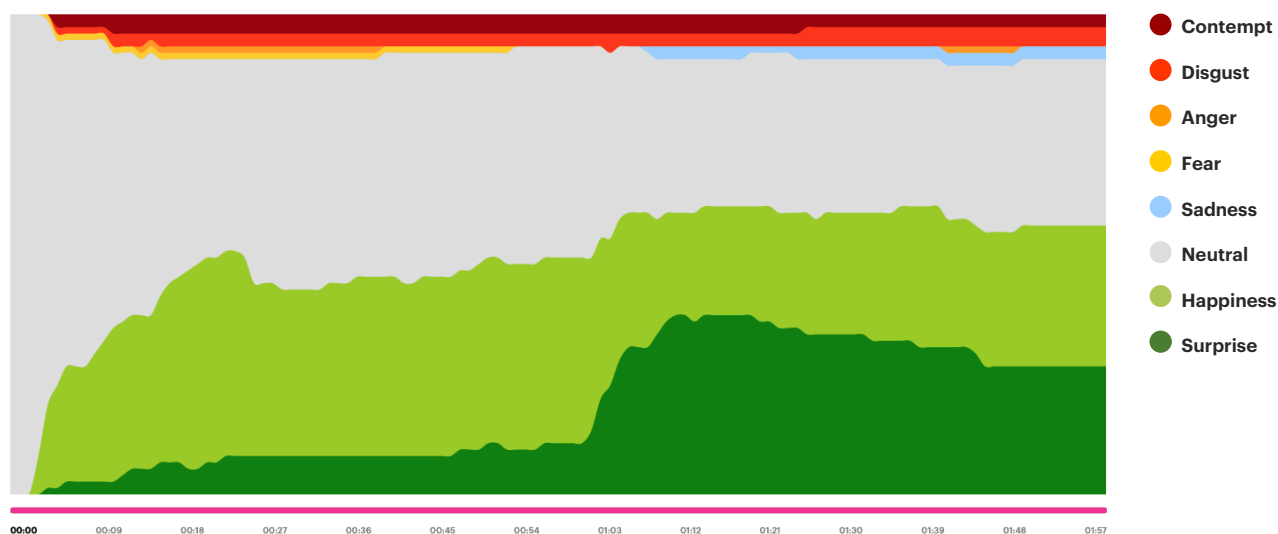
Audiences see greats like Mbappe, Greizmann and Coman making terrific plays on the pitch. The montage ends with ‘Only Les Bleus can give us these emotions. However, it’s not them that you just saw.’

In a clever twist, the ad then reveals the use of VFX and AI deepfake technology to transform female athletes to the most well-known male players. The ad concludes with a message of support for Les Bleues.

It’s a bold show of support and a stellar example of the Anti Dull Dial’s recommendation to challenge key assumptions in order to surprise and delight. The audience assumes the ad is a brilliant display of male athleticism because that is what they’re initially shown. But Orange and Publicis Groupe’s AI platform Marcel soon reveal the truth – the female athletes are the true stars here. The result is a good score among the general public and an even stronger 4.7-Star result with football fans.

In addition to entertaining audiences, the ad also won with industry judges. At the 2024 Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity, Orange received the Entertainment for Sport Grand Prix at Cannes Lions and was also shortlisted for the Titanium Lion.

### TEST YOUR AD | FACETRACE EMOTIONAL RESPONSE



[VIEW TEST YOUR AD REPORT](#)



