

# Why literal, factual, repetitive TV ads are leading to a decline in effectiveness

Stephen Whiteside

**WARC**<sup>^</sup>

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System1, the market-research firm, conducted a variety of studies that helped determine the impact of changing approaches to TV advertising.

- A profound shift in the creative elements of TV spots is contributing to a long-term decline in the impact of this output.
- Research looking at 100 video ads run on YouTube indicated a similar issue may be at play in the digital space.
- Advertisers may want to consider reassessing their creative strategies in order to place greater emphasis on building their brands.

## At a glance

Television advertising is relying on literal, goal-oriented creative rather than tapping the power of empathy, relationships and human connectivity.

## Why it matters

While television advertising remains a vital part of the mix for many brands, there has been a clear move away from the creative elements that deliver sustainable growth. A focus on short-termism may be the main culprit for this situation.

## Takeaways

- Current TV ads strategies may need to be reconsidered, as many spots skew towards “left-brain” features that are consistent with short-term, “disposable” creative.
- Marketers could benefit from incorporating more “right-brain” features – such as tangible characters, wordplay, questioning the world and humor – in TV spots, as these are associated with long-term growth.
- Video ads are showing a similar worrying trend to their TV counterparts, meaning that brand custodians should also reassess their output on platforms such as YouTube.

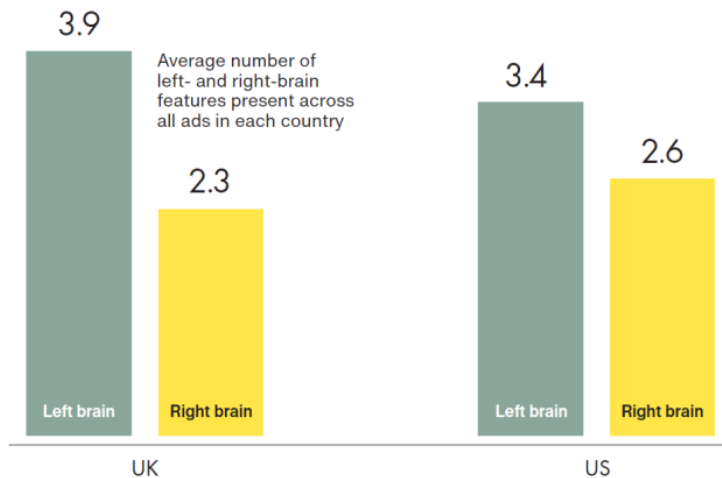
Brands in the United Kingdom and United States are too focused on narrow, goal-oriented TV creative rather than making ads that are based on empathy, relationships and human connection, according to a study by market-research firm System1.

Orlando Wood, System1’s chief innovation officer, used a sample of 100 television commercials – crafted by brands in the automotive, financial, fast moving consumer goods, health/beauty and technology sectors – from the US and UK in reaching this conclusion.

And he found that these spots exhibited a far higher quantity of “left-brain” features (which are literal, factual and explicit) than “right-brain” traits (offering greater depth, questioning, context and self-awareness).



