

Busting the wear-out myth

Jon Evans

Source: WARC Exclusive, January 2023

Downloaded from WARC

WARC

The idea of 'wear-out' – that a given ad will inevitably become less effective as people get used to it – is a deeply rooted one in the industry, but recent research sheds a brighter light on the impact that aging has on advertising.

- In fact, there is no inherent sell-by-date for creative.
- This article provides a deeper dive into the data and uncovers the hidden costs of the wear-out myth, and theorizes on why it continues to endure.

Why it matters

The hidden cost of the wear-out myth is the lost revenue gained from ads which had high potential to drive growth for their brands. Re-using ads and running campaigns for longer isn't just efficient, it's effective too. Older IP and campaigns are often a brand's greatest and most neglected assets.

Takeaways

- There is no evidence for a wear-out effect when looking at ad effectiveness data in aggregate or when reviewing individual ads at different key points in time.
- Many brands are not making the most of their high-performing ads and, perhaps worse, are investing too much in their lowest-performing creative.
- There are several potential reasons why wear-out has persisted, including problems tied to empathy, incentives and priorities.
- With the UK in a recession, many marketers are looking for ways to maximise their budgets. Understanding the true lifespan of creative from the consumer perspective is key to making smart decisions about campaigns.

Of all the pieces of advice a marketer can get, "Do nothing" is one of the hardest to take. The human instinct to experiment, innovate and change runs strongly through the industry. We tell ourselves stories about the risk

takers, not the cautious.

Mostly, it's an instinct that serves us well. Sometimes it causes problems. One of them is the prevailing attitude to advertising and its lifespan. The idea of 'wear-out' – that a given ad will inevitably become less effective as people get used to it – is a deeply rooted one in the industry. How else to explain the fact that for the majority of UK ads, their final airing is less than 100 days after their debut?

Voices within marketing have been pushing back on the idea of wear-out for a long time. Repeated exposure to an ad is important for building mental availability, and marketers who aim for wide reach need longer campaigns to achieve that. Campaigns are expensive to create as well as run, especially with inflation pumping up production costs. Killing campaigns barely weeks after launch and never re-using them seems counter-productive and wasteful.

As Mark Ritson put it during System1's 'Ritson on Recession' webinar, "It's a failure that so many marketers pull so many of their campaigns prematurely when their best days are yet to come". And in their *How Not To Plan* book, effectiveness experts Les Binet and Sarah Carter cited a meta-analysis of econometric studies conducted by a major manufacturing brand which concluded that "there was no evidence of wear-out in any of their campaigns they'd run anywhere in the world".

At System1, we decided to explore the issue of wear-out using our Test Your Ad database, which holds effectiveness test data on over 50,000 ads. We had two hypotheses that we felt would shed light on the extent of wear-out – and whether it matters at all.

The first was this. If wear-out exists and is an issue, we'd expect a negative relationship between the age of an ad when first tested and the score it gets. If we test an ad a year after release, we'd expect enough of the audience to be already familiar with it that wear-out effects would start appearing compared to fresher ads. If wear-out isn't an issue, we'd expect no meaningful difference in the scores. The database is large enough that we could test this across the entire dataset, based on how old each ad was the first time it was tested.

This first hypothesis looked at ads in aggregate. Our second hypothesis considers individual ads. If wear-out is a real problem, we'd expect the test scores of individual ads to decay over time as people get more used to them. Looking at a sample of 100 individual ads over several waves of retests would tell us whether this happened or not.

Before we look at how we tested these hypotheses, it's worth quickly describing how System1 tests ads, and why we think the method is a good one for detecting wear-out effects.

The Test Your Ad platform centres people's emotional response to an ad, as well as measuring speed of brand recognition. Its core effectiveness measure is the Star Rating, which has been validated using the IPA DataMine as predictive of long-term business effects like share gain, profit gain and price elasticity. The Star Rating is based on measurements of how people feel about an ad, as well as how intensely they feel it.

