

Measurement Guide Series

# The DMA Guide to Ad-Testing

In partnership with

**System1**



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## What is it?

One of the most fundamental questions for any marketer is: How do you know your advertising works? With 50% of ads failing to impact long-term market share, ensuring that your marketing investment isn't wasted is more important than ever.

Creative effectiveness is key, as campaigns that truly connect with audiences are far more likely to drive both immediate sales and long-term brand growth. Research has shown that creative remains the most important driver of advertising effectiveness, accounting for the largest portion of sales impact. In fact, even as other factors like targeting, reach, and recency have grown in influence, creative is still the single most significant element determining the success or failure of an ad campaign.

Ad pre-testing is a crucial step in evaluating an ad's potential before it launches. It involves gathering feedback from the target audience using methods like focus groups, surveys, and test markets. The goal is to assess the ad's messaging, design, emotional appeal, and overall impact. This process helps identify areas for improvement, ensuring the ad resonates with its audience, ultimately reducing the risk of campaign failure.

Over time, ad testing has evolved into a vital tool for predicting the effectiveness of ads and refining them before they reach the market. Different companies use various frameworks and metrics to assess ads, so it's important to find the approach that best fits your business needs.

Testing an ad through the eyes of its intended audience provides valuable insights, helping marketers make more informed creative decisions and improve the ad's chances of success—both in the short and long term.

## When you should use it

67% of marketers say creativity is an extremely valuable competitive advantage. However, only 12% feel extremely confident they can convince their CFO to invest in it. That's the confidence gap.

Businesses that don't back creativity are leaving money on the table. But marketers don't always have the evidence or language to win that backing from the budget holders.

Testing can help close that gap. Testing early and often can give marketers the confidence to make the most effective creative decisions. And businesses can invest in brilliant marketing and know it will make money.

Creative designed for TV, digital, print, outdoor and audio channels can all be tested to help better understand and improve the performance of all elements of your campaign.

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Testing in the early stages of development can ensure that creative is heading in the right direction. Bringing in the consumer early means marketers get feedback from the intended audience which can guide future iterations of an ad so that the result is engaging and memorable for viewers. Giving your business the confidence that valuable time, effort, and budget is not being wasted.

You can predict and improve ad effectiveness throughout the development process by testing ads as scripts, animatics, rough cuts, and finished films. You might have different iterations of the same ad and want to know which will offer the best investment. Perhaps one uses voiceover more heavily while the other relies more on dialogue. Testing slightly different versions can highlight which ad elements are working in your favour.

Ad-testing is not just about selecting an ultimate winner. It's about improving that winner even further to extend its effectiveness and allow you to create with confidence.

## How it works

Different ad testing companies have different frameworks and metrics for testing ads, and you need to work out what works best for your business. The following sections explain the System1 methodology.

Behavioural science demonstrates the power of emotion to drive growth. Thus, to measure **long-term advertising effectiveness**, System1 leverages psychologist Paul Ekman's seven universal human **emotions**: Happiness, Surprise, Sadness, Fear, Disgust, Anger, Contempt. And also add neutrality as an option as it's possible for people to feel nothing about an ad.

The approach differs from automated facial coding in that rather than relying on an algorithm to interpret how audiences feel, System1's Test Your Ad platform asks people to indicate how they feel about an ad shown to them. They select one of the seven basic emotions or neutrality from a pictorial scale; an exercise that favours the fast processing that mimics how consumers make brand choices in the real world. In this way, across a Nat Rep sample, it's possible to establish how an ad leaves people feeling.

System1's **Star Rating** predicts long-term brand growth based on an ad's creative quality. Star Rating is calculated by measuring emotional response to each ad.

Because Test Your Ad metrics are driven by emotion, they are the most predictive of business outcomes. This predictiveness is backed by **meta validations** for Star Rating which prove combining ESOV data with Star Rating is far more predictive of market share growth than ESOV alone.

