

A photograph of a young couple sitting on a couch, looking at a laptop screen. The woman is holding a credit card. The image is partially obscured by a white diagonal overlay containing text.

Are today's brand purpose ads really changing consumers' hearts & minds?

by Eric Villain



Growth
from
Knowledge

When good intentions meet short attention spans.

It is not even radical to suggest that purpose is the new pillar of brand building. Just a few years ago, “good works” and “social responsibility” were like the vegetables corporations were forced to eat once or twice a year – a well-meaning press release here, a charity donation there, with little engagement from the company as a whole.

But today, we live in a new brand universe. Climate change has brought sustainability into sharp focus as an urgent priority, not just a nice-to-have. The tragic deaths of George Floyd and many others have transformed social justice into a mainstream priority, something brands of every kind simply cannot ignore. Most recently, we are even seeing companies take a stand on abortion rights – a topic once deemed too hot to handle for even the most progressive brands.

The truth is that what a brand “believes” and how it acts in the world are now essential to acceptance and success.

GfK research has shown that enhancing a brand’s ability to be loved, relevant and meaningful – being a catalyst for creating change – will also boost its capacity to build long-term value, or equity. And while a few brands have CSR baked into their core identities, most are still struggling to find their ways with a variety of purpose-driven messages and creatives.

These campaigns may have the best of intentions, but they also represent major brand investments and need to be measured against some standard. If they are trying to enact global change – and build brand loyalty in the process – how are they doing? Surprisingly, purpose ads have rarely been compared, side by side, for actual effect. Is all of this good feeling actually moving the needle with consumers – in terms of awareness, engagement, and motivation to take real action?

What we found is a combination of sporadic successes and surprising shortcomings – **pointing to the need for new approaches to purpose branding, messaging, and advertising.**



A look at transformational branding

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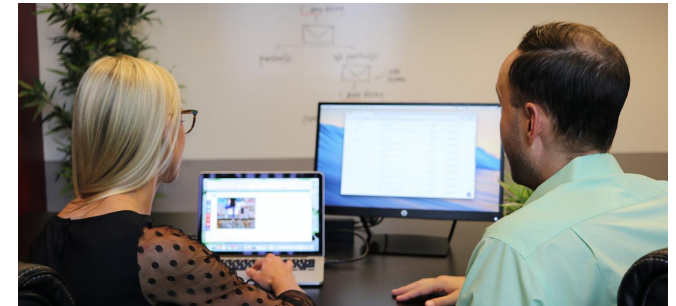
For this research, GfK partnered with Thomas Kolster and Goodvertising Agency to explore the good, the bad, and the ambivalent in purpose advertising. In his book *The Hero Trap*, Kolster argues for a new breed of purpose marketing – one driven less by glorification of the brand itself (“The Hero”) and more by inspiration and empowerment of consumers themselves. Kolster has labeled this new approach to purpose *transformational branding*.

The marketing pressure on purpose to evolve is clear ... It's a move from a transactional relationship – “Believe in us as a company to bring about change” – to a transformational one – “Believe in your own ability ...”

-Thomas Kolster, *The Hero Trap*

To put some finite findings around purpose ad effectiveness, then, GfK and Goodvertising identified 20 creatives in two broad purpose categories:

- **Traditional Purpose** - focusing on good works by the brand itself, with various degrees of transparent branding (even unabashed “hyping” at times). These ads are somewhat more likely to contain brand cues throughout the story.
 - **Transformational** - ads that celebrate the consumer as hero, telling what they can do or have done, and treating the brand itself as a supporting player.
-



While some of the ads measured fall clearly into one category or the other, the distinction is not always crystal clear. But we have called out some of the clearest examples of each type, as well as looking at purpose advertising overall. Our goal – to establish a knowledge base to help clients navigate this new communication path, and to identify potential new ways to think and talk about purpose.

