

Creative Inspiration

Sport Games

Facebook & Google Ads



Introduction

We've all seen big changes in user acquisition (UA) advertising in the last few years. Artificial intelligence (AI) is automating more and more of media buying, as the best practices outlined in Facebook's [Structure for Scale](#) framework demonstrate.

As a result, the AI optimizing the ad platforms has gotten better and better, it's leveled the playing field for advertisers big and small. Now, creative is the key differentiator driving profitable UA.

And, while quality and volume of creative are key factors in success, we've discovered that they're not the only factors that drive UA success.

Monitoring creative trends and doing in-depth competitive analysis are a must within any UA or creative team today. We'll share the latest trends and best practices we're seeing.

But, cutting edge advertisers don't stop there. They also incorporate market segmentation analysis by integrating player profiles and user motivations into their creative strategy.

Player profiles are actually an old idea in game design, but they're a very new idea in advertising. As of late last year, only about 10% of the UA teams we reached out to were using player profiles, and they tended to be the most elite advertisers.

Understanding player profiles and emotional hooks may change how you see ads forever. It's a wickedly effective framework for motivating users, but also a great lens to use as you analyze competitors' creative.

There are also [media buying](#) implications to a player profile methodology. Player profiles favor different copy / calls to action, websites, apps, and even YouTube channels. So, if a UA manager wanted to squeeze every possible drop of ROAS from an audience, they would segment that audience based on different player profiles.

It will take some experimentation to figure out whether it's appropriate to segment creative and audiences for player profiles, or if it's better to just make different ads for the different personas and to let the algorithm figure out optimal performance.

And, all of this from creative trends research and competitive analysis to deep dives into player motivations, is further fueled by the power of creative testing.

We've developed a new approach to creative testing that solves the adage of "why the control always seems to win" through extensive research, which we'll reveal in this paper.

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SECTION 1

Why Creative Is So Important

Creative is any advertiser's best opportunity for a competitive advantage in social advertising, and it has been since 2019. Here's why:

1. Expensive, third-party automated adtech platforms aren't as much of a competitive advantage as they used to be. Facebook and Google's platforms have integrated the best features of those tools and offered them as standard features to campaign dashboards. All that fancy adtech is now available in your ad accounts, for free. However, if you are spending over \$250,000 per month or running multiple titles, an inexpensive ad management platform like AdRules can greatly simplify your workflow and increase productivity.

2. If you're spending less than \$250,000 per month, you may not need expensive, high-end ad jockeys. Automation features have taken a lot of the controls away from UA managers and ad accounts with smaller ad spends have become easier to manage. However, if you are spending over \$250,000 per month or across several networks, you may find it helpful to look for inefficiencies in automated solutions. There are still many levers where a Rockstar UA manager will outperform an algorithm.

Those two factors alone leave creative as the most critical competitive advantage. Because you can now run powerful campaigns without adtech, and lower-spending advertisers can actually get good results, two key competitive advantages are gone. Creative is now critical.

The data backs this up. After managing over \$3 billion in ad spend, we've seen creative prove itself over and over as the single-best driver of ROAS.

Across our portfolio of accounts, we've found that 75% of the ROAS gains we've generated for clients can be directly attributed to creative optimization. Compare that to 15% of the ROAS gained from audience expansion, and 10% of the ROAS gained from media buying tactics and optimization.

Audience expansion and media buying tactics are still fantastic tools for the Rockstar UA manager, but creative wins hands down. Creative is king.

But not all creative is created equal.

Just pumping out more and more creative variations from winning ads won't give you the advantage you need. You need high-performance new concepts and control-beating fresh ideas. Those can be hard to find. Only 1-3 ad concepts out of 20 ever beat the control.

To know which creative assets and elements deliver big results, you need an efficient, accurate testing system. Without the efficiency, it's easy to blow your budget on testing variations that end up generating a disproportionate percent of non-converting spend.

This can be more a challenge than it might seem. Beating the control is surprisingly hard... but more about that later.

If that looks different than how you're managing UA campaigns right now, it's time to bring your advertising – and your entire UA program – into 2020.