**Quality & Quantity Matters**  
ESOV with **Star Rating** is powerfully predictive of market share growth



**System1**  
Create with Confidence

Annual market share predictions for US and UK brands spanning 264 brands. This analysis is based on over 4000 ads in the US and the UK, representing over \$10 billion in media spend.  
Emotional testing source: System1's Test Your Ad database of over 50,000 TV ads, with spend data provided by Nielsen & Numerator.

Test Your Ad also provides two more key metrics: Spike and Fluency.

- **Spike** is a predictor of short-term sales effect. It is determined by the intensity of emotion that a consumer feels (irrespective of what that emotion is) and the speed of correct brand attribution.
- **Fluency** indicates the strength of branding. Consumers are asked to identify which brand the ad was for. Fluency is expressed as the % of people recognizing the brand by the end of the ad.

Taking these three metrics together, marketers have accurate predictions for growth and actionable improvements to make **creative decisions with confidence**.

## What are the key deliverables?

System1's Test Your Ad (TYA) platform enables brands to see how their creative performs with audiences by measuring emotional response and offers creative guidance to improve the result.

When you test an ad with System1, the next day you'll receive a report outlining your ad's Star Rating (predictive of long-term brand building), Spike Rating (predictive of short-term sales performance) and Fluency Rating (strength of branding). You'll see the FaceTrace which reveals the second-by-second emotional response to your ad, as well as the FluencyTrace which shows second-by-second strength of branding.

These tests include a NatRep sample as standard so you can see how your creative performs against other relevant category ads in a database of 165k+ ads globally.

If you want to understand even more about your ad, there are options which allow you to put the ad in front of custom audiences and compare the response to a Nat Rep audience. Ensuring you are on brief and hitting the creative bullseye for a specific target audience.

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These reports also break down the types of happiness felt by people watching your ad, ranked according to their ability to drive business effects for the brand. You get the reasons why people felt the emotions evoked, a list of key attributes associated with the ad, and left and right brain features present in the ad.

Whichever testing methodology you opt for, don't see the results as marking your creative's homework. Ad testing results are a springboard. Learn what's working and where there might be room for improvement, like story arc, the inclusion of fluent devices, soundtracks and more.

## How to read the results

Firstly, consider Emotion. Emotional campaigns are more profitable in the long term. So, how well does the ad create positive feeling? What is driving any negative emotion? What are people feeling?

Then, you must look at Fluency. Is your brand quickly and easily recognisable? Is your ad making effective use of distinctive brand assets to boost that fluency?

Once you understand those key metrics, it's time to action the results by identifying which levers you can pull to boost the emotion and/or fluency of your ad.

Here are a few worth considering:

- **Story:** Does the story arc have a peak-end? Would editing improve its impact? Research shows that positive endings help create positive memories and associations which in turn create positive emotional connections to the brand over the long term.
- **Characters:** Are the characters engaging? And is there connection between them?
- **Music:** What emotion does the music create? Music is an incredibly powerful component in advertising – not just for how popular the track is but also how well it fits and complements the visual story that is playing out.
- **Communication:** How are both characters and consumers being addressed? Is it through voiceover or dialogue? Having interactions between the characters, through dialogue or expressions, can make the story more intriguing to viewers.
- **Pace:** Ads shouldn't use too many fast cut scenes, as this makes it difficult for viewers to follow. A fast, rhythmic soundtrack can also contribute to general hecticness. A single narrative with scenes unfolding is easier to follow and capture viewers' attention.

# Case Study

## Singing Crabs a Debut Hit for OceanSaver

An excellent illustration of how pre-testing can impact creative output is the case of OceanSaver, a new-to-TV brand.

OceanSaver are a young laundry brand – they were only founded in 2018, with a mission to (you guessed it) save ocean life from plastic pollution. Their flagship product is their eco-friendly laundry capsules, proudly plastic-free, and they've used crowdfunding and community growth to get to the stage where they're ready for their first TV ad. The commercial is a textbook example of how a new-to-TV brand can make an impact with their first ad and set themselves up for future success too.

