Bulletin

DECEMBER 2014

Jingle sells?

AD-DING VALUE: WHICH CHRISTMAS ITEMS DRIVE YOUTUBE HITS?

Christmas TV commercials, designed to stir our hearts, loosen our purse-strings or simply sprinkle a little stardust on retail brands, have become an art form. Advert launches are big media events. Newspaper film critics line up to pronounce judgement. So the Christmas gnomes (or nerds) at Frontier decided to reach their own marginally-more-scientific verdict on what makes a good commercial. The task on their advent calendar was to identify the elements in Christmas adverts associated with the greatest number of YouTube views. The answers aren't all what Santa (or you) might expect…

Frontier's tinsel techies viewed and analysed nearly 100 different festive adverts, not only in the UK – although these attracted the most viewings – but also Germany, Ireland, Spain, France and Belgium. We started by identifying the leading brands and retailers in each country and the adverts that they had posted on YouTube over the last three years. We then set about making detailed observations and measurements for the features of each advert – was the advert

set in the present or the past? Did any celebrities (A-list or otherwise) make an appearance to plug the products? Did the advert feature Christmas trees, snowmen, cuddly animals, Santa, and so on? Finally, we recorded the date that the advert had been posted on YouTube and the number of views.

The distribution of the number of views for these adverts, shown below, confirms that advertising can be an unforgiving business. A small number of big hitters are watched by millions of YouTube viewers, but others sink under the wrapping paper without trace.

Figure 1. Distribution of YouTube views for Christmas adverts
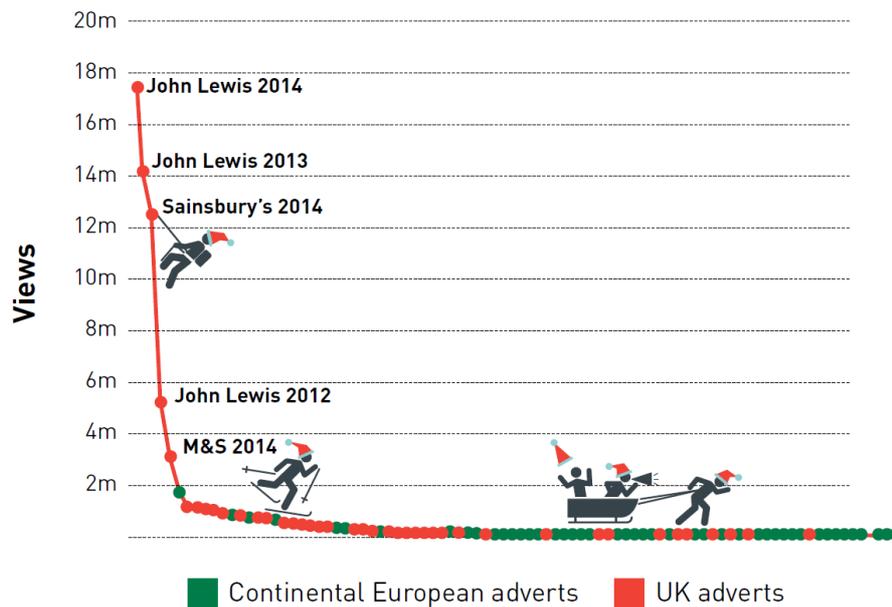

Source: YouTube (numbers collected by Frontier in early December 2014)

Of course, some adverts get a better YouTube start than others: big spend, prime time TV slots, household names behind them. And our research was heavily UK influenced simply because Christmas ads have, it seems, become a bigger event here than in most other European countries. Indeed, nearly all of the successful adverts with over 1 million views were UK based. All the same, ad-makers across the continent tend to dig the same goodies out of Santa's sack.

REWARDS AND FAIRIES

Apart from the occasional outlier, such as Sainsbury's recreation of the 1914 Christmas truce, Christmas commercials stick to a fairly similar theme set. So we watched happy families with (more or less) stressed parents, cosy refuges from snowstorms, generous dollops of Dickensian nostalgia, animal magic and fairy godmothers. The (mince) pie charts below show just how frequently some of these common elements featured.

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Figure 2. Mince Pie Charts - Common elements of Christmas adverts
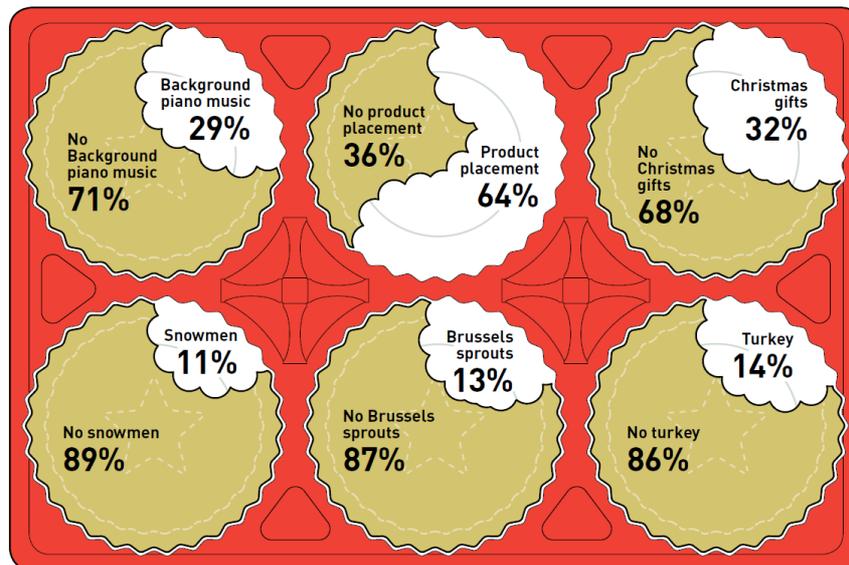
Some ads push products, others leave filthy commerce to the viewer's imagination. Some – like Tesco's huge Wigan Christmas lights show this year – focus on community; others – like Marks and Spencer this year – on fantasy. But some successful elements stood out from our ad-crunching. We used regression analysis to measure the marginal effect of adding any of these elements to a Christmas advert on the number of YouTube hits it received. So, how many more views might you expect to receive if you add a snowman or a celebrity to your otherwise identical Christmas advert? The answer, along with others, is illustrated overleaf.

