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**The Birthplace of a Brand:**  
How the Emotions Unleashed by One YouTube Video  
Created Worldwide Fame

BY CHARLES YOUNG

## **The Birthplace of a Brand: How the Emotions Unleashed by One YouTube Video Created Worldwide Fame**

**By Charles E. Young**

You can't live anywhere on our connected flat earth without having heard this story. In ten days, one video distributed on YouTube gained more viewings than the previous record holder had accumulated in two years—generating more than a hundred forty four million hits. As a result, the unknown Susan Boyle, a 47 year-old church singer from a no-name village in Scotland, was catapulted to worldwide fame in just over a week.

The six-minute video of Susan's performance on the show *Britain's Got Talent* is a unique exemplar of the power of emotional engagement. On a media level, it dramatizes the synergistic effects of cross-platform engagement—combining exposure on a popular television program with the virality of Internet videos, supercharged with the PR of dozens of news programs covering the phenomenon. But on another level, this is about the power of film to tell a compelling story.

Advertisers dream of making this kind of film. As an advertising researcher, I got excited about this film for other reasons—the phenomenal success of the Susan Boyle video provides us with a “teachable moment,” an opportunity to study this film as an instantly familiar case history that can illuminate a number of important general principles about how advertising works.

Three important lessons immediately came to mind. First, the visual story told in the video demonstrates the essential role that *negative* emotions can play in creating drama—which is an important creative option for any advertiser to understand who wants to magnify the emotional impact of a brand communications strategy. Second, this video illustrates the process by which *meaning* is created in film—and, of course, imbuing ordinary products and services with meaning is the essence of building a brand. Third, it has an important lesson to teach about *wear-in*—the psychological phenomenon of increasing engagement with repeated viewings—a phenomenon many ad researchers these days have come to question, even as to whether or not it actually exists.

To learn the lessons the Susan Boyle video has to teach, we conducted an online test among 200 respondents, much as we would as if we were testing a television ad or a corporate web video. Our research design included three test cells. In the first cell we tested the video among a general audience who had not yet seen it. In the second cell, we tested a shorter version of the video, with the opening “negative set up” of the story removed. In the third cell we tested the video among an audience who had already seen the video before, many of them who had already watched it several times over.

In our interview we asked our internet audience open-ended questions, had them rate statements describing their response to the visual, and took them through our three Picture Sorts<sup>®</sup> diagnostics that measure the Flow of Attention, the Flow of Emotion and the Flow of Meaning through the visual portion of the video.

## **The Emotional Pivot**

In the full-length version of the video the story opens with the entrance on stage of Susan Boyle, an overweight, rather frumpy-looking, middle-aged woman. Simon Cowell, the none-too-kind lead judge on a three-judge panel asks her several interview questions. Her answers, for example that she's 47 years old, elicit rolled eyes and sideway glances of disbelief, not only from Simon, but in cutaways, from the studio audience as well. They seem to be thinking, this is going to be bad! She's really going to make a fool of herself! Susan announces that she's going to perform "I dream the dream" from *Les Miserables*. And then she begins to sing, and as her beautiful voice fills the room, the audience and the judges are transformed. By the end of the video the entire studio audience—even one of the judges—are on their feet cheering wildly!

The structure of the story being told in this video is one of four archetypal dramatic structures we commonly see in advertising that what we call an "*emotional pivot*." In the Flow of Emotion graph in Exhibit 1, you can see strong negative emotions at the beginning of the video shown with strong spikes in the red line for negative emotional response. Then toward the middle, the green (positive) line begins to rise rapidly and the red (negative) line fades away rapidly as emotions turn, or pivot, on frame 18 which is the moment Susan begins to sing. Finally, positive emotions rise to a sustained, high volume of intensity for the rest of the video.

Good storytellers understand that it's the motion in emotion that matters. They understand how the audience is moved, and how its emotions are changed by a good story. With the pivot structure, the movement is particularly strong because the actual valence or sign of the emotion changes from negative to positive, which creates the strongest possible contrast between what the audience feels at the beginning of the story and what they feel at the end.

At the pivot point—the boundary between these two states of emotion—lies the most dramatic, brand-creating moment of this piece of film. So in frame 18 when Susan first begins to sing, we are able to pinpoint the actual moment of birth of a new star.

In storytelling terms, this is the moment when a gap opens up in the mind of the audience—a break between what the audience expected to see, and what really just happened. The mind of the audience is now forced to turn in a new direction. As the subjective interpretation of observed events up to now are recalculated, and the audience builds a new mental model of reality to make sense of what's going on. Unexpectedly, the ugly duckling just turned into a swan!

As a result, the turn in emotions is accompanied by a shift in the meaning of what is being watched. In Exhibit 2, we can use the Flow of Meaning picture sort to see the different meanings the audience assigns to various images in the narrative flow of the video.