We'd expect to see two things in particular from ads suffering wear-out. We'd expect the type of emotional response to shift from positive emotions (Happiness and Surprise) to Neutrality – people feeling nothing about an ad. We'd also expect the intensity of response to drop. Both these effects would lower the Star Rating – the test would show the ad as less effective. So declines in the Star Rating, for individual ads or in aggregate, would be good evidence of wear-out.

So – did we find that evidence, and if not, what did our analyses show?

No evidence that age of ads causes wear-out

Our first hypothesis was that any wear-out would be detectable if we looked at the age of ads when first tested.

Most of the ads in the database are tested when first aired, but we test some later, and when brands re-use older creative it's sometimes picked up the second time around. We were able to segment the entire database based on the gap between the original airdate and the test date. (See Figure 1)

The baseline average score – for ads tested within 50 days of initial airdate – was 2.2-Stars. Every other age segment we looked at received a similar score – between 2.0 Stars and 2.4 Stars. For the oldest ads – those first tested when they were 650 or more days old, the average score was, again, 2.2-Stars.

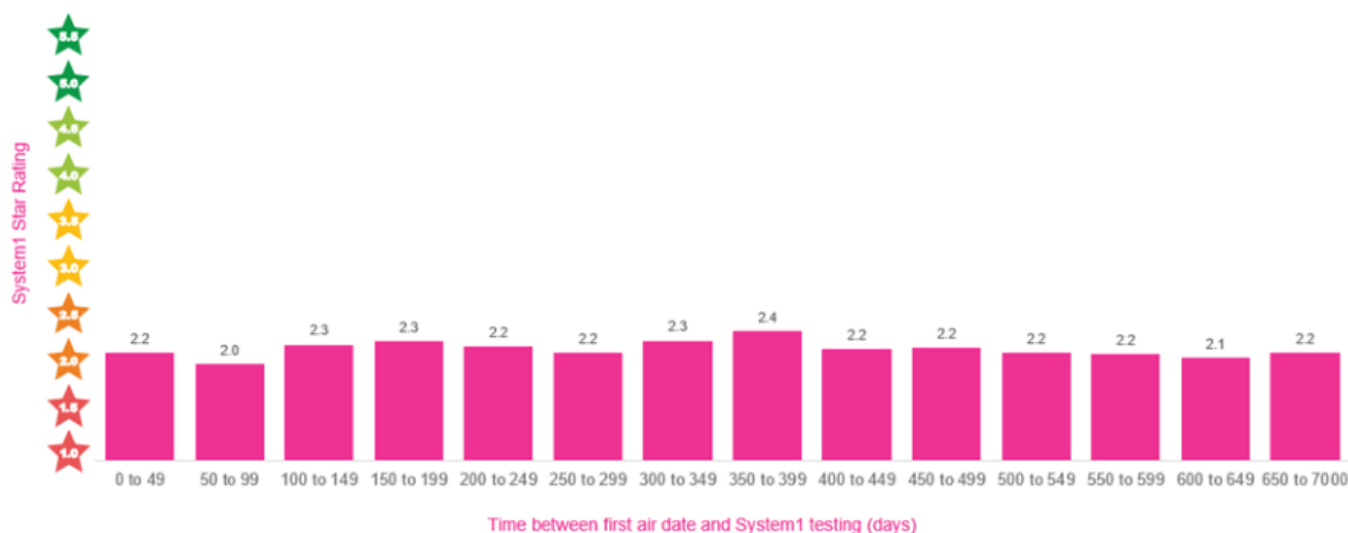


Figure 1

So we found none of the things we'd expect to see if wear-out was a factor. The average effectiveness scores for ads are remarkably consistent no matter how old the ad was when first tested. There is no inherent sell-by-date for advertising.

However, this by itself does not disprove wear-out. If brands are accurately detecting which ads are wearing out, and removing them from air, they wouldn't show up in this analysis. So we don't yet know whether old ads are just as effective as new ads, or whether only effective ads are given the chance to get old.