# DISTINCTIVENESS AND CHARACTER

## SOFTWARE – ADOBE



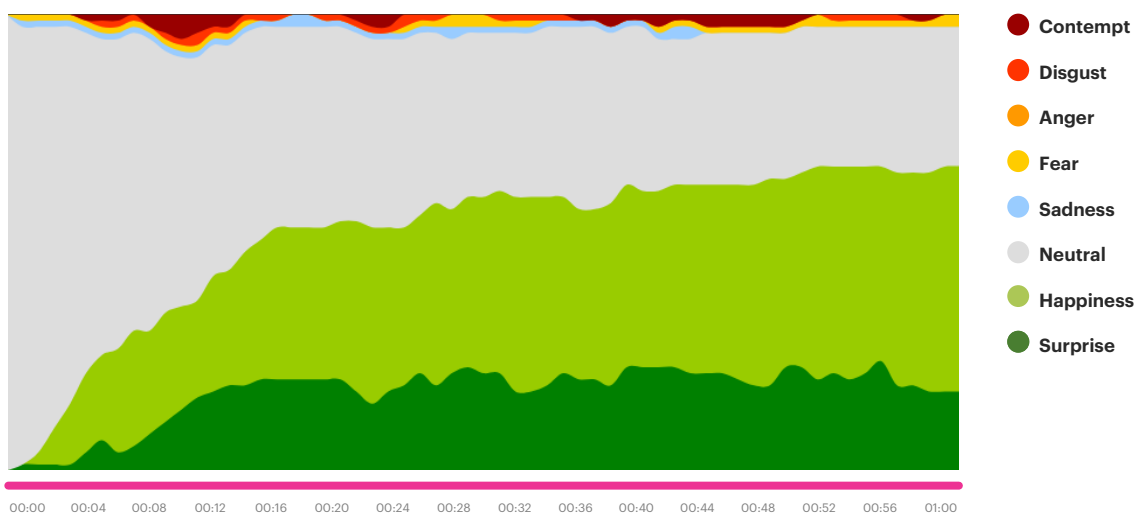
Star Rating  
Exceptional



Even if a piece of software makes a real difference to your life or work, it can be hard to communicate that in an ad. The risk of turning a software commercial into a parade of features is very real, and that approach makes for dull advertising. Not to mention that many B2B ads fall into the **Averaging** trap that eatbigfish cautions against, with a similar tone of voice and narrative.

Much better to show, not tell - something Adobe does in this 2023 ad for Photoshop's generative AI capabilities. Even better, the person doing the showing is a child coming up with a killer poster for her birthday party. The kid's delight as she adds unicorn cats and flying horses to her picture is infectious, and subtly conveys the idea that this new technology is literally child's play to use. The result of all this showmanship? A 5-Star ad that is certainly not Dull.

### TEST YOUR AD | FACETRACE EMOTIONAL RESPONSE



[VIEW TEST YOUR AD REPORT](#)

# USING EMOTION AND STORYTELLING

## CONSUMER BANKING – LLOYDS BANK

(ADAM&EVEDDB)



Star Rating  
Strong

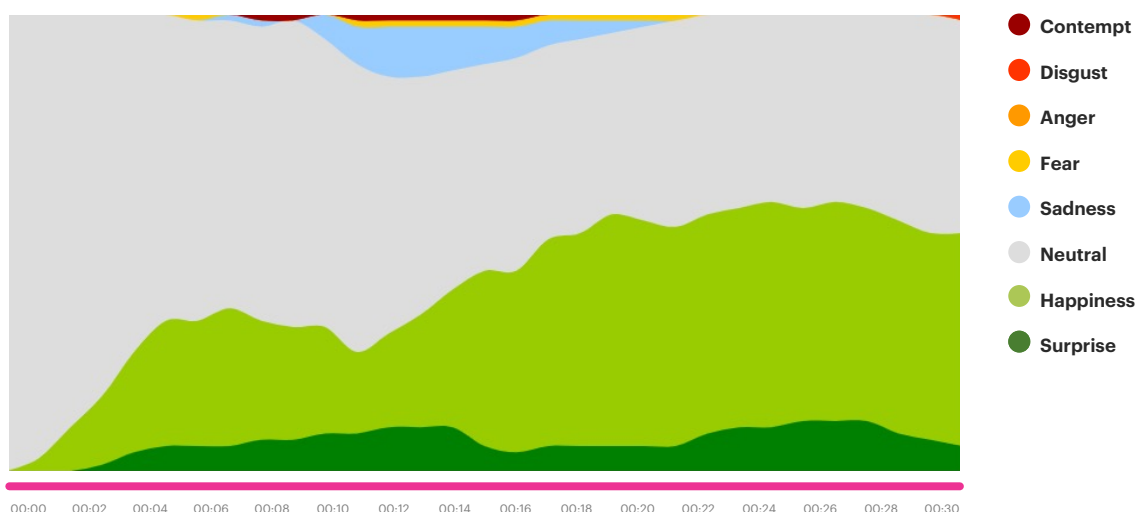


Animals are an element we know are likely to boost emotional response and reduce Neutral reaction to an ad. From the Andrex puppy to the GEICO Gecko, real and animated beasts have been elevating everyday products for decades. Lloyds has an animal distinctive asset too, its famous Black Horses, which it uses in an exciting and unusual way. Lloyds ads stand out for their cinematic appeal - the black horse working to symbolise the help and freedom the bank offers its customers.

