



What We Learned From a Year of Experimenting With Digital Video Ads

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In the age of digital video, traditional advertising models won't cut it. But with a little experimentation, brands can stay ahead of the curve. Here are three lessons a year of Unskippable Labs has taught us about creating digital video ads.

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It's no secret: Viewership is moving online. As time on YouTube has risen 74% year over year, time spent watching TV has fallen 4.6% for 18- to 49-year-olds. ¹ And as viewership moves online, people's preferences, behaviours, and attitudes toward video are rapidly changing. For advertisers, the challenge is to create content that builds personal connections, that's shareable, and that makes viewers *want* to tune in.

Over the past year, we've partnered with brands and agencies to test real-world ads and see what works and why through our [Unskippable Labs series](#). The aim has been to bring data to the art of storytelling. We sought to understand how things like [ad length](#), [storytelling style](#), and brand placement affect brand lift metrics.

Looking back on a year of these experiments, there's a lot we've learned. Do we have a definitive guide for creating compelling creative? No. But what we do know is that there's a lot of value in experimenting—and experimenting often.

Because the industry gathered last month in Cannes, questions about effective online storytelling are top-of-mind. Here's a look at what Unskippable Labs has taught us about experimenting and how you can apply these lessons to your online video strategy.

Lesson #1: Experimentation leads to innovation

Keeping pace with rapid changes in consumer behaviour demands questioning what we know and experimenting to find out what works. But don't get hung up on the difference between experimentation and testing. Testing is more tactical; for example, a brand might run an A/B test to determine what media to invest more heavily in or which message is resonating with an audience. Experimentation, on the other hand, requires a brand to go beyond testing and try out new ways of doing things. We've found that experimenting drives new ways of thinking by asking bigger

and deeper questions about formats, platforms, and audiences.

Start with what your agency believes is a universal truth and get experimenting.

Our Unskippable Labs experimented with ads that would answer questions like: [Should the way we tell stories be different on mobile video?](#) [Does age affect how we connect with video?](#) Or [How long should an ad be?](#)

Asking these kinds of questions leads to richer data and more meaningful insights. In our experiment with Mondelez International, for example, we found that [longer ads may be more impactful](#) (and watched more) than 15-second ads. These are the types of findings that can be applied across the board to different brands and campaigns.

Tip: Start with what your agency believes is a universal truth and get experimenting. Explore the unknown and test your own hypotheses; seek to disprove it; look at it from another angle. Pursue the answers that everyone wants to know but hasn't tackled yet.

Lesson #2: Digital video is easy if you're resourceful

Creating successful online videos doesn't have to mean new shoots, big budgets, and a creative overhaul. If you're resourceful, creating digital content can be easy.

One way we found to get new content up cheaply and quickly. Don't start from scratch. Repurpose and recut your existing assets to put together options that could play well on digital video platforms. When we ran our Unskippable Labs experiments with Mondelez International, Mountain Dew, and L'Oréal Paris, we made small tweaks to existing creative to develop different, online-optimised versions. Production costs were low and recutting the creative took less than a day.

YouTube V. YouTube



Constraints on budget and time can also jumpstart your creative juices. Once you have a solid insight and a well-defined creative platform, create-a-thons [like the one BBDO and Mars ran last year](#) can result in quirky, clever videos that move the needle on key metrics. Even industry leaders are in support of brands rethinking the rules to stay agile and excellent. As BBDO's President and CEO Andrew Robertson put it, agencies must have "the confidence to think a little less and to create and experiment a bit more."

Tip: The low time and money investment in this scrappy approach to production mean the risks are also lower, so you're free to produce a bunch of different versions that can be repurposed for different geographies and platforms.

Lesson #3: Don't be afraid to break the rules

There's no rulebook for online video. In fact, it's often the brands that break the rules that see the most success. When Mountain Dew saw an opportunity to reinvent the pre-roll ad, the company took it. The result was [digital video ads that viewers actually wanted to watch](#).

Try something new. Shuffle around pieces of content you've already produced. Get weird.

The brands that find new and authentic ways to tell stories are the brands that get noticed by the industry and by consumers. Take the [Cannes YouTube Ads Leaderboard](#), for instance, which features the most popular global ads released in the year leading up to Cannes 2016. Leaderboard-topping agencies like BBDO and 72andSunny created ads that leave impressions by breaking free of what's been done—and their ads drive results. Nine out of the 10 videos on the Cannes Leaderboard were also successful TV ads, proving that toggling between platforms is possible.

Tip: Try something new. Shuffle around pieces of content you've already produced. Get weird. Sell in something nontraditional. See what sticks and iterate from there.

To become an agent of change for your organisation—whether it's a brand, a media buyer, or a creative agency—start with a goal to challenge the status quo and experiment on one question you have about digital video. This could mean experimenting with new formats, such as 360 video, or with where and how you run your video ads. As you bring scrappiness and innovative thinking to the process, you will find it easier to keep up with viewers' habits. Based on our experiments, the agencies that adopt a mindset of continual experimentation and evolution are the ones that will see the best success from their work.

Sources

¹ Google commissioned Nielsen study, U.S., audience time spent on TV, mobile, and desktop, Nov. 2015.