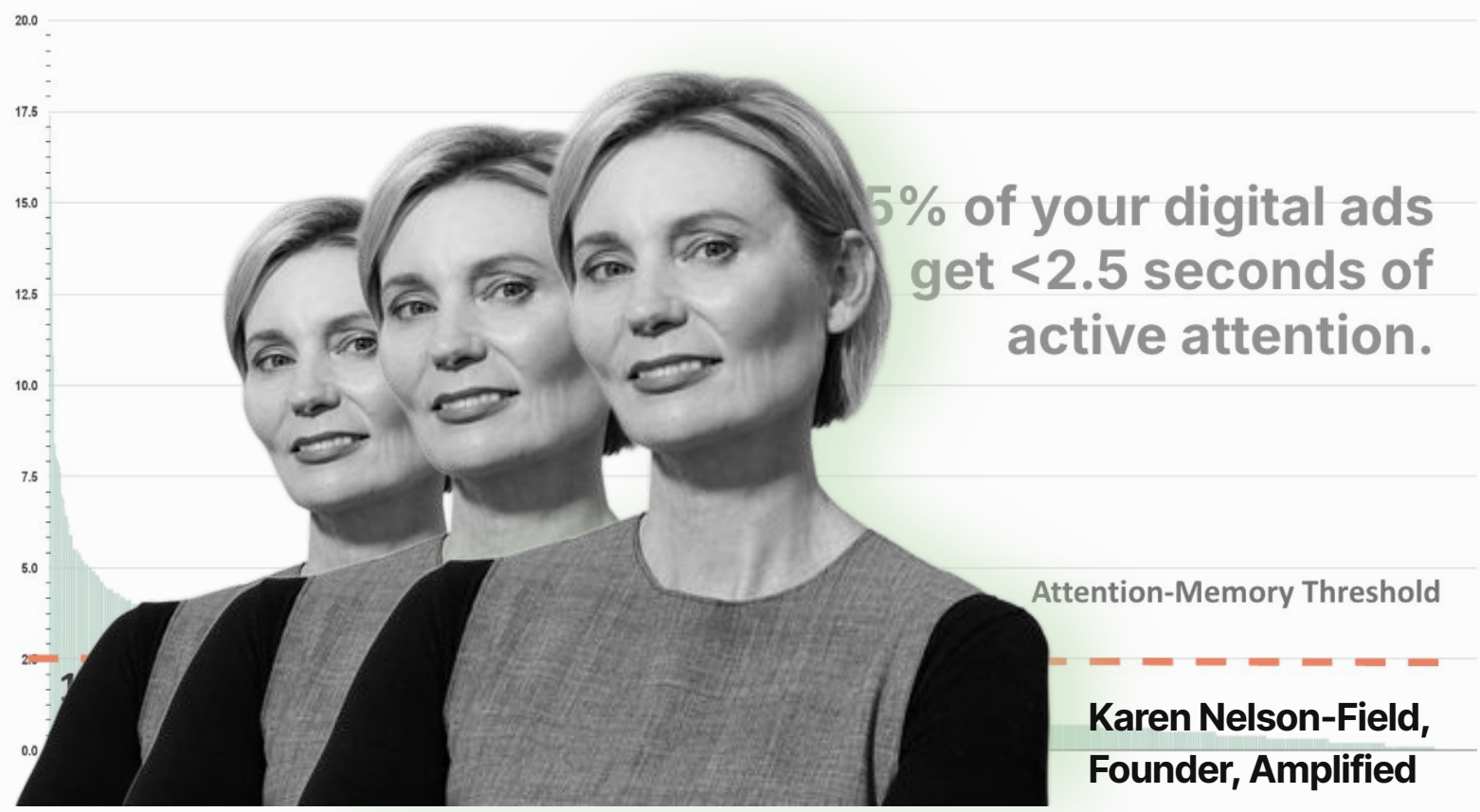
THE EYE-WATERING COST OF DULL MEDIA

Amplified eatbigfish. Peter Field
Marketing & Communications Strategy

By Dr Karen Nelson-Field, Founder Amplified with contributions by Adam Morgan and Peter Field

Contents



We didn't create this report to win awards or stir the pot. We created it to help fix a broken system.

For years, I've made it my personal mission to bring transparency, clarity, and truth to media measurement to show the industry what's really seen, not just what's served, and to help marketers make smarter decisions grounded in human behaviour, not proxy metrics.

The Cost of Dull Media isn't a theory. It's a measurable, financial penalty playing out across the industry every day, a hidden tax on brands that pay full price for media that simply isn't looked at long enough to work. This is media inefficiency in its rawest form.

At Amplified, we've spent years putting that mission into practice, measuring real human attention in real environments. This report is the next chapter. It puts a price on formats that leak attention, and shows how much that leak costs in ROI, in memory, in growth.

If you've ever looked at a media plan and felt something was off, this is the evidence.

If you've ever wondered why great creative underdelivers, this is the explanation.

If you've ever been told CPM is the only metric that matters, this is the counterpoint.

This report matters because it makes invisible loss visible. And it gives marketers the data, language, and tools to challenge outdated assumptions and take back control.

The Cost of Dull isn't just about wasted spend. It's about missed opportunity. About brands that never get the chance to be remembered. And about a future where media works better — because we finally start valuing what really matters.

Thanks for continuing to pay attention to the work we do.

Karen

I was told after our session last year that The Cost of Dull translates in French to Le Coût d'Ennui. And honestly, Ennui sounds like a beautiful fragrance. Even boredom sounds better in French. So we imagined launching a scent called Ennui with notes of burnt budget and creative despair right here at Cannes. A fragrance for our times.

But here's the real question: Did we all spray on a little Ennui this morning, without even realising it? And if we did... what will that cost us by tonight? Because when we hear "Dull," we instinctively think dull content, mediocre creative, forgettable ads. And yes, dull creative is expensive. It leaks effectiveness. But what if content isn't the most expensive part of dull? What if there's another source of dullness that's even more destructive because it can render even the best content invisible?

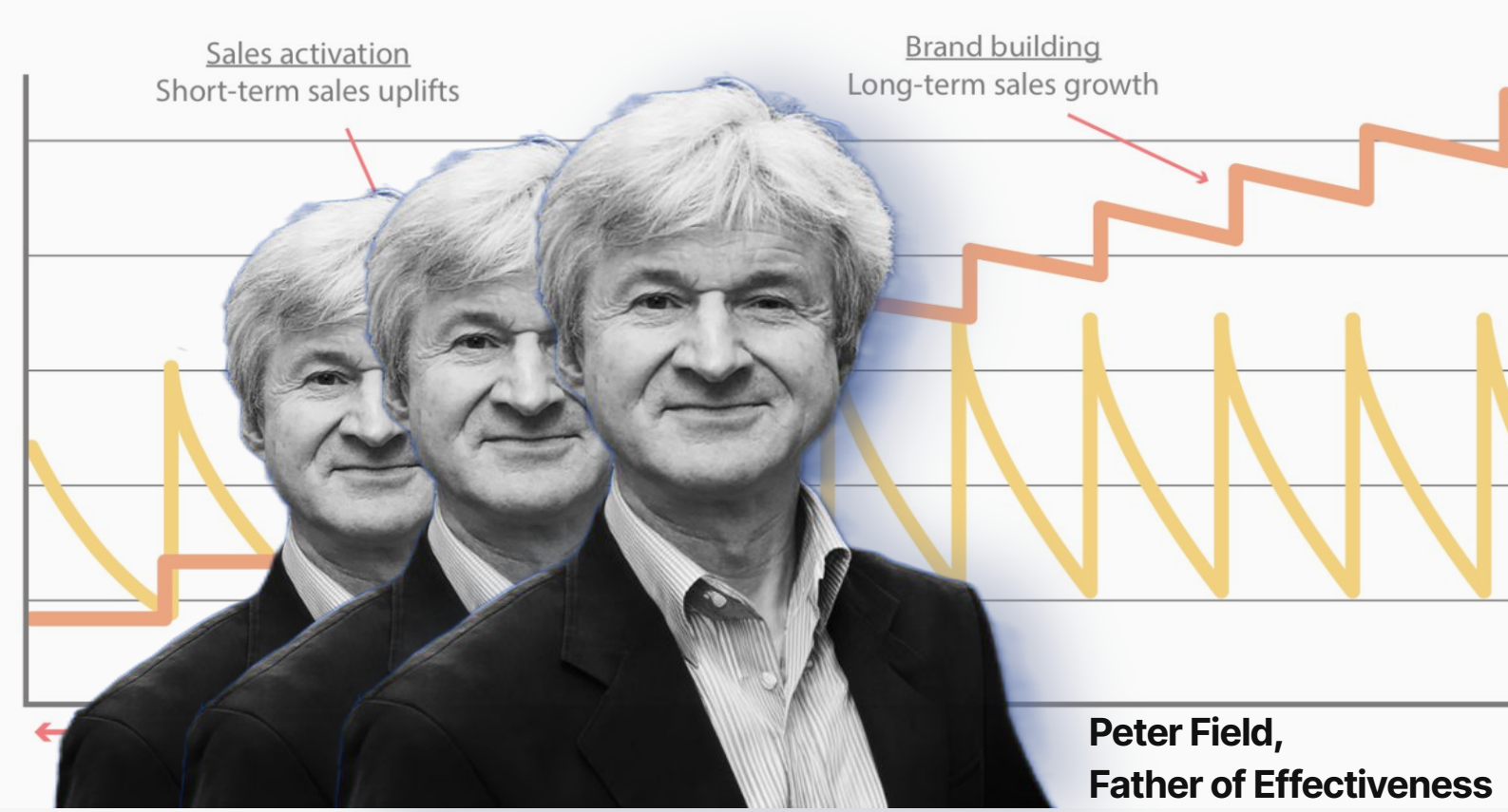
What if Dull Media is actually more expensive than Dull Content?

Now, none of us here set out to waste money. We're smart, well-intentioned marketers. So let's pause and consider the principles we all lean on when planning media responsibly: We know there's a trade-off between effectiveness and efficiency.

- ➔ We aim to balance high impact with broad reach.
- ➔ We accept that some platforms deliver lower engagement—but justify it with their scale.
- ➔ We assume that even if attention is brief, our great creative will still cut through.

So we spread our budget across the mix. Some high-impact media, a larger share to high-reach channels. A balanced, sensible plan. Right? But here's the tension: Is that really the responsible choice? Or is it the risky one?

You will find out here.
— Adam



Peter Field,
Father of Effectiveness

I genuinely believe that this will be the most important effectiveness paper you read this year – and certainly the most important that will emerge from Cannes.

There is a terrifying complacency in media buying that is destroying the foundations of brand prosperity: our ability to strengthen and defend brands and their all-important mental availability. The share of media budgets that is spent on low attention – Dull – platforms continues to grow relentlessly, despite the concerns of many savvy marketers.

Unable to break free from the mindless constraints of Cost per Thousand Impression (CPM) based buying, many marketers I have spoken to know they are wasting money on advertising platforms that simply cannot support brand building advertising.

It is little consolation that these dull platforms might deliver broad reach at lowest cost when the attention to the ads is so fleeting that impact is minimal.

Adding insult to injury, dull platforms in turn promote dull creative, because all they can support is a brief 'performance' message. So a spiral of dull decline sets in: dull creative served on dull platforms. All in the name of 'responsible' media buying.

Thanks to this paper we can now gauge just how responsible our media buying algorithms really are. The answer is predictably ugly.