Creative Tunnel Vision and How to Overcome It

Even with a [world-class testing methodology](#) and creative optimization process, your creative team needs fresh ideas. They have to be aware of all the trends in ad creative that your competitors know about and are already taking advantage of.

To increase the success rate of creative testing while eliminating creative tunnel vision, we are sharing our proprietary creative strategies for gaming genres. We've reviewed thousands of Facebook and Google ads to create a "visual taxonomy" of creative trends. We use those trends to generate a list of fresh creative concepts informed by competitive ads, player motivations, and advertiser performance.

As Picasso said, "Good artists borrow, great artists steal!" Once you identify your competitors' best ads, you have an endless supply of "tested" concepts. However, we have found that analyzing competitive creative, as challenging as it is, is not a UA or Design function. It appears to be a cross-disciplinary exercise.

At this particular snapshot in time, in 2020, we're seeing trends like these that drive ad performance:

Connect the Dots

Puzzles

Noob vs Pro

Hidden Object

Influencers

Again: These trends come and go faster than fashion, and you need to be in touch with the heartbeat of online advertising across thousands of advertisers to even recognize the trends in the massive number of ads launched every day. Then, once you've recognized them, you need to adapt these creative trends so you can use them in your own ads. Get it all right, then test it with a super-efficient creative testing system, and you win the prize: New ad creative that beats the control.

It's all a little bit like baseball... you're only as good as your last hit.

Trying to keep up with trends that evolve so rapidly is hard. Trying to do it while you maintain ROAS is even harder. And expecting the same team of people to do it over and over again, week after week... is damn near impossible. Eventually, almost covertly, creative teams learn what works and what fails and then "play it safe" with their creative. They'll default back to their greatest (and safest) hits of the past and become just a little bit too cautious about testing any out of the box ideas that might not work. We call this "creative tunnel vision".

Unfortunately, while many out of the box ideas don't work, some will. And one or two of those ads – those unlikely, out of the blue winners – could have delivered you a 10-40% leap in ROAS. But if your team never develops those out of the box ideas, they'll never test them. You'll never know how much revenue you've missed.

This is why an outside team can be so helpful. And why [competitive analysis](#) should be a core skill of somebody in every creative team.

Competitive analysis has two key benefits:

- It lets you peer into an almost endless library of tested concepts (tested with your competitors' ad budgets, not yours).
- It increases your success rate for your new concepts, so your entire testing program involves a lot less risk.

Think of all this shared knowledge as the "wisdom of creative crowds." Fortunately, we have ample resources to make competitive analysis efficient. Creative research tools like [AdRules](#) are great, as are SocialPeta and AppAnnie and many others. There's even [Facebook's ad library](#), which is completely free, though it only lets you see which ads your competitors are running, not how those ads have actually performed.

If that's not enough, you can also check out our resource of over 500,000 competitive video ads from Facebook and Google AC advertisers. Just remember to check [competitive benchmarks](#) data so you can recognize what's breakout performance and what's just average for that genre.

