Brands can be more persuasive by being human

A white paper exploring the relation of emotion, attention and memory in the context of storytelling.

Riya Mehta | May 18, 2021

Brands can be more persuasive if they are human! Now what does that mean? How can brands that are offering services, selling products be human you think? Let me tell you about the three traits of how brands can be more human -

1. **Emotion is a human characteristic that makes a brand more human**
   Remember that time, when you and your friends had this wild night in college, what a great story to tell, now 10 years later as you reunite with them again? How about the endless bickering between you and your sister that mom still reminds you on every holiday family reunion? Moments turned into memory only to be narrated again and again in the form of stories. Humans and natural storytellers, surrounded by endless stories, either living them, telling them or recalling them. Why so? Why are stories easier to remember and recall over data and facts? Maybe because you may never remember the details of when, what, why and where but you'll always remember how it made you feel. If I ask you to recall an advertisement that grabbed your attention, you may not remember what it is about but instead bits and parts of the advertisement that made you feel something - happy, excited, anxious, nervous, sad etc.

   Even though humans like to believe they are rational creatures, we are largely governed by our emotions. Our emotions drive our actions and our rational part of the brain later tries to justify those actions. This synchrony is what I suppose we call the gut feeling, the one that's always right and governed by our instincts and emotions and later justified by our rational mind. That said, an appeal to the emotions is a powerful means of persuasion.

   WARC's 2020 Health of Creativity report – an analysis of the most awarded ideas from 2015-18 looking at campaigns awarded for both creativity and effectiveness – found that more than a quarter (26%) of the ideas used storytelling as a creative strategy, the third most used strategy. Research firm System 1 has previously found that in relation to TV ads, those which use defined characters, locations and storylines, which feed the 'right brain', deliver the strongest consumer attention and emotion. The firm also analyzed online video used in campaigns and found that they tended to skew towards the same 'right brain' elements and deliver more, very large business effects e.g. sales, market share and profit effects. Furthermore, testing on Facebook and YouTube also found that 'right-brained' ads tended to generate more attention, emotional response and recall. So, across the most common types of video ads, using elements of storytelling such as character, place and storyline is more effective than more factual, non-narrative ads. On the contrary, today's advertising shows a striking contrast, one that is not in favour of emotion but facts. Various studies conducted by agency and research group System1 have found that creative elements proven to elicit emotional

response – and drive long-term effectiveness – are less used today in advertising than in the past. One study of TV ads showed that over the last 15 years features characteristic of the right brain, based on empathy, relationships and human connection, have largely disappeared. These features include dialogue, implicit glances, scenes unfolding, accents and a clear sense of time and place. They are being replaced by 'left brain' features, which are literal, factual and explicit – and less effective.

A 2019 analysis of Australian Effie winning campaigns confirmed that emotional campaigns are more effective at building long-term market share growth but rational campaigns are more effective in acquiring new customers - so both are needed to deliver brand profitability over the short and long term.

Having said that, emotions in advertising not only helps in long-term brand building but also is proven to drive advertising attention and memorability. The need for quality attention calls for shifting gears from data to emotion. Advertisers need to start using emotion to help us be more creative at scale, be bold and make the most of every platform they're on. Emotion-based communications aim to evoke and appeal to human emotions to encourage brand preference, which will build the brand's business in the long term. This leads us to our next segment on how to capture attention through compelling storytelling.

2. **Long-form storytelling is a persuasive characteristic that makes a brand more human.**
How many times have your weekend plans ended up in a movie marathon with family or binge watching a new show you just found on Netflix? Ever since the COVID-19 and the lockdown content consumption have increased drastically. Users look for more and more long-format content to binge watch and make the most of their weekends staying at home. This makes me think, why do series feel more engaging and why hitting the pause button even after having watched 21 episodes in a row seems hard? The answer is simple, the same reason why when your best friend texts you saying 'he/she wants to tell you something' and then just doesn't text any further. The suspense of not knowing what comes next and the excitement/ anxiety to know what happens next is what keeps us glued to our screens.

Storytelling helps build relationships and gently persuade an audience into suspending their cynicism, to 'buy in' to an emotion or point of view. A good story has character, plot, drama and resolution. It mirrors the experiences and emotions of the audience in order to engage them. Brand stories that focus

on the product, the vision or the user are particularly highly rated for user-related narrative.

Emotion alone is not enough, advertisers should use storytelling to ensure the brand is present at peak moments of emotion so as the audience remembers them. The peak-end rule applies to all aspects of a brand experience, not just advertising - that's something brands should always consider, according to William Hanmer-Lloyd and Stephanie Watson of Total Media.