In this ad, the galloping horses make the ad a lot more exciting, but dullness is also being beaten back by the emotional core of the story, about a girl practising on her BMX bike. The soundtrack, an Alicia Keys classic, is driving and inspiring but also catchy and melodic - it's not just a pounding rhythm. That helps boost emotional response too, and means the ad ends up scoring high - it's also considerably less dull than most ads in its sector.

The answer to eatbigfish's Anti Dull Dial question 'Are we showing real distinctiveness and character?' is a resounding 'yes!' for Lloyds.

### TEST YOUR AD | FACETRACE EMOTIONAL RESPONSE



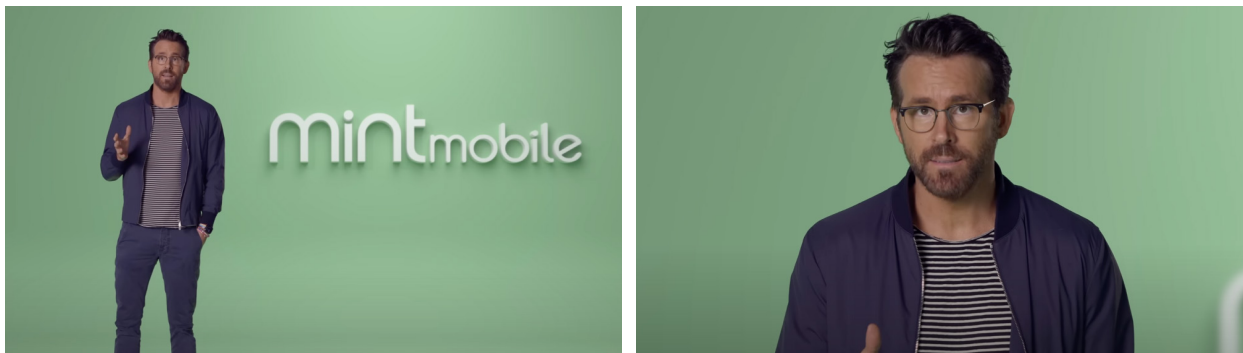
[VIEW TEST YOUR AD REPORT](#)

# SPEAKING IN THEIR LANGUAGE

## MOBILE NETWORKS – MINT MOBILE

(MAXIMUM EFFORT)

4.8  
Star Rating  
Strong

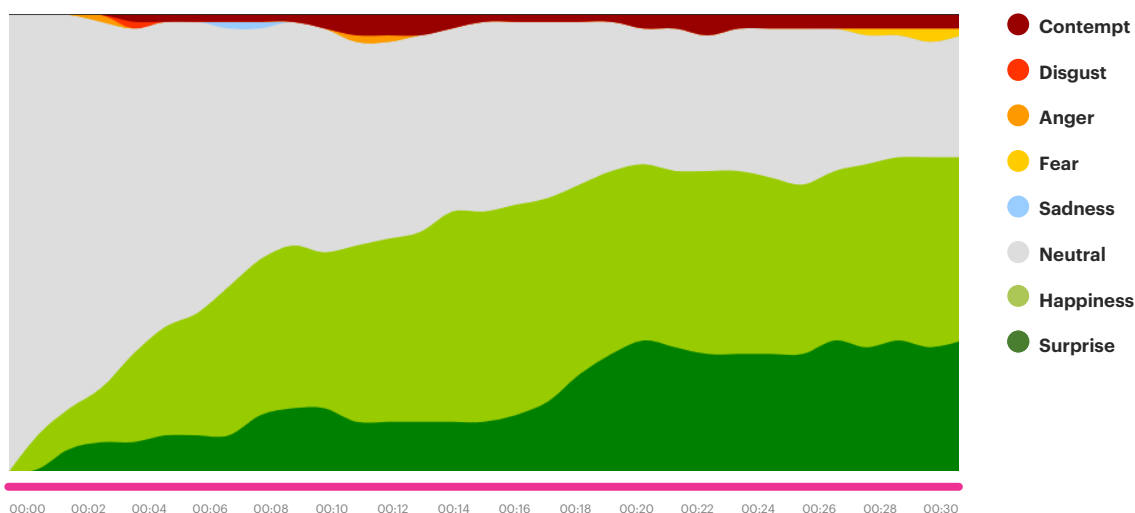


From Aviation Gin to Wrexham FC, Ryan Reynolds has made a habit of bringing his celebrity profile and personal touch to brands. Drinks and sports are interesting sectors, though - mobile networks, not so much. But for Mint Mobile Reynolds is just as charismatic, down-to-earth and funny as he is for his brands in more exciting sectors.