If you look at the primary meaning associated with three of the most memorable images of Susan you can see the trajectory of audience thoughts throughout the story. In the beginning the audience thinks she's "unattractive." In the middle, as she begins to sing, they are impressed with her "confidence." And by the end, they are thinking what a "loving" person she is!

Simon's face transmits his "skepticism" at the beginning, to be replaced by raised eyebrows of "surprise" at the turning point, and his "joyful" engagement with her performance at the end.

Amanda, another judge, follows a similar journey, from "skepticism," to "surprise," to "inspiration" as she realized—and said in a later interview—that she was wrong to "misjudge a book by its cover."

Finally, the studio audience mirrors the emotions of the judges—from "skepticism" to "surprise" to "joy"—as one remarkable singing performance instantly redefined Susan Boyle in their eyes as a legitimate singing star.

### **The Role of Negative Emotions**

The use of negative emotions is something many advertisers get quite nervous about—for fear that those negative emotions might rub off on their brand. In the creation of Susan Boyle as an instant entertainment brand, one might wonder how important were the negative emotions in the determining the unprecedented impact of the video? After all, Susan can obviously sing quite well—what would've happened if she had simply stepped on stage and begun singing right away, exhibiting the power of her voice on national television?

To find out, we decided to test another version of the video among a matched sample of respondents who had never before seen the video. This version was shorter by a minute—because we chopped off the opening interview that had generated all the negative, skeptical emotions and simply started at the point where Susan began to sing.

Interestingly, the emotional response to the singing was just as positive as it was in the longer video. In terms of meaning, the unexpectedly beautiful voice coming from this frumpy, middle-aged lady was just as surprising, and just as joyful, as before.

But when we asked respondents to rate the quality of the shorter video as a whole, something was lost. The shorter video without the negative opening was much less likely to be rated *unique*, *involving*, *entertaining* or *inspirational* compared to the longer version.

The gestalt of an experience changes when a key part is left out. Removing the negative "set-up" and changing the narrative from a high contrast emotional pivot to an uninterrupted flow of positive emotions clearly diminished the quality of the "whole". Ironically, the Susan Boyle story would be quite different—and she would probably not be a star—if Simon Cowell had not displayed his cynicism during the upfront interview.

## **Wear-In**

Blockbuster movies, like *Star Wars* or *The Titanic*, become blockbusters because members of the audience come back to watch the same movie over and over again. What is it the repeat audience is looking for?

With the third part of our test we examined the reactions of an audience who had already seen the video multiple times. Over half the sample consisted of respondents who had watched the video two to three times and a quarter had already seen it four or more times.

If we again look at the ratings in Exhibit 3, you can see that repeat viewers continued to rate the video very high in terms of *entertainment value, uniqueness, involvement, and inspiration*. What's surprising is that repeat viewers actually rate the video much higher than first time viewers of the full video on the dimension of "true-to-life" and one "I might talk to my friends about."

Apparently, on first viewing many people think the reactions of the judges are a put-on. Are they *really* surprised? To see what the audience is "looking for" with repeat viewings, we can examine their visual search behavior with the Flow of Attention, as shown in Exhibit 4.

Not surprisingly the remembrance of imagery is stronger across the board for repeat viewers because with repetition they have absorbed more of the visual content of the video. But although the pattern is elevated, generally the same peaks and valleys emerge, suggesting that the returning audience still focuses on the same important high points in the narrative. However, close inspection of the data reveals some subtle differences.

The repeat viewing audience is actually paying relatively more attention to the faces of the judges, particularly Simon's face. Importantly, the audience is also increasingly sensitive to the non-verbal cues given off by their facial expressions. With repeat viewings, Simon's "skepticism" rating goes up from 41% to 52%, and his "surprise" rating goes up from 25% to 41%.

In contrast, Susan's ratings do not change that much, with the exception that the image of her initial impression shifts from "unattractive" to "awkward."

This level of detail provides us with an important insight into the audience intent to extract the underlying meaning of the story. On the surface this is a Cinderella story. In the words of one respondent, "*She started off in a little village and no one thought anything of her, and then ended up being something big.*"

But at a deeper level I think this is a story about the judges. Watching the video as a member of the viewing audience, we perhaps identify most of all with the judges. We are aware on a level just below consciousness that we all carry around a Simon-like judge inside of us, putting ourselves down, holding us back from achieving our dreams. *What this story is really about is just how wrong that judge can be!*