In a conversation with TV[R]EV's John Cassillo and Oriana Schwindt about Netflix and the data, John highlighted that over the past decade Netflix has skewed more heavily into TV shows and one of the reasons for it is because TV shows help keep the eyeballs on the platform. As Netflix isn't ad-supported and TV shows are a longer commitment than a 3-hour movie as well as offer audience autonomy in terms of the pace in which they want to watch is more of a reason for this inclination towards TV shows. Oriana was quick to add that TV shows are a good way for media producers to hold audience attention for as long as possible.

This along with the emotional investment involved while watching a TV show's character, plot and the excitement of what happens next is a strong reason for them to learn from the entertainment industry and adapt to a long-term storytelling format in their campaigns.

Movies and TV Shows on Netflix: 2010 v. 2020
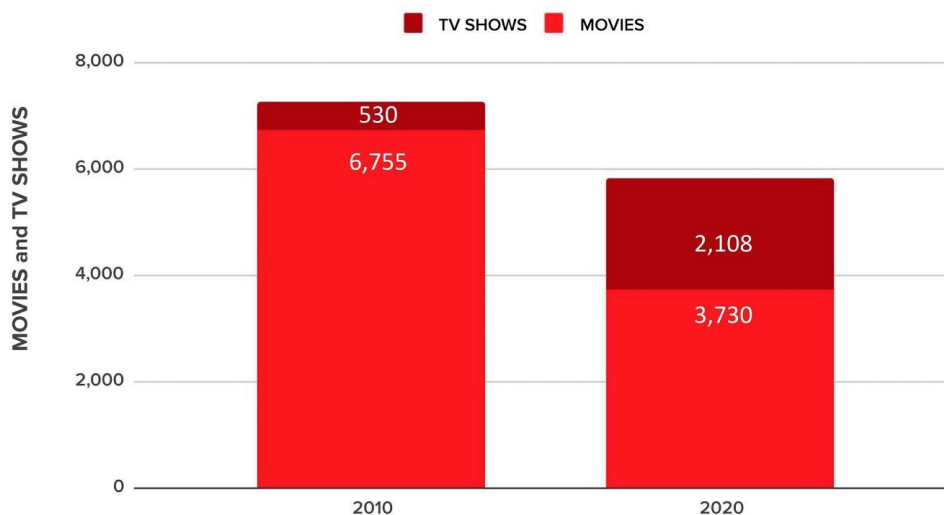
Source: Reelgood.com

Multiple pieces of research have uncovered the importance of emotional peaks, and the timing of them, in creating effective video ads and content. Looking at video ads, research conducted by Ipsos MORI shows the end of video ads are crucial to make them easily retrievable in memory and influence brand choice. An analysis of more than 700 ads, looking at their memorability and second-by-second emotional responses, found that ads which performed best in terms of memorability elicited stronger positive emotional responses in the second half of the ad. Research undertaken by video adtech firm Unruly, facial recognition company Affectiva, and the consultant Richard Shotton, divided nine ads into three groups based on the level of emotional response: a control group had an even pattern of emotional response, with few clear peaks; a second 'multiple peaks' group showed several emotional highs through the course of the ads; a third 'end peak' group showed a clear emotional peak towards the end of the ad. These were then shown to 1,200 people, with researchers following up a week later to see which ads participants remembered and which particular elements of those ads they could recall. The results were -

- Ad recall: this was significantly higher in the multiple peak (31%) and end peak (43%) groups than the control group (23%).
- Brand recall: this was three times higher in the multiple peak group (32%) and two times higher in the end peak group (21%) than in the control group (10%).
- Participants were also more likely to correctly recall details of the ads with strong emotional peaks than the control group.

As for content, research from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) done Using neuroscientific research to explore the relationship between emotion and long-term memory in delivering engaging branded content, it found 70% of long-term memory encoding peaks are associated with peaks of emotional intensity.

3. Weakness is not a brand's enemy but it's friend, a characteristic that makes brands more human.

If we know anything about humans, it is that they are quick to adapt, evolve and eventually outsmart. The same is the case when it comes to humans vs technology. A few years ago, media numbers could be altered using technological advances and data but today the world is different. Humans have quickly found ways to recognize when they're been manipulated in the digital space and found ways to skilfully ignore it. And this is not just an assumption. How many times have it happened that a sponsored story, an

influencer post and 5-star reviews of products have made you a bit suspicious about whether it is genuine or not?

Whenever I am Amazon I make it a point to read the reviews, but if I see that a product has had only positive reviews and all 5-star reviews, I go the extra mile. I use different review filters and metrics as in Top Reviews vs Most Recent and that sometimes does the trick. How do you ask? If I see multiple 5-star reviews posted on the same day with similar sentiment I get suspicious of it not being genuine. I may be wrong but that's my metric.