The result is an ad which talks about product and features, but in a very straightforward, accessible, and funny way. Promotional, but without being dull. A great example of what eatbigfish refer to as 'speaking to the audience in their language' in order to engage them.

There's also a bonus appearance of a goat in the punchline, to make sure the ad ends on a memorable peak. This "peak-end rule" is another great way to dodge the dull - a memorable ending makes the whole commercial more interesting and likelier to stick in the mind.

### TEST YOUR AD | FACETRACE EMOTIONAL RESPONSE



[VIEW TEST YOUR AD REPORT](#)

# CONSTANTLY RAISING THE BAR – SCHADENFREUDE

## OPTICIANS – SPECSAVERS

(THE AGENCY)



Star Rating  
Exceptional

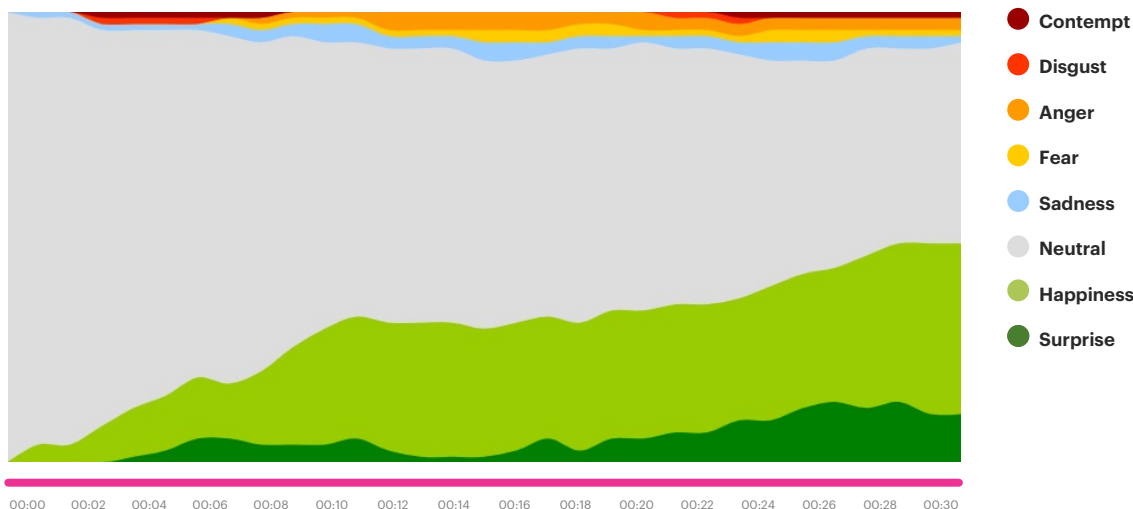


Specsavers in the UK are a stellar example of a brand that’s not only transcended a very functional category but done so with such panache that its ads have entered popular culture. “Should’ve gone to Specsavers” has become a household phrase thanks to the optician brand’s long-running campaign.

Their most recent ad, showing an unfortunate delivery driver hauling a package up a tower block staircase before realising he’s got the wrong number, is a perfect example of their appeal. It’s funny, but it also appeals to schadenfreude - the slightly darker delight people take in others’ misfortune. None of the bad outcomes in Specsavers’ ads are really bad, so we can cackle at what happens to the foolish protagonists.

Specsavers’ ads are successful partly because they’ve invested in the campaign long-term and let the format become widely known. Along with the humour, that familiarity adds to the pleasure people get from them and makes a Neutral response less likely. The result? Ads that are never dull, despite the very functional category.