Only when we can convince the C-suite that not all impressions are equal because not all platforms gather equal attention to ads, will we pull out of this downwards spiral. And this paper, with its rigorous calculations of the immense cost to marketing of over-investment in dull platforms is our best chance of doing so. We no longer have any excuse for not trying.

Let's kill dull before it kills our brands.

— Peter

PART 1:

The Dull Problem

An introduction to dull and the problem we set out to fix.

Introduction

In 2024, Adam Morgan and Peter Field shook the industry with The Cost of Dull Advertising. Their project put a long-overdue price on something most had only suspected: boring, neutral, forgettable creative costs brands far more than they realise.

They analysed over 80,000 ads using System1's emotion tracking to identify the dullest quartile, those that triggered the most neutral audience responses. Then they reverse-engineered the extra media spend needed to make a dull ad perform like a strong one.

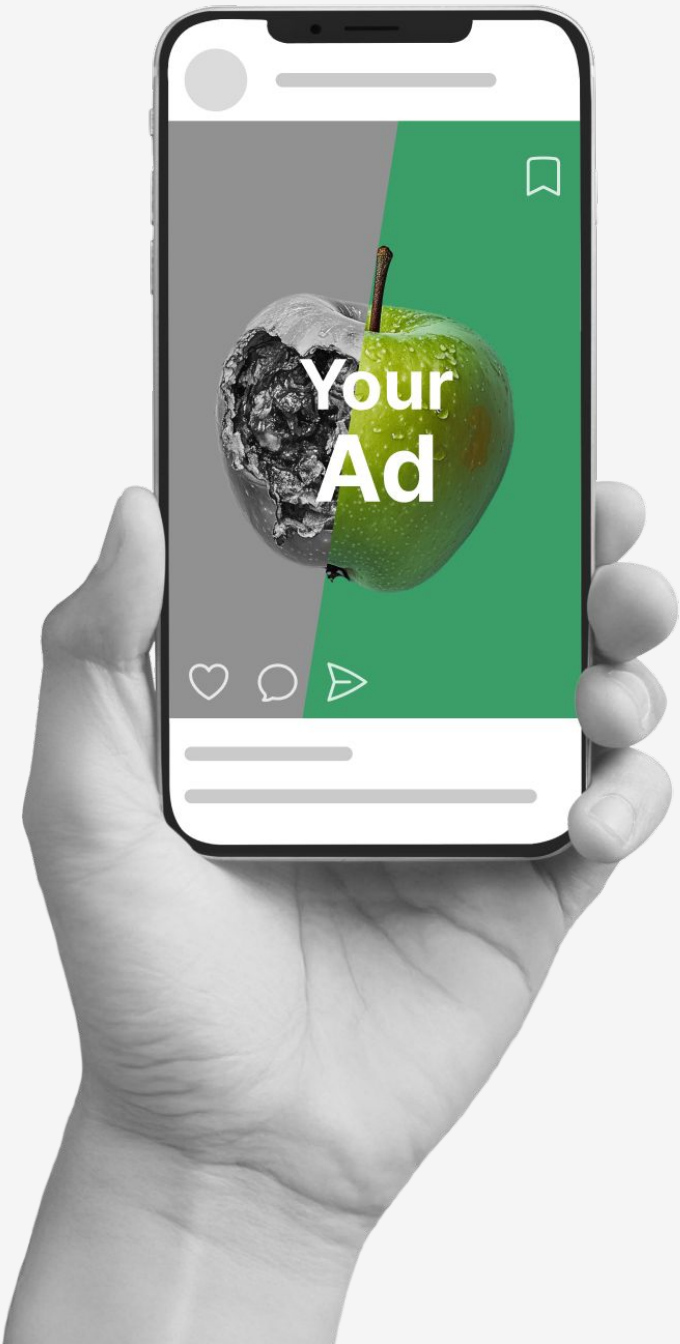
The result? A financial black hole. Dull creative required an extra $189 billion USD in media spend to match the effectiveness of non-dull creative a loss comparable to the GDP of Greece. Their Cannes session stood out for doing what few dare: putting a price on being ignored.

This report picks up where theirs left off. Where their work priced the cost of weak creative, ours asks what happens when even strong creative is placed in weak formats.

This experiment asks: What happens when the media mix fails to hold attention even if the creative is good?

Built on original biometric data, this analysis including modelling, interpretation, and outcome valuation was developed by Amplified, building on the methodology introduced in 2024. It calculates the cost of media that's served but unseen, of formats that leak attention, and of the billions lost when impressions are mistaken for impact.

This is The Cost of Dull Media.



The Problem

Ads Are Delivered, But Not Viewed.

No marketer sets out to buy invisible media. But across today's digital landscape, that's exactly what's happening. Ads are being served but not actually seen by humans.

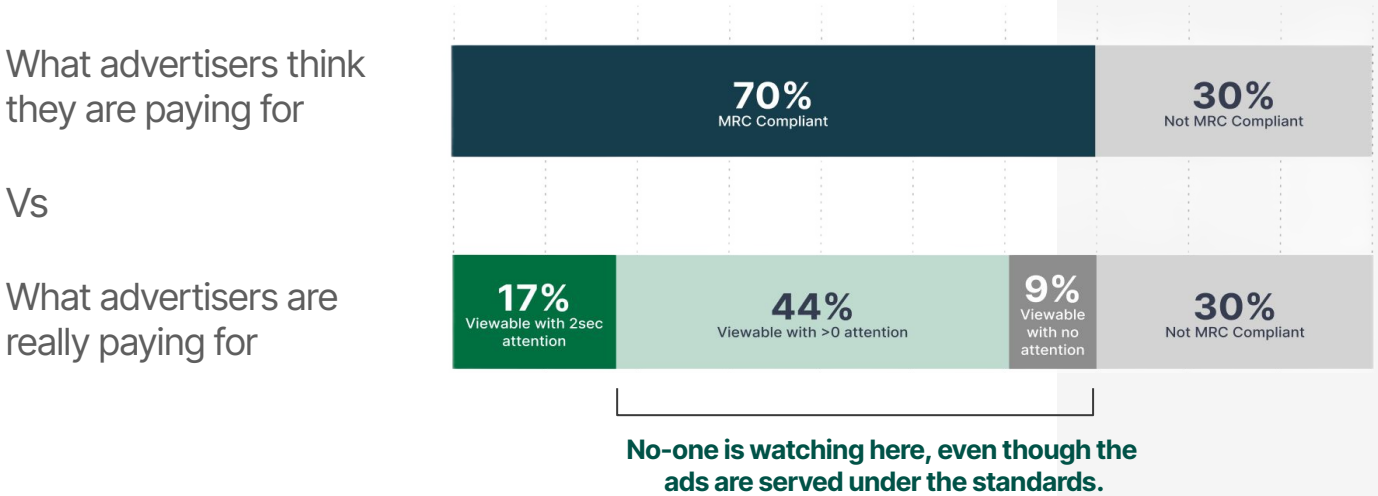
And here's the kicker: when no one's looking, you're still paying. In fact, around 75% of MRC-accredited digital inventory receives zero active attention. That means the vast majority of the ads you invest in, using the currency you trust, fail to deliver the value you expect.

This glaring gap between what's technically viewable and what's actually viewed exposes a deeper failure. The systems built to measure human engagement like viewability and time-in-view, are no longer singularly fit for purpose. And any models built on those foundations, from optimisation to ROI, are now in question.

For advertisers, when a campaign falls into this gap, the consequences are real. Media spend is wasted. Memory doesn't form. Action doesn't follow. And yet, those ads still count as delivered.

This is media waste hiding in plain sight.

This work defines that gap, measures its financial impact, and offers guidance for advertisers looking to close it. Because here's the truth: cheap media isn't cheap if nobody's watching.



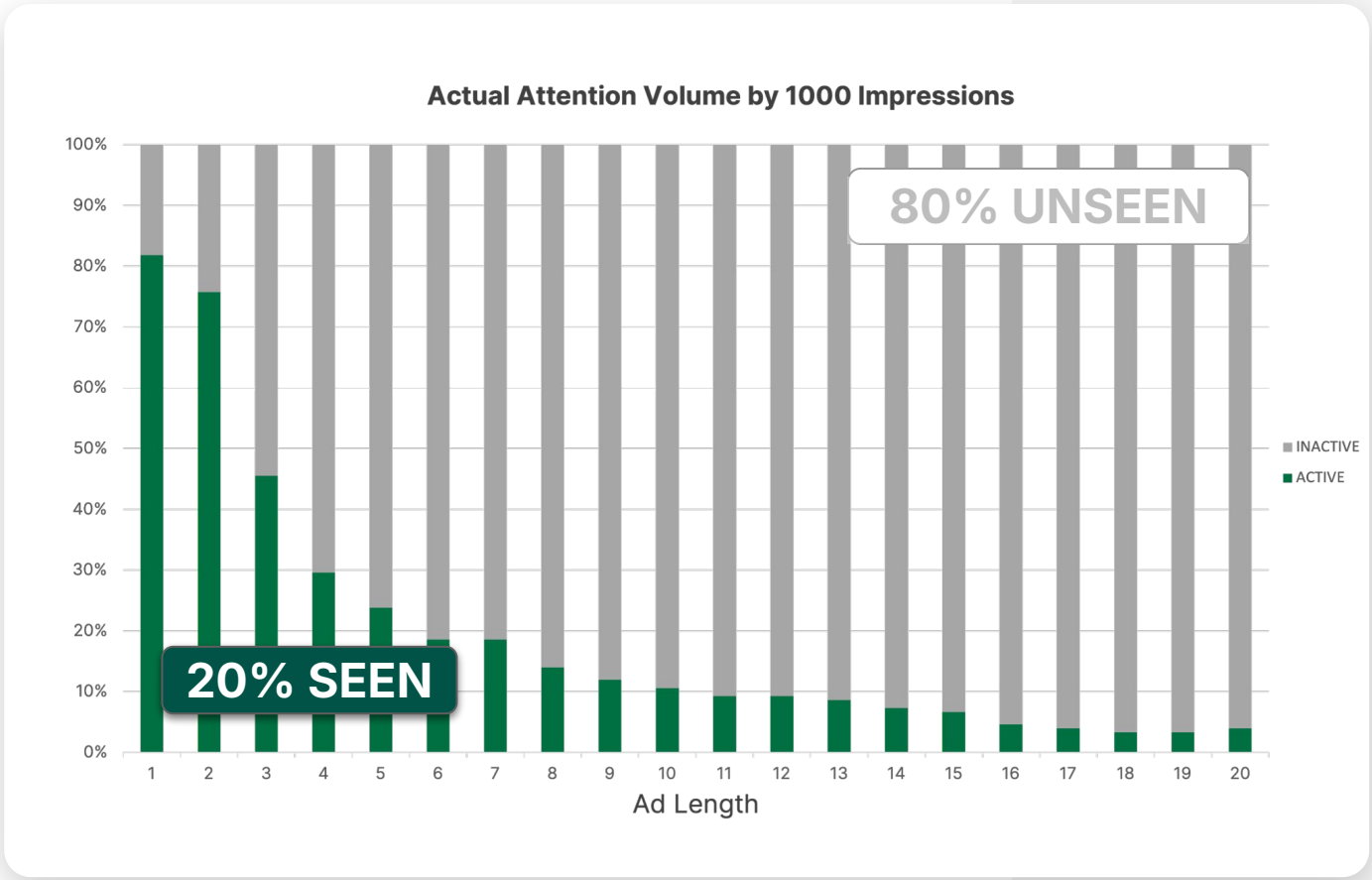
Served vs Seen is advertising's biggest sleight of hand.

