

# Is the brain really receiving your brand's sustainability message?

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**WARC**

As brands create sustainability messages in response to growing awareness of environmental problems, Neuro-Insight's Casey Kudrenko examines the effectiveness of such messages and whether consumers link them to brands.

- Viewers connect with the idea of sustainability issues but switch off when it comes to the sustainability message or solution.
- This effect becomes more prominent for advertisers whose association with sustainability is less obvious to consumers.
- Stereotypical green imagery cues viewers to switch off if the message is incongruent from the advertiser's usual tone or personality.

## Why it matters

Brands must ensure that credibility, context and congruency are understood in relation to their sustainability message, but also be mindful that subtle nuances in content and delivery can cause consumers to disengage, thus inhibiting the message and brand linkage.

## Takeaways

- Viewers are sensitive to sustainability ads, but credibility, content and delivery inhibit the link between message and brand.
- Explore alternative delivery of key messages as a super stamp frame but avoid extensive, multi-message or elaborate solutions.
- Consider using demonstrations or examples of actions or claims and involve talent directly addressing viewers for impact.

As awareness of sustainability and environmental impact increases globally, advertisers are increasingly investing in campaigns to showcase their commitment to positive change. However, brands face challenges in meeting consumer expectations, protecting their reputation and standing out in the market. Consumers may expect sustainability messages and may even demand it of their brand but how effective is the message, approach and ultimate link to the advertiser?

Over the past few years, Neuro-Insight has conducted in-depth analysis of consumer brain activity, studying over 50 sustainability campaigns across the US, UK and APAC regions. These campaigns span various brand categories and approaches, offering valuable insights into overall consumer receptivity, powerful moments and barriers to effectiveness. The insights and knowledge aim to empower marketers to create impactful sustainability campaigns and strategies that resonate with consumers, guiding behaviour towards sustainable practices and strengthening brand affinity. The key findings were:

- Viewers connect with the idea and urgency of the sustainability issues but switch off when it comes to the sustainability message or branding frame.
- Credibility, context and congruency must be understood in relation to your brand and your ownership of your sustainability message.
- Subtle nuances in content and delivery, for example cliché green visuals or environmental drone footage, can be a cue to disengage, inhibiting message and brand linkage.

## How we did it

The specific **technology** used by Neuro-Insight is founded in work originally developed for academic and neuroscience research, and has been evaluating and optimising campaigns around the world for over 15 years. The technology simultaneously records viewer's second-by-second changes in motivational valence, emotional impact, personal relevance/reliability and memory whilst watching advertisements and/or consuming media.

To assess brand impact, message receptivity and narrative strength, Neuro-Insight focus on the metric of long-term memory encoding, due to its strong and highly researched link to market performance metrics. This measure reveals what the subconscious deems as important and therefore, what the brain stores (or encodes) into long-term memory to guide future consumer behaviour.

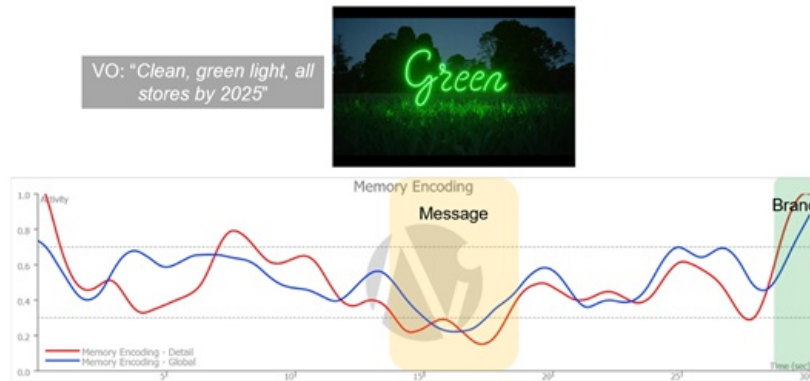
Across the article, we use the timeseries graph to explore examples where advertisers miss the mark with messaging or branding and discuss why this might occur. The higher the graph (more specifically, reaching the effectiveness benchmark of 0.70), the more strongly that moment is stored in memory and the more likely it will be attributed to the brand or influence future behaviour.

## What we found

### **Sustainability issue cuts through but the brand's solution or message is missed**

The meta-analysis universally revealed that advertisers are struggling to integrate brand into a powerful sustainability issue. Most commonly, viewers connected with the idea and urgency of sustainability themes or a climate disaster, but often switch off upon the solution (e.g. sustainability position, commitment "By 2025, brand

will be 100% plastic-free” or alternative offer) or solo branding frame. This effect was even more prominent for advertisers whose association with sustainability is perhaps less obvious to consumers.

