Creative and Media:

Activities That Perform Together Should Be Resourced Together

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Introduction

Marketers know that creative elements of their campaigns are important, even if the bulk of their budgets are deployed in support of media and other activations. However, the *relative* degree to which creative is important is hard to ascertain with much precision, and so **Madison and Wall has performed a meta-analysis of research on the role of creative as a driver of business outcomes in studies which *also* consider the impact of choices related to media planning and buying in determining those outcomes**.

Although there is a significant amount of opportunity for further research on the topic, in most cases creativity has been found to be more important than media. As larger marketers typically manage creative and media-related services and software with separate budgets, separate internal and external teams and separate partners, such an approach effectively risks under-resourcing creative at the expense of media (and sometimes vice versa). Historically there were understandable reasons for this separation, including the clear distinctions of workflows between creative and media services, benefits of specialization and different competitive sets for each of these functions. But with the increasing availability of generative AI-based tools and software that can blur the lines between creative and media strategies and activations – let alone allow brand-owners to completely re-think how they work together – there are new reasons to look at tighter integrations in order to optimize marketers' resource allocations.

Marketers should benefit wherever and whenever they can tie their creative and media decisioning together through software or services. There are choices that marketers can make towards these ends, although some of those choices may initially appear more expensive than the status quo. For examples, marketers could empower a creative agency with a media budget or vice versa. They could probably also tighten coordination or integration of internal teams. The unit cost for every dollar of creative or media activation might be higher because of a loss of scale efficiencies, but the decisions marketers and their agencies make would probably be superior in terms of driving overall campaign effectiveness. None of this is to say that all marketers *will* take such actions, but those who do are likely to fare better than those who don't.

Background

Intuitively, everyone can understand that nothing can change the world (or a consumer's mind) like a big idea. And at the same time, as Marshall McLuhan expressed when he wrote "the medium is the message," the presence of a medium can be more impactful than anything which might be communicated on it, making the functions associated with media activations particularly important.

When it comes to marketing, how do these two key disciplines, creative and media (including planning and buying), which can be so deeply intertwined, contribute to business or other marketing-related outcomes? Individually, each is known to be effective, but what is their relative importance? How should marketers prioritize one over the other, if needed? This is a topic we thought worthy of deep exploration. For our first dive into it, we wanted to look at existing, contemporary research in order to see what we could learn about the contribution both elements provide.

To perform our meta-analysis, we wanted to first look for recent peer-reviewed academic research. Recent research was going to be much more important than older research because arguably any work on this topic that doesn't account for the emergence of newer media channels and a modern consumer environment may have limited application to the present time, let alone the future. We wanted to see peer reviewed research because ideally our conclusions should be based upon work that is replicable, held to high standards and not obviously intended to benefit any one firm or type of firm. Unfortunately we were unable to find any of a recent vintage focused on major markets and written in English, and so this led us to explore research from the industry instead.

After filtering out studies that were focused solely on one element of effectiveness, we were able to identify multiple pieces of work on the topic-at-hand from over the past decade. While we recognize the lack of peer reviews involved and potential for commercial biases, we are also mindful that individual entities involved need to maintain quality and some process integrity if only to maintain their reputations with customers and other stakeholders.

Mindful that we didn't want to review research that *solely* covered whether or not creativity impacts outcomes, or whether better media activations *alone* can impact outcomes – instead focusing on research that looks at the *contribution* of each set of functions – we found the following studies, reports and presentations (with the most recent publication date indicated following the study's name if it was included in the name itself)

- NCS: Five Keys to Advertising Effectiveness (2023)
- Magna and Yahoo: Creative, The Performance Powerhouse (2023)

- Analytic Partners: 2018 ROI Genome Marketing Intelligence Report
- Media Science: Unpacking Ad Effectiveness (2025)
- Accelero: The Power of Creativity (2023)

We'll now review each of these studies in turn, summarize the bigger picture takeaways and then identify areas for future research which individual marketers may want to consider exploring on their own or in partnership with others, whether in commercial or academic spheres.

Study Review

NCS: Five Keys to Advertising Effectiveness (2023)

Probably the most widely cited source on the topic of the contribution of creative and media to business outcomes, in 2023 NCS (currently a joint venture between Nielsen and Catalina and in the midst of being acquired by Circana) produced research which said that creative drives 49% of incremental sales, with targeting, reach and recency (collectively, in our minds, “media”) responsible for 30%.

Going a little deeper into the conclusions, “creative” was defined primarily by the absence of other factors, essentially looking at incremental purchases closely preceded by ad exposure, controlling for cost of media, targeting, reach, seasonality and flighting. More specifically, NCS used an independent incrementality measurement linked exposure in the period just preceding a purchase occasion as a covariate in their model. In this context, creative means both the advertiser’s message and the context in which the message is delivered.