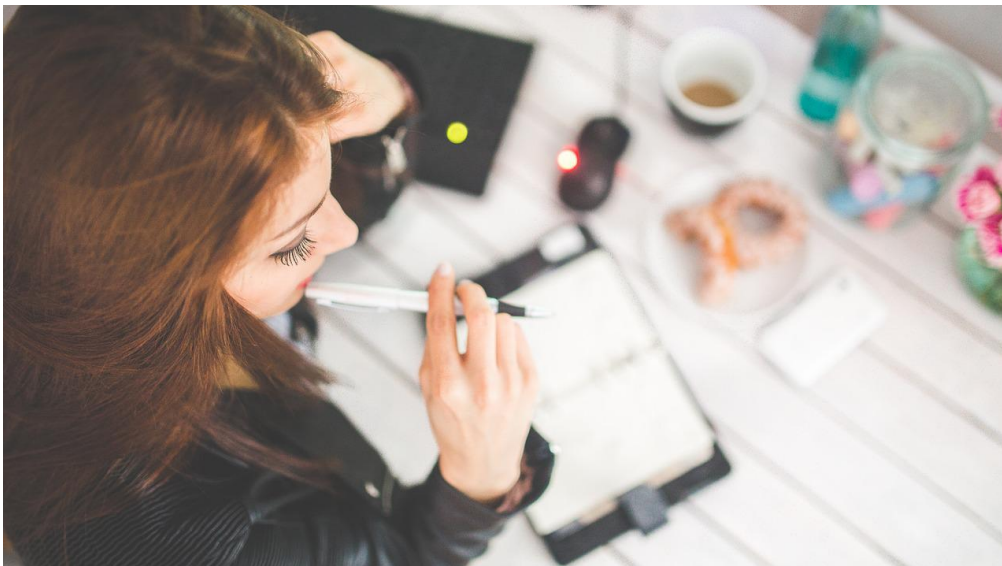
- Each ad was shown to about 240 viewers
- Viewers were ages 18 to 64 -- 50/50 male vs. female
- Each participant viewed two of the ads
- Field work conducted March-April 2022



Studying ads in their natural environments

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To evaluate the 20 ads, we leveraged GfK's Ad Fit Optimizer (AFO) methodology, a proven and uniquely effective approach that has been adopted by dozens of major brands.



With AFO, we

- measure unforced exposures to ads in their natural environments (pre-roll)
- capture engagement through behavioral metrics
- define an ad's ability to Hook and then Hold viewer attention

AFO's consistent analytic framework focuses on "F-I-T":

- **Fascinates** - Grabs and keeps attention
- **Imprints** - Leaves a lasting impression
- **Triggers** - Motivates direct or indirect responses

The ads we studied

Transformational

HiringChain.org	"The Hiring Chain"
Dove	"Reverse Selfie"
Colgate	"The Power of Smile"
Glossier	"Feeling like Sandy"
Tula	"What We Tell Ourselves"
P&G	"It's Out There"
Budweiser	"Let's Grab a Beer"
Ben & Jerry's	"Join the Climate Movement!"

Patagonia "We're All Screwed"
Soda Stream "Be Smart, Drink Things"

Open full table in browser:
<https://discover.gfk.com/story/2022-gfk-ad-purpose-ebook/page/3/2>

Traditional

Toyota	"Upstream"
Cleancut	"A Powerful Clean..."
Seventh Generation	"Weird Dyes"
Method	"Baby Wash for Every Mood"
H&M	"Conscious Exclusive"
Tom's	"Introducing the Rover"
Chipotle	"Can a Burrito Change the World?"
Starbucks	"Possible Is Just the Beginning"

FedEx "Delivering the Earth"
Pepsi "Be Smart, Drink Things"

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The Big Takeaways

Brand purpose ads struggle to break through



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Comparing our 20 brand purpose ads to a benchmark for all video creatives, the purpose ads had a significantly harder time grabbing viewers' attention and holding it. This held true for transformational and traditional ads alike.