SECTION 2

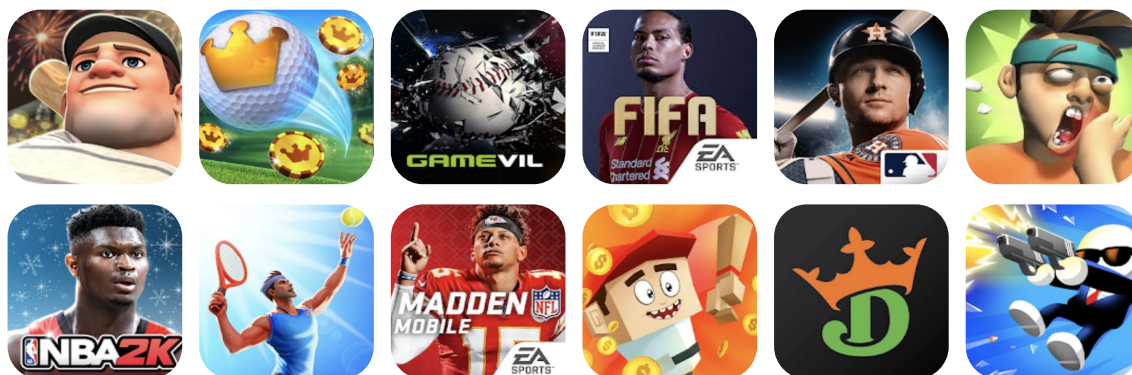
Inspiration for Sport Games

Facebook and Google Ads

Sport Games Competitive Analysis

Competitors: MLB Tap Sports Baseball 2020, 8 Ball Pool™, Real Boxing 2, My NBA 2K20, Tennis Clash: Online League, NBA 2K Mobile Basketball, Asphalt 9: Legends, Basketball Stars™, Homer City, MADDEN NFL MOBILE FOOTBALL, Golf Battle, WWE SuperCard, Oh My Goal! - Soccer, Baseball Boy! MLB 9 Innings 20, NBA LIVE Mobile Basketball, Dream League Soccer 2020, MLB Champions, FIFA soccer, EA SPORTS™ UFC®, PBA® Bowling Challenge, Football Strike, Score! Hero, PGA TOUR Golf Shootout, NBA 2K20, R.B.I. Baseball 20, NBA JAM by EA SPORTS™, Football Manager 2020 Mobile.

View competitive videos by hitting competitor tab [here](#).



Puzzle Hidden/Object Games Competitive Trends

Gameplay/Game Overview Shots of gameplay that showcase graphics and players. (Home Run Clash, NBA 2K, Boxing Star, many more)	Distance Challenges Simple gameplay that challenge viewers to hit an object as far as they can. (Baseball Boy, Slap Master)	Competition Videos dramatizing head to head competition between players. (Darts of Fury, Home Run Clash)	Noob vs. Pro Videos displaying bad versus good gameplay. (Darts of Fury, Mini Golf King)
Real Player Footage Real footage replacing game characters and gameplay. (Tennis Clash, Sniper Arena, Draft Kings)	Cinematic Techniques Slo-mo, camera pans, and other cinematic techniques utilizing game characters. (Johnny Trigger, Mr. Bullet, Sniper Arena, Tennis Clash)	Augmented Gameplay Illustrations, emojis, talk bubbles and voice over added to gameplay or characters (Mr. Bullet, Draft Kings, Flip & Dive 3D)	Game Controller Overlay Game controller overlay on gameplay to give it a game console effect. (Tennis Clash, City Fighter Vs. Street Gang)

Puzzle Hidden/Games

Creative Concepts We Recommend

Concept: Statcast ►

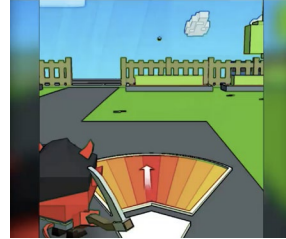
Create videos that incorporate statistics into gameplay

- Overlay graphics to show distance of tape measure shots and challenge viewers to play and hit home runs
- Overlay graphics on pitching stats and ground covered by outfielders, challenging viewers to beat their opponent

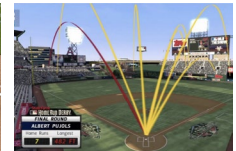
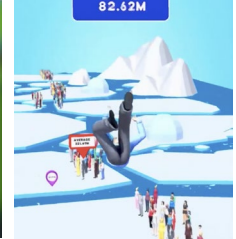
Competitor/Share of Voice

- Baseball Boy: 90% SOV
- Slap Masters: 100% SOV

No one has reached the ocean



Can you slap harder 🤪



◀ Concept: Character Countdown

Create a countdown of featured players in the game

- Showcases animation style, range of players and stats
- Use baseball card like graphics
- Generates engagement (curiosity over list of characters)