What's more, people openly share their lives online - flaws, opinions and all authentically and people expect the brands to do the same. How many times has it happened that you see an influencer partnership and immediately call out it to be not genuine? Very often, right? Sometimes it's easy to see a partnership is pure business and not people oriented. It's human nature to have a hard time genuinely connecting with, opening up and really trusting other humans who (pretend to) have no weaknesses or flaws and seem to be perfect and the same applies for brands.

Two things to bear in mind:

- Flawlessness is a harmful illusion for a brand. Negative reviews don't kill brands. In fact, the opposite applies: people's trust in brands where both positive and negative reviews appear alongside is higher. Consumers aren't stupid: they know that not all products are meant for everyone. According to an article by Reevoo.com, January 2021
    - 68% of consumers trust reviews more when they see both good and bad scores, while 30% suspect censorship or faked reviews if there aren't any negative comments or reviews.
    - Shoppers who go out of their way to read bad reviews convert 67% more than the average consumer.
- Things will go wrong. While consumers have never been able to be so vocal about their complaints, brands too can react and respond. If handled well, even flaws can be amended and reputations mended if not made.
    - 76% of people who complained on Twitter re- ceived no response from the brand. But among those who were contacted, 83% liked or loved that the brand responded, and 85% were satis- fied with the response (Source: Maritz Re- search, September 2011).

People appreciate authenticity and honesty from a brand rather than flawless and perfect brand image. Real people stories and being more acceptable

towards flaws can make a brand more human and genuinely persuade their audience.

Consumers' disillusionment at corporate behavior has now turned into outright disgust. As a result, any brand that can show themselves more empathetic and authentic will be welcomed with open arms. Consumers are increasingly advanced, and effective storytelling isn't just about getting likes and followers. There's a need for deeper, stronger, more memorable and more emotionally engaging stories based on real people and events acting as brand advocates. Real people stories and being more acceptable towards flaws can make a brand more human and genuinely persuade their audience. One such example is of Airbnb

In 2015, Airbnb released an apology in response to allegations of racial discrimination taking place on its platform. It also followed it up with an investigation and a number of changes to combat the issue. In doing so, Airbnb showed it was capable of admitting fault – but also that it cares enough to try and turn it around.

airbnb

Dear Airbnb community,

At the heart of our mission is the idea that people are fundamentally good and every community is a place where you can belong. We don't say this because it sounds nice. It's the goal that everyone at Airbnb works towards every day – because we've all seen how when we live together, we better understand each other.

Discrimination is the opposite of belonging, and its existence on our platform jeopardizes this core mission. Bias and discrimination have no place on Airbnb, and we have zero tolerance for them. Unfortunately, we have been slow to address these problems, and for this I am sorry. I take responsibility for any pain or frustration this has caused members of our community. We will not only make this right; we will work to set an example that other companies can follow.

In June, we asked Laura Murphy, the former head of the American Civil Liberties Union's Washington D.C. Legislative Office, to review every aspect of the Airbnb platform, and to make sure that we're doing everything we can to fight bias and discrimination. Thanks to Laura's leadership, today we're releasing a report that outlines the results of that process. You can read the full report here, but I'd like to highlight four changes that will impact the way our platform works:

Now that we know of the three ways brands can be more human and therefore more persuasive are -
- Emotion is a human characteristic that makes a brand more human
- Long-form storytelling is a persuasive characteristic that makes a brand more human.
- Weakness is not a brand's enemy but it's friend, a characteristic that makes brands more human.

The next question is how brands can use this in their favour to persuade the audience. There are a number of ways brands can do so -

Give your Audience a Platform
Your brand is more human when you listen to customers, empathize with them and give them a voice. User-generated content on your social channels is a great way to do that. Content creations from consumers are most authentic, using this as part of a brands's marketing strategy can be really effective. Obviously it is okay to highlight social posts and reviews from influencers, but brands should focus on encouraging organic social posts from friends, family, and loyal users, as consumers tend to find this more credible.

Be there for your Customers
Think about brands like Zappos who focus on exceptional customer service and choose to be human by actually being available for its customers rather than using bots. Another example of the same is T-Mobile when they announced a new initiative called "Team of Experts" , saying no to bots. Instead, each customer will be assigned a team of 30-40 agents who live in their region, understand local concerns, and, over time, build relationships with callers. Customers were encouraged to schedule a call in advance, or message their team via the T-Mobile app. The change, said T-Mobile COO Mike Sievert, was made to tear down the "massive digital fortress between you and the people who can help you."

Lastly I would like to conclude, brands can not only profit by being human but also be better at user connections by being human in their communications.

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