Viewability and other served metrics trick us into thinking ads are working up to 75% of the time.

This study digs into the gap between what was served and what was actually watched. By measuring Attention Volume, we can now see just how much of your ad time was looked at, and how much wasn't.

Why it matters: Because even ads that are technically served, and even viewable, can go completely unseen.

And when that happens, you're still paying for it.



PART 2:

The Dull Framework

What data we used and how we classified levels of dull.

The Data

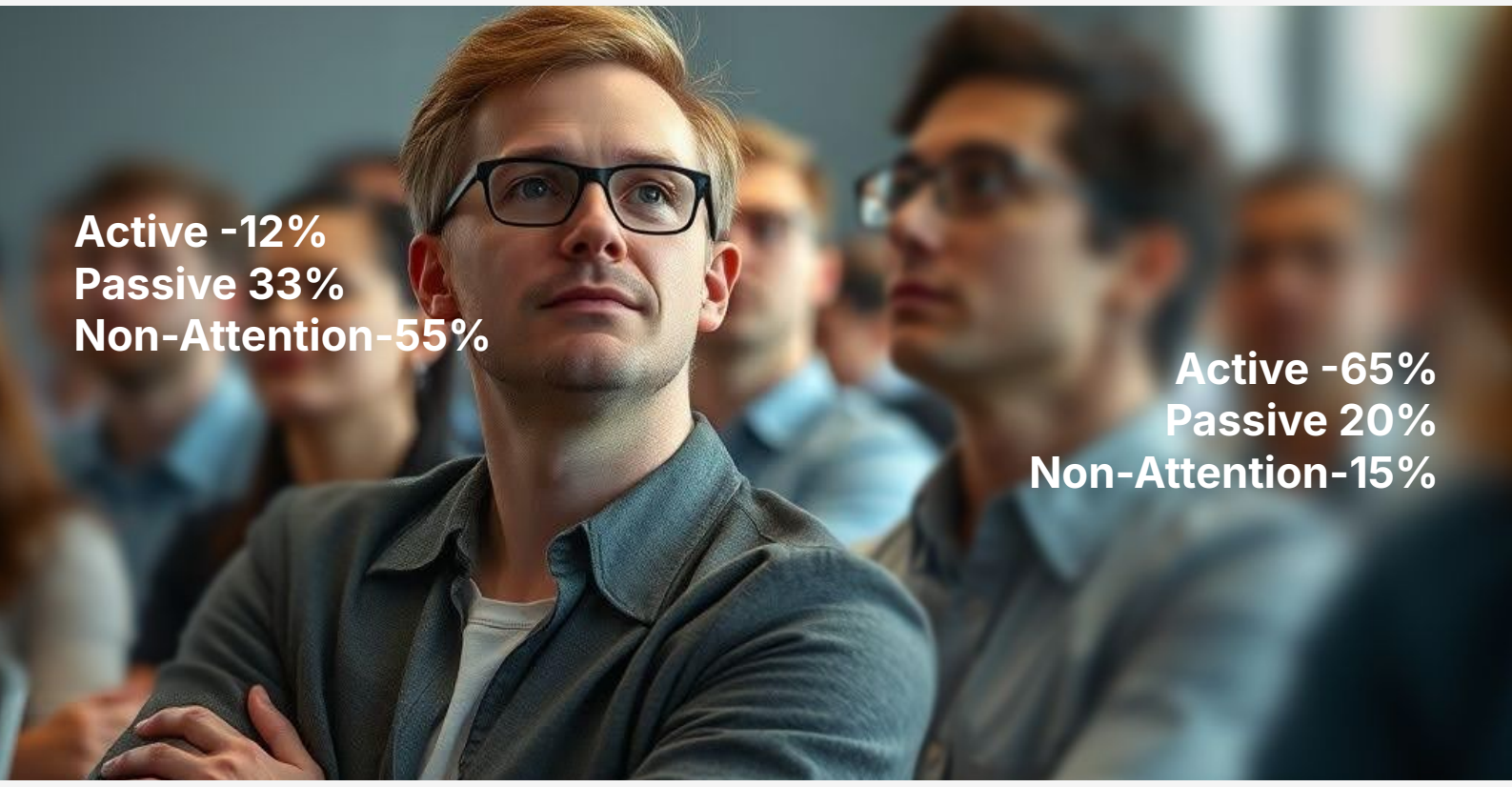
The data used in this original work is collected via Amplified's privacy-safe biometric and visual methods (i.e. eye tracking and facial detection using a customised app). The data is collected via device cameras every 0.2 seconds in natural environments (no labs) when panelists are logged in, or switched onto, their own real media experience such as socials or TV.

Our biometric technology captures where viewers look, how long they stay focused, when attention drifts and importantly when they disengage. While behind the view a JavaScript tag collects data signals that collect further placement and engagement data about their experience using the media.

The biometric data is then modeled into three mutually exclusive states of attention:

- **Active Attention:** the viewer is looking directly at the ad
- **Passive Attention:** the ad is on-screen but the viewer is looking nearby and not directly at the ad such as a feed
- **No Attention:** the ad is on-screen but the viewer is not looking at or nearby the ad at all

These three attentive states sum to 100% each split second building a continuous, objective picture of moment-to-moment attention and distraction throughout the entire course of the ad on screen.



The Sample

The sample includes 114,899 biometrically confirmed ad views, captured across 190 campaigns all with a unique mix of up to 60 ad formats across CTV, linear TV, social, gaming, and web environments. We used data from 164 unique brands across 46 IAB categories, spanning 12 countries.

But each view is more than just biometrics. It comes with a wealth of contextual data that helps us understand how someone interacts with the ad including scroll speed, phone orientation, volume while ad is playing, ad aspect ratio, ad skipping information, view decay rate, ad time-in-view, presence of headphones and more.

In addition the campaign data in this study includes format level CPMs and individual-level Short Term Advertising Strength (STAS) (see definition below) from those exposed. STAS is a conversion metric commonly used to predict short term sales. To strengthen the outcomes analysis, we also drew on external ROI benchmarks, using short- and long-term return data from Profit Ability 2: The New Business Case for Advertising (Thinkbox, 2024) as a cross-check for our findings.

When all put together this data enabled us to see not just whether an ad in each campaign was watched, but how it was experienced by a human frame by frame, what action the view triggered and what it cost to achieve that action.

115k Real-time biometric ad views	**190** Campaigns	**164** Unique Brands
46 IAB Categories	**12** Countries	**60** Ad formats across CTV, linear TV, social, gaming, and web.

Short Term Advertising Strength (STAS)

STAS is a behavioural outcome metric that measures the immediate impact of advertising on brand choice, and is often used as a proxy for conversion. It compares the purchase rate between people exposed to an ad and those who weren't - capturing what people actually do, not just what they claim to remember.

Unlike traditional metrics based on recall or perception, STAS reflects real-world influence and spontaneous brand conversion through a simulated buying moment (a virtual store). It's also effective at capturing the effects of passive attention which is important given how much advertising is consumed this way.

A STAS score of 100 indicates no effect (i.e. no lift above baseline). Scores above 100 show that the ad had a measurable impact, driving conversion beyond expectation.

Levels of Dull

To mirror the 2024 Dull Creative methodology, we grouped campaigns into quartiles based on Attention Volume, forming four distinct Dullness Levels.

Attention Volume (AV) is a proportional, volume-based metric that compares how much attention an ad actually achieved versus how much was theoretically possible (if the viewer hadn't disengaged by scrolling, skipping or avoiding). It reflects how many people viewed the ad and for how long, as a proportion to the total ad time-in-view. Giving us a natural 'below the curve' vs 'above the curve' metric to consider the gap between served ads and those that were truly seen.

For example: A campaign with 60% AV means viewers looked directly at the ad for 60% of its available viewing time. While A campaign with 10% AV means 90% of the time the ad was on screen, it wasn't being actively viewed.

Attention Volume =

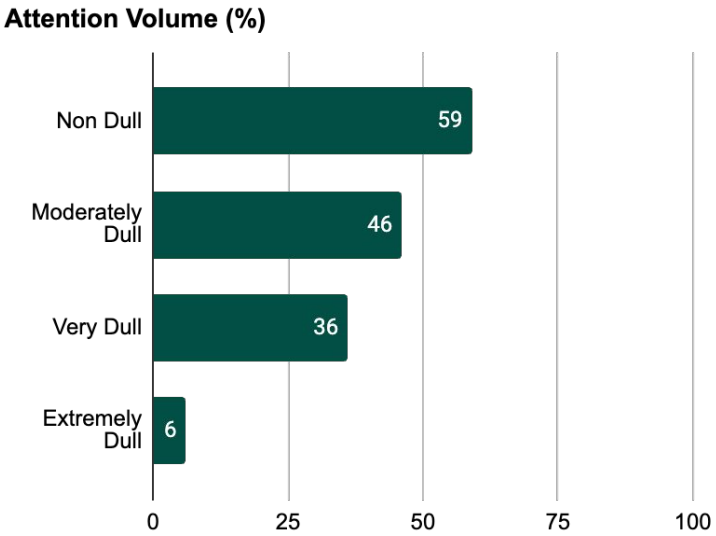
$$\frac{\text{Active Attentive Reach} \times \text{Active Attention Time}}{\text{Total Time-in-View}}$$

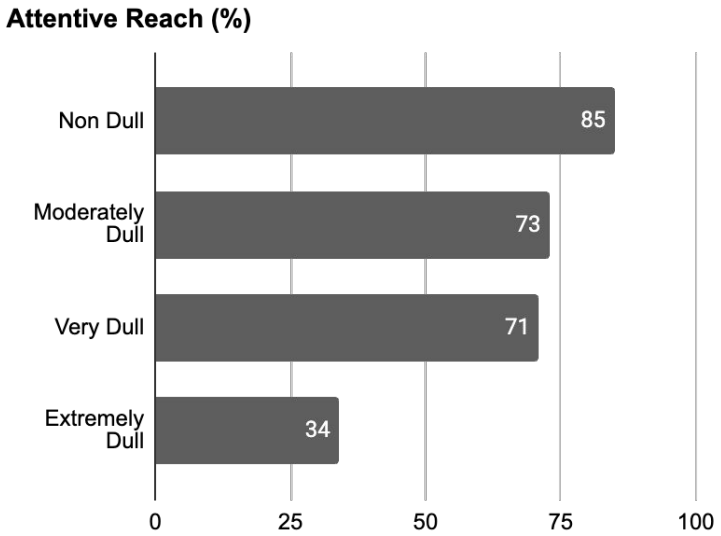
Attention Volume provides a clear, consistent way to quantify how much of the media exposure was truly seen and how much wasn't. The scores are relative across formats making this a perfect and transparent volume based metric to quantify 'dull'.

