The Value of Pretesting

Does pretesting **increase** or **diminish** your chances of producing effective advertising?

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I realize that the names "Link" and "Millward Brown" are unlikely to inspire a positive reaction in the hearts and minds of many in the audience today.

I just hope that you won't shoot the messenger.

But I am not going to apologize for the fact that the Link pretest is one of the most widely used quantitative pretests in the world today. I genuinely believe that when used appropriately, pretesting can add significant value and help improve the chances that advertising will benefit a brand.
You must have a great creative idea

But that does not mean pretesting can create value. A great idea is just a starting point. It takes a lot of work to turn a brilliant idea into an effective execution. After all, da Vinci conceived of flying machines, but it took over 400 years to make that idea a reality.
You must have a great creative idea

Idea ≠ Execution

And ideas are rarely developed without some difficulty along the way. A great idea is not the same as a great execution.
You must have a great creative idea

Idea ≠ Execution

Today's risk is far greater

There is always risk involved in turning an idea into a reality, and as ideas become more complex, that risk increases. Just as the stakes are higher in designing and testing a fighter jet than a glider, there is more risk attendant in developing and implementing a 360 campaign than in producing a single TV ad.
We all know that it's difficult to bring an idea to life in an ad. And that difficulty is compounded when many people are involved, each with their own idea of what the final incarnation should look like.

All too often, a finished ad is as different from the original idea as a camel is from a racehorse.
Advertisers can't afford to back losers. Once they have bought into an idea, they need to know that the execution is going to live up to the original idea.

As you will hear, there are consequences that result from not keeping up with competitors.

Pretesting provides a final opportunity to check that the original idea is still coming through, and that the ad does resonate with the intended audience.
Top five reasons why pretesting is valuable

1. A great creative idea can get lost during development

And I would put that as number one on my list of reasons why pretesting is valuable:

because great ideas can get lost during development.

(Originally I had ten reasons for pretesting, including "because needs, values and humor differ across countries" and "to provide input to optimize the media mix" but we don't have time, so I am going to stick with the big five.)
Top five reasons why pretesting is valuable

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2. It is the first real chance to assess the response of the target audience

Second on my list would come the fact that this is the first real chance to assess the response with the target audience.

Yes, the target audience. Remember, that's not us.

Dan O'Donoghue once expressed this idea in a way I wouldn't have dared...

"(Ad) agencies have got to focus on stimulating the targets rather than stimulating themselves." (http://www.researchtalk.co.uk/rt/2006/10/08/danodonoghue-publicis/).

How will you check that the execution is likely to resonate with the target audience if you do not get feedback from them? Not just a few people in a focus group, but with a hundred or more.
Top five reasons why pretesting is valuable

1. A great creative idea can get lost during development
2. It is the first real chance to assess the response of the target audience
3. Pretesting can provide learning to improve in-market response

My third reason to pretest is because the results can be used to improve in-market performance.
Pretesting should be about improvement

When ads are tested before production...

finished film engagement improves
almost 50%

Even finished executions
can be improved

There is always
next time

Pretesting should not be used just to make a go/no go
decision. It should also be used to help guide and improve
execution.

Forget the whining about testing rough formats (no one
said they had to be animatics, did they?)--we have good
evidence that when rough ads are tested and changes are
made based on that research, the finished films are 50
percent more engaging. That translates into a significant
payoff in terms of sales. For example, in the case of a UK
soft drink ad, an increase in branded engagement from 4
to 6 is predicted to result in £6 million in additional sales
over the first 8 weeks that the ad airs.

Even finished executions can be improved. Video ads can
be edited to clarify the flow of ideas or to change the
voiceover or music. The layout of display ads (print,
outdoor, online) can be modified and copy adapted.

And even if changes cannot be made, there is always next
time. Over time, consistent testing leads to long-term
improvements in effectiveness.
Top five reasons why pre-testing is valuable

1. A great creative idea can get lost during development
2. It is the first real chance to assess the response of the target audience
3. Pretesting can provide learning to improve in-market response
4. Poor in-market response has negative consequences

Some people minimize the downside of weak advertising, believing it's OK to wait to evaluate an ad's effectiveness until after it has aired. With Internet and mobile ads, which have direct-response measures built in, in theory you know whether the ads have worked without any research.