	Benchmark (Top 40%)	Total sample - all purpose ads	Transformational ads	Traditional purpose ads
Grab viewers' attention	74%	65%	64%	65%
Hold onto viewers' attention	56%	45%	44%	46%

How to activate: Use a multimedia program to reinforce your purpose and involve your targets. Adding shorter, more active communication will enhance breakthrough and better engage younger viewers who are used to shorter sound bites and communication strategies. Many of the advertising stories may not be immediately linked to brands in consumers' minds. While this is not cognitive dissonance per se, it will take time and reinforcement for associations to be formed with their brands and audiences. This is true regardless of whether the ads are deemed "transformational" or traditional.

Success Stories

Dove's "**Reverse Selfie**" is a poignant take on issues facing young tween girls that also fits perfectly with the essence of Dove brands. The message reaches every age group and is one of the best-performing ads tested.

H&M's "**Conscious Exclusive**" spot is simple, well executed branding and a clear message.

Patagonia's "**We are all screwed**" had the ability to hold onto its audience, and the issue resonates and is a fit with the brand.

FedEx "**Delivering for Earth**" provides a very clear and well branded message fitting in with what the brand does and tackling exactly what it can take on as its purpose (carbon neutrality).

The Big Takeaways

Transformational ads are particularly effective at getting their messages across

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Success Stories

When it comes to message clarity, the purpose creatives we tested significantly outperformed the general industry benchmark – with transformational creatives especially strong. Nearly half (48%) of transformational ad viewers reported that the message was clear, compared to just one-third (33%) for all ads. Some simple brand purpose ads do a solid job at communicating clearly, but creatives varied widely in their focus on specific messages and actions. There are only a few ads that put the most compelling attention on what to do or what has been done.

How to activate: Ensure the most memorable creative elements reinforce the action the brand is inspiring to change; this is a core trait of transformational campaigns and suggests a potentially powerful alternative to traditional messaging.

Being clear and to the point is especially important for purpose ads – and it is also essential to ensure that the brand fits with the message and is well woven into the story.



- Dove's **"Reverse Selfie"** and Patagonia's **"We are all screwed"** – while very different creative executions – are also better at message clarity. Again, they are both known for the very purpose and transformation they ask of their consumers.
- **"The Hiring Chain"** is focused on the upbeat story of someone who hires, and inspires another to hire, and so on. The main creative elements reinforce the intended behavior change.



The Big Takeaways

Don't expect a brand's new purpose commitments to resonate with consumers immediately

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On traditional branding metrics, such as recall, the purpose ads we measured were essentially identical to our benchmark standards. Striking the right balance between brand and cause in purpose ads is a challenge – but some ads managed to succeed on both counts. Branding is actually stronger for traditional purpose ads than for transformative. Our hypothesis is that the definition of a transformative approach may take viewers a little more time/viewings to understand how they – along with the brand – can be part of the

story. Because viewers are more accustomed to messages in traditional purpose ads, they are easier to grasp. In addition, branding cues are somewhat more frequent in traditional purpose ads.

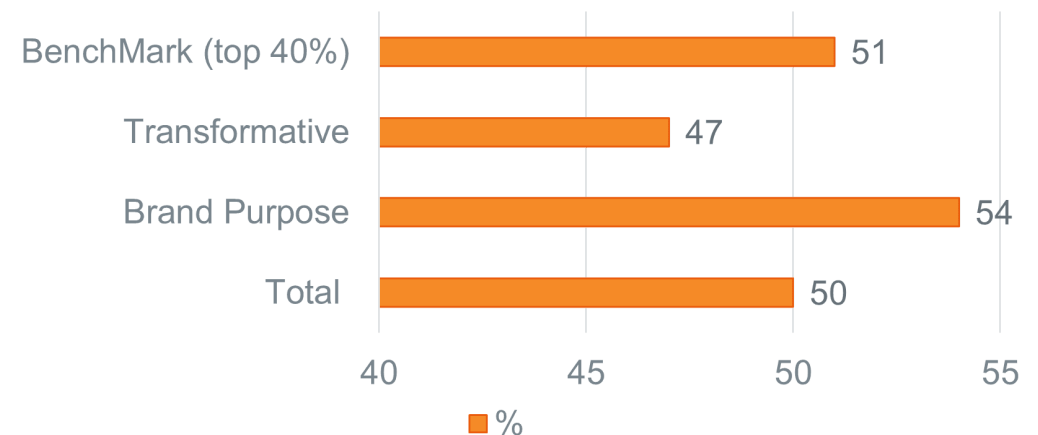
How to activate: There is a very strong correlation between frequency of brand visuals/mentions or mnemonic devices and branded recall. The brand needs to be part of the story – but we also want to put causes and compassion front and center.