Some mild positives (children, soft piano music in the background) were unsurprising and of modest significance, each adding around 1 million views if included in an otherwise identical Christmas advert. But easily the top two positives were echoes of Christmas past and friendship, contributing between 5-7 million views each. But note this – not a relationship with another tiresome human being, but with a furry friend. Cute animals clearly hit the spot, although we'd need to refine our analysis to tell you which species win the cuddly stakes.

John Lewis clearly hit the cuddly spot this year: Monty and Mabel, the penguin couple united under the tree in its ad, stunned everyone by the speed at which they rushed off the shelves (and the website). The pair were a rapid sell-out, despite John Lewis having laid in far higher stocks of penguins than of the animals featured in its previous ads. Elves worldwide have been working to restock, but meanwhile shoppers could either go on Ebay (at a price) or do something for real-life Montys and Mabels by ordering a special package from the World Wildlife Fund.

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Figure 3. Impact on Views from common elements of a Christmas advert
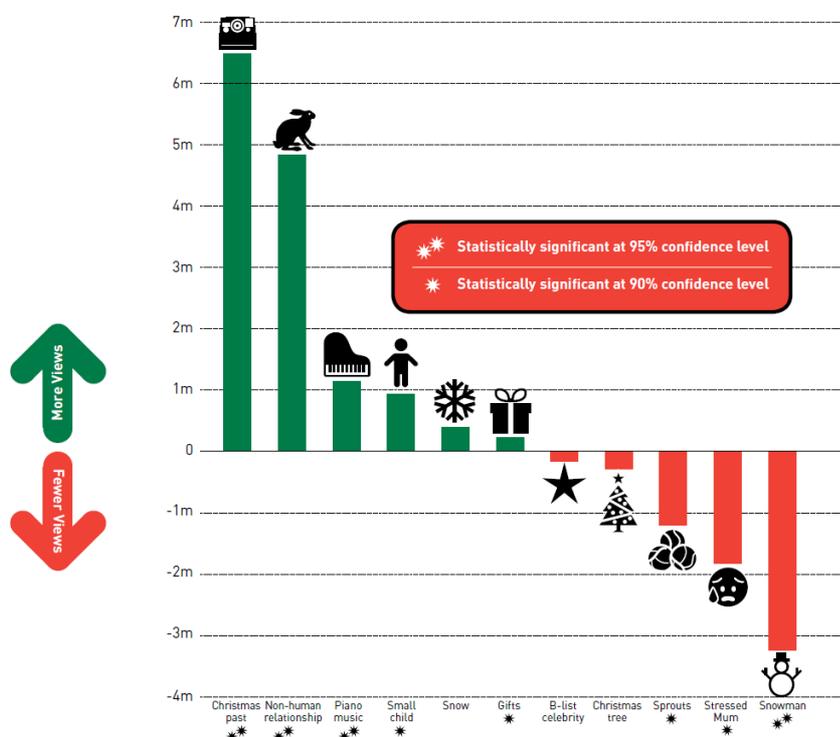
TREE-HUGGERS WANTED

What our analysis did throw up, however, were surprising black marks for some common advert themes. A sprinkle of snow seems ok, but your actual snowman was found to cool an advert's popularity significantly, knocking off 3 million views. Have we all watched (or bought) too much *Frozen?* Or is the struggle to make a child-satisfying snowman out of wet British snow one of those bits of Christmas past we don't want to remember? Celebrities (at least the B-list variety) are negative rather than positive, good news for everyone else. And perhaps unsurprisingly, the addition of Brussels sprouts would reduce the number of YouTube hits by over a million views.[1]

And what's with the negative result for Christmas trees? Tree-huggers, where are you? Maybe the decorated end-products just look like too much hard work for stressed mums – who, by the way, also seem to be a turn-off in a Christmas ad. The last thing we want to watch in the run-up to Christmas, it seems, is a mirror to ourselves…

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[1]   And what's more, we found a negative correlation between whether an advert originated in Belgium and the appearance of Brussels sprouts, suggesting that Brussels are not even popular in Brussels.

THE PERFECT ADVERT?

Taking these factors into account, Frontier's elves have dreamt up a Christmas advert that, the statistics suggest, is a sure-fire recipe for success[2] – a scene from which is shown below.

Figure 4. A scene from Frontier's "perfect Christmas advert"

Here's hoping that our festive analysis is accurate, and that next year we will not be receiving complaints from retailers with surplus stocks of unwanted cuddly Christmas pandas.

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[2]   Our analysis suggests that this advert could expect to generate more than 14 million YouTube views, a little over the population of Belgium.

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