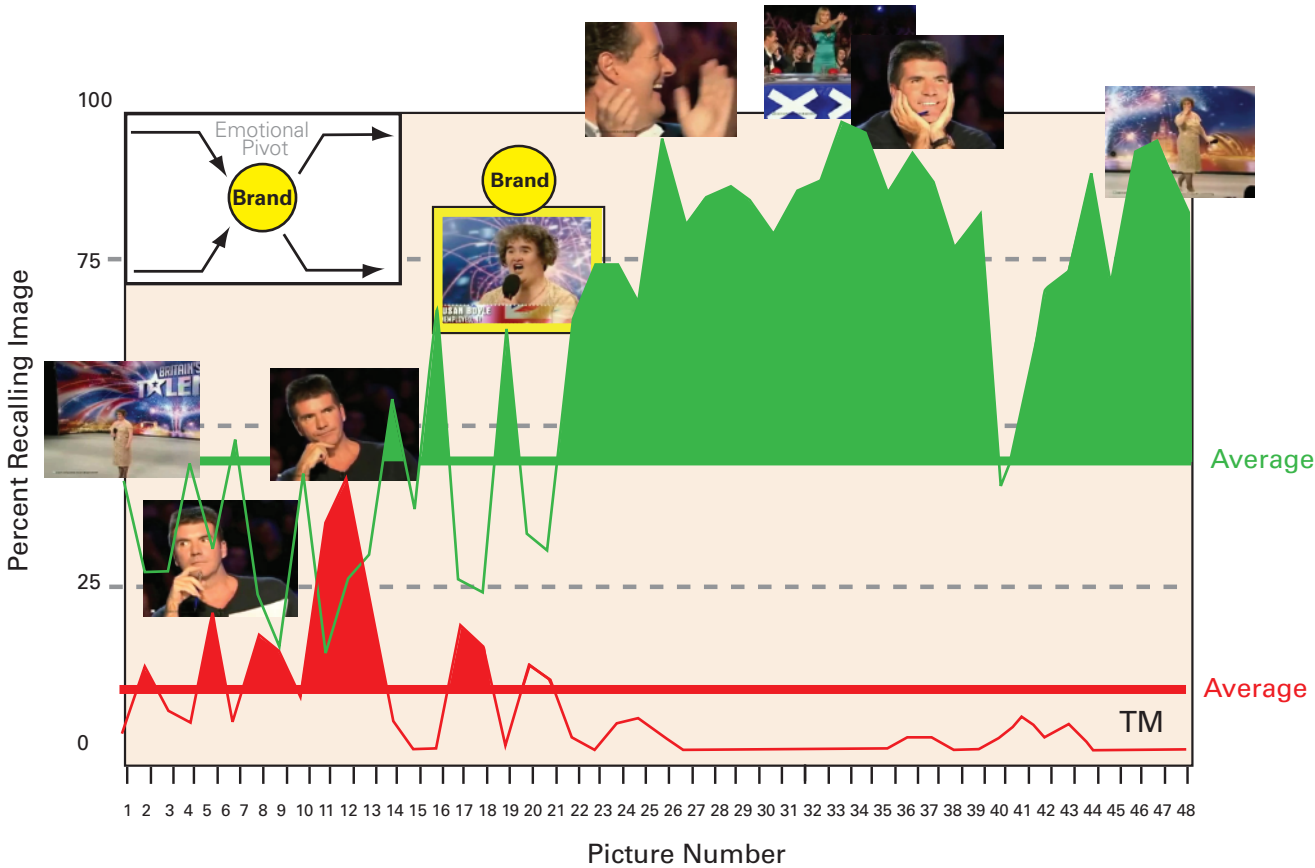
## **Summary**

So what can advertisers take away from the Susan Boyle story? First, a good villain can make the hero seem that much more heroic. The correct use of negative emotion in a piece of film can boost the positive response to a hero (represented by the brand in advertising) while effectively adding drama to the story. This can also make the piece of film more engaging to the viewer.

Second, unexpected reactions can breed repetition. We've already discussed how repeat viewers are paying more attention to the judges than to Susan when watching the video again. However, it is also apparent that viewers who have seen the video before are better able to interpret meaning from the judges as well. The unexpected reactions of the judges are what repeat viewers are more aware of the second time around, so giving the viewing audience something unexpected to look forward to upon multiple views of a piece of film can help increase the desire to watch it again.

Finally, if you can convince the audience of the authenticity of something great, you can effectively generate buzz. The repeat viewers of the Susan Boyle video seem to be watching the video again to gauge the realism of the responses. Are they an act? Do they already know how the story will turn out? When viewers are convinced that the reactions are genuine, it makes the video seem more true-to-life, and therefore also giving viewers the urge to pass such a piece of film along to friends and colleagues.

# Flow of Emotion®



The Susan Boyle story is a classic example of an emotional pivot from negative to positive emotions.

