

Looking to win the battle for consumer attention? Take the blindfold off.

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Harvard Business School professor and brand consultant Thales Teixeira—whose research focuses on the marketing principles of the attention economy—says advertisers are fighting blind when it comes to vying for consumer attention.

Imagine that you're blindfolded and willingly throwing money into a pit as you fight battles beyond your means. It may sound far-fetched, but that's exactly what's happening with brands and their advertising spend right now.

I know this firsthand. I research, teach, and practice the marketing principles of buying, selling, capturing, and using consumer attention efficiently. When I don't have my professor hat on, I work to help brands navigate this battlefield.

Based on my research and experience, I've come to a sobering conclusion: The advertising industry is broken.

As the volume of video content has exploded in the past few years, consumer behavior changed drastically, and the advertising industry failed to adapt. Today the [attention paid to ads is not equal across screens and mediums](#), but advertisers aren't accounting for that properly.

think with 

Why the attention economy raises the stakes for brands

If you aren't familiar with the concept of the attention economy, it's based on the fact that [consumer attention is limited and always comes at a price](#)—that price has skyrocketed in recent years. Every single day, there are more companies, with more brands and more products to advertise, which means there's more demand for consumer attention than ever.

When you take demand that greatly outweighs supply, and throw in the rapid transformation of consumer behavior, you have a recipe for waste.

The problem is, the supply of consumer attention simply hasn't kept pace with this demand: There's no evidence individual human attention capacity is growing. Nor has the population grown as fast as the number of brands has.

But what *has* changed is how quickly consumer behavior evolves. For example, the way people use any given social media site is constantly changing. So when you take demand that greatly outweighs supply, and throw in the rapid transformation of consumer behavior, you have a recipe for waste. Especially when you consider the increased pressure on CMOs to show bottom line results. It's no wonder [CMO turnover has reached a new high](#).

Navigating the attention economy

Lest there be any misunderstanding, ad effectiveness is not down across the board—only when it comes to mass, traditional media, which doesn't hold attention like it used to.

But, all is not lost. People do still pay attention—under the right conditions—and there are proven ways to capture that attention more efficiently. In my years of research at Harvard Business School, and work with companies such as Nike, Unilever, and Microsoft, I’ve come up with three simple principles for how to reclaim value in the attention economy:



Buy right: Stop wasting money on “spray and pray” media.



Maximize attention by optimizing the creative factors you can control.

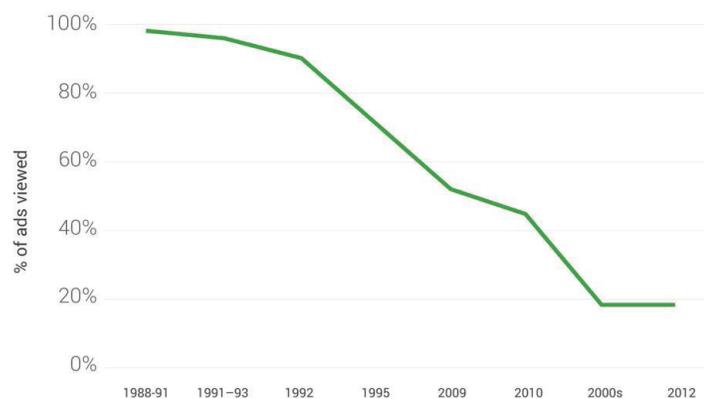


Build up customer attention over the long run.

1) Buy right: Stop wasting money on “spray and pray” media

Over the past two decades, the cost of one minute of a person’s attention to TV in the U.S. has risen by a factor of seven, even after controlling for inflation.¹ At the same time, the percentage of ads considered fully viewed with high attention has decreased from 97% in the early 1990s to less than 20% just a few years ago.²

Decreasing attention to ads



Source: Teixeira, Thales. "The Rising Cost of Consumer Attention: Why You Should Care, and What You Can Do About It." Harvard Business School working paper. Jan 17, 2014

Despite the increasing cost and decreasing quality of attention to TV, advertisers are still wasting money with a “spray and pray” approach on traditional media instead of moving spend to digital.

Unless yours is a rare brand whose products truly appeal to all, you should only spend on media that allows you to accurately target, measure, and pay appropriately for the attention you receive. Often, making this shift will require overcoming serious risk aversion, inertia, and incompatible resources. But the payoff is speed, precision, and power.

2) Maximize attention by optimizing the creative factors you can control

How much attention someone will pay to an ad depends on countless factors, such as what that person is thinking about in the moment, what’s competing for their attention, what they were just doing, the context of the ad, the creative execution itself, and its relevance to the individual.

Some of those factors you can’t control, but the creative execution is one that you can. My research points to a few creative principles that consistently drive increased attention (as measured by intensity of focus and time spent with an ad).

Fighting blind in the battle for attention is not a life sentence. It’s a choice.

One factor I’ve found incredibly effective across both ad types and verticals is emotion. Not just employing emotion, but specifically engineering it in a “rollercoaster” technique where emotions are pulled on a ride over the course of an ad—up, back to neutral, and up and back to neutral again—compared to keeping emotions up, down, or flat. This makes for compelling storytelling.³

Another important factor is the timing of when a brand logo appears in an ad. My research consistently shows that if it's too soon and too long, people are likely to disengage. What seems to work best is brand pulsing—bringing your brand logo on and off throughout the duration of the ad.⁴

3) Build up customer attention over the long run

The first time you present a customer with your brand, you shouldn't ask them for several minutes of their attention, upfront, all at once. That's like asking someone to a three-hour dinner for a first date—you have to work up to that. Start with something quick and simple, like a coffee. If that goes well, you can build on it. The next step might be lunch, and, over time, you can work your way to the big dinner.

This marketing principle is known as the [ladder of engagement](#). The idea is to build relationships with your brand incrementally, with small asks of attention before big ones, so that you can *earn* customer attention—or else you'll never be able to keep it.

Using various ad lengths is a good way to do this. For instance, try serving short ads initially, then working your way to long-form, more cinematic ads. You could also try [sequential storytelling](#) by breaking involved stories into several parts, and remarketing to viewers so they see the ads in sequence.

Determine your game plan

Fighting blind in the battle for attention is not a life sentence. It's a choice.

There's no magic formula for earning a potential customer's attention, but there are certain principles brands can lean on, including those I just

outlined and many more. At a higher level, there's one simple question I encourage you to ask to determine a game plan for navigating today's increasingly complex attention economy: Are you spending on the right platforms, and are you leveraging the tools of each in a way that will help you capture and keep consumer attention?

Answer that honestly, and you'll be on your way to a fairer fight.

Thales Teixeira

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Sources

- 1 Teixeira, Thales. "[The Rising Cost of Consumer Attention: Why You Should Care, and What You Can Do About It.](#)" Harvard Business School working paper. Jan 17, 2014
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