When OceanSaver approached System1 in 2023 with their upcoming creative featuring a group of sea-shanty singing crabs, they aimed to assess several key factors. These included whether entertainment and humour resonated in a category primarily dominated by rational messaging, if the pack design effectively signalled the brand, if messaging was clear to consumers, and if the environmental message connected with them. The initial test yielded a respectable 3.7 Star Rating, promising short-term sales potential, and a notable 69% brand recognition. This gave the Ocean Saver team confidence that the creative emotionally resonated, while also highlighting opportunities for optimisation.

Following the initial test, OceanSaver made several enhancements to their creative. They added additional pack shot frames to improve brand recognition, refined the audio for better comprehension of the sung words, and simplified the end frame to enhance the clarity of the final message and brand signal.

The results were remarkable, with positive improvements across all metrics. The Star Rating soared to a strong 4-Stars (compared to a 2023 new-to-TV average of 2.3 stars), placing the creative among the top 5% of UK Laundry ads ever tested for long-term brand building potential. Short-term sales potential also saw a significant increase from good to strong, while fluency (brand recognition) experienced a notable 12% uplift.

“When launching a TV advert for the first time, the stakes were high, and its success weighed heavily on our minds. Thanks to System1’s pre-testing and consultancy, we not only benchmarked the creative against industry norms and new-to-TV standards but also pinpointed features to optimise the final output. While adjustments were subtle, their impact proved significant, particularly in enhancing fluency (brand recognition) and message clarity. Having this foresight was invaluable, empowering us to move forward with confidence in our creative vision.” Andy George - Creative Director at Hearts&Minds

[View Test Your Ad Report](#)

## Key checklist

1. Test early and often – Judging through the eyes of the intended audience in the early stages of development allows you to make effective creative decisions with confidence.
2. Familiarise yourself with the metrics - Look for an ad testing platform that keeps the metrics simple yet rooted in evidence as part of your ad testing strategy. Emotion-based metrics are better at predicting campaign success because the more people feel, the more people buy.
3. Test multiple versions - You can also use testing for film, audio and static ads within the same campaign to ensure that a similar emotional response is being felt for TV, radio, print, digital, and outdoor activations.
4. Leverage custom audiences - Whether it's a product that is being marketed specifically to women, older adults, or an ad focusing on the disability community, there are opportunities to test with custom audiences so you can compare how your marketing is performing among a target group and the public.
5. Improve through guidance - Being able to lean on experienced research teams can help your organisation learn what's working and where there might be room for improvement, like story arc, the inclusion of fluent devices, soundtracks and more.
6. Compare with others in your category - Testing your own creative is a great way to understand how it will impact your brand health over the long term. It's also important to watch how your competitors' ads are performing to determine if they're likely to gain, lose or maintain market share.
7. Read relevant industry thought leadership to help unlock advertising effectiveness insights that can supercharge your campaign. Orlando Wood's Lemon and Look out are a great place to start if you're looking to create advertising that entertains for commercial gain.

## About System1

System1 is The Creative Effectiveness Platform that quickly harnesses the power of emotion to drive growth for the world's leading brands.

Our Test Your Ad (TYA) and Test Your Idea (TYI) solutions quickly predict the short-and-long-term commercial potential of ads and ideas, giving marketers the confidence that their creative concepts will resonate with consumers and drive profitable commercial growth. Complementing TYA and TYI is Test Your Brand (TYB) which measures the impact of ads and ideas on brand health.

With a database of over 100,000 ads, System1 allows brands to compare their ads against competitors, and System1's expert guidance helps brands improve the effectiveness of ads and ideas.

System1 was founded in 2000 by Founder & President John Kearon and has operations in Europe, North America, Brazil, Singapore and Australia.

Visit: [system1group.com](http://system1group.com)