## Left-brain dominance today in the UK and US

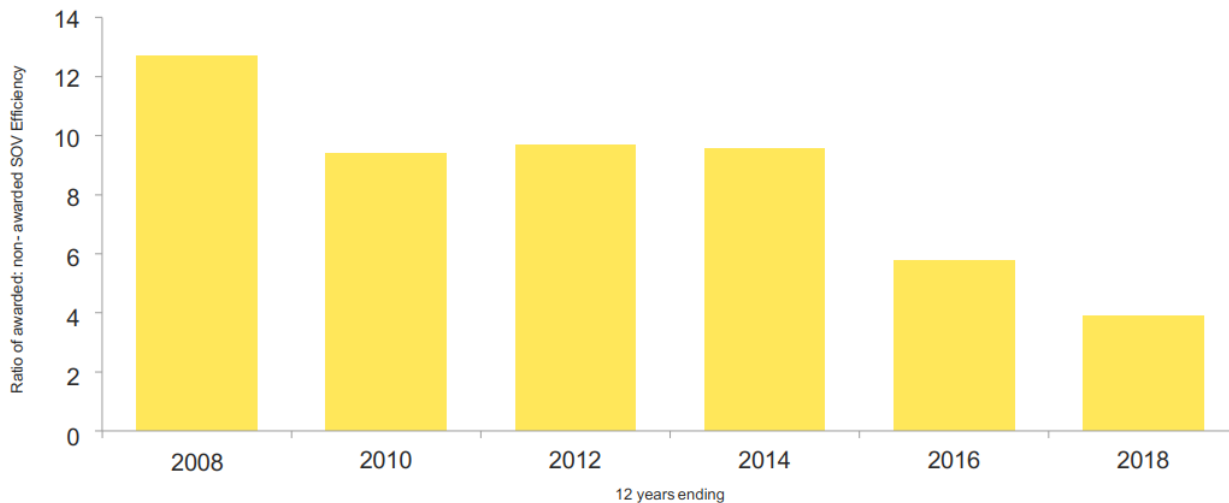


The average number of left- and right-brain features in ads in the UK and US, from a random sample of 100 UK and 100 US TV ads selected at random from Automotive, Financial, FMCG, Health & Beauty and Tech sectors



The backdrop to this analysis was a [recent study by Peter Field](#), a consultant and leading researcher on the subject of marketing effectiveness. According to Field’s work, the impact of award-winning creative is now at its lowest level in the 24 years he assessed, largely as a result of short-term thinking that has led to eye-catching, but ultimately “disposable”, messaging.

## The crisis in creativity.



The creative multiplier is dying  
From *The Crisis in Creative Effectiveness*, IPA, 2019



Building on that thesis, Wood – who presented his findings to delegates at the Media, Marketing & Effectiveness Conference held by thinktv, a marketing-and-research association dedicated to commercial television in Canada – outlined several insights:

- **The difference between “left-brain” and “right-brain” ads**
- **Digital ads skew towards “left-brain” features**
- **“Right-brain” ads yield long-term growth**
- **Long-term ad trends point in the wrong direction**
- **Effectiveness drivers are being neglected**

## The difference between “left-brain” and “right-brain” ads

In summarizing the characteristics of the left brain, Wood reported that it:

- “is very narrow in its focus”;
- “is very goal-orientated”;
- “abstracts things from their context”;
- “likes to break things down into smaller parts”;
- “is quite reductionist”;
- “loves to categorize”;
- “likes things to be explicit.”

The left brain, Wood continued, prefers “things” to “people” – and clarity to ambiguity. It also has a bias towards cause-and-effect thinking, repetition and the familiar.

Advertising that excites the left-brain, he suggested, might exhibit the following traits:

- “abstracted product features” that may be shown in close-up rather than a wider context;
- “abstracted body parts”, like a hand holding an item, instead of seeing a full person;
- words overlaid on the screen;
- “unilateral communications” like voiceovers and monologues;
- “noun-ification” that turns adjectives into nouns – as with taglines like “In search of incredible” from tech brand Asus, or “Rethink possible”, AT&T’s one-time slogan;
- freeze-frame effects;
- visual repetition;
- repetitive, rhythmic soundtracks.

“These are some of the things you might expect to see in advertising today if advertising had gone a bit left-brained,” Wood said.

Looking at the right brain, System1’s innovation chief reported that it:

- “sees things as they really are, in context;”
- “understands the whole world ... as a set of connections and relationships”;
- “understands gestures, intonation, accents”;
- “is open to novelty”;
- “can understand humor, because it can understand that two different things can be true at the same time”;
- “is very self-aware of its place and time in the world”;
- “is very questioning of the world”;
- “is what gives us our sense of lived time, space and depth.”

Ads that appeal to this side of the brain could thus involve:

- “a sense of place”;
- “a sense of a scene unfolding”;
- “physicality in the way that actors act and portray a part”;
- “a connection between characters”;
- “characters with agency: so, voice, movement, expression”;
- “implicit communication [like] knowing glances”;
- “dialogue between people”;
- “distinctive accents”;
- “a play on words or subversion of language”;
- “references to other cultural works: pastiche, or parody”;
- “music with melody.”