To answer that question, we can turn to the data from our second experiment – testing a sample of individual ads repeatedly over time and seeing if their effectiveness scores decline.

No evidence of wear-out for individual ads

Investigating this is a long-term project. Fortunately, we already had a data set measuring exactly what we needed – effectiveness scores for individual ads over time.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 the ad industry reacted en masse by pausing or cancelling

existing campaigns. Brands quickly made new ads to reflect a suddenly changed world. We wanted to know whether this was the right move – would audiences really react differently to ads just because they showed a pre-COVID way of life? So, we randomly selected 100 then-recent ads (50 each from the US and UK) which already had their initial scores on the Test Your Ad database, and retested them in March 2020 during the first wave of the pandemic.

We've since gone back and retested the same 'basket' of 2019 ads in 2021 and 2022, giving us four waves of data on individual ad effectiveness. This same data is also where we'd expect to find evidence of wear-out as an issue consistently affecting individual ads.

As Figure 2 shows, we found no evidence of wear-out as a consistent factor dragging down effectiveness scores over time. The correlation between our scores in January 2020 (pre-pandemic) and our scores in October 2022 is 0.9 – the data is almost identical.

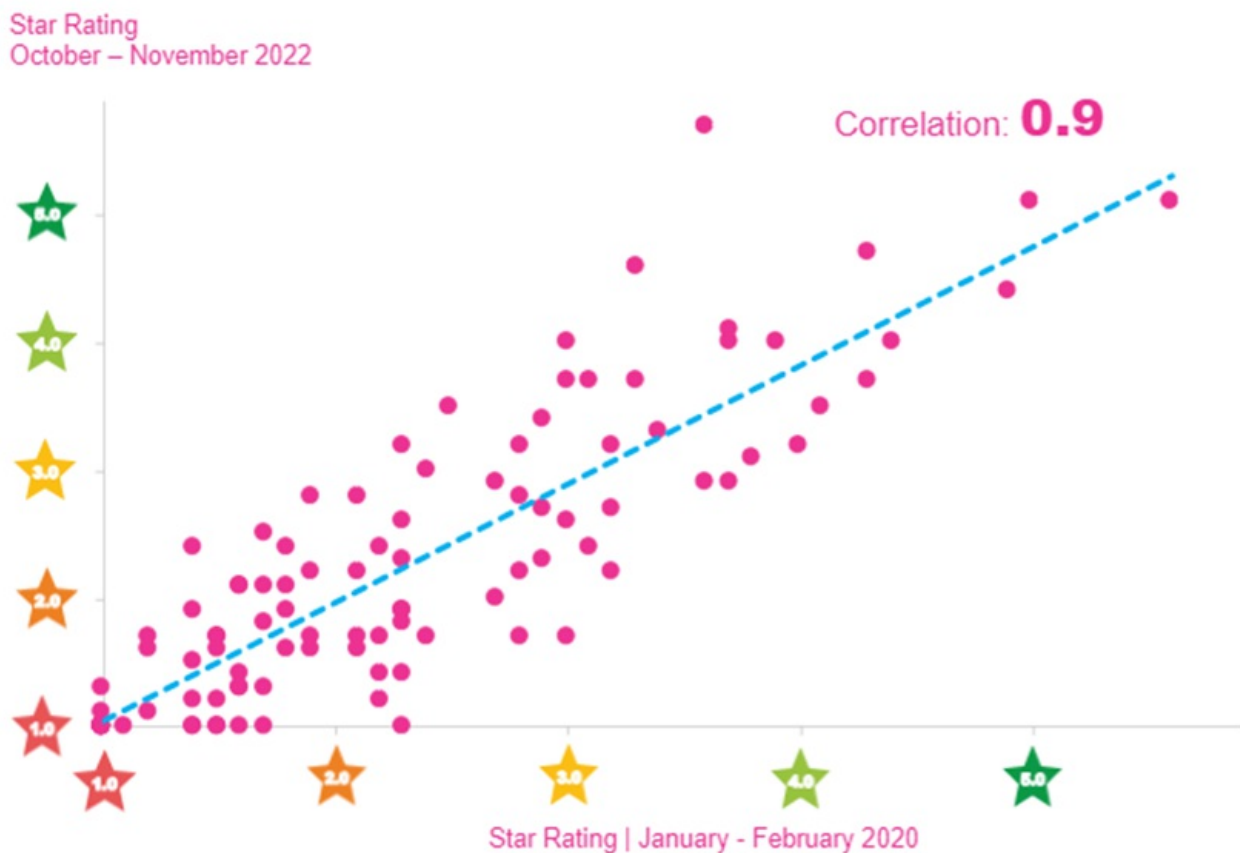


Figure 2

No dataset is without noise, of course, and there are specific ads which have become less effective. But there are just as many specific ads which have become *more* effective over the period considered. There is no evidence of a consistent wear-out effect afflicting individual ads. A good, effective ad remains a good, effective ad.

The hidden cost of the wear-out myth

Both analyses drew the same conclusion. Whether we look at the data in aggregate or via retesting specific ads, there's no evidence for a wear-out effect.

So if wear-out isn't really a problem, it follows that advertisers should maximise the return on their ads by running good ones for longer. Is that happening?

As Figure 3 shows, US marketers are getting it right. Ads run on average for longer than in the UK, and the higher the ad scores, the longer it runs, with 5-Star US ads enjoying a 25% longer lifespan on average than ineffective 1-Star ads.

But in the UK the opposite is true. Ad lifespan overall is lower but 1-Star ads are shown for longer than high-scoring commercials. A 5-Star ad in the UK airs for only 71 days on average, compared to 95 days for 1-Star ads. This is the exact wrong way round! British marketers in particular are keen on killing their golden geese.

