



Democratizing ad ratings

Using a crowd-sourced rating system to help businesses improve results

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June 9, 2014

Abstract

We are developing scalable and efficient ways to help advertisers quantify the creative elements of online ads and their effectiveness. Whether ads aim to improve online conversions or drive offline purchases, this research quantifies the patterns of what makes ad creative effective across brands, industries and business objectives. The goal is to ultimately provide advertisers with guidelines and “pre-testing” standards for creative, enabling them to strengthen ads before any online marketing campaign goes live. The objective is to help advertisers develop the best digital ads.

Executive summary

Marketers spend a lot of time selecting the best platform, targeting and placement for their online ads. But they spend comparatively little time assessing the creative used in the ad. What’s more, a current common metric for assessing the quality of an ad’s creative quality is its click-through-rate. Past research has shown that CTR is sometimes a poor proxy for an advertiser’s key performance indicators.

The main focus of our research is to ultimately understand how creative elements affect actual business results, both online and in store. And while this work focused on ads delivered on Facebook, we believe the findings about what creative elements are most effective will apply more broadly to online advertising. In particular, our research rated ads along 7 key creative elements, which follow below with the question or statement we used to test the elements:

- **Focal point:** The image has one obvious focal point.
- **Brand link:** How easy is it to identify the advertiser?
- **Brand personality:** How well does the ad fit with what you know about the brand?
- **Informational reward:** Does the ad have interesting information?
- **Emotional reward:** The ad appeals to you emotionally.
- **Noticeability:** While browsing online, this image would grab your attention.
- **Call to action:** This ad urges you to take a clear action.



To determine the effectiveness of the ads in generating business results, campaigns intended to drive online purchases were measured with Facebook's conversion tracking pixel, while campaigns aimed at generating in-store sales were measured using outcomes measurement.

After assessing the creative scores for these ads representing 350 brands in 18 industries, we made 2 key findings.

- Brand advertisers generally achieved 1.03X to 1.04X higher scores than average in brand link, emotional reward and noticeability.
- The ads of direct response marketers had 1.03X higher scores than average for call to action.

Among other findings, successful ads for online conversion either provided product information and a clear directive, or had a strong focus on the brand. As far as driving in-store sales, successful ads had high scores in more than a single creative element, including brand link, brand personality and noticeability.

One of the goals of our research is to provide advertisers with “pre-testing” standards for creative that enables them to strengthen ads before any online marketing campaign goes live. We intend to grow our database of creative scores for ads and to statistically substantiate differences by industry and objective. This ongoing research will enable us to provide fast, effective and actionable data on how ads rate on these elements. We ultimately plan to provide recommendations for improving ads, the consumer ad experience and the results from those ads.



Introduction

What makes an ad resonate with people? It is likely the ad's creative expression: a combination of the image, copy, size and placement of the ad. We believe there is a need for a scalable method for brands to assess an ad's holistic creative expression and to determine the potential business impact of ad creative before ads go live.

In 2012¹, Facebook research proved it was possible to quantitatively evaluate and pinpoint the elements of ad creative that drive consumers to purchase. In this latest study, we aim to advance that work with research conducted between October 2013 and March 2014 that analyzed ads that ran on Facebook between January 2012 and March 2014. The goal is to provide tangible and actionable guidelines that will enable advertisers to create ads that are more effective in generating desired business results.

Unlike our previous research that relied on experienced marketers as raters, this study recruited over 700 raters and screened them through rigorous qualification tests. Between October 2013 and March 2014, the raters scored over 1,500 ads, which ran in Facebook's News Feed. The ads were scored on 7 key creative elements, which follow below with the question or statement we used to test the elements:

- **Focal point:** The image has one obvious focal point.
- **Brand link:** How easy is it to identify the advertiser?
- **Brand personality:** How well does the ad fit with what you know about the brand?
- **Informational reward:** This ad has interesting information.
- **Emotional reward:** This ad appeals to you emotionally.
- **Noticeability:** While browsing online, this image would grab your attention.
- **Call to action:** This ad urges people to take a clear action.

A main focus of the research was to understand how these 7 creative elements affect actual business results, both online and in store. To determine the effectiveness of the ads in generating business results, campaigns intended to drive online purchases were measured with Facebook's conversion tracking pixel, while campaigns aimed at generating in-store sales were measured using outcomes measurement.