When faced with certain stimuli, each side of the brain essentially can “inhibit the other” half, Wood said. And the left-hand side is stronger in this regard than its right-hand counterpart – with powerful implications for ads.

“For creative leaps, we need the whole brain to be in action. The right brain sees the whole, the left brain represents it, and then passes it back to the to the right brain for us to understand and make sense of the world,” he asserted.

## “Right-brain” ads yield long-term growth

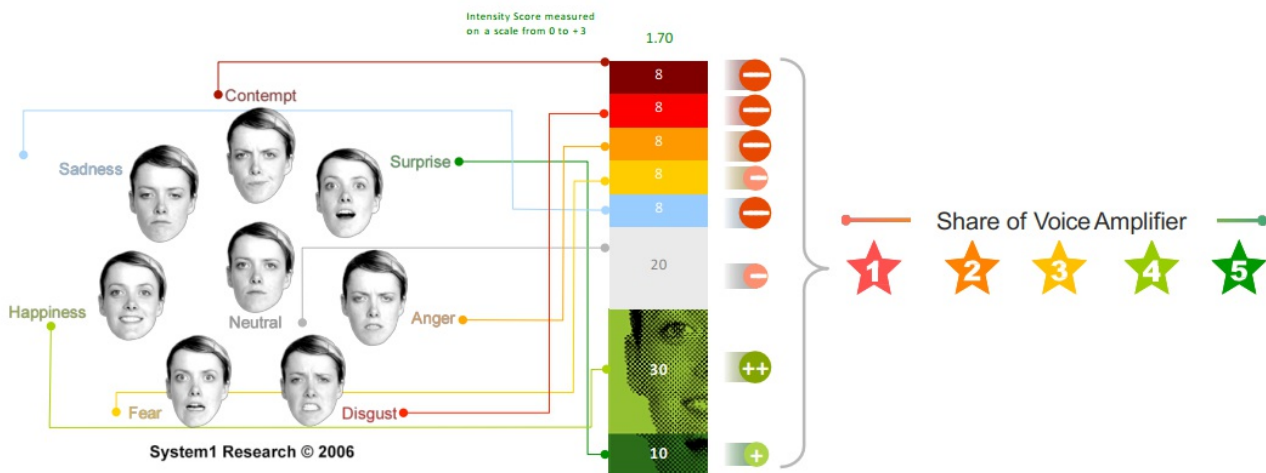
System1 tests each TV ad that airs in the UK and US from a range of categories – and, to date, has assessed over 34,000 television spots. In doing so, it draws on a mix of consumer-perception data and media-spending figures to develop an effectiveness spectrum that can be used to benchmark performance.

More specifically, this scale takes the consumer response to ads, and also looks at a brand’s share of voice in its category. Why? As positive emotional reactions combined with an excess share of voice – where a brand’s proportion of ads in its category outstrips its market share – has been found to have a multiplier effect on the impact of advertising.

System1’s ratings model begins with one-star TV commercials, which are expected to generate no meaningful growth over an extended period. Five-star spots, by contrast, are projected to deliver growth of at least 3% in the long term.

