



The First 5 Seconds: Creating YouTube Ads That Break Through in a Skippable World

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Five, four, three, two, one. What keeps people watching after the first five seconds? What can science tell us about the art of video advertising? We took a peek behind the data curtain to see which creative choices capture audiences' attention.

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Online video ad formats like [YouTube TrueView](#) ads have created a paradox for marketers. They remove traditional 30-second time constraints, giving brands more time to tell their stories. But introducing a "skip" button after five short seconds also means that advertisers have to create more engaging stories that not only grab their audience's attention, but hold it, too.

Is it time to start creating ads with the "skip" button in mind? Today, all ads are skippable—whether it's a function of the format or not. People have been honing their skipping skills for a while. Think about it: Viewers experimented with fast-forwarding on their VCRs, improved their skills with DVRs, and now are mastering ad choice on the web. Even if there's no option to fast-forward or skip, consumers can always pick up a smartphone, switch tabs, or find other ways to hit a metaphoric skip button.

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Thousands of ads run on YouTube every day. So, when we look at that data in aggregate, what patterns emerge? What can we learn from existing video ads about creative that works in the first five seconds? To find the answer, we looked into thousands of TrueView ads across 16 countries and 11 verticals, categorizing them according to 170 creative attributes, including brand name mentions and featured celebrities. We used aggregated analytics from AdWords to see how long people watched without hitting the skip button. To measure [brand awareness and ad recall](#), we took advantage of Google's [Brand Lift](#).

There are no “rules” for making ads people choose, but we did find that certain creative choices are associated with how long viewers watch or how well they remember ads on YouTube. Turns out, there is a certain science to the art of engaging video advertising. Here's what we've learned.

Creating unskippable ads: Brand placement matters

Everyone is familiar with the age-old debate about where to put the brand logo in a video ad. It goes something like this:

Brand marketer: *Love the ad. But let's put the brand logo earlier.*

Creative: *Can't put the logo first—then no one will watch the ad!*

So what does our research tell us? That the tension is real, folks. When ads on YouTube include the brand early on—through a logo or an audible brand mention—there's an inverse relationship between recall and engagement. While ads with the brand in the first five seconds have higher ad recall and brand awareness lift, people are also more likely to skip them.

Our Art, Copy & Code team saw a similar result with its first [Unskippable Labs experiment](#). The team created and tested three YouTube ads for Mountain Dew® Kickstart™ and one with a lighter brand touch in the first five seconds was skipped less on mobile.

No matter your brand goal, our research suggests that if you are going to show your logo in the first five seconds, you should make sure it's tied to your product, not appearing elsewhere on the screen. Our study showed that viewers are less likely to watch and remember brands and ads when they feature floating brand logos that aren't actually on products. So, whether your goal is viewership, brand awareness, ad recall, or all of the above, try to show your logo on a product.

Viewers tune in to the right tone

Turns out, tone can also affect whether people tune in or tune out. Think of the most recent ad you saw and loved. Did it make you laugh? Did your eyes well up? Grabbing the audience's attention in the first five seconds starts with setting the right tone.

For our study, we organized ads into ten categories of style and tone, including “humorous,” “emotional,” and “calming,” to name a few. Across the board—whether we were looking for a lift in brand metrics or how long the viewer watched—humor took the cake. People are more likely to watch humorous ads, and those ads also see greater lifts in ad recall and brand awareness.

Even businesses that don't necessarily lend themselves easily to humor can have a little fun. Take Geico's recent ["Unskippable" ad series](#) or the ["Dumb Ways to Die"](#) video by Metro Trains Melbourne. Insurance and train safety aren't inherently hilarious, but these brands still found a way to have fun.

If humor just isn't right for your brand, consider taking a “suspenseful” or “emotional” tone in the first five seconds. These types of ads were also associated with higher ad recall in our study.

The people that keep people watching

YouTube creators like [Hannah Hart](#) exude authenticity; they build fandoms based on who they really are. Hannah, specifically, lives by a mantra—[“reckless optimism”](#)—and frequently brings other YouTube creators on her show to live it with her. According to our study, taking a page out of Hannah's book isn't a bad idea for brands, either.

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First, she’s got a point about “reckless optimism”: In our study, we saw brand metrics jump when ads featured “smiling characters” in the first five seconds. And whether you bring in YouTube creators or more traditional celebrities, having a recognizable face in the first five seconds of your TrueView ad tends to result in higher viewership and better brand lift. Take it from Hannah: Keep it authentic, gather a few friends, and practice “reckless optimism”—people will watch.

Mixed results on music

As we said, there’s no perfect formula for an attention-grabbing ad. Quite a few of the creative choices we tested came back with mixed results. We found some musical styles, for example, were more effective in the first five seconds than others. People were more likely to skip ads that featured calming, relaxing, or action-oriented music. Here, humor won again. Viewers in our study better remembered TrueView video ads that featured humorous music (like the funky dubstep [Mountain Dew](#) selected for its Kickstart ad).

But surprisingly, when it came to brand awareness, we found that featuring any music in the first five seconds may have a negative impact. Ads like Kmart’s [“Ship My Pants”](#) and Nike’s [“Winner Stays”](#) were onto something when they muted music in those initial moments. Perhaps people are intrigued by the change of pace in ads without music, or they don’t immediately recognize videos without music as ads.

Mixed results invite further investigation. All we know now is that music (or no music) matters, so don't rely on your default. Try testing ads with and without music and use analytics and Brand Lift to see what works for your brand.

Robots will never replace artists. Averages will always be just that. Exceptions to "rules" will abound and there will never be a "creative-by-numbers" solution for video ads. So, in an effort to balance the math and the magic—the art and the science—we're using equal parts data and creativity to understand video advertising. This has been the science portion: using data to understand what's working well for ad creatives. What's the magic, you ask? Check out the video ad experiments Art, Copy & Code is running with [Unskippable Labs](#). They're working alongside creative agencies and brands to figure out what types of stories work best in the modern, mobile age.