The 2023 research was based on campaigns which ran during 2021 and 2022, although the conclusions were broadly similar to conclusions made in prior years, so we could rule out that the pandemic and post-pandemic environment skewed outcomes in any meaningful way. However, category limitations mean that we should be mindful about extrapolating results to other media, as the study was based upon 450 consumer and packaged goods campaigns, which are the categories where NCS’ core data solutions are primarily focused.

Moreover, we note that media activity included in the study included social media, open web and digital audio along with linear TV and CTV. Although we recognize that many traditional media are shrinking in size and may not be as impactful as they once were, the absence of some media such as outdoor advertising and retail media could be a limiting factor in interpreting the study’s conclusions. In addition, the study was based on activity in the United States, which could limit the applicability of conclusions to other markets.

Magna and Yahoo: Creative, The Performance Powerhouse (2023)

In this study, Interpublic’s Magna and Yahoo found that creative quality drives 56% of purchase intent while vs. media can claim to drive 44% of intent. Meanwhile, creative was assigned credit for 79% of top-of-mind recall and 77% favorability vs. 21% and 23%, respectively, for media’s contribution to these metrics.

Here, perceived creative quality was based on consumers’ perceptions of a range of attributions, including elements such as whether or not an ad was “aesthetically pleasing”, “fun to look at,” ”communicated valuable information,” “high quality” or was “able to stand out from other ads on the same page.”

The research was based around randomized, controlled experiments (with ads for non-profits used as controls) testing the effectiveness of display ads with “a variety of attributes across devices” on desktop/laptop and mobile devices on the aforementioned KPIs (intent, recall, favorability, etc). In terms of categories, the study focused on CPG, automotive and food delivery app marketers within the United States. The representative panel underpinning the study was recruited via email.

Although the focus on display ads undoubtedly provides for a useful basis for comparisons within this work, we note the applicability of conclusions may be limited because of the lack of data for additional media formats. Similarly, with limited geographic and category inclusion, one may not be able to identify whether or not the results of the study hold broadly.

Analytic Partners: 2018 ROI Genome Marketing Intelligence Report

Analytic Partners, a consulting firm focused on marketing mix modeling and related services, has produced several publications and shares some of its proprietary data over the past couple of decades in various reports.

In its most recently published study from 2018, the consultancy stated that 60% of ROI on Video is driven by creative (both the copy quality as well as the creative message), with 40% driven by execution (i.e. media) while 44% of Display’s ROI is driven by creative and 56% by execution.

Data supporting these conclusions were informed by more than 3,200 campaigns which ran between 2012 and 2017 using the company’s “ROI Genome,” a “vast quantity of marketing intelligence across industries and countries” covering “more than750 brands, 45 countries and hundreds of billions in spend across industries.”

Considerations to be mindful of in looking at the report are both positive and negative. While it appears that the study’s data is global and cuts across multiple categories (meaning: conclusions should be broadly applicable), data is on the older side relative to other studies referenced here. As well, with only a couple of media formats included in the creative vs. media assessment, conclusions about the applicability across additional media formats are also limited. Moreover, there will likely be a skew in the form of the client base that Analytic Partners has, as marketers who choose to work with a third-party consulting firm for marketing mix modelling may not necessarily serve as a representative group of marketers.

The ARF and Media Science: Unpacking Ad Effectiveness (2025)

The Advertising Research Foundation and Media Science explored the relative contribution of media platform, creative, brand equity and targeting to overall advertising impact, and also sought to identify whether premium content or user-generated content leads to “greater success.”

Overall, the study did show the positive impact of both creative and media. However, where each of media, creative, targeting and brand were considered at the same time, it seemed clear that media was most impactful, attributed with driving 53% of the contribution towards unaided recall and 81% of the contribution towards “ad linking” sentiment. Media’s impact on ad liking likely reflects the impact of the screen size on which the ad was seen. Brand was also outsized in its impact, accounting for 44% of unaided recall, 97% of brand purchase intent and 89% of brand favorability. Also unsurprisingly, whether or not a brand was well-known influenced purchase intent and brand favorability against unknown brands, leaving little variance for creative to explain. Meanwhile, creative and targeting had negligible impact on unaided recall and brand purchase intent, while creative had negligible impact on brand favorability once the effects of media and brand familiarity were accounted for. However, targeting did account for 9% of brand favorability.

More specifically, “good” creative, defined as David Ogilvy Award winners, was found to exceed average creative on all explicit KPIs such as recall and sentiment (albeit not necessarily at statistically significant levels). More specifically, on television, good creative affected whether a brand was perceived as “cutting edge” but didn’t produce a meaningful difference on brand recognition, unaided recall, brand favorability, ad liking and sentiment around whether a brand was “high quality.”

On short videos, there was a high impact on brand recognition for award-winning commercials relative to the alternative of “general ads.” “Ad liking” appears to have been impacted by whether or not a “good creative” campaign was involved although relevance and quality were not evidently impacted by whether or not the related commercial was “good creative.” Good creative was more important for short video on the small screen than when shown on the television.

