

Case study: BMW movies – luxury car to movie star

Charles Young and **Amy Shea Hall**, Ameritest, examine a famous piece of branded entertainment, and show how two similar films have different effects

FADE IN: *An impossibly handsome man guides his convertible up to a dilapidated house on a deserted street. He exits; his white suit glints in the sun as he surveys the landscape from behind impenetrable sunglasses. In his hand, a metallic attaché case. Members of a SWAT team manoeuvre silently behind a fence. The driver takes out his cell phone and dials. A man's voice answers. The driver says simply 'I'm here.'*

The latest Hollywood blockbuster? A prime-time TV drama?

Neither. It's advertising. Or, more accurately, advertising on steroids, aka branded entertainment.

This is the opening of 'The Hostage', produced by BMW and their former ad agency, Fallon, employing A-list director John Woo. To understand why this and seven other BMW films were made, one need only look to the challenges facing the long-time prime brand-advertising venue: TV. Media platforms are multiplying; the internet moves ever closer to being our primary source of information, music and entertainment; and TV recording technology allows for easier ad-skipping. Advertisers worldwide are searching for new ways to use the power of film to reach increasingly elusive viewers.

It is easy to be drawn in to these films and forget that they had, from their inception, a purpose beyond brilliant entertainment. Our question, and that of many, is did they work as advertising?

FADE IN: *We hear a clicking camera shutter and rapid breathing as we peer through*

tall grass. Across the field, a gang of men carrying automatic weapons force a group of people from the back of truck. Click. The thugs line the locals up, hands on head. Click, click. It's over quickly: one woman screams, there are shots, and bodies fall to the ground. The grass rustles as the hidden photographer races through the field, breathless, and not silent enough. Two gunmen hear him and shoot blindly into the grass. We hear a body fall, see dog tags suspended, and the words 'Times War Photographer, Harvey Jacobs, was wounded after witnessing the massacre at Nuevo Colon. In a desperate effort, the United Nations sent a vehicle to get him out.'

A single research statistic prompted BMW to try a new approach to reach potential customers: 85% of BMW buyers checked the brand's website before buying a vehicle. In a bold strategy that would define current standards of excellence in branded entertainment, BMW decided to shift its strategy from 'push' to 'pull'. Commissioning eight top directors to make short films featuring its cars, BMW launched them on its website in 2001, while reducing spending on TV ads.

Unqualified success?

In terms of buzz, the films were an unqualified success. Within a year, the films were viewed more than 10 million times. Two million people registered on the site after viewing the films and 60% signed up to receive more information via email. Of these, an amazing 94% recommended the films to others, and over 40,000 people

volunteered to respond to a survey. By October 2005, when the films were taken down, they had been viewed more than 100 million times and reviewed as 'cinema' by *Time* and the *New York Times*.

Yet, despite this evidence of success, BMW discontinued the experiment. Why? According to a 2005 article in *Ad Age*, it got too expensive. Whatever the reason, little has been made publicly available on what the 'Hire' films bought for the brand. As any advertiser in this nascent field will tell you, entertainment is only half the equation. The branded part, the ability of the films to ring the corporate register in Munich, was always where BMW rubber met the road.

As advertising researchers, we at Ameritest are interested in understanding how this new genre of branded entertainment works, at a deeper level than simple awareness, to contribute to the brand. So we decided to test two of the films: 'The Hostage', directed by John Woo, and 'Powder Keg', directed by Alejandro Gonzalez Inárritu.

One worked, one did not

We found that one movie worked very hard to build the brand's image in the eyes of the consumer; but the other did not.

As you can see in Table 1, after viewers have seen 'The Hostage', there is a pre-to-post increase in perceptions of BMW as a leader in innovation and dominating the luxury car category. There is also a lift for superior handling and an exhilarating ▶

TABLE 1

Pre to post ratings – 'Powder keg' and 'Hostage'

| | 'The Hostage' | | 'Powder Keg' | |
|--|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| | A BMW Pre-viewing | B BMW Post-viewing | A BMW Pre-viewing | B BMW Post-viewing |
| BMW ... | (49) | (49) | (49) | (49) |
| is a leader in innovation engineering and technology for automobiles | 61 | 83 A | 72 | 80 |
| understands high performance means greater safety | 61 | 57 | 64 | 72 |
| enhances the joy of driving | 74 | 78 | 84 | 76 |
| creates an exhilarating driving experience | 70 | 87 A | 72 | 76 |
| has superior handling | 57 | 74 A | 76 | 88 |
| dominates the luxury car category | 48 | 70 A | 80 B | 56 |

A/B = significant difference at 90% confidence level

driving experience. In contrast, for 'Powder Keg' there is actually a decrease in perception of BMW as a luxury brand – not surprising, perhaps, for a film that shows the BMW in a poverty-stricken environment. But none of the other brand ratings improved.

As an investment, then, branded entertainment appears risky, with the odds of success here no better than 50/50. So we wanted to learn how research could help manage that risk, as for our clients' traditional advertising films. Our first question, therefore, was why BMW brand ratings were lifted by 'The Hostage' but not by 'Powder Keg'.