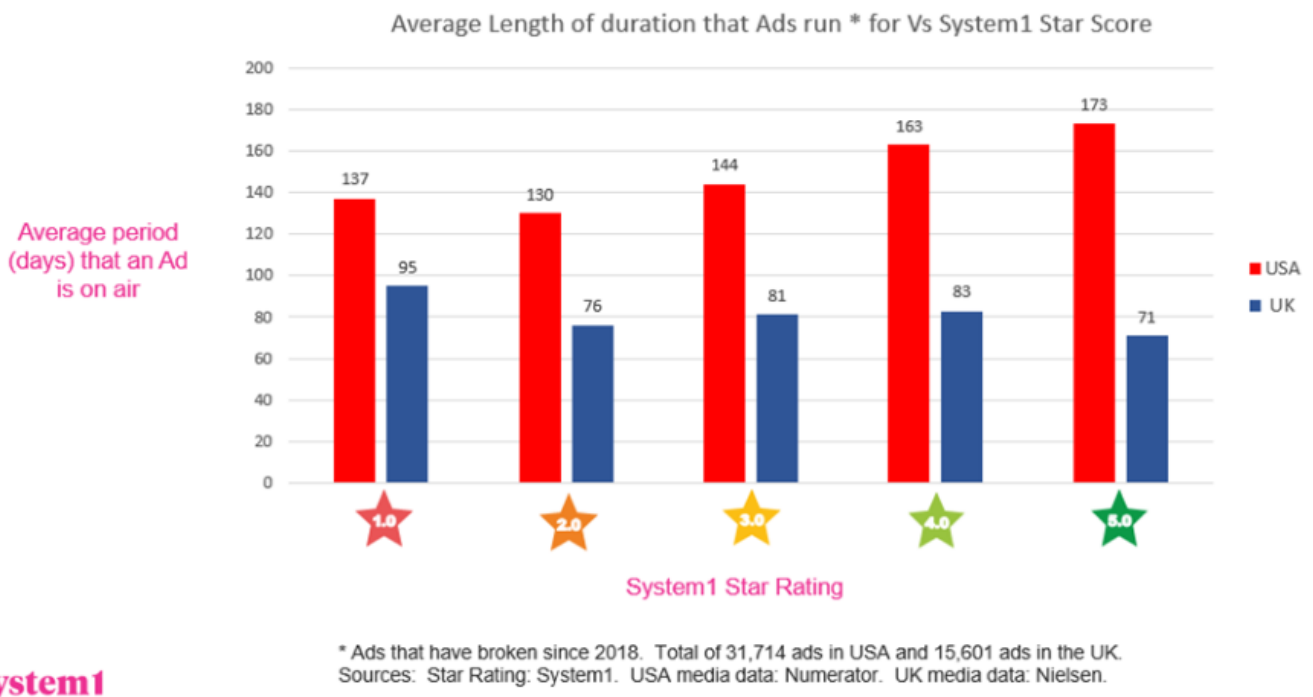


Figure 3

The hidden cost of the wear-out myth is the lost revenue gained from ads which had high potential to drive growth for their brands. Re-using ads and running campaigns for longer isn't just efficient, it's effective too. Older IP and campaigns are often a brand's greatest and most neglected assets.

The persistence of the wear-out idea

As we previously stated, System1 are not the first analysts to have offered evidence that wear-out is a myth. Wear-out is what the Nobel-winning economist Paul Krugman calls a "zombie idea" – an idea which refuses to die despite all evidence against it. How can marketers make sure that this time, wear-out stays dead?

We believe there are three main reasons why wear-out has persisted.

The first is a problem of *empathy*. There's a saying in politics that the moment a politician is utterly sick of repeating a point is the moment the public are just beginning to hear it. The same applies here. The people who make ads see them vastly more often than the public do, think about them much more intensely and get bored of them far quicker. Wear-out is a projection of that restlessness onto a public who don't in fact share it. We know from Andrew Tenzer and Ian Murray's *The Empathy Delusion* that people working in marketing are cognitively very different from the mainstream – wear-out seems another manifestation of this.

The second is a problem of *incentives*. As we said in the introduction, “Do nothing” is not advice any marketer likes to hear. Churn in marketing roles is high, and ordering a new campaign or agency review is one of the most immediate ways an incoming CMO can make their mark. Wear-out persists as an idea because it appears to provide an excellent reason for doing this. Our advice would be to frame apparent inaction – continuing to use old ads – as positive action. The ads which saw rises in effectiveness over time were generally those which used Fluent Devices – recurring slogans or characters like the GEICO Gecko or Weetabix's “You've Had Your Weetabix” slogan. Investment in a proven, beloved Fluent Device should be seen as a strong, positive move, not as inertia.