Concurrently, targeted creative content was found to significantly enhance effectiveness particularly on TV for recall, both aided and unaided, and short videos on mobile for both forms of recall and purchase intent. For “in-market” samples, the recall and purchase intent metrics were proportionately stronger. Targeting presumably offered a “back door” for the advertisement to have a creative impact.

Regarding the impact of different media platforms on ad effectiveness, each of the four media studied varied widely in terms of their capacity to impact memory (with podcasts highest by a significant degree on unaided recall), and both TV and podcasts resulting in significant higher brand recognition vs. mobile video and mobile news feeds. Brand purchase intent was significantly higher for television over mobile news feeds, but not otherwise statistically different vs. the other media studied.

Looking at some of the key definitions, involved in the study “good creative” was identified by whether or not commercials were ARF David Ogilvy Award-winning, and “targeted” referred to the brand a consumer was exposed to (wither well-known / in-market to a consumer vs. a lesser-known brand).

For a sense of the process, in a lab consumers were exposed to ads on television, mock mobile video and social media environments and podcasts. A survey of post-study impacts including brand memory, purchase intent, brand attitude, ad linking, ad creative evaluation and other brand KPIs were subsequently tracked

Limitations of the study include the fact that the award-winning creative may have been better than average creative, but perhaps not by much, limiting the impact of creative in this analysis. Also, the nature of the study itself, as a mock / in-lab environment, which means it may not be replicable in the wild. On the other hand, such an environment provides more control than might otherwise be possible and offers potentially replicable processes for others to apply to future studies. As with other studies, there was a limited geographic element to the study given the US-focused nature of the study, and a further limit on the inclusion of certain media such as retail media and search. The age focus of the study is also important to consider, as it only included 18-54 year-olds.

Accelero: The Power of Creativity (2023)

In this study, commissioned by UK TV trade group ThinkBox and conducted by Paul Dyson (co-founder of consultancy Accelero) its author conveys that creativity is “by some way the biggest lever at a marketer’s disposal.” Focusing on “Profitability multipliers” – referring to a definition of ROI, or return on investment, that divides extra revenue attributed to media divided by a media budget - the relative importance of different factors on “profitability” are listed as follows:

- Brand Size: 20
- Creativity: 12
- Budget setting across geographies : 5
- Budget setting across portfolios : 3
- Brand vs. performance: 2

- Budget setting across variants: 1.7
- Cost/product seasonality: 1.6
- Laydown/phasing: 1.15
- Target audience: 1.1

Although the work is informed by market mix modelling experience over 28,000 global campaigns and 7,000 campaigns, the numbers are based upon historical studies developed by the producers of the research, modified subjectively to reflect more recent trends. They are also described by the author as short-term effects-focused rather than long-term effects-focused.

While the general thrust of the conclusions may be correct and should be applicable across brands, a primary point for readers to consider might be the definition of ROI. To a financial analyst, "ROI" would generally refer to capital returns on capital investments. This could mean expected profits or cash inflows produced by an upfront expense or cash outflows. By contrast, here ROI is defined here as incremental revenue divided by incremental expense. Thus, the notion of profitability multiplier could be characterized with the admittedly unwieldy phrasing of "incremental revenue to incremental expense multiplier." More generally, the qualitative nature of each of the data points used is also a limiting factor in applying the study's insights.

Separately, a study that combined all media factors vs. all creative factors might very well show that media is just as impactful as creative. When media elements are considered in isolation it seems inevitable that they should be only modestly impactful. Geographic breadth of the study is another consideration, as the work is largely informed by activity in the UK alone.

Summary of Findings / Opportunities for Further Exploration and Conclusion

First, it appears to be universally true that in most studies on the topic, creative has a bigger effect than media in driving outcomes, although both creative and media are important everywhere. At the same time, the definition of “creative” is far from consistent, placing limits on direct comparisons across studies.

Still, marketers who take creative as fixed and only look to optimize the activities that media can control are undoubtedly limiting the upside potential of their campaigns. There are practical barriers, including the ways that marketers choose to engage with agencies and technology firms (by separating creative from media) but those who are better able to integrate these activities and ensure that creative functions are not “starved” for resources are likely to experience superior overall business outcomes.

Nonetheless, it would still be worthwhile to explore additional topics which would help to establish a broader perspective on the question at hand. For examples, we note that there could be big differences in the relative importance of creative and media for different industries. It would also be worth ensuring that all media – especially including search and retail media, but also including offline media – are included in any such studies. Geographies covered by such studies could be broader, or otherwise it would be interesting to see if effects vary widely by country

As the observations here are broadly supportive of the importance of creative and also supportive of the importance of media, the benefits of integration between creative and media paired with the growing availability of Gen AI-based tools highlight that there are good reasons for individual marketers to integrate these functions more than they do at present. While there are operational reasons why many marketers will not pursue this integration, opportunities should await those who are able to do so.