

research and destroy

Many argue that the trend of pre-testing ads before they are broadcast is having a stifling effect on creativity. **Belinda Archer** asks 500 dog owners whether they agree

Around 150 housewives are sitting in an Oxfordshire village hall, each parked in front of a computer. A rough-cut commercial comes up on the screens and, as it plays, the lovely ladies are asked a series of questions. Do they like the ad? What do they think it's for? How about the music? Each fumbles with a keypad, and gives the film a suitable score on a range of different elements.

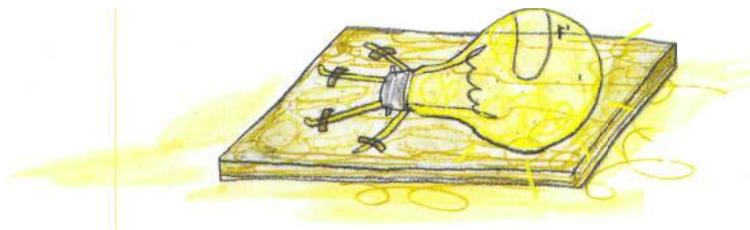
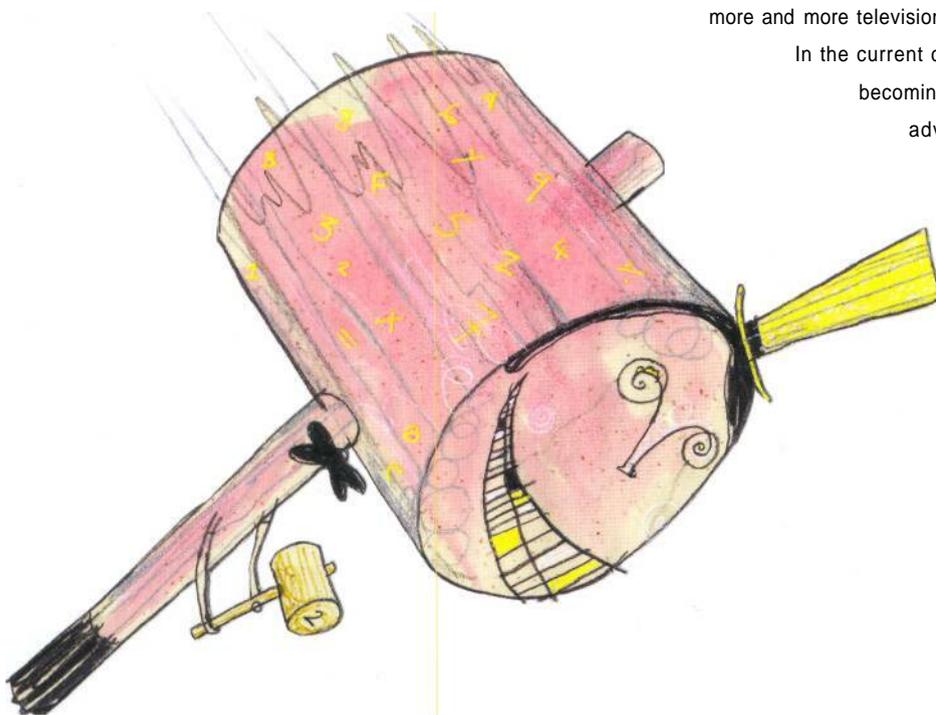
This, for the uninformed, is a typical commercial pre-test in action - and what is happening to more and more television spots before they reach TV screens across the world.

In the current climate of fear and ever-straitened budgets, clients are becoming increasingly desperate to assess how their advertising is likely to impact on target audiences.

As such, they are doing far more to research their advertising - usually in rough or animatic (a very basic type of animation) format - before it is made and broadcast.