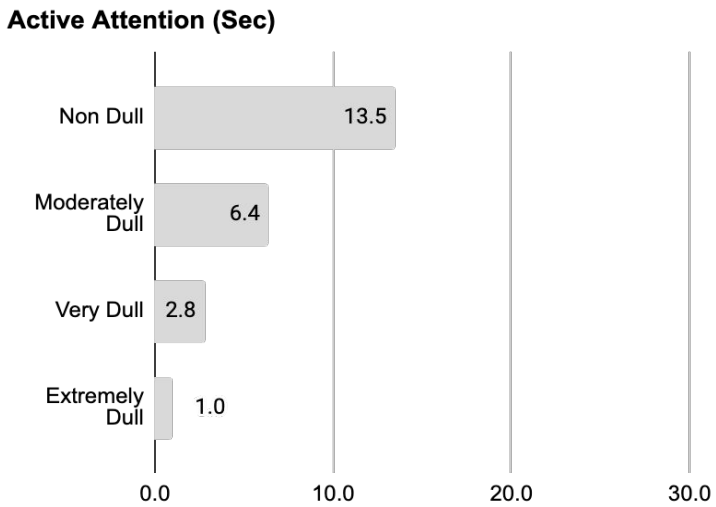
Non-Dull Campaigns (Top 25%) *Where attention delivers*	**Attention Volume is 59%** *(from 100% available attention)* These campaigns include the greatest % of formats with the highest attentive reach and the longest active attention time viewing (13.5sec). This mix is best in class.
Moderately Dull Campaigns (Upper Middle 25%) *Where attention starts to slide*	**Attention Volume is 46%** *(from 100% available attention)* These campaigns include the second highest attentive reach and the second longest active time viewing (6.4). But with the AV dropping, the mix of formats used in these campaigns triggers an obvious drop in viewer engagement.
Very Dull Campaigns (Lower Middle 25%) *Where attention weakens further*	**Attention Volume is 36%** *(from 100% available attention)* These campaigns use formats where the average active attention seconds per impression crashes (2.8) while the number of viewers engaging only drops a bit. This describes a classic fast scroll experience where many view upfront but scroll away super quickly to avoid the ad.
Extremely Dull Campaigns (Bottom 25%) *Where ads go largely unseen*	**Attention Volume is 6%** *(from 100% available attention)* These campaigns include the greatest % of formats that deliver on average only 1 active attention second while only a third of the total audience is watching. This quartile is officially invisible (yet around 20% ad spend is allocated here).

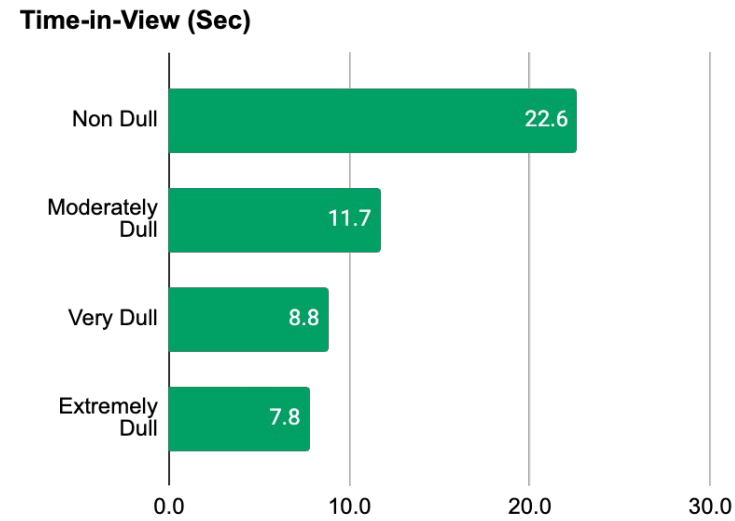
Attention Volume Measures the Gap

The drop in attention across dull media isn't just a minor issue it's a sign that the system is broken. These formats fail to deliver people who actually watch your ad, even though you're paying as if they do.









Attention Volume (%)

A proportional metric that shows how much of the ad's available viewing time was actually looked at. It's calculated as the area under the attention curve, the intersection of active attention and time-in-view.

Attentive Reach (%)

The percentage of the audience that gave any active attention to the ad not just delivered on screen. A clearer signal of the number of people who truly saw the ad.

Active Attention (Seconds)

The count of seconds a viewer looked directly at the ad. Not around it or nearby it, focused and straight at it.

Time-in-View (Seconds)

The number of seconds the ad was on screen. The significant difference between TIV seconds and Active Attention seconds here makes the problem clear - served and seen are not the same.

Q: Why is this study using only Active Attention and not Passive?

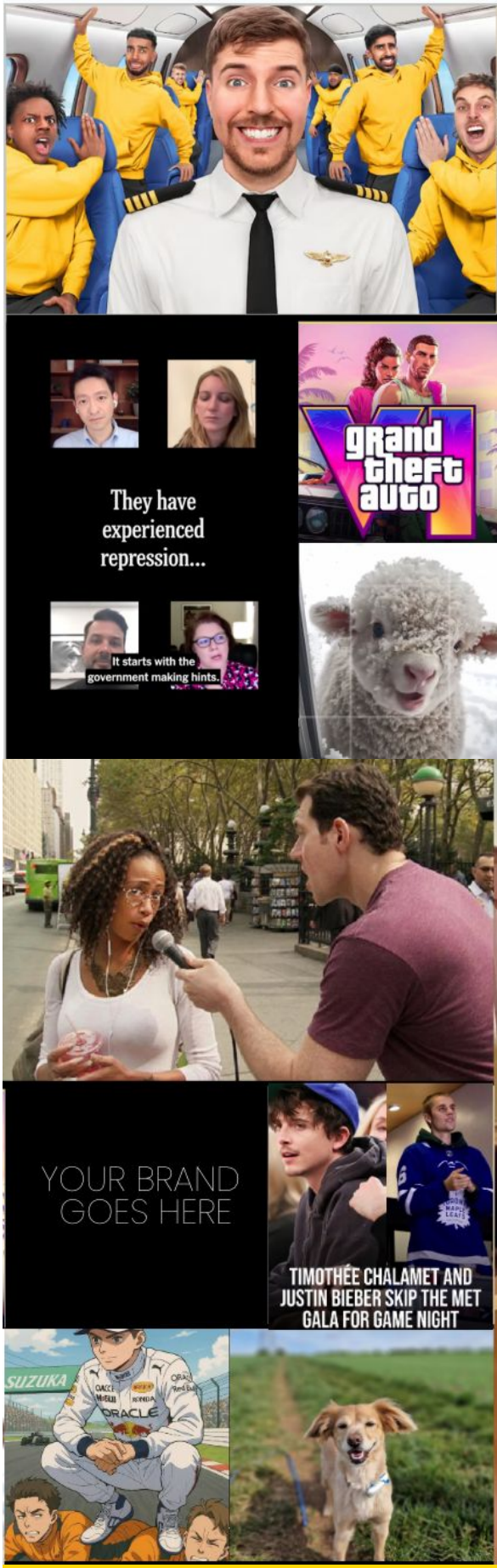
A: Because the Active relationship to outcomes is hard to ignore.

While passive attention has value, active attention is significantly more predictive of outcomes - around 7x more influential than passive attention to be precise. Why is passive less related to outcomes?

Passive attention can reinforce distinctive assets for well-established brands, but it's much less effective when you're a challenger brand or the ad introduces new messaging or information. Under these conditions the ad needs to cut through (what UK Agency VCCP call, a *'million brilliant little distractions')* and be viewed actively for all sorts of outcomes to eventuate like message retention and improvement in brand asset strength.

So when passive works sometimes but not others it makes for the wrong baseline here. So while we acknowledge the supplementary role that passive attention plays, we needed a definitive indicator of "seen" not an indicator of 'sort of seen'. That's why this study uses active attention as the standard.

What we found next shows its value.



VCCP | Challenger Series

A Quick Explainer

Behind the Benchmarks - What Profit Ability 2 Tells Us

What Econometrics Showed and Attention Explained

This study uses ROI benchmarks from Profit Ability 2: The New Business Case for Advertising (2024), which is a multisector, multimedia marketing effectiveness study by Ebiquity, EssenceMediacom, Gain Theory, Mindshare, and Wavemaker UK. Based on over 100 econometric models across 10 advertiser categories, it remains one of the most robust cross-format ROI datasets available.

While it doesn't include attention, it provides a reliable baseline for understanding how different media channels perform:

- **Short-term ROI** = profit within 0–3 months (sales, direct response)
- **Long-term ROI** = profit over up to 2 years (brand-building, memory effects)

These benchmarks are used throughout this report as a stable point of comparison. While they don't go down to individual ad length or attention seconds, they offer a valuable proxy for trend-level media outcomes. Our findings don't replace Profit Ability 2, they extend it.

Econometrics tells us what happened while attention tells us why and what to fix.

Where econometric models show which channels deliver average ROI, attention data reveals the mechanics. Why some formats fail, why great creative underdelivers, and why equal budgets don't produce equal results.

Together, the two build a more complete picture:
→ Profit Ability 2 shows where ROI is.
→ Attention shows why it's disappearing.

The table below summarises key themes across both studies, showing how attention data helps explain the mechanisms behind ROI patterns identified in Profit Ability 2.

Key Themes	Profit Ability 2	This Report
Advertising is broadly profitable	All media channels deliver ROI, especially with long-term effects included.	**True:** but attention reveals *why some formats underperform*, especially when scroll speeds are high and attention time is short.
Channel choice matters	ROI varies by channel; over-investment in PPC/social limits long-term growth.	**Same pattern:** and attention shows *why* these channels struggle: they fail to secure and hold human focus.
Full-year, full-effect matters	Recommends optimising for total ROI, not just immediate impact.	**Reinforced:** formats that don't hold attention fail to build memory or drive long-term brand effects.
Message over medium	Message drives whether a campaign behaves like 'brand' or 'performance'.	**Agree:** media sets the boundaries of what can be achieved by the message, regardless of message/creative quality.
Saturation points differ	TV has highest saturation point; social/display saturate faster.	**Agree:** attention decay mirrors this: formats with fast decay hit diminishing returns quicker and waste more impressions.

PART 3:

The Early Signs

The first patterns that revealed dullness wasn’t just a creative issue.

Metrics That Fell off the Cliff

Before we calculated the Cost of Dull Media, we looked at general patterns in the data. Naturally, we expected some variation across groups - after all, if attention volume goes down you would expect there to be some implications across the ROI metrics we collected. But what we didn't expect was a near-perfect, systematic collapse across every single metric we analysed.

Table 1. shows from Non-Dull to Extremely Dull, we saw a consistent and unforgiving pattern: as attention volume fades, outcomes and ROI metrics fall in lockstep.

Table 1. Some metrics that fell, but as a marketer you don't want them to

Level of Dull	STAS	Long-Term Financial ROI per $1 Spend	Short-Term Efficiency per $1 Spend (STAS)
Non-Dull	169	$5.21	2.23
Moderately Dull	117	$4.99	1.25
Very Dull	102	$4.74	0.12
Extremely Dull	106	$4.48	0.51

Table 2. starts to show the 'why' dull campaigns fall apart. As dullness worsens the % of active attention to passive attention declines, slow attention decay formats disappear (which means high scroll fast decay format stake over), and far fewer ads cross the critical 2.5-second threshold needed for memory formation. In short, the more dullness creeps in, the less time your message has to land. And without that time, even the best creative goes 'unseen' and 'unremembered'.

Table 2. Why performance falls:the culprits behind the drop

Level of Dull	Active:Passive Ratio (%)	Slow Decay Formats (%)	Reached ≥2.5 Active Sec (%)
Non-Dull	74	76	70
Moderately Dull	69	60	52
Very Dull	52	33	28
Extremely Dull	17	19	9

This isn't just media under delivering, it's media undermining the very foundations of advertising effectiveness and efficiency. Every impression in these campaigns are treated as equal, regardless of whether it was truly seen. And that means you're not just seeing underperformance, you're staring at a structural failure in how media is traded.