This paper first describes the motivation of the project and the research methodology. Next, it discusses high-level trends that we observed across business objectives and industries. And finally, it digs into the trends observed for the top and bottom performers by online conversions and in-store conversions.

Helping marketers create better ads

Marketers spend a lot of time selecting the best platform, targeting and placement for their online ads. But they

¹Facebook Internal data, presented at ARF in June 2012

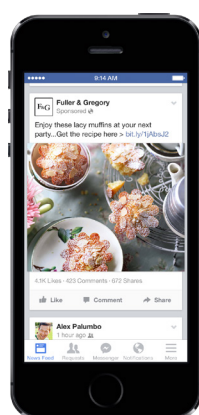


focus comparatively little time assessing the content of the ad. The best practices that advertisers follow for the content of online ads usually apply to more traditional advertising offerings, such as television and print. But these ads are, by nature, delivered in a different format and context. What's more, a common metric for assessing online ad creative quality is click-through-rate. Past research has shown that CTR is sometimes a poor proxy for an advertiser's key performance indicators.

Our new research studied Facebook Ads campaigns to determine how each creative element affects actual sales and brand metrics. While the research focused on ads delivered on Facebook, we believe the findings about what creative elements are most effective will apply more broadly to online advertising.

Previous Facebook research conducted in 2012² looked at what aspects of ad creative have the most impact at different points along a consumer's journey from awareness to purchase. The research suggested that a sense of reward (eliciting a smile or providing valuable information) is most highly correlated with the bottom of the purchase funnel: purchase consideration. In addition to reward, the other elements listed below are most correlated with the top of the funnel: a person's recollection of having seen an ad:

Which creative elements matter?



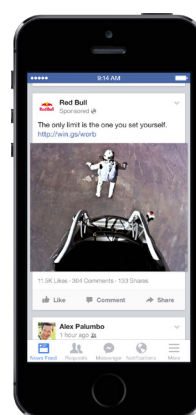
Focal Point

Do you know where to focus?



Brand Link

Can you tell who the brand is?



Personality

Does the ad fit with the brand's personality?



Reward

Does it make you smile?

The initial research was based on a few hundred ads, which were rated exclusively by marketing experts. In this latest study, we set out to broaden the scale of ads to help provide tangible and actionable guidelines that will enable advertisers to create more effective ads.

Crowdsourcing ad quality ratings

This new research examined more than 1,500 ads that ran in the Facebook News Feed from over 350 brands in 18 industries. The campaigns that we studied featured various marketing objectives. Ads were identified and rated when there were associated business results with either online conversions or in-store sales. Campaigns intended

²Facebook Internal data, presented at ARF in June 2012



to drive online purchases were measured with the Facebook conversion tracking pixel, while campaigns aimed at generating in-store sales were measured with outcomes measurement.

In order to confidently assess the impact of an advertising campaign, the research evaluated ads from larger advertisers who had reached a sufficient number of people. However, the findings may still provide guidance to small- and medium-sized advertisers.

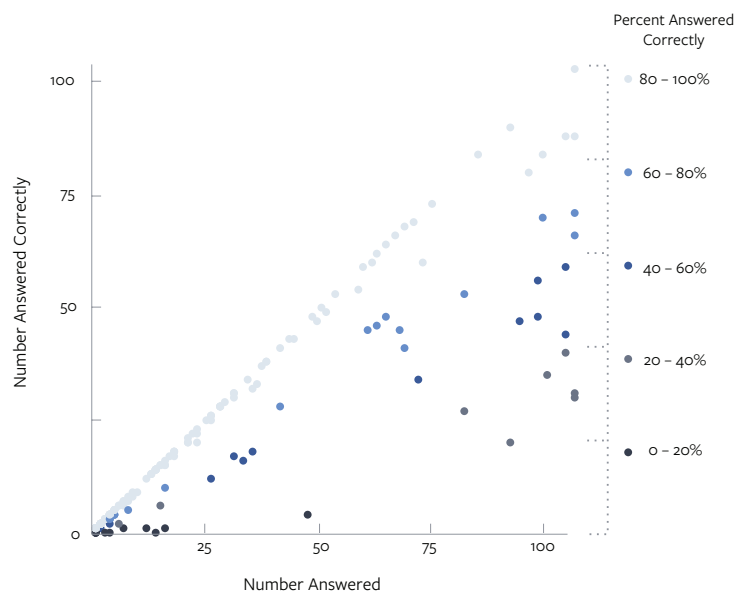
Screening ad creative raters

The 700 raters employed in this study were sampled from around the world and screened through qualification tests. The qualifications required that the rater had a baseline understanding of the questions and continued to pay attention to the ad and the concept. For every ad, each of the 7 creative elements was evaluated by 50 of the 700 to generate an adequate number of responses from which to assess and aggregate a score along each given creative element.

