

## “Why the eye is so much more than a sophisticated camera”

*Martin James*



The amount of attention we have is finite. If we focus our attention on one image, theme or concept, we focus less attention on others. This simple finding has profound implications for advertising development.

Most of us have had the embarrassing experience of failing to notice when a friend or colleague grows a beard, gets a haircut, or starts wearing contact lenses. Despite this, psychologists acknowledge a common trait in humans in which we tend to believe we see and remember everything around us, and take our occasional blindness to visual details to be an exception.

Research over the last decade has however revealed the full extent to which this is not true. Before going further, however, I urge you to firstly visit this website:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ahg6qcgoay4>

If you were tricked, you were on the receiving end of what psychologists refer to as 'inattentional blindness'.

Conscious perception requires attention. When attention is diverted to an object or task (eg. following the ball in the video), observers often fail to see an unexpected object, in this case the ape. Other research has revealed a number of similar phenomena, but all point to one clear conclusion; we have a limited amount of attention and our eye hence acts more like an intelligent search engine than a camera that simply records everything.

That's why for advertising to be effective the viewer's attention must be focussed at those points in the commercial that carry key messages and branding. It is unreasonable to expect the consumer to pay full attention to all scenes in your commercial. It is important then, that the limited “high attention scenes” shoulder most of the burden of message and brand delivery.

Moreover, to deal with this the viewer's attention must be managed. This is an integral part of the art of good storytelling. The waxing and waning of attention is the tempo of a commercial which adds to the drama of our “mini movie”. This is why so much loud, intense retail advertising leaves consumers with no memories of it. The sustained bombardment of stimuli leads the consumer to switch off entirely. Careful management of attention, on the other hand, can lead to commercials that engage and are remembered.

Just as vital in the competitive commercial viewing environment is the need to grab the consumer's attention early. When confronted with yet another advertisement, it's easy for viewers to switch off mentally. Unless the opening scenes engage the viewer, you will almost certainly lose their attention.

And once it's lost it's hard to win this back.

Thus while waxing and waning levels of attention are an essential part of storytelling, a sudden drop in attention represents a clear danger to the ad and its likelihood being placed in long-term memory. Recognising our viewer's limited attention is a simple lesson that too few creators heed. And let us remember that just because a gorilla is in a commercial it doesn't mean consumers will see it.

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