To understand how films work as ads you need to understand how they work as films. Every writing teacher has a way to talk about the guts of a story. Some call it the 'core theme', some the 'pulse' of the story: we find Robert McKee's film term most applicable: the 'controlling idea'. McKee, screenwriting consultant and author of the book *Story*, defines this as 'a story's meaning expressed through its action and emotional climax'.

Since making brands is ultimately about making products or services meaningful to consumers, understanding how meaning is expressed through a film's action and emotional climax – the controlling idea-is of critical importance to

understanding how it works as advertising. The controlling idea concept provides a useful framework for managing the creation of branded entertainment. But to make effective use of it, we also need to ground theory in measurement. We need tools for measuring the audience's cognitive and emotional response to film, and to measure, from the audience perspective, the meaning of film images.

Branding moments

We have pioneered the use of picture sorts to measure moment-by-moment audience response to commercials, both in terms of cognitive processing and emotional engagement. We have published validation of our Flow of Attention®, to show how the rhythm and tempo of visual storytelling peaks are related to attention-getting power and the formation of advertising memories, as measured by recall testing and tracking studies.

We have also shown how a second picture sort, the Flow of Emotion®, explains how different dramatic structures create viewer engagement and persuasion, to move consumers closer to the brand. We have shown that these two dimensions of audience response are independent, providing two distinct, but equally important, points of view for examining the internal structure of ads. But until now, we

haven't shared the full power gained when you put the two together – the focal points of the mind and the dramatic beat of the heart – to identify the Branding Moments™ of advertising film.

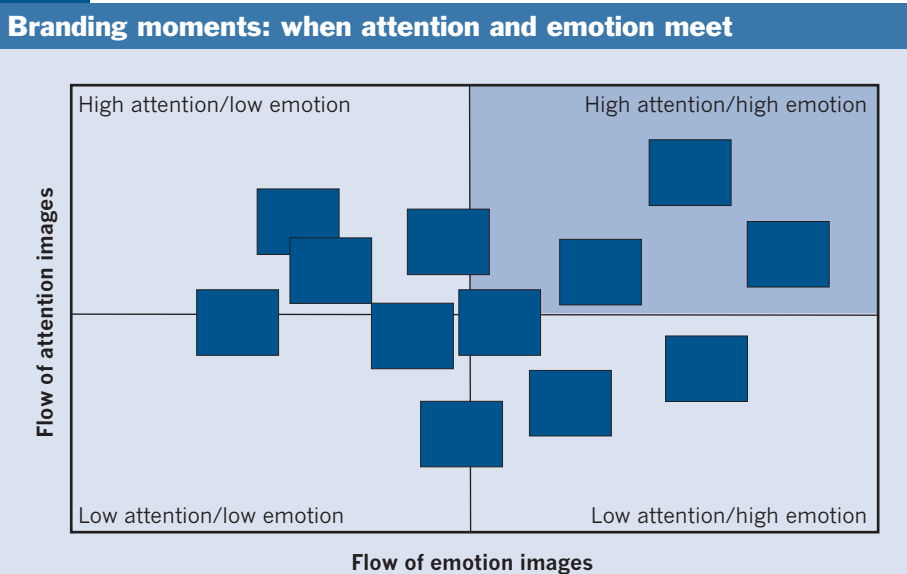
Objectively, 'film' is a mechanical system that creates the illusion of movement by reproducing equidistant snapshots of time to create the perception of continuity. In this mechanistic view, each instant of time captured on film is equally important for creating the illusion. Artistically, though, movement is related to privileged instants – certain moments in the film that take on particular significance. According to the French philosopher of film, Gilles Deleuze, 'the cinema seems to thrive on privileged instants. It is often said that Eisenstein extracted from movements or developments certain moments of crises, which he made the subject of the cinema *par excellence*. This is precisely what he called the 'pathetic': he picks out peaks and shouts, he pushes scenes to their climax and brings them into collision.'

The meaningful moments of film are where thoughts and emotions come together. This is the essence of a work of art, according to McKee, 'Because in life idea and emotion come separately. Mind and passions revolve in different spheres of our humanity, rarely coordinated, usually at odds.'

Research can identify these privileged moments of a piece of film, where the thoughts and emotions of the audience come together, by plotting the Flow of Attention against the Flow of Emotion, in a grid like that in Figure 1. The images in the upper right-hand quadrant are, by definition, the ones that stand out the most in terms of both attention and audience emotions. In a previous *Admap* article we showed that these privileged moments (maximum thought + maximum feelings) are where long-term advertising memories are formed. These are the branding moments of ad films.