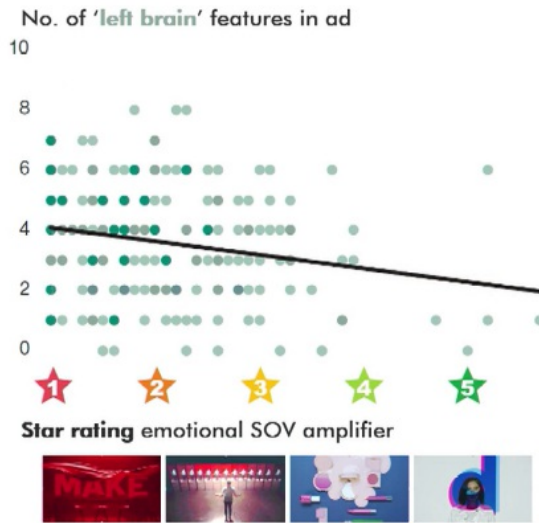


## Predicting share gain from emotional response



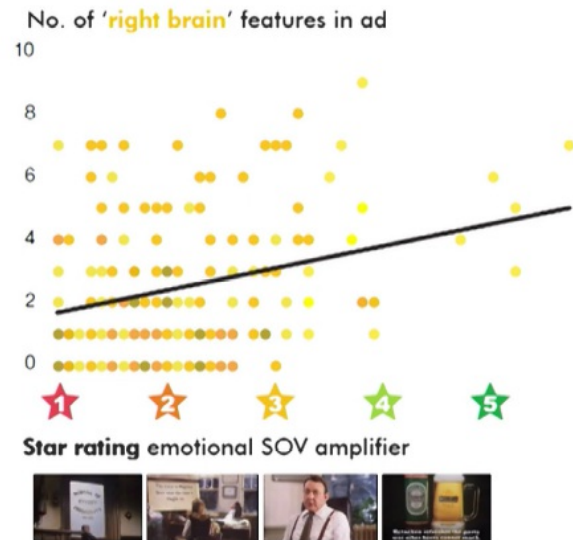
When considering his sample of 100 spots from the US and UK, Wood learned that ads incorporating a greater number of “left-brain” features generally recorded lower star ratings based on System1’s testing formula. Commercials with more “right-brain” traits logged stronger effectiveness scores.

## Entertain for commercial gain.



Flatness and Abstraction

1 System1 An audit of 100 UK and 100 US TV ads selected at random from Automotive, Financial, FMCG, Health & Beauty and Tech Sectors (System1 Ad Ratings)



Depth and Humanity

System1 Group PLC 31

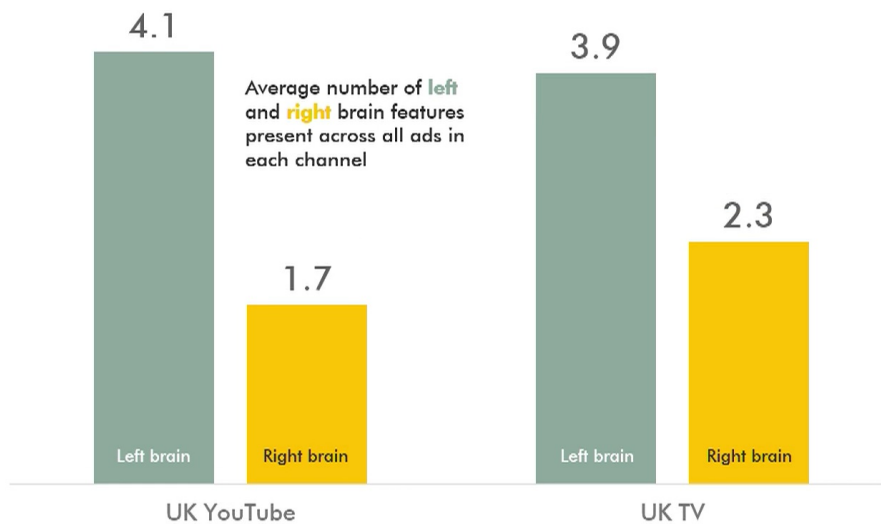
“What you find is that these ads that have high quantities ... of left-brain features do not translate well into your star rating – [and] your proxy for long term growth,” said Wood. “On the other hand, ads that have these right brain features are likely – and it's very significant, this relationship – to drive long-term growth.”

## Digital ads skew towards “left-brain” features

Just as Wood’s study of 100 television ads demonstrated a skew towards the left brain, his analysis of an equivalent number of YouTube ads from British brands on YouTube, the video platform owned by Google, yielded a similar result.

Indeed, the “left-brain” bias in ads was even more pronounced than for the TV sample, with the typical video ad from its research corpus had 4.1 features that fell into this category, versus 1.7 for “right-brain” elements.

A pattern that's even more marked in digital video.



The average number of left- and right-brain features from a sample of 100 ads on YouTube compared with a sample of 100 UK TV ads. Selected at random from Automotive, Financial, FMCG, Health & Beauty and Tech sectors. YouTube ads include pre-, mid- and post-roll and range from 0 to 200 seconds.