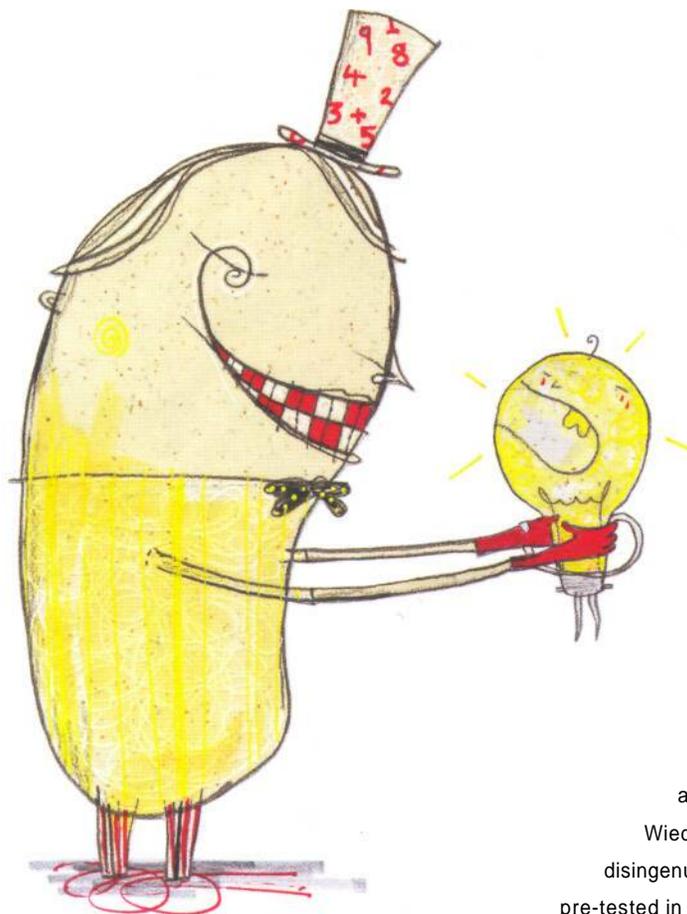
Millward Brown, the global market research agency, has invented arguably the market-leading test, the Link Test, which is being eagerly embraced by nervous clients and brand managers worldwide. And, at £20,000 a pop, they are taking it seriously.

Gordon Pincott, head of client services of Millward Brown UK, explains: "The test was devised in 1988 from an understanding of how ads work. We've been studying advertising" 



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gets them to pull a lever when it is most boring or most interesting. The ideal, they say, is that the ad should be at its most interesting at the point when the product or brand is introduced. But look at Honda Cog. The product doesn't come in until right at the very end."

Notably, and maybe not surprisingly, Cog wasn't pre-tested. If it had been, it almost certainly would have "failed".

Ben Walker, the copywriter on Cog and sister Honda film Everyday at Wieden + Kennedy London, says somewhat disingenuously: "We have not had any work pre-tested in a long time, and I think that's probably helped us get good work out. Honda just don't do research.

They believe they understand their brand better than anyone and they are the best judges of their advertising."

In fact, the clients that sanction exhaustive pre-testing tend to be the clients that lack confidence in their brand and its communication, say the agencies. They are also often part of a multinational conglomerate with a company-wide policy, such as Unilever, that nothing can get on air without being put through the process and scoring a particular, almost arbitrarily drawn, figure. Pre-testing is also a way for the timid advertiser to cover his or her arse: if the ad doesn't work, then they can point to the research figures and say that all the indications were that it would.

Olivier Altmann, executive creative director of Publicis Conseil in Paris, observes: "Research is a big issue for big clients, mostly clients for food or cosmetics, but rarely for cars unless the campaign is a huge international one. It also tends to be brought into play when the client and the agency have strong opposing views, where the consumer ends up being the final judge."

Phil Cockrell, a creative editor at Abbott Mead Vickers BBDO, can't blame some advertisers for doing research, understanding that they want as much quantifiable "evidence" that their campaign is going to work. But he has big reservations. "Creativity isn't quantifiable by facts and figures," he says. "It is not a factual thing or an exact science - it's about instinct, skills and talent. We're one of the only professions where people come to us for our advice, and then ignore it. It's really very disconcerting when members of the general public are being asked how to write an ad."