Figure 1.

Overall rater consistency

Across all 7 creative elements, most raters answer correctly the intermittent questions we use to gauge consistency and reliability.



After running 2 sets of hundreds of ads through the rating process, our study established a set of best practices to validate worker quality. Generally, the research found the set of crowd-sourced workers to be largely reliable. We used both pre-qualifications and intermittent checks of workers to assess their reliability in quantifying a given creative element.

Pre-Qualifications

Before being allowed to rate ads, raters were required to qualify by scoring ads for each creative element. Each qualification test involved two “gold standard” questions with ads obviously conveying (or not conveying) a given

creative element. A rater would have to correctly score these 2 sample ads before being allowed to score any actual ads. In fact, if a rater were to randomly select an answer for both questions, the rater would only have a 16% to 24% chance of qualifying into rating ads for a creative element.

Intermittent checks

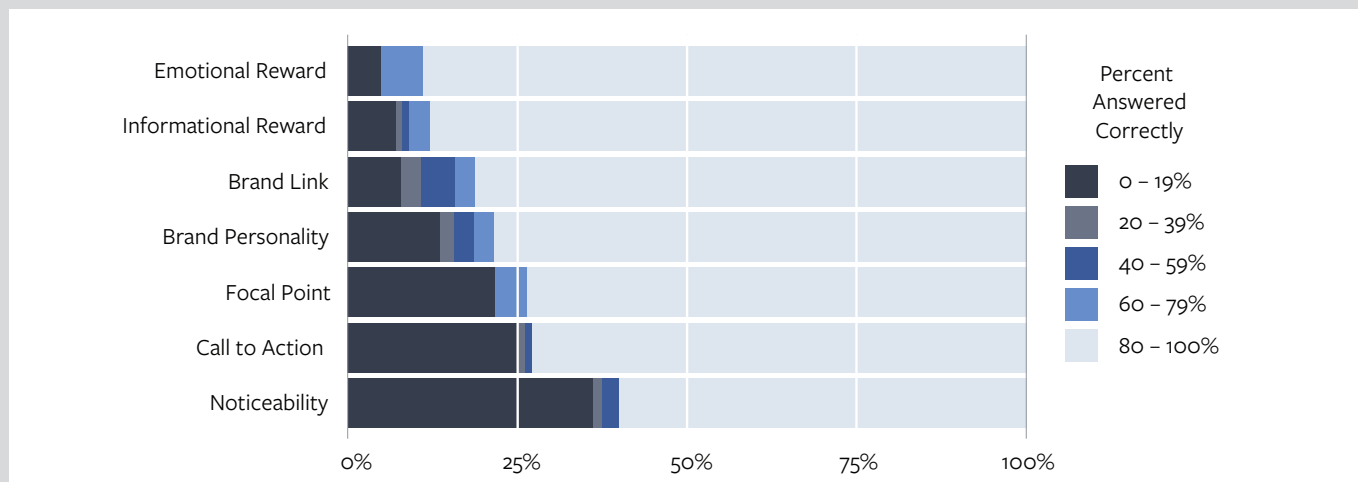
In addition to scoring the 2 sample ads, raters were intermittently asked to answer a gold standard question within the set of real ads to gauge rater fatigue and consistency as they rated an increasing number of ads.

Figure 1 displays the results of those intermittently asked gold standard questions. If a rater were to answer at random, the rater would have a 40% to 60% chance of being correct. A majority of raters correctly answered over 60% of the gold standard questions correctly. Indeed, an evident trend line depicts raters correctly answering 100% of the gold standard questions. Then, to calculate the creative scores for each element, the research involved taking the ratings from those raters who correctly answered at least 80% of the gold standard questions attempted for that element.

Figure 2.

Rater consistency (by creative element)

Within each element, we employ ratings from workers who achieved at least 80% accuracy in answering the intermittent questions assessing reliability and consistency..