### TEST YOUR AD | FACETRACE EMOTIONAL RESPONSE



[VIEW TEST YOUR AD REPORT](#)



**THE  
EXTRAORDINARY  
COST OF DULL**

**THE  
FUTURE  
OF  
DULL**



# THE FUTURE OF DULL

In this paper, we've tried to show you the Cost of Dull - both the media spend being wasted on ads that are too dull to be effective, and the staggering amount it would cost to make those dull ads work as hard for brands as the interesting ones.

But dull ads are a part of life, you might say. What makes dealing with dull such an urgent priority for the creative industries?

It's because **while the Cost of Dull is high in one sense, in another, it's never been cheaper or easier to make a dull ad. If even half the claims made for generative AI are accurate, we are entering an era where average will only be a click away.**



We're not saying AI can only create dull ads. It's a tool, and can be used for Dull or Non-Dull purposes. There are already plenty of effective, highly interesting ads in which AI has played a part, like Coke's 2023 'Masterpiece' commercial in which some of history's greatest artworks come to life in search of refreshment. And the Adobe ad we talked about in the last section shows a child using it to unlock creativity.

But the nature of generative tools is to use the data they're trained on to produce the output they're asked for. Their default is to create something generic - the average of what they've found in their training data. And unfortunately, generic and average mean dull. The digital environment is already filling up with AI-generated ads and content. Right now, the focus of commentators is on when AI gets things wrong. But an even bigger problem is when it gets things dull.

Brands and marketers can't turn the clock back. A media environment full of deeply average AI ads is something we will have to cope with. It's a threat, but it's also an opportunity. In a world of average, it's even more important for brands to stand out, and the ones who can will make an even greater impact. Whatever tools we use to make them, ads that are funny, stylish, insightful, culturally on-point, and tell great stories full of humanity - in other words, ads that are not dull - will always make a business difference.

# SUMMARY

## AFTER ALL THIS TALK ABOUT DULL...

We wanted to put our Anti Dull skills to the test. Adam challenged Jon to make an ad about paint drying that would outperform the average ad in System1's Test Your Ad database.

An Extremely Dull subject you might say! But the good news is that entertaining and effective ads don't need to be complex. In fact, simplicity is often the key to success. And remember that there are no dull categories or topics, only dull ads.

Things like a narrative with a clear beginning, middle and end, characters, animals, and melodic music can all engage audiences, even those who are not yet in the market to buy.

With the above in mind, a budget of just £40 and 30 minutes, we set out to defeat dull. We had a central character (Jon), a story that was easy to follow, a catchy soundtrack, and an adorable pup. The result? The ad scores better than 90% of ads in System1's database. If we can do it on a shoestring budget, imagine what you can do!



Star Rating  
Good

## SO, WHAT'S NEXT?

In this paper we've explored the spread of dull, the reasons it happens, and given some practical examples of how your ads can escape the tedium trap.

But this is only the beginning. There are a lot of things we can still find out about dull advertising and this paper is the springboard for additional research from System1, eatbigfish and Peter Field which will answer some of the outstanding questions.

*How Dull is advertising outside the US and UK?* The English-speaking world hardly has a monopoly on boring ads. We're going to be working with the WARC database to look at the Cost of Dull elsewhere in the world – and see where the bright spots might be where interesting ads are getting the investment they deserve.

*The very dull B2B problem.* The Anti Dull Dial looks at culture and advertising in general, but there are some interesting nuances in B2B we will apply our future thinking to and create dedicated content. For example, Peter Field has proven that B2B is an exception to the findings on purpose. In B2B, there is evidence that purpose is more important than other industries.

*How Dull are other advertising formats?* We've focused here on video advertising, on the hypothesis that video is likely to be the most interesting and engaging format, so understanding the problem here is a bridge to understanding it across other formats. But ads on radio, out-of-home, via digital display, to take just three examples, all work in different ways and require different guidelines for success. Dull will manifest in different ways there too, and together we'll be working to find out how.

*Dull ads... or dull platforms?* We also have to ask ourselves, are some platforms duller than others? Is a TikTok less boring than a YouTube pre-roll, for instance? How do X and Facebook match up for monotony? We're working with Dr. Karen Nelson-Field to expand the reach of the work from dull ads to dull platforms.

## THE FIGHT AGAINST DULL HAS ONLY JUST BEGUN.

# THE EXTRAORDINARY COST OF DULL

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