Competitor/Share of Voice

- Rise of Kingdoms: 28% SOV

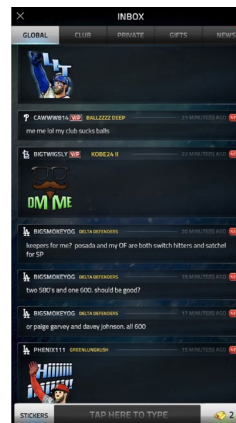
Concept: Trash Talk Voice Over ►

Juxtapose gameplay with player trash talk

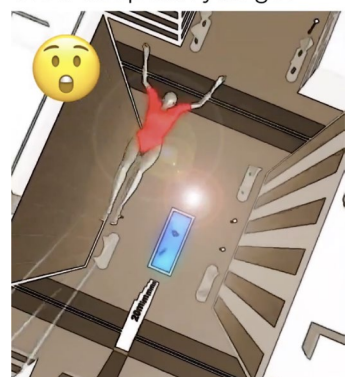
- Showcases gameplay and graphics
- Mimics player dialogue and chat portion of the game
- Uses subtitles

Competitor/Share of Voice

- Icing on the Cake: 54% SOV
- Flip & Dive 3D: 90% SOV



How deep can you go?



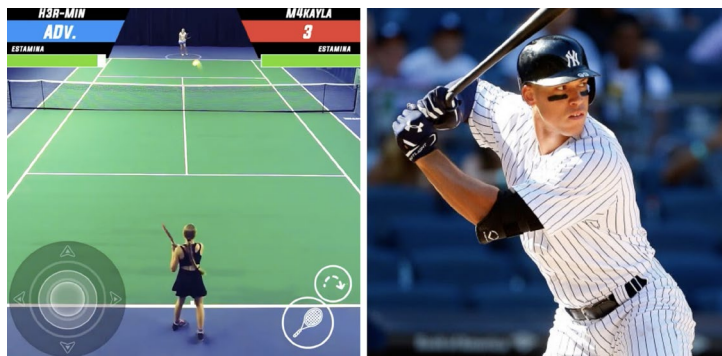
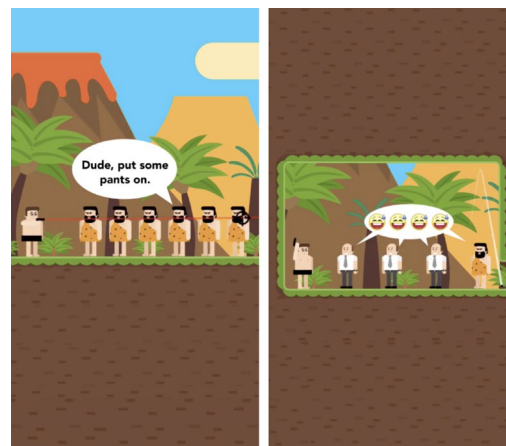
Concept: Emoji Gameplay ▶

Feature gameplay with emoji overlays and talk bubbles to communicate player emotions

- Humorous
- Humanizes players
- Showcases game graphics

Competitor/Share of Voice

- Mr. Bullet: 3% SOV
- Flip & Dive 3D: 90% SOV
- DraftKings: 12% SOV



◀ Concept: Real Game Footage

Intercut gameplay with real footage, so that it's hard to tell what's real and what's the game

- Showcases game graphics
- Promotes simulation aspect of the game: "Closest thing to being on the field"

Competitor/Share of Voice

- Tennis Clash: 50% SOV
- Sniper Arena: 3% SOV

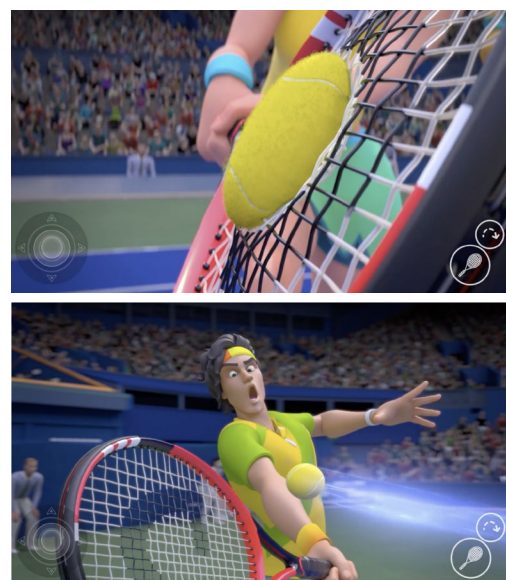
Concept: Cinematic Stories ▶

Create videos using cinematic techniques and voiceover to up the emotional ante of the game

