Trust me, I’m in marketing

By Suzanne Broadley, Markinor.

It’s about this time of year when I feel incredibly popular. The source of this popularity? Top Brands. Questions about who, what and why literally flood in pre and post the survey release. But the most recurrent question by far must be “what can we do to influence our brand’s position and what role does our advertising spend play in our position?” So this was my mission...

To determine the influence of advertising spend on being a Top Brand. And although there are many definitions of what a top brand is, in this context I’m specifically referring to the Markinor/Sunday Times definition of a Top Brand, which comes in two forms: single, spontaneous questions like ‘favourite brand’ and ‘favourite advertiser’ and a neatly-packaged metric called the Brand Relationship Score©.

Just so that we are all on the same page, the Brand Relationship Score© is an assemblage of three metrics: spontaneous awareness, level of trust and degree of differentiation.

So how does advertising spend influence Top Brands status? Thanks to Nielsen’s ADEX data (advertising spend on all media types: TV, Print, Radio, Cinema, Direct Mail, Outdoor and Internet), we are able to unpack this relationship. Let’s start simple, with our ‘favourite brand’ question. Remember, it’s a single, spontaneous question. What did we find when we correlated advertising spend to the Top 10 brands in this category?

As it happens, the correlation is fairly weak – anaemic, even. The link to our ‘favourite advertiser’ question is stronger, but the power of the almighty advertising rand is not as strong as one would expect, even here.

So what’s going on? Does advertising spend not have an influence on my brand’s status? It does, of course, but the path is not as simple as we’d hope. The answer lies in the unbundling of the Brand Relationship Score© and the appreciation of how the three weighted metrics interact to yield a strong brand.

Now of course we can’t expect consumers to tell us how these three concepts work together in their minds, although many a marketer has tried! Why?

Because when we interface with brands, we’re all bird-spotters.

Borrowing from Malcolm Gladwell’s inimitable thinking on how we make lasting and fundamental decisions based on the smallest sliver of encounters, the transitory manner in which we interact with brands means that we have become adept brand-spotters. Gladwell describes ornithologists’ ability to correctly categorize birds from the briefest of glances as their unconscious detection of the bird’s jizz – it’s essence (derived from US slang giss, meaning ‘general impression of size and shape’).

This instinctive identification of shapes, colours and angles of course resembles the way in which we are able to live (semi) sanely in the ubiquitous world of brands.

So, if we are incessantly thin-slicing brands and making decisions based on almost no conscious thought whatsoever, how can I influence my brand’s jizz and where does my intensity of advertising spend fit in to all of this?

Let’s begin with Top Brands’ third metric, differentiation, since this is a brand’s ultimate end-state in order for this thin-slicing to be successful. We need to differentiate our brands effectively enough so that the most minuscule of servings beguiles our consumers. Differentiation, as we measure it, means that it would matter a great deal if that brand could no longer be bought.

So how does ad spend influence the perception of differentiation? Unfortunately, we find no relationship whatsoever. This is intuitive, of course, because if moola alone was the answer to differentiation, brands appearing in our single ‘favourite brand’ question would be closely correlated to spend.

So where do I see a return on my advertising rand? Let’s turn our attention to a brand’s keystone - spontaneous awareness. Of course, things like how early your brand is mentioned in response to this question matter, so we up-weight the familiarity frontrunners. Determining the elasticity between the level of advertising expenditure and the level of achieved awareness doesn’t reveal any new news. We found once again that one’s likelihood to mention a brand spontaneously was closely correlated to the amount marketers spent on their brands’ exposure. The link between spend and awareness is stronger in high-touch industries where our relationship is on-going, such as telecoms or retail banking, as opposed to the automotive industry, for example, where our purchases are much more infrequent.

So what’s the link? I can influence the ability of my consumers to summon up my brand in their mind but what’s the point if it is interchangeable with other brands? How do I ensure a dazzling jizz?

This is where metric number two - the degree of trust and confidence consumers have in our brands – provides the answer. When correlated with differentiation we found the relationship to be strongly positive, thus the more trust we have in a brand, the more it makes a material difference to our lives if we can’t purchase that brand in the future.

And spontaneous awareness, as expected, has an impact on the level of trust we have in brands because meaning gets infused into brands via advertising. This finding is also supported by something called the Zajonc effect, which talks to the fact that humans don’t initially like rare or unfamiliar things. The more we see the same thing, the more we like it and, hence, trust it.

So trust becomes the adhesive between ad spend, awareness and differentiation.

The trick in the trust equation is that the yin to advertising’s yang is delivery. A brand is a promise made and a promise kept (Interbrand Sampson).

Essentially this all culminates into some piercing questions. If the brand war is based on a consumer’s coup d’oeil, or the power of the glance, how are we ensuring a consistent jizz, and in what ways are we measuring and leveraging this?

Just like birders, we infer things from what we learn and what we experience, and if trust is the critical factor which binds these two together, are we using this as a strategic filter in the business of brand building?