Breaking this out by each creative element, it became clear the majority of raters within each element were attentive and consistently answered correctly the gold standard questions. While the intermittent checks within both informational reward and emotional reward elicited a high degree of accuracy from raters, similar checks for call to action and noticeability resulted in a smaller share of raters accomplishing the same degree of accuracy. Seeing the same message and ad creative several times may have adversely affected an ad's ability to elicit attention (i.e., noticeability) and action-oriented excitement (i.e., call to action) from a rater (see Figure 2).



Direct Response		Brand	
Vertical	# of advertisers	Vertical	# of advertisers
E-commerce	52	Beverages & Packaged Food	34
Organizations & Associations	20	Personal Care & Cleaning	34
Professional Services	16	Retail	23
Health	13	Travel	13
Entertainment & Media	12	Technology	11
Gaming	9	Consumer Packaged Goods	6
Education	5	Automotive	4
Dating	3	Government & Politics	3
Financial Services	1	Telecommunications	2

Figuring out how industries matter

Advertisers typically have business objectives that fall into 2 broad categories. One is optimizing brand-related outcomes, such as driving awareness. The other is increasing direct-response rates, such as increasing online sales. Typically, businesses in a particular industry will focus a majority of their marketing efforts on one of the 2 goals.

Categorizing advertisers by brand vs. direct response

When looking at creative scores within an advertiser's industry, different creative elements are likely to be

more important, depending on whether a business is a brand or direct-response advertiser. The 350 brands for which we assessed creative were put into 18 industry categories. The industries were then divided by their primary business objective in the following manner: Direct-response advertisers tended to have their main presence in the digital space, while brand advertisers tended to conduct their primary business in bricks-and-mortar spaces.

Trends for brand advertisers

Brand advertisers achieved 1.03X to 1.04X higher scores than the average scores for brand link, emotional reward and noticeability. These advertisers were optimizing their ad campaigns to achieve brand awareness and brand affinity to encourage in-store purchases.

By definition, awareness of a brand can only be achieved if a consumer is able to identify the brand. When paired with emotional reward, brand link helps build affinity by fostering a bond between a consumer and a brand.

Noticeability is another key element for a brand advertiser. Generally, brand advertisers are larger advertisers with easily recognizable names. It may be that their ads presented familiar logos and pictures, which made the ads more noticeable than ads containing unfamiliar images.

Direct-response advertiser trends

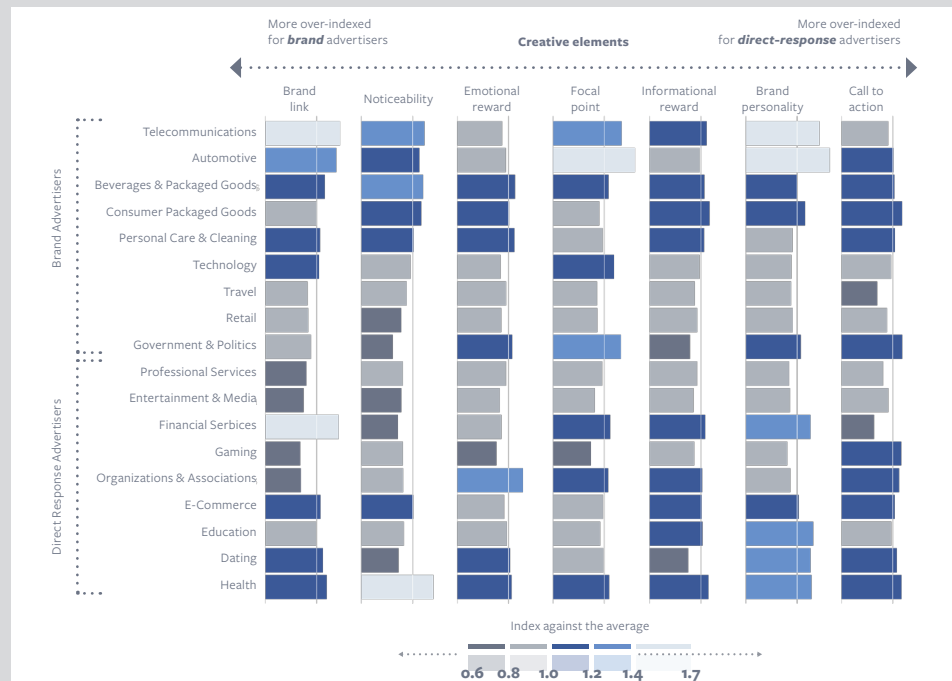
In contrast, the ads of direct-response advertisers scored 1.03X higher than average in call to action. This indicates that direct-response advertisers, on average, were succeeding in conveying clear directives to their consumers.