And the third is a problem of *priorities*. While wear-out as a concept predates the rise of ‘performance marketing’ as a separate discipline, the idea is rooted in its thinking. The idea of ads as things that wear out treats every ad as transactional: a message people either act on or don't. Each repetition reaches fewer potential conversions, and so the ad gets less effective. That idea possibly makes sense for ads at the bottom of the funnel whose only goal is conversion. But ads at the top of the funnel are not transactional. Their aim is to build mental availability and positive response to a brand. Wear-out for them makes no sense, which is why we don't find any evidence of it.

As Orlando Wood says in *Lemon*, “Familiarity breeds contentment”. The current economic climate, with families and brands both making cutbacks, is the perfect opportunity for marketers to lay the wear-out myth to rest and proudly refuse to fix what ain't broken.

About the author

Jon Evans
Chief Customer Officer, System1

Jon Evans is Chief Customer Officer at [System1](#).

© Copyright Ascential Events (Europe) Limited 2023

Ascential Events (Europe) Limited

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

APAC: 5 Shenton Way, UIC Building #10-01, Singapore 068808 - Tel: +65 3157 6200

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

www.warc.com

All rights reserved including database rights. This electronic file is for the personal use of authorised users based at the subscribing company's office location. It may not be reproduced, posted on intranets, extranets or the internet, e-mailed, archived or shared electronically either within the purchaser's organisation or externally without express written permission from Warc.

WARC
AN ASCENTIAL COMPANY