The Cliff on a Page

From Non-Dull to Extremely Dull

–37%
Short Term Conversion

STAS:
169 → 106

STAS shows how likely a brand is to be chosen in a real buying moment.
As attention fades, so does influence.

–14%
Long Term ROI

Profit ROI: $5.21 → $4.48
(Long-Term ROI per $1)

Brand-building only works if attention is earned. Dull media strips that attention and long-term value fades.

–77%
Short Term Efficiency

STAS Efficiency per $1:
2.23 → 0.51

STAS Efficiency shows how much brand uplift you get per dollar.
Dull media kills it.

–77%
Active Viewing

Active Ratio: 73.9% → 17.1%

As active attention fades, passive exposure rises and cut-through vanishes.

–75%
Slow Decay Formats

% Slow Decay Formats:
75.7% → 18.9%

Slow-decay formats give your message time to land.
Dull campaigns replace them with scroll-heavy, skippable media.

–88%
Memory Threshold

% Reached ≥2.5 Sec:
70.2% → 8.6%

2.5 seconds is the proven threshold for memory formation. In dull campaigns, 9 out of 10 ads fall short.

All from this one little thing called wastage.

That's the percentage of impressions that were served but not seen.

+130%
Wastage

% Served not Seen:
41.0% → 94.2%

The inverse of Attention Volume is wastage.
It's the portion of ad time that was on screen but never looked at.
Time technically delivered, but never seen.
It's the space above the viewing curve. And it's costing us everything above.

With only 30% of ad views crossing the Attention–Memory Threshold, most impressions served in the bottom two dullness categories will struggle to build memory.*

* The Bad Twin Test: Distinctive Assets Supercharge Outcomes in Low-Attention Media

In partnership with VCCP (famous for the longstanding Compare the Market campaign), we showed how distinctive branding drives performance, even in scroll-heavy, low-attention environments. The study found that with strong assets in place, memory impact can begin in just 1.5 seconds of active attention. That's an improvement on the well-known threshold of 2.5 seconds, a threshold proven to be the memory-forming line in the sand.

Of note, while brand assets were found to accelerate outcomes at 1.5 seconds, they only do so when brand fluency is strong. In the VCCP data, the 2.5-second threshold held for brands trying to build assets.
See Report Here.

For those who are interested, here is the media mix story.

This chart shows how ad dollars are distributed across formats grouped by dullness level. It's not about naming and shaming, we're keeping formats anonymous to stay focused on the bigger goal. What matters here is the pattern: a significant portion of spend is still going to formats that consistently underdeliver on attention. Importantly, this isn't saying each format always underperforms — it's saying that, across thousands of campaigns, formats that frequently appear in the Dull quartiles are the ones most associated with wasted spend and low attention outcomes.

Level of Dull	Connected TV (%)	Social Premium (%)	Linear TV (%)	Social Non Premium (%)	General Web (%)	Streaming Gaming (%)
Non-Dull	30.9	23.7	17.5	14.4	9.9	3.6
Moderately Dull	26.6	18.9	12.1	38.2	1.8	2.3
Very Dull	4.3	9.9	15.3	64.6	1.9	4.0
Extremely Dull	1.3	1.6	13.6	72.8	8.4	2.4


Maybe it's time to change
'Viewability'
to
'Seenability'

An Adjacent Truth

Not the main focus of the experiment - but the pattern was too good to ignore.

The Real Cost of Invisibility for Challenger Brands

When we break out the data by brand size, a clear pattern emerges: dull media environments may be equally harsh for all brand sizes, but they're not equally forgiving.

Challenger brands begin with a performance edge. In Non-Dull campaigns, their STAS reaches 199, compared to just 115 for big brands - a +73% uplift. But that early advantage collapses fast. In Extremely Dull environments, challenger STAS drops to 107. Big brands hold more steady at 99.

That's a 6× steeper performance drop for challengers.

And it's not because they're seen less. In Extremely Dull campaigns, both groups receive similarly low levels of attention:

- ≈10% of impressions >2.5-second threshold
- ≈90% wastage

So what's the difference?

Challengers rely on attention to grow. Big brands can survive without it, at least for a while.

Challengers are still building memory structures, awareness, and mental availability. Every second of attention counts. When the media environment fails, so does the opportunity to make that impression. The impact isn't just inefficiency, it's lost opportunity. Without attention, challenger brands don't just underperform. They miss the chance to grow at all.

Meanwhile, big brands are buffered by salience. They're already known. Even when formats underdeliver, familiarity and distinctive assets can still carry the message.

Challenger brands don't have that safety net.

Dull media might treat all brands equally, but it punishes challengers disproportionately.

In other words, inattention hits the brands the hardest that need attention the most.

What the Bad Twin Test Adds to This Story

The Bad Twin Test reinforced what we saw in the broader data in this work: challenger brands are more exposed to the quality of media. In low-attention environments, their performance is capped, despite strong creative. But in high-attention formats, their results accelerate. The uplift is sharper than for big brands.

This tells us that challenger brands are more responsive to attention overall.

- When attention is high, they gain more.
- When attention is low, they lose more.

Big brands can lean on familiarity. But for challengers, media quality either unlocks growth or blocks it entirely.

The Illusion of Efficiency

While we are here, let's talk about some metrics that look great on paper but collapse under scrutiny. Take CPM; easy to track, easy to optimise, and easy to celebrate when apparent savings are made. But in low-attention environments, CPM becomes a mirage: it reflects the cost of distribution, not the value of delivery.

And that's where the trap lies.

In our dataset, as campaigns became duller, CPMs dropped by 41% - from $27.90 in Non-Dull campaigns to $16.50 in Extremely Dull campaigns. On the surface, that looks like a win. But efficiency dropped even faster than the media cost.

So while your spreadsheet says you're saving money, you're actually spending more for less. If CPM savings were truly efficient, ROI per dollar would hold steady. But it doesn't.

It turns out cheap is a poor strategy.

Low CPMs might look good in procurement reports, but they often trade efficiency for invisibility. The spreadsheet might say "win" but the brand loses attention and ROI on outcomes.

This is exactly why, in The Attention Economy: A Category Blueprint, we renamed CPM for what it too often is: Cost Per Meaningless Thousand.

Fig 5. Efficiency Drop by Dullness Group

Level of Dull	CPM (USD)	STAS Efficiency ($/1)
Non-Dull	$27.90	$2.23
Extremely Dull	$16.50	$0.51
Relative Change	**–41%**	**–77%**

Attention Volume: The Core Metric Behind Dullness

Why it worked

We chose Attention Volume because it doesn't just show what was watched, more importantly it shows what was missed.

It measures the total volume of attention delivered across a format: how many people looked, and for how long. That makes it the clearest way to quantify both media quality and measure the gap between impressions served versus impressions seen.

It worked because:

- **It reflects real human behaviour over time**, not just binary screen exposure.
- **It correlates more strongly with outcomes**, than any other attention metric we've tested including seconds alone, which was already strong.
- **It's proportional so it's relative,** which means you know what the goal is relative to what your ad achieved..
- **It works across all media,** and alongside other percentage-based metrics like viewability, physical availability, and mental availability (see WARC paper The Missing Availability).

Attention Volume gives you a clear read on what actually reached people and what didn't, making it the right metric for measuring dullness here.

If your phone battery is at 40%, you know it's **not enough.**

If your Wifi signal is at 40%, you know it's **not reliable.**

If your download is at 40%, you know it's **not ready.**

If a media format is at 40% (AV), you know it's **not being seen.**

In Other Words

Full Price But <Half Full

The Story So Far

The Hidden Collapse of Media Value

Across the first half of this story, one pattern has held true: when attention disappears, everything else begins to fail.

We've seen that this failure isn't caused by poor creative or weak messaging. It's not about tone, targeting, or talent. It's about something more foundational - the environment in which advertising lives.

Formats that can't hold attention create the illusion of delivery. They serve impressions, rack up numbers, and often appear cost-efficient.

But beneath the surface, they bleed effectiveness.

For challenger brands, the impact is even more brutal. They enter the game without salience or memory structures. They need every second of attention to land, to build, and to grow. When media dullness strips away that chance, it doesn't just reduce performance, it erases their opportunity to grow.

Even the best creative can't work if it's never really seen.

The result is a system that looks like it's functioning - campaigns run, impressions are delivered - but underneath it all, advertising is being quietly devalued. Not because the ideas are bad, but because the media isn't fit for delivering them.

This isn't a condemnation of any one format or platform, every channel has its place. But if your media mix leans too far into environments where Attention Volume is low and wastage is high, then every metric downstream suffers.

And worst of all, we start believing that advertising doesn't work when in reality, it was never given the chance to.

PART 4:

The Main Event

How we calculated Cost of Dull and what we found.

A Model Method

Step 1: Getting Prepared

We used:

1. **Dullness Level:** Non-Dull, Moderately Dull, Very Dull, Extremely Dull quartiles based on attentive reach and attention time.
2. **Avg CPM (USD):** Real-world average cost per thousand impressions by format.
3. **Spend Distribution Across Dullness Levels:** Proportion of total media spend allocated across dullness levels, based on each format's CPM and share of usage.
4. **STAS Efficiency:** Brand choice ROI, measuring uplift per $1 spent, derived from hundreds of human-measured campaigns.
5. **USA Media Investment Data:** Total U.S. media spend in 2024 was **$427.4 billion USD** (WARC).

Step 2: Building the Model

Then we calculated:

1. **Allocated Spend % by Dullness Level:** The share of total ad spend by each dullness level, based on real-world CPMs then converted into dollar amounts using the USA ad spend.
2. **Delivered Value:** The real-world return they got from that spend using STAS efficiency.
3. **Target Value (Non-Dull Efficiency for all):** What the return would have been if every dollar worked as well as the average in non-dull campaigns.
4. **Required Spend to Match Non-Dull Efficiency:** How much extra money would be needed to get the same good results using bad media in dull campaigns, assuming non-dull average performance.
5. **Cost of Dull:** The total waste. The extra money spent just to get dull media to deliver what Non-Dull media already does.

Nearly **$287 billion** is being spent on dull formats that collapse attention.
Non-Dull media is **~11.5×** more effective than Very Dull and Extremely Dull formats combined.

Level of Dull	Share of Spend (%)	Spend Allocated ($B)	STAS Efficiency
Non-Dull	32.85	140.36	4.23
Moderately Dull	26.51	113.30	1.25
Very Dull	19.44	83.10	0.12*
Extremely Dull	21.20	90.64	0.51

*Note - In this sample, Very Dull media delivered the worst return relative to CPM.
These campaigns were disproportionately high-priced for the attention and outcomes they delivered.

The Cost of Dull

Across the U.S. media market, brands are investing heavily in ad environments that fail to hold attention long enough to drive outcomes. Using verified STAS Efficiency across four levels of media dullness, we calculated how much extra money would the collective industry need to spend just to get the same results they could've had if they'd used a greater skew of better (more attentive) media in the first place.

The result? $198.29 billion in additional spend required.

That's not part of the existing $427B. That's what would need to be added on top just to compensate for the underperformance of dull media environments. A hidden cost created by inefficient attention.

And when we break it down by dullness level, the scale becomes clear:

- Non-Dull: Benchmark: $0 in additional spend (baseline)
- Moderately Dull media:+$49.79 billion
- Very Dull media:+$78.62 billion
- Extremely Dull media: +$69.89 billion

This is the Cost of Dull Media. The industry-wide financial impact of under-delivering attention at scale.