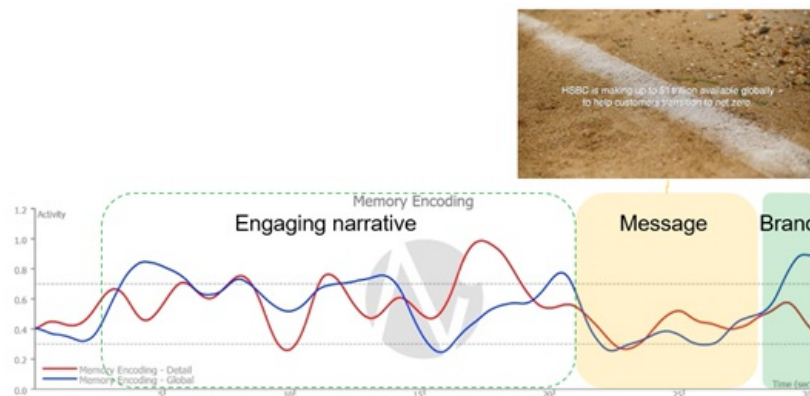


Woolworths Green (Australia)

## Branding is reinforced but poor linkage to sustainability message

The timeseries above showcases brain activity in response to Woolworths' Green ad. The higher moments of memory correspond to in-context visuals (Woolies employees and apple display), as well as the master branding frame at the outro. This suggests the supermarket brand is reinforced. However, what message or information is being stored with the brand?

In this case, the dip in brain activity and the critical sustainability message (announced as lyrical voiceover) fails to reach effective levels of processing. In other words, the subconscious is failing to store and link the sustainability message with the brand.



HSBC Climate Change (UK)

We observe a similar occurrence to HSBC's Climate Change ad above, more specifically to its 'net zero' message. Here, the advertiser delivers a highly impactful context of the climate change issue, utilising a UK celebrity talking direct to viewers. However, brain activity plummets upon the key message.

The final branding frame, upholstered by HSBC's mnemonic, triggers a global memory response (reconsolidating previous memories and region-sensitive to encoding sound). Again, the advertiser serves brand, nevertheless, not likely communicating its involvement combating climate change.

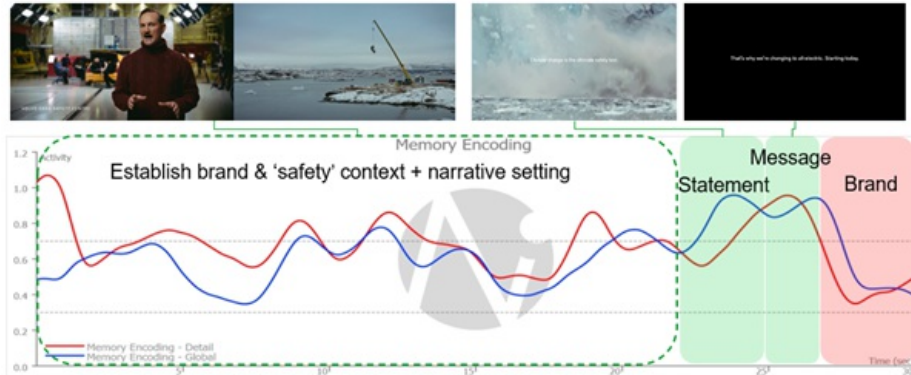
So what might be driving the switch off? The two examples above showcase a phenomenon seen across many different brand categories when addressing sustainability issues. When it comes to the execution, the use of stereotypical or cliché green imagery appears to cue viewers to switch off. This may be due to the message appearing too incongruent from the advertiser’s usual tone, personality or content delivery style. In other words, the viewers may reject the obvious sustainability visuals in the context of the advertiser and them being the ‘owner’ representing the visual.

Far too common was the disengaging response to the executional approach to have a highly developed, almost cinematic opening narrative addressing sustainability, only to be followed by a void in voiceover or talent involvement, and a low-energy shift in soundtrack to then be paired with the critical text-super displaying a sustainability commitment or solution. The shift in content and delivery serves to subconsciously cue viewers to take a break in committing information to memory, unfortunately attributing little sustainability equity towards the brand.

Additionally, in many cases, the message was also an ambiguous link to the preceding narrative which often covered a multitude of sustainability themes. For example, in regards to the HSBC ad, the narrative established a broad address to climate change and rising sea levels, whereas the message articulated, “HSBC is making up to \$1tn available globally to help customers transition to net zero”.

Although the elements are related, it may be a little harder for viewers to connect the dots subconsciously, especially given the advertiser is not an established commentator in the sustainability space.

