

Why a Number Paints a 1,000 Pictures

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Where do you start having ideas?

I asked my first creative director that question and he replied that he got them from a barman in Soho, who got them from a bloke who came in every Thursday, who got them from a carpet salesman in Liverpool. And where he found them, he had not a clue.

Casting aside divine inspiration for the moment, I find a clearer direction in the observations of 18th Century Scottish philosopher David Hume who wrote:

“Nothing is more free than the imagination of man; and though it cannot exceed that original stock of ideas furnished by the internal and external senses, it has unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating and dividing these ideas, in all the varieties of fiction and vision.”

The point he makes is that our most vivid and resonant ideas come from impressions of the real world about us, not the concoctions of pure fancy.

Indeed, the most powerful campaigns of my first years in advertising all derived from sharp takes on reality, like “We try harder...” Bill Bernbach’s brilliant interpretation of the fact that Avis was second to Hertz in size at a time when size was all that mattered. Or, “Member since...” David Ogilvy’s simple stance on the prestige and loyalty of the American Express Card.

Both campaigns challenged their category conventions and campaigns started with a “magic” number that led to “magic” work. Allow me, then, to contend that there may exist a property in numbers and what they tell us that is intrinsically creative. Less proscriptive than words. More prescriptive than pictures. A better springboard for creative thinkers.

To see what I mean, take a look at the following numbers and see how hard it is not to start imagining campaigns around them. Each gives the creative worker a bold and clear opening when applied to an appropriate brief.

- 40:** The percentage of single women who would rather ditch their boyfriends rather than lose their mobile phones.
- 8:** The percentage of Americans who flush the toilet with their feet because they are frightened of germs.
- 66:** The percentage of UK men who admit to having bought a book simply to impress someone.
- 300:** The percentage by which a German shepherd dog’s carbon footprint exceeds that of a Sports Utility Vehicle.

If only pictures today could be as trustworthy. Time was when Stalin could retouch out of history the lives of thousands of former colleagues. Besides, anyone who doubted what they saw in Pravda was similarly removed. Contrast that with the public scandal when Conservative Prime Ministerial hopeful David Cameron was given a digital facelift on his recent campaign posters: less jowly, less wrinkled, less conservative. Everything, political ambition included, can be airbrushed. No wonder cynicism about advertising has never been more prevalent.

Conversely, numbers, well-chosen and purposeful, cut through to the truth in a way that pictures cannot. Could this be transformational? Just review some recent case histories of “magic” numbers at the service of advertising creativity.

Here in London, our planners were trying to get a new angle on car insurance, a market now so commoditised that impact can only be achieved by creating a cuddly brand icon, from bulldogs and elephants to meerkats. But our planners found the magic number: 44 — the percentage of Britons who talk to their car on a daily basis. Further investigation indicated that 1 in 4 drivers have a familiar name for their car (most popular Betsy, least popular The Beast).

As the first to recognise that there's a human side to car insurance, suddenly our client was sprung out of the price trap and the creative teams could see the possibility of doing breakthrough work.

A similar creative transformation informed our colleagues in the U.S. as they were preparing a Super Bowl TV spot for Dockers casual wear for men. Here the magic number came up as: 17 — the percentage by which men's testosterone levels have dropped in the past 20 years.

A month later, America's most watched event of the year was disrupted by a commercial showing bearded men in their underwear walking over a hilltop while singing "I wear no pants!" Designed to reawaken the nation's masculinity, the campaign became the most Googled item after the Big Game, with online sales up 60% year on year.

A final example from Sweden, where our agency people were trying to work out how to encourage younger metropolitan types to pay their yearly license fee to Radiojanst, the State TV company. The magic number was 90 — the percentage of older folks who do pay their TV tax promptly.

Rather than hector the urban youngsters, the agency's strategy made national heroes of those who support the network. Using a viral email (in the style of a breaking TV news story) the campaign featured any uploaded photograph as a bill-paying hero. To date, more than 7 million photos have been uploaded, with 30 million unique visits from around the world. It's 2010's most successful viral. All thanks to the right number and a superbly realistic rendition of the idea.

Which brings me to creative execution and another number that really matters. Last year Drafftcb researched thousands of consumers on both side of the Atlantic, across all media channels from TV to internet to press. We discovered that, on average, today's time-poor consumers would give an advertisement 6.5 seconds before switching off. That 6.5 seconds is now the backbone of our creative operating system – the slide rule by which we judge if ideas are engaging.

My own favourite example of the 6.5-second approach is stolen from the seminal punk rock fanzine "Sniffin' Glue." It featured a single scruffy page on which were scrawled an A, G and E chord along with the call to action: Now Form a Band. That simple idea launched a thousand bands that went on to revolutionise the music industry.

Their mission was not unlike ours: to strip away illusion and find the truth — any truth that hits the mark.

For the moment, at least, we have more than three chords to play with.