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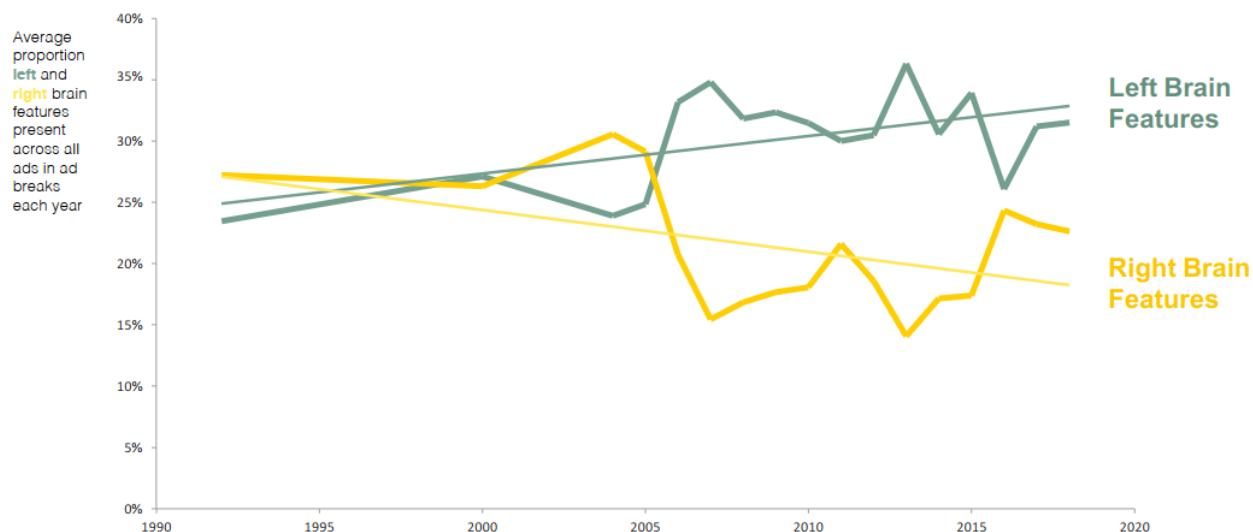
“If all this were a matter of taste,” Wood said, “it wouldn’t really matter. But, actually, it has a real bearing on effectiveness.”

## Long-term ad trends point in the wrong direction

Corroboration for these findings came from a UK-focused study by Wood that looked at TV spots that ran during “Coronation Street”, a soap opera that has been aired by broadcaster ITV since 1960.

Based on a sample of 687 spots that ran during this show over the last 30 years, System1 unearthed a “quite dramatic” learning. “There was a massive swing towards the use of left-brain features in the year 2006,” said Wood. This resulted in “a swing away from humanity, depth and between-ness towards this very literal, left-brain way of advertising.”

## Right-brain features have declined; left-brain features now dominate



Analysis of 620 ads appearing in Coronation Street ad breaks from week 40 2004-2018; 29 ads from 1989, 1990, 1995 breaks (shown as 1992) and 38 ads from 1996, 1997, 1999 and 2003 breaks (shown as 2000)