Striking the right balance is essential, and brands cannot expect consumers to fully absorb their new purpose commitments overnight.

Success Stories

- Pepsi Max's "Nothing Tastes Better" is short and to the point.
- H&M's "Conscious Exclusive" is simply well branded.
- Colgate's "Power of a Smile" 15-second spot tugged at emotions while clearly being about the brand.

Brand imprint effectiveness



The Big Takeaways

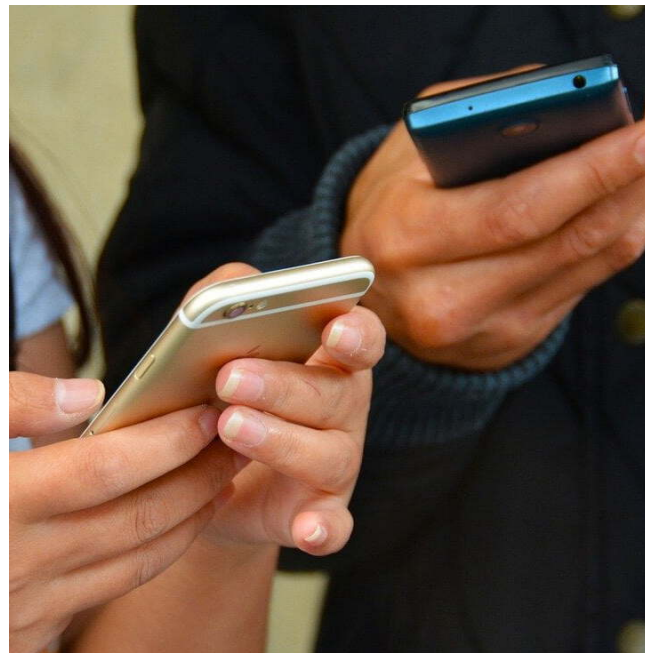
Celebrating consumers as
heroes inspires empowerment,
action

Transformational ads are particularly effective at getting their messages across

Our study showed that, for purpose and general ads alike, two-thirds of consumers reported that they were “more likely to want to talk, learn or do something about what they viewed” in the creative. Purpose ads with strong transformational messages were particularly resonant when it came to inspiring action and creating an impact – not surprising, given the motivational nature of this approach.

How to activate: Be sure to recognize that brands alone cannot enact global change. They can – and should – provide powerful inspiration; and, with smart strategic approaches, they can also build their brands in the process.

The key is not leaning too far in either direction.



Success Stories

The following all had strengths in creating intent to action in one aspect or another.

- “The Hiring Chain”
 - Dove’s “Reverse Selfie”
 - Colgate’s “power of a smile”
 - CleanCut’s “A Powerful Clean”
 - Seventh Generation’s (featuring Maya Rudolph)
 - P&G’s “It’s Out There”
 - H&M’s “Conscious Exclusive”
 - Soda Stream’s “The Small Things”
 - FedEx’s “Delivering the Earth”
-

What we learned...

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1. It's time for **new approaches** to purpose branding and messaging.

To break through in today's cluttered environment requires **innovation and imagination** – as we see in the new transformational category.

2. To help accelerate the connection between brand and purpose **be clear, focused, and brief.**

Use **multiple mediums** - and do not expect instant results.

3. Finding the right **balance between brand and cause** is essential.

Great ads and great fit between purpose and brand do just that. **Weave your brand into the story** in ways that make sense and support your overall message. Brand overkill stands out even more in a purpose context, but you still need to claim your space.



Thank you for reading

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