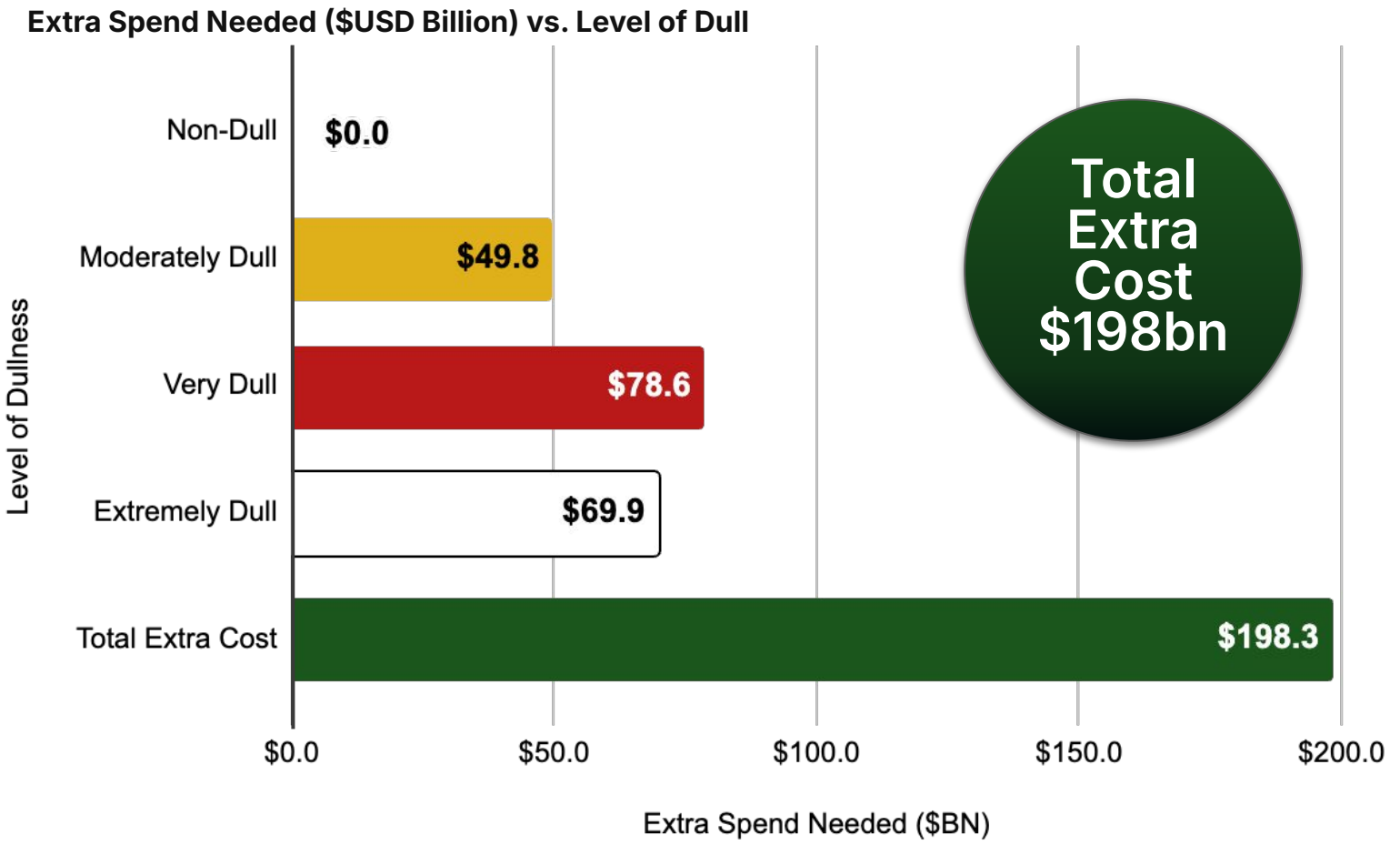
$198

Billion

The estimated extra annual spend (USD) required over current levels to match the average short-term sales uplift potential of Non-Dull media.

The Hidden Cost of Being Unseen

The total annual loss due to media underperformance by level of dull.



A $198B penalty, paid annually just for using formats that don't hold attention.

The Dull Media Tariff

The Cost of Dull Media project set out to measure macro, industry-wide waste putting a dollar value on the extra spend required when advertisers rely on low-attention formats. But we wanted to go further. Our goal was to turn that big, abstract number of $198b, into something marketers could relate to and remember. So we translated the industry-wide inefficiency into a per-dollar tariff, using an estimated monthly spend of $3 million for the top 10,000 advertisers in the U.S. This creates a built-in cost that varies depending on what media mix you choose to 'import'. Using the same model inputs (CPM by format and brand uplift efficiency multipliers), we calculated how much more advertisers have to spend in dull formats to achieve the same average outcomes as high-attention media.

The result? Advertisers are losing an average of 43 cents for every dollar spent in dull media environments.

Across each dullness group we found:

- Non-Dull: Benchmark (Tariff = $0)
- Moderately Dull media: Wasting 20¢ per $1
- Very Dull media: Wasting 68¢ per $1
- Extremely Dull media: Wasting 49¢ per $1

That's not abstract. That's real.

.43c
in the dollar

The estimated average value lost for every $1 spent when a campaign skews too far toward dull, low-attention formats.

What If Every Dollar Worked Like Your Best?

The gap between average outcomes and full creative + media synergy.

The $198 billion Cost of Dull shows what advertisers lose when they stick with dull media. It's based on how dull formats perform compared to the average results from higher-attention media, outcomes most campaigns could realistically achieve.

But some campaigns did even better.

When strong creative runs in high-attention formats, the impact doesn't just improve—it compounds.

If we compare dull media to the best high-attention campaigns, the cost jumps to **$245 billion.**

So, there are two ways to see the loss:

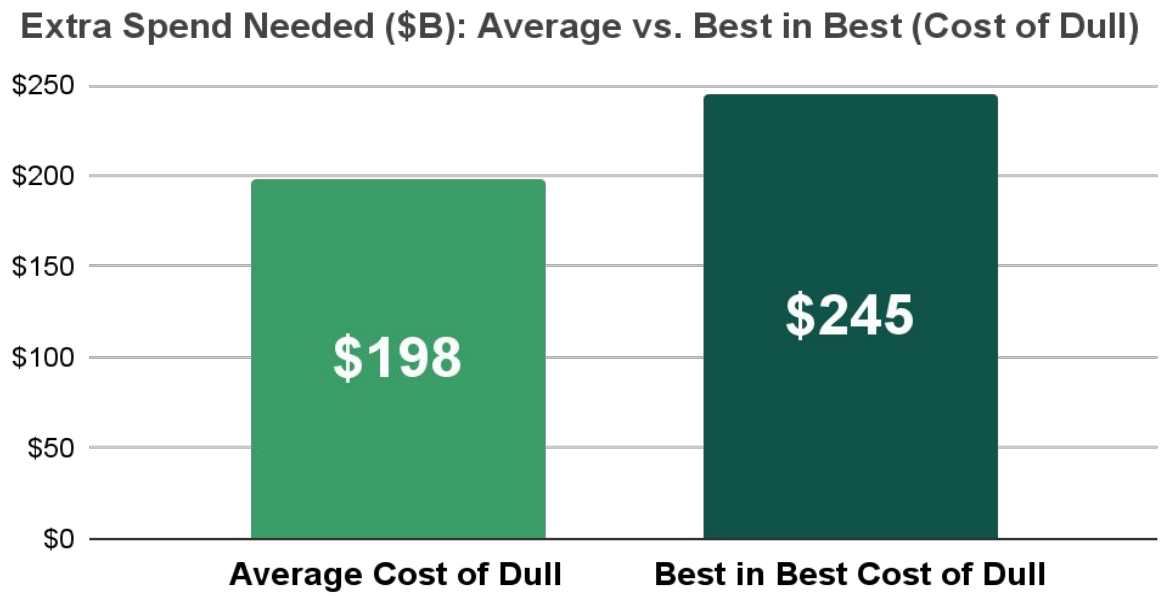
1. **$198B USD →** The cost of an average campaign sticking with dull formats instead of switching to non-dull, high-attention ones.

2. **$245B USD →** The cost of missing the full upside by not pairing great creative with the best media environments.

That's a 23% jump—a $47 billion missed opportunity.

This is the real gap: where your media spend is now, versus what it could deliver if great creative ran in formats that actually hold attention.

Because even the best creative can't perform if the media can't carry it.



When Media Fails Creative: The 72¢ Tariff.

Here's what happens when creative does its job... but media doesn't.

The Cost of Dull doesn't just show us missed averages—it reveals how media failure drags down even the best creative. When we looked at average campaign performance, the loss was $198 billion. But when we re-ran the model using only top-performing campaigns—where creative clearly did its job—that figure jumped to $245 billion.

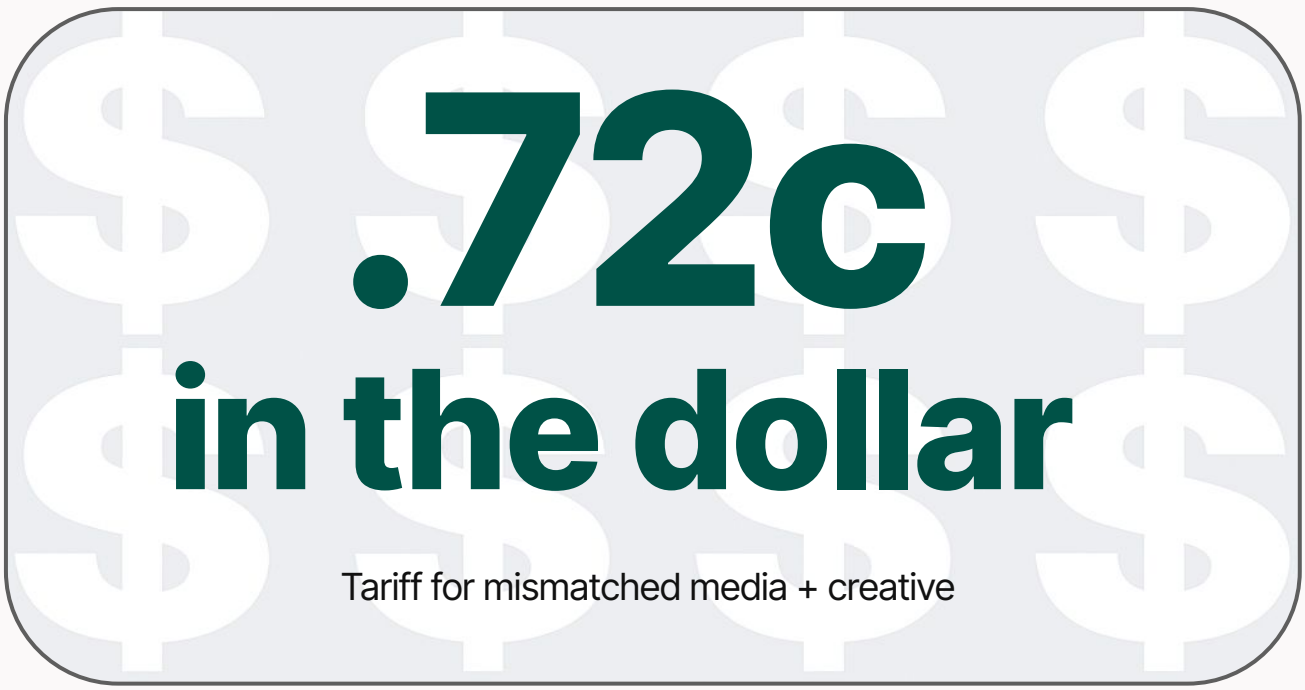
Why? Because even brilliant creative can't shine in dull formats.