Benchmarking by industry

Figure 3 provides the benchmark of average creative scores for each industry. Notably, only a few industries are

more than 20% over-indexed for any creative element. In fact, the scores within brand-advertiser industries—including automotive, telecommunications, beverages and packaged foods, personal care and cleaning—over-indexed across both brand link and noticeability. And the scores for direct-response advertisers, including e-commerce and dating, were higher for brand personality and call to action.

Figure 3.
Index of creative scores,
by vertical



Within Figure 3, the industries are arranged by primary business objectives. They are also organized by overall scores across the 2 strongest elements for each objective: brand link and noticeability for brand advertisers and brand personality and call to action for direct-response advertisers. Ads from the telecommunications and automotive industries exhibited the highest average ratings for brand link and noticeability. And ads from the health, dating, education and e-commerce industries showed the highest ratings for call to action and brand personality.



The health industry included ads that primarily promoted competitions, such as those with people completing obstacle courses or runners crossing the finish line. The combination of vibrant colors and active people featured in the images likely contributed to the ads' high ratings in noticeability and emotional reward. The ad shown here was not one of the actual ads rated in the study, but it is representative of the originals.



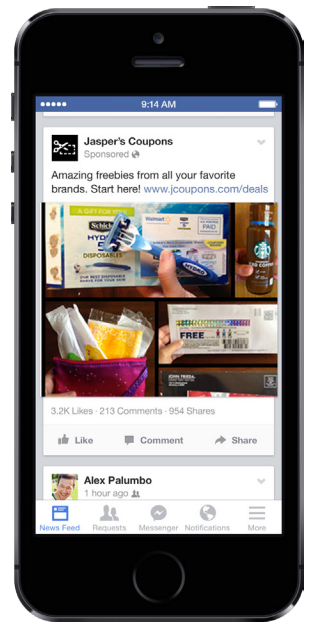
In contrast, ads in the gaming industry were focused on convincing consumers to download a digital game. It is fitting that call to action was the sole creative element for which this vertical over-indexed. While brand recognition seems less important for digital games, action-oriented copy directing people to download a game was key.

Again, the ad shown here was not one of the actual ads rated in the study but it is representative of the originals. The patterns among similar types of advertisers may be attributed to marketers thinking alike given their similar business objectives. Or, the similarity in ads may stem from the fact that they resulted in the best performing ads.

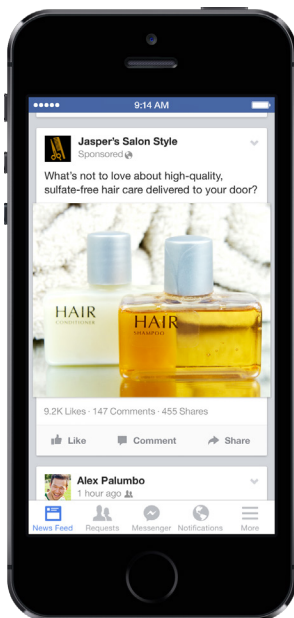
In subsequent rounds of scoring, our research will seek to further investigate the interaction between industries and business objectives in the context of key performance metrics. Future research will also explore patterns in the creative elements across campaign objectives (i.e. new product launch, re-branding, always-on), the degree of brand equity and size of the advertiser.

Creating more effective online conversion ads

Among the hundreds of campaigns aimed at online conversions, there were common patterns observed among the top and bottom-performing campaigns.



An example of a product-focused ad that rates highly on call to action and informational reward.



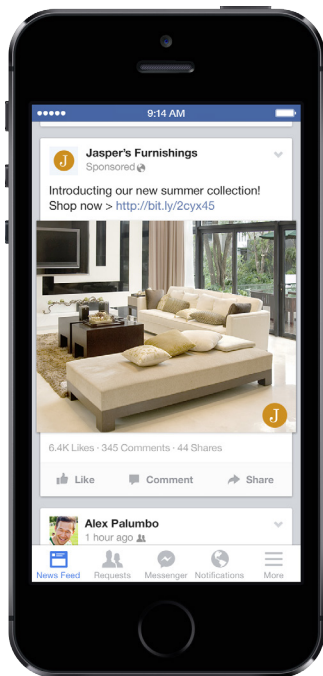
Best practices for online conversions

Focus on the product

When an advertiser is focused on increasing online conversions, one of the best tactics observed was providing product information and a clear directive in the ads. If a marketer did this well, the ads did not need to score higher than average on any of the other elements to be effective.