## Exhibit 2

# Flow of Meaning

### Beginning



Unattractive 24%



Skeptical 41%



Skeptical 14%



Skeptical 32%

### Middle



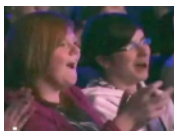
Confident 36%



Surprised 25%



Surprised 76%



Surprised 37%

### End



Loving 28%



Joyful 27%



Inspired 36%

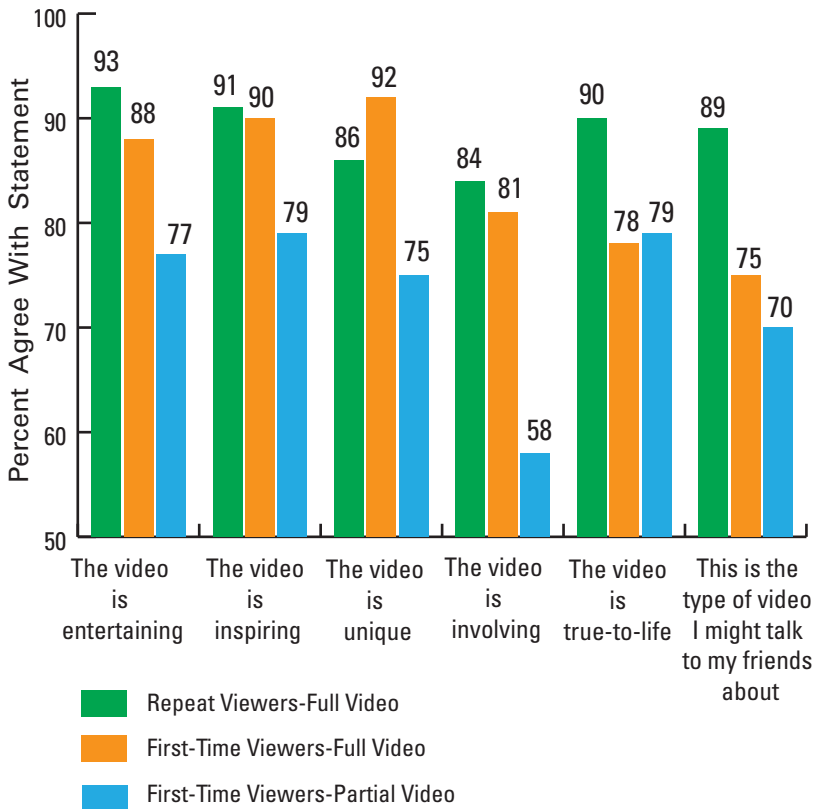


Joyful 48%

**The shift in emotions displayed on the faces reveals the meaning of the story.**

## Exhibit 3

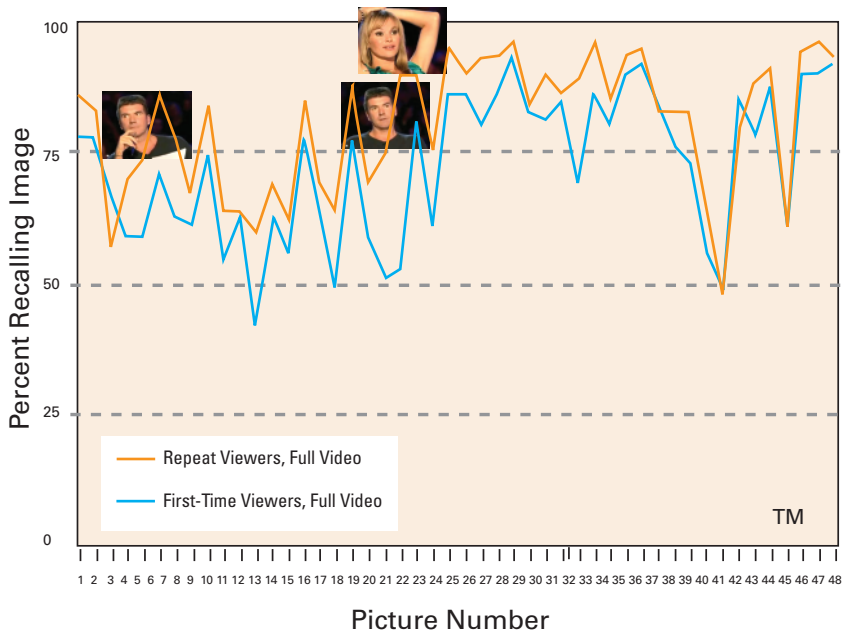
### Diagnostics



**The negative emotions at the beginning of the video set up a more powerful story than simply showing the positive singing segment.**

## Exhibit 4

# Flow of Emotion<sup>®</sup> Comparison



**What is the audience searching for in repeat viewings?  
A clearer view of the reactions of the judges.**