In fact, advertisers lose an average of 72¢ on the dollar when standout creative runs in low-attention environments. It's not the creative that's failing—it's the media that fails the creative.

This is the same story told two ways:

1. **A $47 billion opportunity from pairing great creative with better media**
2. **A 72¢ tariff when great work is trapped in dull formats**

The message is clear: attention isn't optional. Even the best creative can't perform if the media can't carry it.



Creative *Can't* Perform if It's Not Seen

We've all heard the old "which comes first media or creative?" debate. But when it comes to attention, the data is clear: media sets the stage.

Our findings show that media is the primary driver of attention opportunity. It creates the conditions that either allow great creative to thrive, or force it to fail.

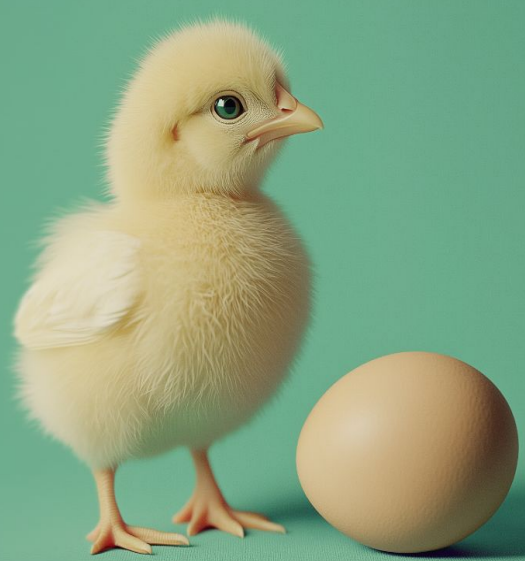
In this study, the performance gap across media formats is far greater than the gap across creative executions.

- Media contributes ~65–70% to outcome variance.
- Creative accounts for ~30–35%.

If creative alone drove results, dull formats wouldn't carry a 72¢ tariff. **But they do.**
If creative alone drove results, the tariff would be equal across formats. **But it's not.**
If brilliant ads could lift poor media, we'd see it in the data. **But we don't.**

This doesn't diminish the value of creative, it's a reminder that even the best creative can't succeed in the wrong environment. Media doesn't just deliver the message; it shapes whether the message gets seen at all.

Creative only works if it's seen.



What is driving this loss?

The 80:20 Attention Principle

When the 80:20 Rule Works Against You

The Pareto Principle tells us that a small number of inputs often drive the majority of results. Across hundreds of campaigns in this study, we saw a familiar 80:20 pattern, but not in a good way.

In Non-Dull campaigns, around 80% of formats were slow decay and only 20% fast decay, the kind of mix that supports sustained attention and stronger outcomes which we see in this study.

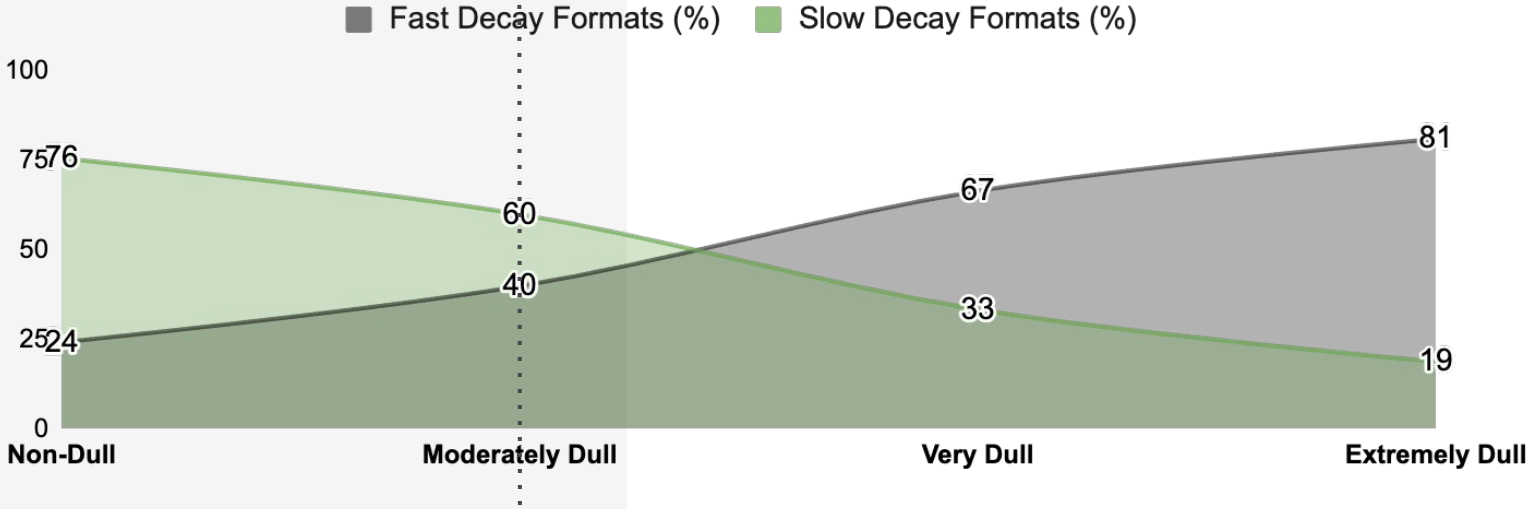
But in Extremely Dull campaigns, that mix flips. Only 20% of formats were slow decay, while a staggering 80% were fast decay creating the perfect conditions for attention loss.

When the mix tilts too far toward fast decay, campaigns experience:

- More scrolling
- Faster attention drop-off
- More seconds served than seen
- Fewer attention seconds delivered
- Fewer branded moments noticed
- Cost rising faster than return
- Fewer memories made

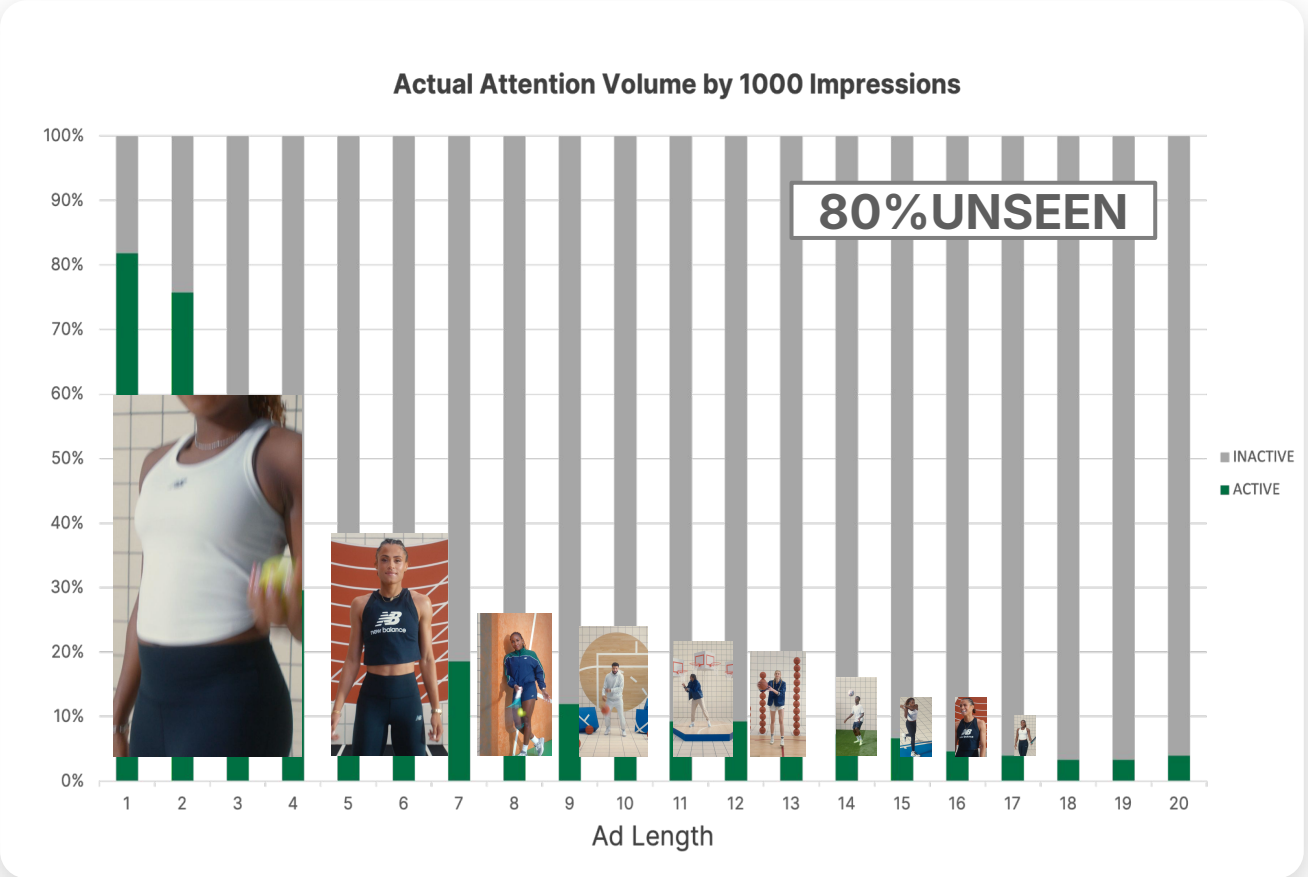
So unlike the classic Pareto Principle, where 20% drives the most value, the Attention Decay Principle shows that in the wrong media mix, the 80% delivers the least.

60:40 is the tipping point.
It's the mix where outcome efficiency peaks balancing cost, attention, and memory formation. Go higher on fast formats, and performance starts to fall. Go lower, and scale or absolute cost may become a challenge.



When attention drops the chance of your brand being seen shrinks with every passing second. And fewer people see your brand and less often.

Ultimately this is why outcomes dive in-line with dullness level.



So What Does the ‘Best Creative’ Look Like in Our Data?

BRANDING

THE DISTINCTIVE ASSET TEST

The Bad Twin Test, a collaboration between Amplified and VCCP, showed how distinctive brand assets drive stronger outcomes even in low-attention environments.

Matched creative pairs revealed that ads without branding had to work harder or spend more to match results, even with the same media.

How it relates to Cost of Dull Media:
Again, both studies isolate waste just from different sources and angles:

- Cost of Dull reveals media inefficiency.
- Bad Twin Test reveals branding inefficiency.

Same structure, different variables.
Here's what the Bad Twin Test showed:

- **Creative quality matters, but without branding value is lost.**
- **Poorly branded ads waste attention, even in high-quality formats.**

CREATIVE

THE EMOTIONALLY DULL TEST

In the 2024 Cost of Dull Creative study, dullness was defined as emotional neutrality and ads that failed to evoke emotion consistently underperformed. We tested this again through a media lens, coding a subset of ads for emotional strength.

Across three social platforms, two patterns emerged:

- High-emotion ads captured more attention than low-emotion ones.
- But the emotional advantage shrinks as media quality declines.

How it relates to Cost of Dull Media:
Both studies isolate waste but from different angles.

- Cost of Dull Media highlights media inefficiency.
- Cost of Emotionally Dull shows creative inefficiency within formats (which also shows up in this study).