### Impactful issue and message, yet ineffective branding



Volvo – The Ultimate Safety Test (Australia)

The above exhibits a very powerful memory encoding response to the Volvo narrative, the climate statement and ultimately the advertiser’s sustainability claim. However, it suffers from conceptual closure at final branding.

Conceptual closure is a neuro-phenomenon which occurs when the brain perceives a narrative sequence to have come to an end. Technically, this end is termed an ‘event boundary’. On encountering an event boundary, there is a momentary drop in long-term memory encoding as the brain takes a ‘time out’ to process the information it has just received. During this time, it is relatively unreceptive to new information and all responses tend to fall away sharply (Silberstein, Seixas & Nield, 2020).

Volvo successfully reinforces its strong brand ownership of safety within the first few frames of the ad (Volvo Safety Centre) and proceeds to establish the safety test narrative setting amongst a glacier backdrop. The

viewer's brain activity reveals a distinct element of stickiness (sustained degree of high memory encoding  $>.70$ ) for the majority of the storytelling. The story arch has the viewer anticipating the safety demonstration. This is abruptly disrupted by a collapsing ice formation with the message "Climate change is the ultimate safety test", followed by the black message frame "That's why we're changing to electric. Starting today", all effectively stored into long-term memory.

The example is a clear leader in terms of credibility and consistency with existing brand territory (safety), congruency with narrative concept and climate statement ("Climate change is the ultimate safety test"), as well as clarity and a direct link to the brand's climate solution ("That's why we're changing to electric. Starting today").

Nevertheless, the final master branding frame suffers. This is less likely a function of the narrative or message but more about slight creative cues that the ad has come to an end (conceptual closure). The cues, often not articulated consciously, are a combination of finality of statement, black outro frame and void of ambient audio or sound. Upon identifying such minor cues at critical branding moments, advertisers have the power to make small changes (often in an editing suit) to optimise brand performance.

### Congruency, clarity and consistency = impactful



Levi's Buy Better Wear Longer (Global)

Our last example highlights a standout performer, effectively executing issue, message and branding. The fashion brand pairs its celebrity talent dialogue/voiceover with matching text-super. Through the fast-paced, multi-vignette approach, the synergy between issue, message and brand personality appears to captivate viewers.

The key scenes highlighted above of the Levi's 'Buy Better Wear Longer' campaign are deemed highly important by the brain and thus committed to memory to ultimately guide associations and future behaviour towards the brand. The clarity and emphasis of the direct address to viewers – in a creative flair viewers may be accustomed to by Levi's or more broadly in the fashion category – suggest the authentic tailored approach works.

### Neuro-Insight considerations

In summary, viewers appear highly sensitive to advertising addressing sustainability. Whilst highly receptive to a sustainability issue in general, a combination of factors at a macro level (credibility and congruency of advertiser

and message) and micro level (content and delivery) appear to inhibit the link between the sustainability message and brand.

In addition to the examples already discussed is a summary below of key insights from our global sustainability analysis, outlining the watch-outs and impactful plays for advertisers to consider when approaching their next sustainability move:

- Avoid cliches or stereotypical imagery
- Explore alternative delivery of key message as super stamp frame
- Examine true credibility, context and congruency between your message and brand
- Avoid extensive (multi-message) or elaborate address or solutions
- Consider articulation of how advertiser must fix 'the problem', avoid speaking on behalf of the audience (i.e. 'us' or 'we')

## Impactful plays: What is working well

- Evaluate authenticity; reasons for adopting need to be authentic and in line with brand
- Ensure issue and solution = congruent and easier to pinpoint
- Consider using demonstrations or examples of actions or claims
- Involve talent directly addressing viewers (children and brand-compatible celebrities = impactful)
- Utilise inspirational and relatable appeals

## References

Silberstein R, Seixas S and Nield G (2020). 'Conceptual Closure Elicited by Event Boundary Transitions Affects Commercial Communication Effectiveness'. *Frontiers in Neuroscience*. 14:292. doi: 0.3389/fnins.2020.00292

Timeseries graph: Neuro-Insight's Memory Encoding timeseries graph reveals how elements of the ad are stored. The higher the graph, the more strongly that moment in the ad is stored in memory and the more likely it will influence behaviour. The timeseries red trace reflects memory encoding from the left hemisphere, which is primarily responsible for the encoding of the detail in experiences, such as text, dialogue or micro features. In contrast, the right hemisphere, which is reflected by the blue line, is concerned with the storing of global features, such as soundtracks, scenery, facial expressions and the emotional underpinnings of a particular experience.

## About the author

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