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Isolating and measuring the brand effect of search advertising

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According to the UK's Internet Advertising Bureau (IAB), internet advertising accounted for 19.2% of overall advertising spend in 2008 – more than £3.3bn according to the *IAB/PwC 2008 UK Online Adspend Study*.

Within the broad category of internet advertising, most spend (59.3%, or just under £2bn) was on paid search advertising. This means UK advertisers are, on average, spending over 11% of their advertising budget on paid search activity.

The overriding perception of paid search is that it delivers benefits to advertisers by influencing consumer behaviour, resulting in increased site visits and online sales. These are the usual measures of search effectiveness. They are easily tracked outcomes with hard metrics and the results can be delivered in real time. But what about the influence of paid search on brand measures?

In 2008, we were approached by Google with a brief to isolate and quantify the brand effect of search advertising in an FMCG multimedia campaign. For a given brand and campaign, Google wanted to understand the relative effects of each medium on consumer attitudes towards the brand and, specifically, the brand impact of paid search advertising.

The methodology we adopted combined cookie tracking, qualitative and quantitative research, and two stages of statistical modelling, all combined into one piece of attitudinal research.

QUESTIONING BRAND EFFECT OF SEARCH

The brief presented several research challenges, but first we looked at its overall notion. By commissioning research in the brand effect of search, Google was presupposing a positive attitudinal effect of exposure to search advertising. But why should there be a brand effect of search advertising?

It is clearly in the interests of all media owners to extol the virtues of their channels versus other channels competing for marketing budget, and in this respect Google is no exception. But the more obvious benefits of search advertising tend to be around behavioural effects and metrics such as click-through and tracked online sales. The brand effect of search is less easy to identify and evaluate.

Almost all of us use search engines regularly, and although our preferred search engines might vary depending on task and personal preference, we are all familiar with the environment of search engine results pages, especially those returned by a Google search. As regular search engine users, we quickly develop a mind map that helps us to categorise results. Emboldened headlines, messages and brand names allow us to categorise search results quickly.

One way to quite quickly and easily categorise the results we are presented with is by order of relevance to our intended query. Search engine programmers are always looking for ways to improve their algorithms to increase the relevance of search results to the searcher (this technology is becoming increasingly sophisticated by referencing individuals' broader online behaviour), but a single search query could refer to many different things and it is not always clear what information we seek. What do we tend to find in these search results, and how do we categorise them?

1. **Goals** What the searcher is looking for and the advertiser wants them to find, usually the brand's own website(s).
2. **Relevant third-party results** Relevant information but from other sources, such as news sites, Wikipedia, IMDB, reviews, affiliate sites and consumer generated content.
3. **Irrelevant results** Usually because there is ambiguity in the search query.

For example, imagine you are in the market for a new car, and are searching for further information on the Volkswagen Golf. Simply typing 'golf' into Google will return results almost exclusively related to the sport, rather than the car. Sometimes, we anticipate such results and are more specific in our search query – searching for 'Volkswagen Golf', perhaps – but the ambiguity is not always easy to anticipate, or we are not inclined to stop and think. In this example, we might describe a search result linking to the VW Golf official website as a goal result, a result linking to a VW Golf article on a car review site as a relevant third party result, and results concerning golf the sport as irrelevant.

Our hypothesis is that search, and particularly paid search, can provide two kinds of reward for the searcher – functional and emotional –

and that these rewards can translate into a brand engagement effect.

What do we mean by functional rewards of paid search? Paid search tends to appear prominently at the top of the page, especially when the search term is a brand name (rather than a generic or category term, so there are fewer advertisers competing for prominence). First, the prominent position on the page facilitates navigation and saves time for the searcher, with less need to mentally process many natural search results or perform a second, narrower search. The paid search ad might also give further information for the searcher in the limited space available for ad text – for example, that a new VW Golf model is about to become available.

By emotional rewards, we are referring to the ability of paid search results to add resonance to a campaign. We are familiar with the media effect of TV, with the prestige of television as an advertising medium transferring onto brands that advertise within it. Arguably there can be a strong media effect with search as well. In this instance, the parallel might be the prestige of both 'As seen on TV' and 'As found at the top of Google search results'. Whether or not this media effect occurs, the appearance of goal search results may also reassure a searcher that what they are looking for will be interesting, and clever use of the ad text can enhance existing brand attitudes through creative messaging aligned with other communications.

The combination of functional and emotional rewards might explain why text-based paid search advertising can affect attitudes towards brands as well as behavioural metrics.

As an aside, when considering the brand effect of search, we are considering search as an advertising exposure and evaluating the effects such advertising can have. But we must also question how that exposure comes about. If an individual is searching for 'Volkswagen Golf' in Google, they must already be aware of the brand and marque, and be inclined to search for more information about it. Evaluating the drivers of search behaviour is another area of interest, but not the focus here. The relevance of this point for research is that we must be able to separate the behaviour of searching, and the attitudinal mindset that underlies it, from the attitudinal effects of advertising that appears within search results. We can isolate these effects by comparing a variety of combinations of search behaviour and exposure – individuals who did not search at all, those who searched but did not click on a paid search link, and those who searched and clicked on a paid search link.