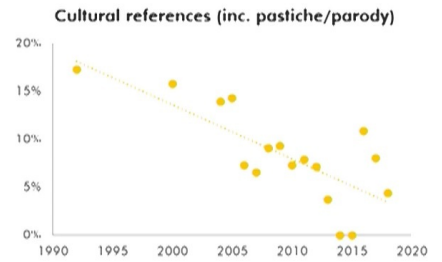
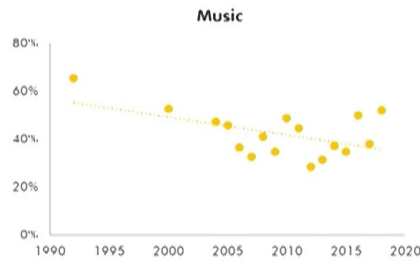
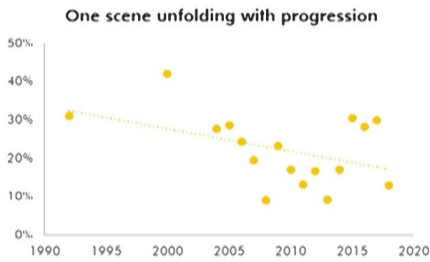
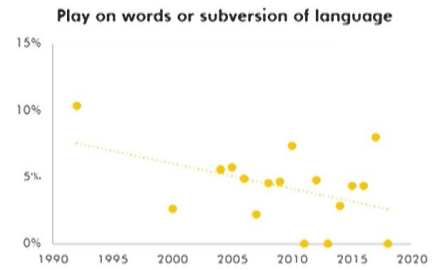
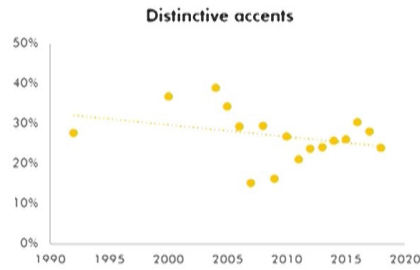
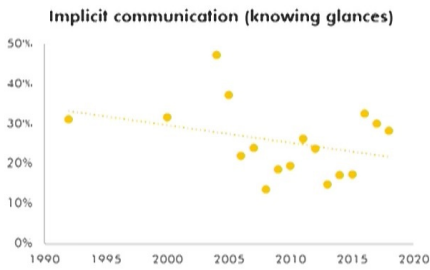


While periods of economic duress are often blamed for encouraging ads that favor activation to building brands – given the need to drive short-term revenue – the shift in material being shown to “Coronation Street” viewers pre-dated the financial crisis that began in 2008, Wood noted.

And he broke down exactly what creative elements were being phased out: “What we see is a decline in implicit communications and knowing glances. We’re losing distinctive accents. We’re losing a play on words or subversion of language. We’re losing the sense of a scene unfolding with progression. Music is disappearing.

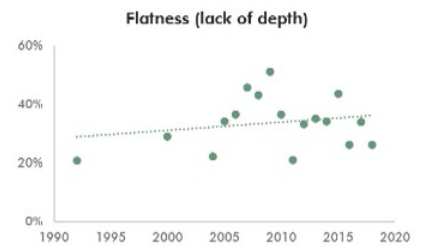
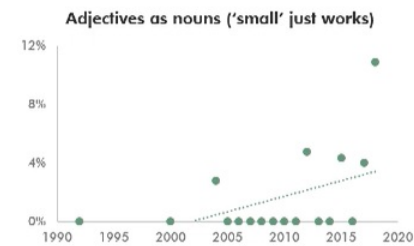
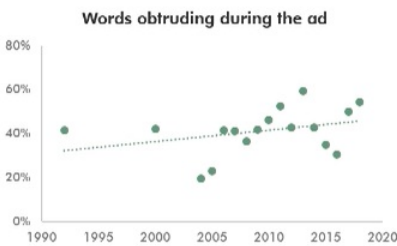
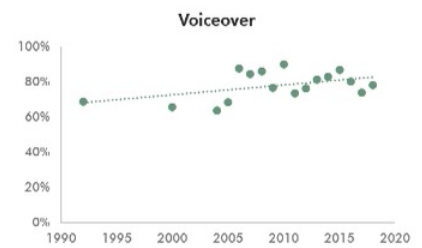
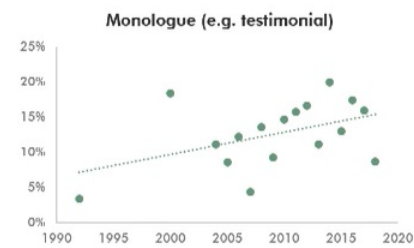
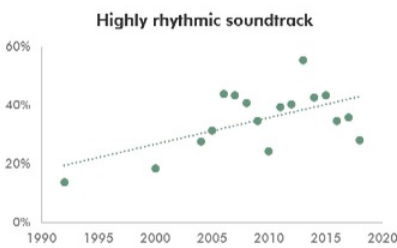
“Cultural references – perhaps most worryingly of all – [and] pastiche or parody have disappeared.”





Equally, the powerful “human scenarios” that tell stories involving relatable characters – as exemplified by the “**You’re Not You When You’re Hungry**” campaign from Snickers, the candy line – are in decline. This research also confirmed another prior System1 insight: namely, that “**fluent devices**” which regularly feature in ads, like slogans or characters, are decreasing in frequency, too.