Same setup, different variables. Here's what the Emotionally Dull test showed:

- **Creative quality still matters: some ads earn more attention within the same format.**
- **Media conditions set the ceiling: even great creative can't break through if the media environment can't deliver attention.**

Format	High Emotion	Low Emotion	Gain from Emotion
Format A	9.7 sec	8.6 sec	1.1 sec
Format B	4.1 sec	3.1 sec	1.0 sec
Format C	3.5 sec	3.2 sec	0.3 sec

So What the Does ‘Best Campaign’ Look Like in Our Data?

The Winning Formula (*in order)*:

Media that **Holds Attention**
Branding that **Sticks**
Creative that **Moves People**

PART 5:

Defeating Dull

How to tell if your media is drifting into dullness.

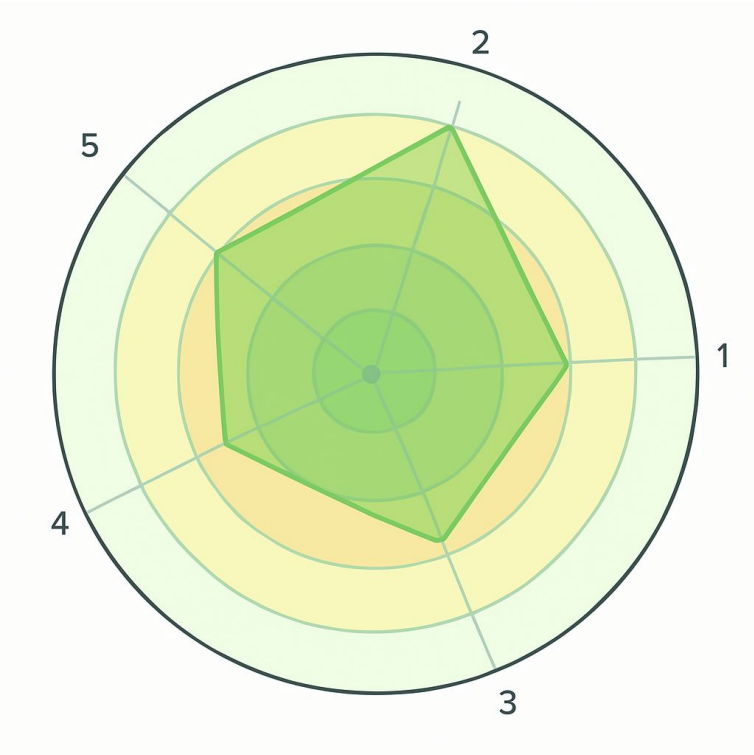
Is Your Media Strategy Dull? Here's How to Tell. Introducing the Media Anti-Dull Dial

Adam Morgan and the team created the original Anti-Dull Dial as a simple, practical tool to help marketers steer away from forgettable creative and strategy.

It's a self-check system that rewards honesty and encourages smarter decisions before the campaign goes live.

In the same spirit, we've adapted it for media planning, buying and measurement.

Think of this as your Media Anti-Dull Dial - a quick gut check to make sure your media investment isn't quietly leaking attention, outcomes, and ROI.



The more "Yes" answers, the less dull, and the more effective, your media strategy becomes.

1. Are we matching creative to the media or forcing fit?

→ Does the environment give the idea enough attention time to land and build memory or is it being starved before it starts?

2. Are we sizing ad length to attention decay or overstaying our welcome?

→ Are we right-sizing our ad length to the format's natural attention curve or just defaulting to 30s or 60s out of habit?

3. Are we securing enough real attention to cross the 2.5-second threshold?

→ Are we earning enough engaged viewing time to drive outcomes or just counting time-on-screen and hoping it worked?

4. Are we buying attentive reach or just chasing cheap impressions?

→ Are we optimising for attentive reach that actually grows brand equity or still buying broad exposure and calling it a win?

5. Are we closing the served:seen gap or hiding inefficiency behind low CPMs?

→ Are we using Attention Volume to uncover hidden wastage or letting low CPMs mask a sea of unseen impressions?

When the Mix is Flipped

Case studies where advertisers asked better questions, escaped the dullness trap, and delivered results that reached the CEO.

Case study

Optimising toward higher attention inventory in-flight to generate 30% more campaign conversions

Attention verification and in-flight optimisation delivered greater active attention, CTR and conversion while reducing CAC by 30%.

5%
Increase in click through rate

30%
Uplift in conversions

33%
Reduction in CPA

A prominent Australian media agency used Amplified's live campaign performance to make in-flight optimisations for their banking client.

The client, promoting a new credit card, was targeting a difficult-to-reach audience, and executing a broad run-of-network campaign across the open web.

Two streams of DSP placements were compared: data-adjusted ads using the smart measurement tag and standard brand creative. The agency prioritised scale with delivery and applied brand safety and anti-fraud filters to minimise negative placements.

Improvements in inventory quality and bidding capacity, along with insight-backed optimisation, resulted in significant efficiency gains with 26% fewer impressions fuelled by human-led insights.

When the Mix is Flipped

Case studies where advertisers asked better questions, escaped the dullness trap, and delivered results that reached the CEO.

Case study

How An Post used attention to drive better media performance

An Post rebalanced their media approach to shift budgets to higher attention channels, off the back of outcomes from an attention research study.

4 months

Ahead of sales schedule

An Post made strategic shifts in their media mix to prioritise high-attention environments and reduce investment in lower-performing placements.

Key optimisations included:

- Reallocating budget toward platforms and formats with higher active attention.
- Refining creative placement strategies to maximise engagement in high-performing environments.
- Minimising spend on placements where attention data showed weak engagement.

The shift in channel strategy and budget allocation had an immediate and measurable impact on campaign performance.

- They achieved their annual stretch targets four months ahead of schedule.
- Cost-per-acquisition (CPA) outperformed expectations leading to stronger efficiency and better returns.

When the Mix is Flipped

Case studies where advertisers asked better questions, escaped the dullness trap, and delivered results that reached the CEO.

Case study

Irish National Lottery already had a strong brand score - attention moved the dial even further

Irish National Lottery had become acutely aware that vanity metrics were not enough to drive meaningful brand impact. So they switched to human attention data to clarify their media mix strategy.

35%
Increase in campaign attention

9%
Increase in DA score

By using attention data in campaign planning, they were able to analyse the real attention performance of different platforms, formats, and placements before launching their campaign.

This allowed them to:

- Optimise ad spend allocation to high-attention environments
- Predict and enhance creative effectiveness
- Increase overall campaign efficiency by reducing wasted impressions

The optimised campaign strategy delivered immediate and measurable results:

- A 35% increase in active attention seconds over the original media plan, demonstrating the power of planning media around human engagement rather th
- A 9% increase in their longstanding Distinctive Brand Asset (DBA) Score within just three months, proving that higher attention leads to stronger memory retention and brand recognition.

PART 6:

The Wrap Up

How things ended between us.

The Full Story in Summary

The Cost Is Real. The Fix Is Possible.

This isn't about better measurement.
It's about stopping the quiet loss hiding in your media plan.

The data is clear: when media can't hold attention, outcomes suffer and marketers are left paying full price for partial delivery. Dullness isn't just creative. It's not just emotional neutrality. It's structural. It's in the formats you buy, the time-in-view you assume, the attention you overestimate.

And that cost adds up quietly, invisibly, relentlessly.

This report shows:

- **$198B** in annual media waste, when dull formats are benchmarked against the average performance of high-attention media.
- **$245B** when benchmarked against the best-performing campaigns in top-tier media.
- **That's a 23% opportunity gap**, the difference between business as usual, and best in class.

What this proves is that attention isn't a buzzword. It's a baseline.
It's what stands between your investment and the impact it was meant to drive.

So what now?

You don't need to blow up your media plan. But you do need to rebalance it.

★ Use the dial.
★ Watch the decay curves.
★ Know your 60:40.
★ Close the served:seen gap.
★ Measure.
★ Unify media and creative.
★ Question the norm.

And above all, stop counting ads as seen just because they were served.
Because dull costs. And attention pays.

What Should You Be Thinking About Now?

1. **Rethink what 'viewed' really means.**
Replace proxy metrics with human-verified attention data.

2. **Audit your media mix through the lens of attention.**
Where are you overspending on formats that underdeliver? Which placements give your creative the time and focus it needs?

3. **Stop assuming great creative can survive anything.**
Even brilliant work fails when no one sees it. Great campaigns don’t just rely on emotion, they require attention and branding to land.

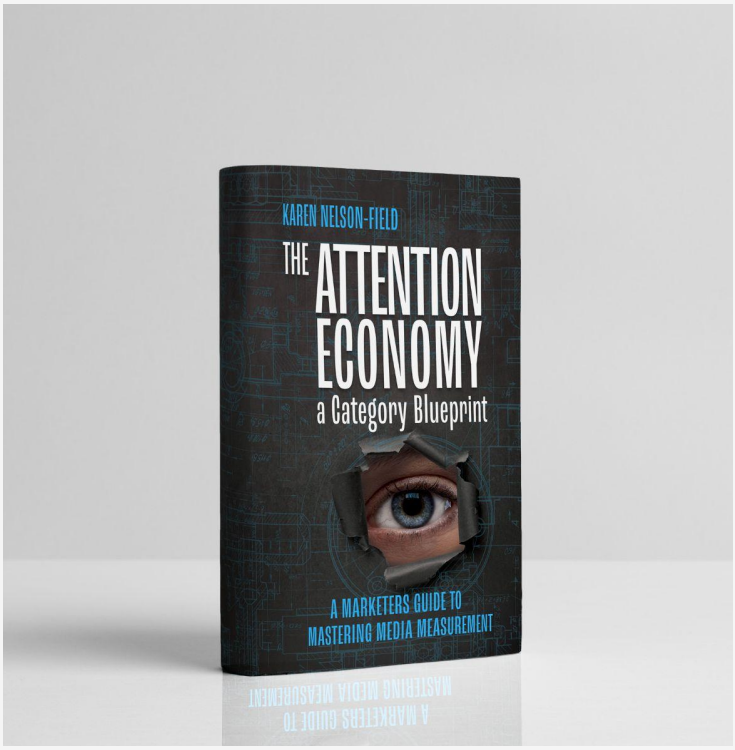
4. **Shift from ‘what was served’ to ‘what was seen’.**
Every impression has a cost, but not every impression delivers value. Close that gap before it costs you again.

5. **Build a plan to reduce your own ‘Dullness Tariff’.**
Start with high-attention formats. Strengthen distinctive assets. Test the combinations that deliver more per dollar.

6. **Use Attention as a Design Principle.**
Attention is no longer just a media metric, it’s a design framework. It aligns media, creative, and branding across the portfolio. Not a reactive fix, but a proactive, synchronised strategy for impact.

Want to Go Deeper with some Non-Dull Learning?

Start with Dr Nelson-Fields book or WARC course.



THE ATTENTION ECONOMY
A Category Blueprint

DR KAREN NELSON-FIELD

This book takes an in-depth look into the dynamic world of marketing and advertising, unveiling the pivotal role that human attention measurement plays.

MASTERING MODERN MEDIA
Effective Strategies for the Attention Economy

DR KAREN NELSON-FIELD

This course goes beyond basic media certifications to expose legacy media flaws and equip you with practical, future-proof skills to apply attention and emotion data for better outcomes.

THE EYE-WATERING COST OF DULL MEDIA

Amplified eatbigfish. Peter Field
Marketing & Communications Strategy

Look Beyond.