CAMPAIGN CASE STUDY

In conjunction with Google, we identified a suitable campaign to evaluate and gained permission from the brand owner to conduct our research in tandem with it. It was a UK-only campaign in summer 2008 for a major soft drinks brand.

The integrated campaign featured TV, outdoor and various online channels, including email, social network activity, paid-for search, video blogs and web advertorials – all of which needed to be evaluated on a level playing field with traditional channels.

Returning to the Google brief, we identified three key research challenges: first, how to account for the multitude of communications and other influences on brand attitudes; second, the challenge of recruiting research samples exposed to low reach digital communications; and third, employing a reliable means of measuring search exposure. Let's describe each of these challenges in more detail.

Challenge 1 The number of different media deployed in most integrated campaigns tends to be large, especially when there are digital elements. Search was the medium in the research spotlight, but how could we evaluate its effectiveness in a fair and comparable way with other media and non-media factors?

If we are to evaluate accurately the effects of all communications, we also need to take account of all other consumer touchpoints with the brand – for example, online and offline word-of-mouth, previous experiences of the product, historical advertising campaigns, and a full range of competitor considerations. With such an array of influences, it is almost impossible to use a test and control methodology – there would have to be hundreds of cells to capture all combinations of relevant experiences and exposures, and each cell would have to be significant in size.

To answer the brief, we used a special deployment of our ICE (Integrated Communications Evaluation) methodology, designed to capture the effects of all communications on attitudes towards the soft drinks brand. The measure of success was a brand engagement measure – the extent to which consumers agreed with four positive attitudinal statements about the campaign and the soft drinks brand (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The three phases of ICE

First, qualitative research was conducted, and this helped to inform the quantitative phase of the research. It delivered understanding of how consumers considered the soft drinks brand and its competitors, revealed the key brand attitudes and identified the most important experiential questions and advertising stimulus to include in the questionnaire. The groups also enabled us to capture the language in which consumers were talking about the brand and category, enabling the wording of the questionnaire to be consumer, rather than marketer focused.

Second, quantitative research was undertaken; 651 individuals completed the 25-minute online questionnaire, which comprised three sections: capturing their attitudes towards the soft drinks brand; recording their past experiences and usage of the brand; and capturing their exposure to the brand's advertising via recognition of audio-visual stimulus. The sample was representative of the audience reached

by the overall campaign, with a focus on 20-to-30-year-olds who consumed the soft drinks brand or one of its direct competitors.

Finally, analysis of the questionnaire data was undertaken using the ICE two stage modelling approach. This involved an initial modelling phase, which used linear regression to measure the effect on each attitudinal statement of experience, communications and marketing exposure variables. This was followed by a second modelling phase, which used structural equation modelling to create a 'brand system', providing us with a measure of the importance of each attitudinal statement on the KPI (engagement) measure. By connecting these two models together, we could ascertain that exposure to a particular brand contact had a percentage impact on certain attitudes, and that those attitudes were having a certain quantified impact on KPI attitudes (Figure 2, page 30).

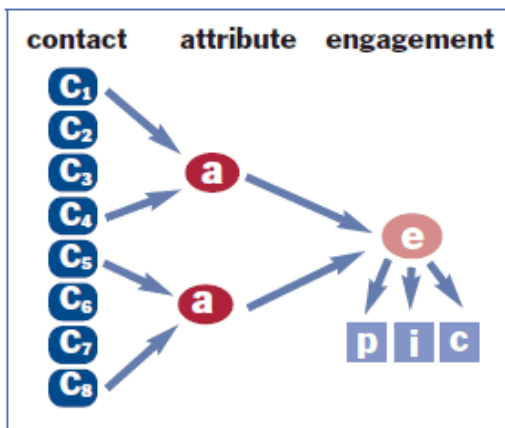


Figure 2: ICE two-stage modelling

Challenge 2 How can we evaluate the effectiveness of low penetration digital communications when only a tiny proportion of any existing panel would have been exposed to them?

We were aware before the campaign that the penetration of some digital channels would be very low. Search advertising was a case in point. It tends to deliver lower reach than traditional broadcast channels, and much lower reach for most FMCG advertisers compared with major direct response advertisers. In fact, the social media, email, web advertorial and paid search elements of the campaign recorded a combined reach of less than 0.4% of the UK population.

The sample was therefore recruited using targeted online overlays placed on websites that were part of the campaign, and deployed over the course of the campaign, rather than after it. Respondents were asked to submit their email address to take part in the survey and were then emailed the survey to complete in their own time.

The effect was to up-weight proportions of the survey sample that had been exposed to these niche digital communications. This enabled us to harvest enough sample to evaluate accurately the effectiveness of these channels, albeit on an eventual 'per person exposed' basis only, as our final sample was not representative of the overall campaign in terms of communications exposure rates. Put another way, the results are in terms of the relative, not absolute, impact of each communication.

Challenge 3 How can we measure accurately consumers' search experiences and exposures when specific Google search results cannot be recalled easily for a survey, or distinguished easily from results from any other search queries they have performed?