Some agencies are so anti the whole idea that they have a policy of refusing to carry out pre-tests altogether, whatever their clients think. Crispin Porter + Bogusky in the US claims to be one such shop. Tom Birk, director of research and strategic planning at the Miami agency, says: "Our philosophy is that we really don't like to pre-test. We believe it

for 30 years and have learnt that advertising which is commercially effective is memorable, but it has to be remembered in association with the brand rather than just be memorable in itself. The test measures how engaging or enjoyable or even how creative the ad is, but always whether the brand is at the heart of the ad. It has to be the hero."

This test, so named because it "links" soft understanding with hard-edged numbers, has so far been used to research over 32,000 ads internationally - including 2,500 in India, 2,000 in China and even 500 in Russia - before they air. As many as 50 ads globally are now being subjected to the rigour of pre-testing per week

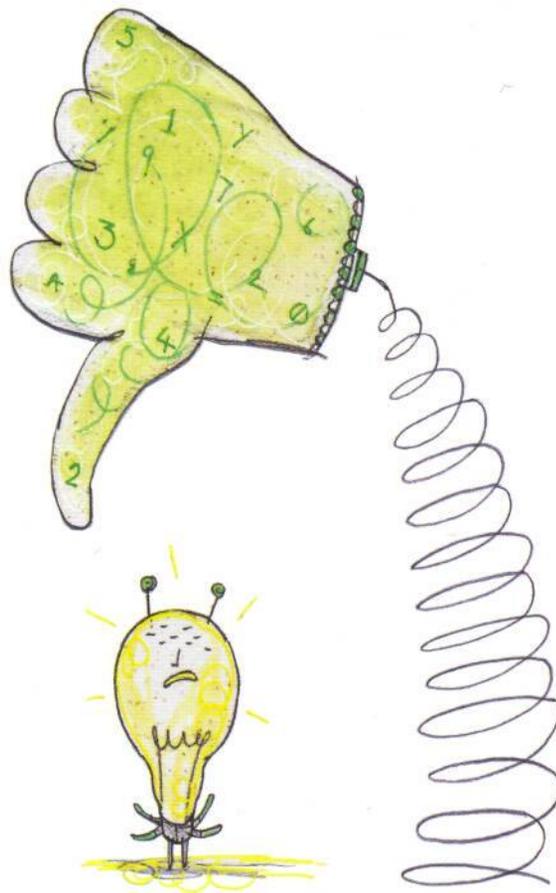
through Millward Brown, and there are several other research organisations doing roughly the same thing.

But what sort of effect is all this having on creativity?

Could it not strangle creative ideas at birth? And are consumers really the best people to judge, in a totally controlled, artificial environment, what they like or don't like about an ad - ultimately deciding whether it gets made or not?

Damon Collins, a creative director of Mother London, bristles at the very mention of the term "research". "There are different types of research, some of which make it harder to get great work through, others which may help," he says. "The quantitative research, as carried out by Millward Brown, is full of holes and not a good measure. It measures people as they watch an ad and

"Research will never reflect reality. The materials are totally different, and the conditions are totally different"



is just not a good idea to test with consumers, especially quantitatively. A lot of the work we do is very future-oriented and our experience shows us that consumers are conservative and not at all oriented towards the future. They are also not good at analysing why they like or don't like things." Birk adds that research is often about testing how familiar something is, rather than how creative it is. So, by definition, any cutting-edge, ground-breaking advertising will not research well.

"We call it the Wind Tunnel Effect. If you put a really well-designed car in a wind tunnel, the tunnel will tell you to round out the edges.

So, if your work is different or edgy, consumers will say to round off the edges, too," explains Birk. "We just don't want their view on casting or humour, or the voice or tone of an ad.

They are not the best people to say what works on them, despite being the target audience. It's totally ironic."

Altmann, too, believes the very methodology is flawed. "Research will never reflect reality; the materials are totally different, and the conditions are totally different. Advertising works on emotions, not on pure reason," he says.