In the fourth quarter of 2013, a coupon site ran a campaign that resulted in one of the best conversion rates for campaigns with similar objectives that ran on Facebook. The business employed a series of 4 ads that scored, on average, 1.1X higher on call to action and 1.2X higher in informational reward than other campaigns running at the same time.

These ads displayed popular products in the creative and cited well-known brands in the copy. These elements can lead to higher scores in informational reward. And the “Start here” link was a clear element resulting in a high call-to-action score. The ad shown here was not one of the actual ads rated in the study, but it is representative of the originals.



Focus on the brand

Another successful approach for optimizing conversion rates was a strong focus on brand. In particular, these ads demonstrated a strong link to the brand and a good fit with the brand's personality. One personal care brand promoted its home-delivery service to more than 4 million people on Facebook and resulted in another one of the best performing campaigns in driving online conversions. The brand employed 4 ads with 2 themes: 2 ads featured prominently product itself and the other 2 ads featured its founder.

The ad shown here was not one of the ads rated in the study, but is representative of the originals.

While the 4 ads scored similarly to other ads in emotional reward, focal point, informational reward and noticeability, they rated over 2X higher in brand personality and brand link.

Conversions cannot be attributed to any single ad impression. As a result, it is not possible to conclude which ads were more effective. But the diverse collection of ads employed in this campaign may have just as likely contributed to the success of the brand's campaign.

Common pitfalls for online sales

One common pitfall for online conversion-focused campaigns is running ads that lack a connection to the brand's personality. These lower-performing campaigns may have scored highly in a few creative elements, but did not exhibit enough of the brand's personality.

One online furniture store in brand link scored more than 2X the overall average. Indeed, the brand's logo was prominently featured in all of the ads. However, the ads under-indexed in brand personality and focal point. While the ads employed attractive and curated furniture sets, there was no focus to any of the images to provide a clear representation of the brand or intention of the ad. And the images displayed a somewhat out-of-reach aesthetic. The ad shown here was not one of the actual ads rated in the study, but it is representative of the originals.

To better communicate and attract potential customers, single product-focused images should lure customers into viewing the brand as approachable and accessible.

Generating higher in-store sales with better ads

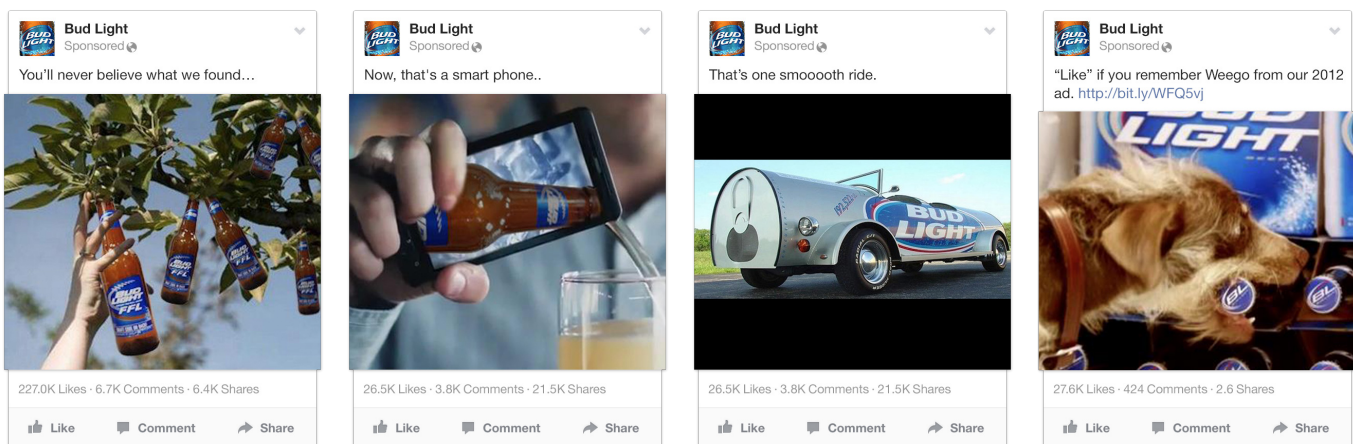
Similar to the online conversion-focused ads, common patterns among the top- and bottom-performing campaigns in generating in-store sales were observed.

