

# Creative awards vs. copytesting

Many advertising creative directors who distrust the value of copytesting research view winning creative award shows as an important validation of the quality of their work. The creator of an ad is more likely to accept the verdict of his/her peers over the performance measures devised by researchers. The feeling is that research all too often either “measures the wrong thing” or rewards formulaic advertising at the expense of more original executional ideas. Indeed, the director of one of the major award shows, whom we initially approached with an offer to conduct research on their award-winning ads, rejected the offer outright on the grounds that research was “antithetical” to what they were doing.

On the client side, many managers are suspicious of creative awards, viewing them as self-congratulation by the creative community, or as a public relations vehicle for new business pitches by agencies rather than an indicator of good performance on their accounts. In fact, when we approached several advertisers for permission to reproduce their award-winning ads in this article, we were more than once informed that the agencies that had created the advertisements had been fired because their advertising “wasn’t working.”

Undoubtedly the judgement of successful advertising practitioners, as summed up by the major award shows, must count for something. Indeed, it could be argued that creative award shows are themselves an

early form of copytesting, developed long before the advent of modern copytesting methods as a way of informing advertisers what defines quality in creative work.

You could even argue that copytesting is a reasonable substitute for the combined opinions of a group of masters of the advertising craft. In making the decision about whether an ad is good enough to run, a hypothetical client could call

up a friendly list of creative directors on the order of, say, Jay Chiat, Hal Riney and Steve Hayden and ask their opinions about the work. Or, that hypothetical client could, somewhat less expensively and more practically, simply commission a research study to find out the same thing. This view would lead one to expect that, on average, if the research is well-designed it should produce results that are the same as the judgments of creative award shows.

The contrarian position is that professionals, because they are professionals, look at advertising in a fundamentally different way than ordinary

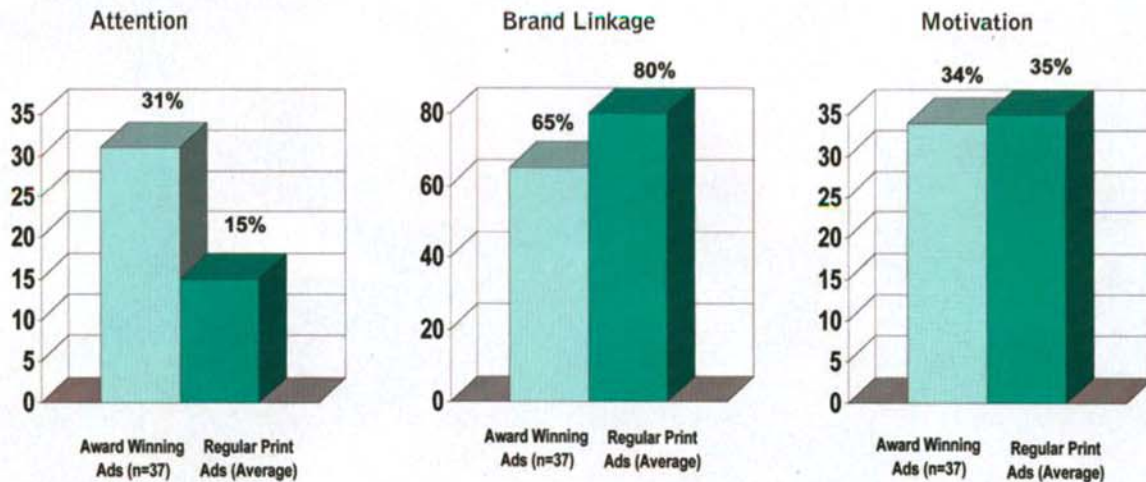


By Charles Young  
and Larry Cohen

Is one a better predictor of an ad's success?