In 'The Hostage', Clive Owen's character, the Driver, is tasked with finding a female CEO of a burger chain. She has been kidnapped by an ex-employee, played by Maury Chaykin, who, when we meet him,

FIGURE 1



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has merely a passing acquaintance with sanity. The Driver, pulling up to the kidnapper's run-down lair in his BMW Z4 Roadster, exits the car. Standing in the street in his white suit, the Driver is the modern-day gunfighter in this homage to the American western, which John Woo's camera reflects without losing the film's contemporary currency. The mental and physical strength of the Driver is tested as he races against time, riding his BMW stallion to the rescue of the woman, who instead of being tied to the tracks, is inside the boot of a car sinking in the rising tide.

In Inárritu's 'Powder Keg' a rescue is also taking place, but of a different sort. Clive Owen, again as the Driver, is sent to rescue a photographer. The photographer has been wounded by gunmen he has documented massacring farmers in a remote field in a place called Nuevo Colon. The photographer, played by Swedish actor Stellan Skarsgard, is picked up by the Driver in a BMW SUV to be taken across the border to safety, where he can deliver the evidence of this latest act of brutality. Of course, this is not an easy ride, as the 'authorities' are anxious not to see photographer and film end up across the border.

A branding-moments analysis of film creates a set of pictures that represents the essence of the film from the audience perspective – the bones of the story. You could arrange these pictures into storyboard and use it to describe the film, leaving out no dramatic event.

On the first dimension of audience response, the Flow of Attention, what we saw with 'The Hostage' was that more images made it past the gatekeeper of the mind than for 'Powder Keg'. If you've seen the films, this is easily understood. 'The Hostage' is a much more complex film, with more visual information than 'Powder Keg', which has much of its action on the same dirt road.

On the second dimension, the Flow of Emotion, peak emotional moments were more numerous in 'Powder Keg' than in 'The Hostage'. Again, this should not be a surprise. 'Powder Keg', with its massacre, martyrdom and grieving mother is a moving portrayal of a few minutes in a war photographer's life. However, in

branded entertainment, as in other advertising, the quantity of emotion is not enough. If that emotion is not put to work for the brand, it's not branded.

When we look at what moments make it into both peak attention and peak emotion, the branding moments, there is merely a single image of the BMW in 'Powder Keg', compared to 45% of the shots featuring the brand in 'The Hostage'. Yet this is not a matter of time on screen: the BMW is on screen longer in 'Powder Keg'.

The controlling idea

The explanation is tied directly to how these stories are constructed. Following McKee's definition, we should be able to demonstrate that both action and emotional climax tie back seamlessly to the controlling idea. Based on qualitative research, here is our interpretation of the controlling ideas of these two films.

- ▶ The Hostage: life is worth saving even if that life is corrupt.
- ▶ Powder Keg: corruption is worth fighting, even if we fail.

This concept also identifies each film's protagonist, and what instrument he uses to carry out the controlling idea.

In 'The Hostage', the Driver rescues the woman and saves her life, only to discover that she was having an affair with the kidnapper and then discarded him. The action of the entire film is the saving of her life. And the emotional climax of the film is learning that the life the Driver saved is corrupt. Yet the data show the emotional response to the Driver is as a hero. Positive emotional response to him as he drives into the sunset is not diminished by the quality of the life he saved.

Following this controlling idea, the protagonist is the Driver – the saver of life. The heroic instrument is the BMW Z4 – without which viewers told us they were unsure that he could succeed.

Contrast this with 'Powder Keg'.

Here, the photographer's rescue is built around his life story. He recounts the wars, the photos he has taken trying to change the world and fight corruption. He has sacrificed his home life, and his own, to this fight. The film's action is the story of fighting corruption. The emotional

climax? An ambiguous victory. The photographer is posthumously awarded a Pulitzer, while the Driver brings the dead photographer's dog tags to his blind mother. Will anything change? Who knows, but the photographer is no less heroic.

The protagonist is the one who carries out the controlling idea: the photographer who fights corruption. The heroic instrument? The film – not the car.

Branded entertainment is not the same as product placement. In branded entertainment, the brand is not placed in the story: the brand is an instrument in the story – you couldn't imagine another brand in its place. What then does the audience, the final arbiter of these controlling ideas, have to say? From qualitative interviews we learned that the BMW was the hero in one movie, but not the other:

'I couldn't stop thinking about the car ... maybe another kind of car, it would have fallen off the bridge.' ('Hostage' viewer)

'The car seemed out of place. Anyway, it wasn't about the car. It just happened to be a BMW.' ('Powder Keg' viewer)

When the picture-sort data are examined, we find the audience understood these films all along. In 'The Hostage', which lifted ratings of brand BMW, the beauty shot of the Z4 car was the strongest image when it comes to both attention and emotion. For 'Powder Keg' it was the image of the bloody film on the car seat.

Years of analysing and conducting research on advertising film remind us repeatedly of the cognitive and emotional intelligence behind how viewers process stories on film. While film may be relatively modern, stories are not, and it is critical to our understanding of branded entertainment to neglect neither narrative nor visual structure in our examination. If advertisers are going to be successful in making good branded entertainment, or even product integration that works and makes good sense, they can't start in a better place than employing the rigours of research to understand exactly how viewers watch film and process brand stories. ■



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