But a brand's advertising does not take place in a vacuum. There can be serious negative consequences to airing weak advertising.
Weak advertising is not only a waste of media money; it can also exact a cost in terms of lost sales.

We analyzed the ads for established brands that scored in the lowest third of the Link database. More than half of the brands advertised suffered a share decrease in the 8 weeks after the ad aired. The average share loss across all the low-scoring ads was 0.26 percentage points. For a U.K. soft drink, an 8-week loss of 0.26 of a share point equates to **£5 million in lost sales**.

Why did sales go down? Because while these brands were airing less-than-compelling advertising, their competitors were working hard to sway people to buy their brands.

It's bad enough to leave money on the table. You don't need to put it in your competitor's pocket!
And last, but not least, reason number five. Pretesting can give people the confidence to step beyond their comfort zone.

If there is concern that a particular campaign or execution is going too far beyond the bounds of what people consider acceptable – either for themselves or for the brand – then this is a great way to check whether this is true or not.

Now let's move on to what I believe is the real issue being addressed by today's session: does pretesting kill creativity?
Does pretesting kill creativity?

Only if those involved let it.

Of course, there are always people who claim that pretesting kills creativity.

I vehemently deny that charge. Pretesting is a tool that can aid creativity, not damage it.
To prove my point, here are just a few of the award-winning ads that have been pretested by Millward Brown.

In each case, the ad performed significantly better than normal on key measures like enjoyment, a key driver of engagement.

Pretesting can kill creativity only if those involved—the agency, the client, and the research company—stand by and let it happen.

To avoid this, three things must be done.
Get involved **EARLY** in the process.

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All interested parties need to get involved in the process early. Discuss what the advertising is meant to achieve, how it is meant to work and what you expect people to take away from it.

With this in mind, the researchers can help avoid one of the biggest problems of pretesting: inappropriate measurement.
An ad must be measured against what it is intended to achieve.

One of the biggest issues I come across is the application of standard benchmarks for advertising effectiveness. Too often these standard benchmarks are applied without regard to the category, brand or advertising task in question.

But if people have agreed on what an ad is intended to achieve, it is far easier to set specific and appropriate action standards.
Finally, I will admit that the fact that pretesting can predict in-market performance has a downside, and this is that sometimes people get hung up on what the results are, and not what they could be.

So don't take results at race value—consider what they really mean.

It amuses me that people often use Henry Ford's famous quote to criticize the shortcomings of research. He said, "If I'd asked my customers what they wanted, they'd have said a faster horse." These critics assume that the only thing Henry could have responded to was the idea of "horse"—which was, after all, the only vehicle people knew. But he also had the option of focusing on the concept of "faster."

If the advertising does not meet the action standards set for it, the question should be, "Does it have the potential to do so?" And that's not a research question. Rather, it is a collective decision of those involved.

Follow these simple guidelines and pretesting can become a celebration of creativity. It certainly will not kill it.
Pre-testing 360 campaigns makes even more sense

So those are the three things that need to be done if pre-testing is to be truly valuable. However, I have heard some people say that pretesting a single execution is no longer valid in an age of multi-channel campaigns.

No problem. Any good pretesting system can be adapted to test campaigns, not just single executions.

Link360 has been designed with this specific objective in mind. This approach recognizes the interaction of both media channel and execution. People are only shown executions in the media to which they are likely to be exposed. For instance, there is no point in showing the people not yet online a banner ad. Link360 also identifies the synergies between media channels and executions. As I said earlier, with significant investments being made in complex campaigns, there is no excuse for not testing them.
We recognize that pretesting is a PITA

**Pain In The Agency**

Pretesting is a PITA. That stands for Pain In The Agency, just in case you were wondering.

We know that the client wants to reduce the risk involved in running the ad, and yet we know how frustrating it can be from an agency viewpoint when the client gets fixated on one-size-fits-all benchmarks, or, worse still, go/no go decisions.

To avoid this happening and for pretesting to be constructive, collaboration among client, agency, and research teams is critical.
Just because pretesting is a pain... does not mean it is without value.

"Never stop testing, and your advertising will never stop improving." Ogilvy

Just because pretesting is a pain does not mean it is without value.

And with that I'll leave it to one of the more famous advertising practitioners to conclude for me. I think this message is as appropriate now as it was when Ogilvy said it.
Thank You

For not shooting the messenger.

Thank you for listening...and not shooting the messenger.