*Editor's note: Charles Young is president of Ameritest/CY Research, Albuquerque, N.M. He can be reached at 505-856-0763. Larry Cohen is president of Seminarts, Evanston, Ill. He can be reached at 847-328-7907.*

Figure 1



consumers do. Since the true test of advertising quality is whether or not a consumer audience will notice the ad and buy something because of having seen it, advertising research among consumers may frequently produce results that are not only different but are superior in some ways to the judgments of creative award shows.

We enter the debate by contributing a piece of research on research where we asked the question: Does the fact that a print ad won a major award show tell us anything about how that ad is likely to perform in research tests among consumers? And, as a corollary: What does winning an award show not tell us that may be critical to understanding the true potential of the ad to generate sales in the marketplace?

The sample of award-winning print advertisements we chose to include in this study were national winners of major award shows, with the majority of ads drawn from the pool of national winners of either a gold or silver medal from the One Show. Several additional ads were drawn from the winners of the Kelly Show, the Art Directors Show and the Athena, for a total of 37 award-winning ads.

All the ads were tested in Ameritest and compared to our norm base for categories corresponding to the award winners. In general, the average ad in our database is not an award winner, but rather is representative of “regular”

advertising.

The three key copytest scores produced by Ameritest are attention, brand linkage and motivation. Attention is a measure of the stopping power of the advertisement in a clutter book with other ads competing for the reader’s attention. Brand linkage is measured by coding the verbatim responses to the attention question for the percentage of respondents who recall the ad with interest and use the brand name as the top-of-mind handle for describing the ad. Motivation is collected after a second exposure of the test ad by itself, without the clutter environment, and is measured by a simple five-point probability scale for

rating consumer intentions. This scale varies depending on the category being advertised (from “definitely will buy/consider/visit” to “definitely will not buy/consider/visit”). Finally, other diagnostic measures were also included in the test.

**More stopping power**

How do award-winning ads perform on the copytest? The performance of the ads on the three key evaluative measures are shown in Figure 1. On average, we see that award-winning ads have more than twice the stopping power of regular or non-award-winning ads. However, award winners are significantly less well-branded com-

Figure 2

Diagnosics	Award Winning (n=37 ads)	Regular ads (Ameritest Norms)
Overall, I liked the ad	57	53
<b>Entertainment:</b>		
The ad is a lot of fun	54	39
The ad is different	67	36
I like the images	52	54
<b>Relevance:</b>		
The message is believable	44	50
The message is important	25	27
I can relate to the people	26	33
<b>Negative:</b>		
The ad is confusing	37	19
The ad is irritating	20	15
I don't see what I read or saw had to do with the brand	29	15

pared to regular ads. And, award-winning ads are no more motivating than non-award-winning ads.

These results confirm that award shows are telling us something important about the potential performance of an advertisement: the judgments of creative award shows appear to be highly correlated with the ability of an ad to break through clutter and get noticed. Intuitively, this makes sense. One of the most important reasons that advertisers hire advertising agencies is to get someone who has the talent to create an execution that is particularly clever or entertaining or unique so as to capture the attention of a large audience.

The finding that award-winning ads are no more motivating than non-award-winning ads also has face validity. In general, identifying a selling proposition that has real strength in motivating consumers usually requires a deep understanding of the product category based on a substantial amount of strategic research into consumer's attitudes, perceptions and current behavior. Typically, the information needed to make a critical judgment as to whether or not a particular message will be persuasive is proprietary and is not submitted along with the entries to creative award shows. As a result, the judges of creative award shows do not have access to relevant information to effectively discriminate among the various entries on the basis of motivational impact. Award shows are about executions, not strategies, so it should not be surprising that the key to winning award shows is the attention-getting power, not the motivational power, of the ads that are entered.

The weakness in brand linkage in award-winning ads is more of a problem. Strategic insight is not required to make a judgment about how strongly a particular execution is branded. One possible reason for this finding is that award shows tend to reward ads that break the rules, viewing this rule-breaking as an indicator of creativity. Certainly, clearly communicating the identity of the brand in an ad is a classic rule of advertising. Defining creativity in iconoclastic