Best practices for in-store sales

Prominent product placement

Advertisers focused on increasing in-store sales often use ads as a way to remind consumers of a wide-ranging, multi-channel message about the product. The research observed that some of the highest performers used prominent placement of an iconic product image. This made for an attention-grabbing ad, as people could easily identify the brand.

Four ads from a Bud Light campaign that ran in Fall 2012 conveyed prominent product placement. Employing fanciful images and prominent product placement, the ads scored over 1.5X the average in brand link and noticeability.



Example ads that focus on the product image and catch attention via their strong brand link.

Well-rounded creative

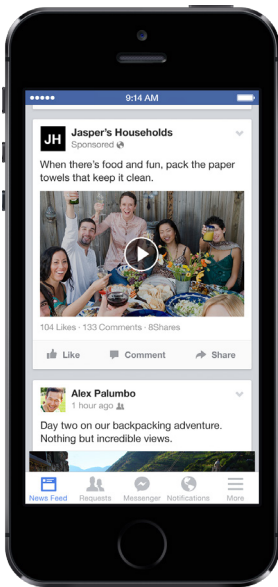
A few of the best-performing Facebook campaigns rated highly on nearly all of the creative elements. On these campaigns, it was difficult to determine what exactly drove their success since they were well executed on almost every aspect.

One of the campaigns by a consumer packaged goods company is a great example of a well-rounded series of ads. In addition to links about the use of the product, the ads in the study presented simple images of the product being used. The ads scored higher than the average ad for call to action, brand personality, emotional reward, focal point, informational reward and noticeability. Relative to other ads, the actual ads scored more than 1.42X higher than average in call to action and 1.5X higher in noticeability.

Common pitfalls for in-store sales

The same pitfalls that we saw with campaigns focused on online conversions were also a problem for brand-

focused campaigns. To be successful, ads should feature a strong link back to the brand and reflect the brand's personality.



The mock of the consumer packaged good ad shown to the left lacks this brand connection. Despite employing an engaging, people-focused image, neither the ad copy nor the image is readily associated with brand. As a result, the ad scored 30% less than average for ads in both brand link and brand personality. The ad also scored less than average in call to action, focal point, informational reward and noticeability. The only element in which the ad scored higher than average was in emotional reward, which was likely due to the people-focused image.

Especially in a video ad, it seems obvious to communicate a compelling story about a product in an ad. But when an advertiser is aiming to generate product sales, an ad demonstrating a clear association with the product is more effective. In particular, when an advertiser is considering a cover image for its next video ad, the creative should contain an obvious link to the brand.

But it's not enough for an ad to exhibit brand link. A successful campaign should employ an ad that achieves high scores in more than a single creative element.

Conclusion

Guidelines

High ratings in all creative elements do not necessarily make for a successful ad. A brand's industry and objectives are key in understanding which creative elements are most important in driving performance. When designing online ads, this research suggests advertisers should keep 3 key ideas in mind:

1. **Objective is important.** Direct-response advertisers achieved higher call to action while brand-focused advertisers scored higher on brand link, emotional reward and noticeability.
2. **Top performers for online conversions** focused on either the product (informational reward and call to action) or on the brand (brand link and brand personality).
3. **In-store sales top performers** were often well-rounded ads (scored high on nearly all dimensions) or had prominent product placement (brand link, brand personality and noticeability).

Future research areas

With this initial round of research completed, new areas of investigation will focus on continuing to build standards for pre-testing ad creative quality before ads go live. This latest research relied on observational results when



comparing differences by objective, industry and performance. In the future, additional data will help to further statistically prove the findings. We plan to also explore the impact on ratings based on the demographics of raters and the characteristics of advertisers.

Business impact

This research is a step forward towards answering the question: “What makes online creative impactful?” We aim to provide advertisers with guidelines for strengthening ads in any online marketing campaign before ads go live. The ultimate goal is to encourage advertisers to focus on quality of their creative and to develop the best digital ads.

We hope that in the near future, this data will help to create standards for pre-testing ads and an effective alternative to CTR optimization. At the same time, growing out database will help businesses benchmark potential ads against others in the same industry with similar marketing objectives.