He adds that quantitative research has no real value because "it just compares your results with a grid of previous ads, not of the genuine impact the ad may have. A good marketing director should be ahead of his consumers, not behind. Many products would also never come out if it were all down to research."

To fuel the debate further, there are numerous

case studies of award-winning ads (and, by extrapolation, effective ads that clients would have been pleased with) which have spectacularly bombed in pre-testing. Guinness Surfer was apparently "fucked over" in research (you can almost hear the panellists saying "but where's the pub?"), while Levi's lovable Flat Eric would never have seen the light of day if the research results had been heeded.

Ditto a famous puzzle spot for Manpower in France and Tango's trailblazing Orange Man Tango ads.

The seminal Heineken Refreshes the Parts that other Beers cannot Reach

campaign also famously bombed, as did the

Stella Artois Jean de Florette work, still going strong

now after 15 years and with three Cannes gold Lions

under its belt. Are you detecting a trend? Yep, all of them

fabulous campaigns that contained not a small bit of unquantifiable, immeasurable creative magic.

So how did they go on to get made? What can agencies do when faced with the fearful "below average" score on one of these tests?

It seems what is needed is a combination of a client with balls of concrete, a stubbornly determined account man, and deep trust between the two.

"Frank Lowe drove the Heineken campaign through," observes AMV's Cockrell. "He just wasn't prepared to take no for an answer. But Frank would have instilled great trust in the client. It takes a really brave client and a braver agency. Unfortunately agencies can't afford to lose clients these days, and many aren't prepared to have that difficult conversation."

Derek Robson, managing director of Bartle Bogle Hegarty and the planner on Levi's at the time of Flat Eric, says: "You simply have to respect the research process and pay it due care and attention, as you would the finished film. You have to express the idea in as full a way as you can, using the best materials and you need to find people who can draw animatics well." Altmann reinforces the need for trust: "I believe that when the client and agency trust one another, the research is merely the homework. It's the creativity that counts."

In response to all this, Millward Brown's Pincott insists that great ads are not necessarily killed off by pre-testing and can - and do - get through the process unscathed. He says Lynx always does well in the Link Test, as does Pot Noodle "The slag of all snacks", John Smith's and the Sprite goblin.

"But those ads all have the brand embodied in the creative idea," he repeats. More than this, however, Pincott claims that he and his teams can actually improve the creative product. There is one ugly rumour that suggests the Moby Dick voiceover on Guinness Surfer was added after feedback from research suggested the narrative of the film was unclear.

Pincott adds: "Where our data and insights are used well, we've been able to say that there's a good idea and we can make it come out more powerfully. The data can actually enhance creativity."

Another agency gripe, though, is that it is not the finished film that is researched by this method but rather a very rough, unsophisticated version. So consumers are judging a thing before the special alchemy of lighting, casting, direction and sound engineering has taken effect.

"There is a massive difference between an animatic and a finished film. Magic happens with exposed film," observes Mother's Collins. But Pincott insists: "We get the same score for an animatic and a finished film. The prettying up makes no difference. But where the ad has been tested as an animatic and changes have been made before going to finished film, the score can increase by 50 per cent, which is a 50 per cent better return on your media money."

Despite the stout defences, Millward Brown accepts that there are often "tensions" with the creative community, saying that it goes with the territory.

"Difficulties arise when you get highly creative advertising that has nothing to do with the brand or where the brand is tacked on. The test is if you can take the brand out of the ad and it still works. We have to say 'nice ad, but it's not about the brand', which can create tensions with people who have invested a lot of time, money and emotional energy in the process," says Pincott

Pre-testing quantitative research, it would appear, is here to stay - not least because Millward Brown is part of the giant WPP group, and thus not something that CEO Martin Sorrell is going to allow to wither. So adfolk had just better get used to it.

But strength to the bold account director or creative who stands up to the client and says: "Ignore the research. Take a punt."

Because if they don't, consumers could well be deprived of the next bit of TV advertising magic. 🌀



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Anúncio