To address this challenge, we identified three potential ways in which an exposure to an advertiser's search campaign could be determined:

- By asking consumers if they had searched for certain terms.
- By presenting consumers with an image of the relevant search results and asking if they recalled seeing them.
- By tracking consumer exposure to search advertising using adserver cookies.

All three methods can capture different search experiences and exposures, as illustrated in Figure 3 (page 31).

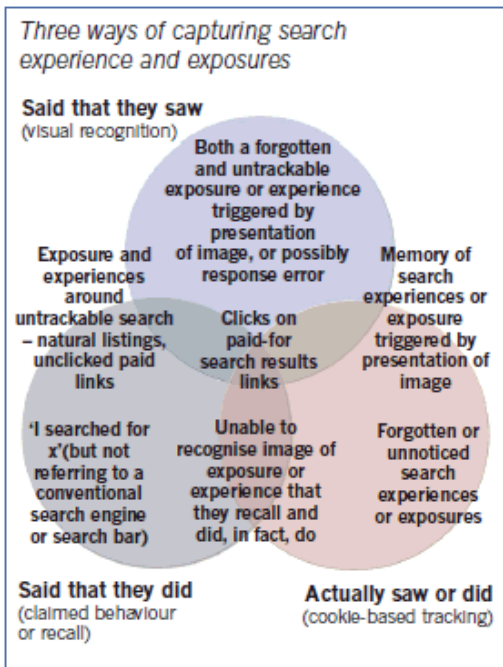


Figure 3: Capturing experience

To execute a thorough and accurate evaluation of search, we had to recognise its unique nature and adopt multiple methodologies, so that all types of relevant search exposure and experience were captured.

The most innovative and important of these was the cookie tracking. At the point of registering interest in the survey, retrospective cookie-tracked search behaviour was automatically appended to the respondent's profile, so that we knew passively whether or not the survey respondent had been exposed to the search element of the campaign for up to 90 days before their survey response, and also the keywords they had typed. Within the survey, further questions were asked, and visual stimulus presented, to capture claimed exposure to specific search ads and other relevant search behaviours.

RESULTS

Overall, we found that just over half of consumer engagement with the soft drinks brand was attributable to experiences of the brand, primarily having drunk it (Figure 4). A further 12% of engagement was the result of word-of-mouth or recommendation, and the remaining 36% was the result of various media exposures (Figure 5).

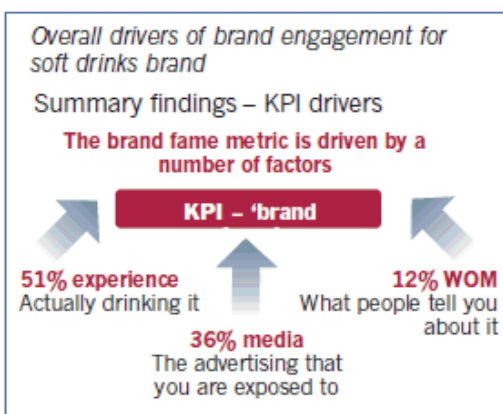


Figure 4: Campaign results

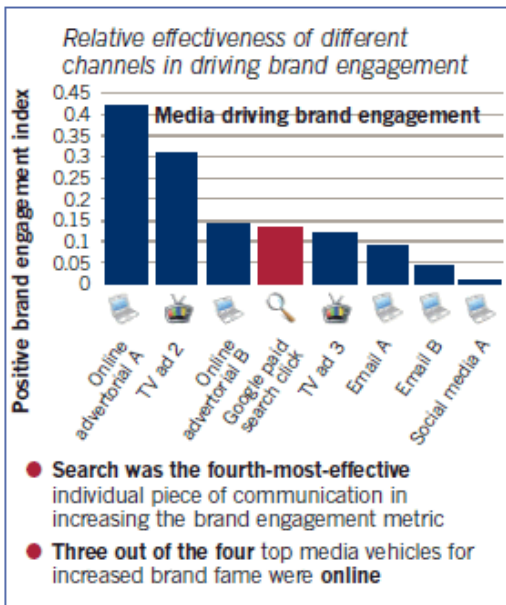


Figure 5: Brand engagement drivers

The breakdown of the media results emphasises the strong effects digital channels can have on brand engagement and validates the strategic role set out for these channels – to enhance the offline campaign and deliver engagement with additional content and interactivity online.

The ICE research showed that the online elements of the campaign were particularly effective. Online advertorial and email partnerships shifted positive engagement by around one-and-a-half times as much as TV, which itself was a strong performer.

Perhaps more surprisingly, Google paid-for search was the third-most effective medium in shifting attitudes, proving it to be an effective branding tool, as well as its more traditional reputation and role as a transactional or navigational tool.

The research revealed the powerful effect that well-executed online activity, including paid search, can have on brand metrics. Of course, far fewer people were exposed to these elements than TV or outdoor, which played the largest overall roles, but for the significant minority that engaged with these elements, there were strong brand effects.

The understandable desire for aggregate level research capable of evaluating the total brand impact of all brand touch-points runs the risk of showing that low reach communications have no impact at all, despite the fact that the effect to those exposed may be similar to, or greater than, media with broader reach.



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