“In their place, what we’ve gained is highly rhythmic soundtracks, unilateral communication in the form of monologues and voiceovers, words intruding on the ad ... adjectives as nouns, and flatness, lack of depth,” Wood said.

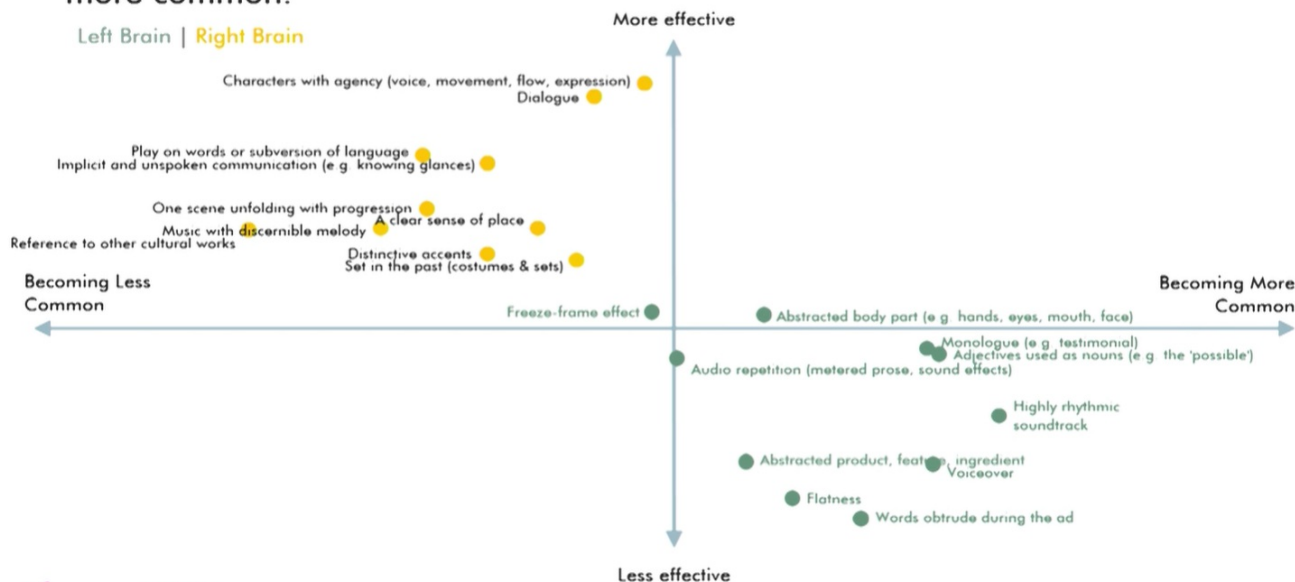


## Effectiveness drivers are being neglected

In concluding, Wood pointed to the correlation between the increasing or declining presence of “left-brain” and “right-brain features”, on the one hand, and advertising effectiveness, on the other.

This indicative chart was created by “overlaying” the various aspects of different ads onto System1’s historical analysis – and challenges brand teams to reconsider their strategies.

**The most effective features are becoming less common; the least effective, more common.**



Correlations between presence of features and effectiveness (star ratings, on the vertical axis) and between prevalence of features and year (less/more common, on the horizontal axis)

“Those highly-effective, right-brain features are the features that are becoming less common. And the least effective, left-brain features are the ones that are becoming more common,” said Wood.

“This helps to explain the crisis in creativity. This mental shift helps to explain the rise of short-termism and the decline in advertising effectiveness.”

## About the author

Stephen Whiteside

Reports Editor, WARC

[stephen.whiteside@warc.com](mailto:stephen.whiteside@warc.com)



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Americas: 229 West 43rd Street, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10036, United States - Tel: +1 212 201 2800

APAC: OUE Downtown 1, #44-03, 6 Shenton Way, 068809, Singapore - Tel: +65 3157 6200

EMEA: 33 Kingsway, London, WC2B 6UF, United Kingdom - Tel: +44 (0)20 7467 8100

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