- Showcases game graphics
- Utilizes nostalgic sports documentary feel
- Appealing to sports fans

Competitor/Share of Voice

- Tennis Clash: 2% SOV
- Johnny Trigger: 97% SOV
- Mr. Bullet: 3% SOV



Concept: Noob vs. Pro

Create side-by-side videos of good and bad gameplay, with “Noob vs. Pro” header

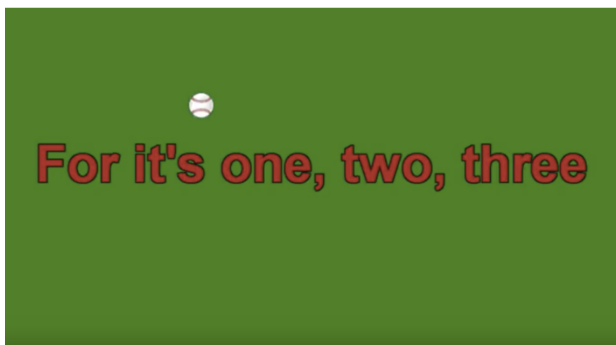
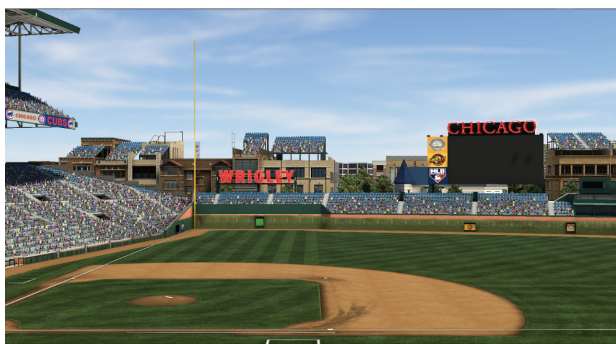
- Shows the difficulty of the game
- Triggers player competitive urge
- Incorporates head-to-head aspect
- Highlights both “wins” and “fails” - both powerful hooks for players

Competitor/Share of Voice

- Darts of Fury: 13% SOV
- Mini Golf King: 12% SOV

Dad Tactics

Mom Tactics



Concept: Sports Chants

Create a sing-along music video of gameplay with a famous sports chant

- E.g. bouncing ball version of “Take Me Out to the Ballgame”
- Most chants are in the public domain
- Showcases graphics and gameplay
- Will appeal to sports fans (specific team chants could accompany more targeted campaigns)

Competitor/Share of Voice

- N/A

SECTION 3

Using Player Profiles for Market Segmentation and Creative Targeting

Before you can develop your creative, based on your learnings of trends, you'll need to first understand your audience and who it is you are targeting.

Why do people play mobile games? What motivates them to choose one app over another, or to click on one ad over another? What motivates them to continue playing a game rather than just playing it once?

The answer lies in a concept called “horizontal segmentation.” It's an idea that remade the food industry a few decades ago and has remade several other industries since then. We believe it's about to remake user acquisition and Facebook ads, too.

Pasta sauce, pickles, and Howard Moskowitz

The first champion of horizontal segmentation in consumer marketing was a guy named Howard Moskowitz. Moskowitz, a food researcher and psychophysicist, had been asked to find the perfect sweetness level for a new type of Pepsi. But after he dug into the problem, Moskowitz discovered there was no perfect level of sweetness for the new type of Pepsi. There were only perfect levels of sweetness.

Or, as [Malcolm Gladwell](#) explains this in his TEDTalk on the subject, there was no perfect Pepsi – there were only perfect Pepsis.



Pepsi, unfortunately, wasn't sold on this concept. Moskowitz had to keep pitching it far and wide, with tepid reception, until a pickle company gave his idea a spin. And Howard, true to form, found them not the perfect pickle, but their perfect pickles – zesty, classic, etc.

That was a good start, but the revolution of horizontal segmentation didn't take off until Prego, a pasta sauce company, hired Moskowitz. Moskowitz, once again, went out and did a ton of research about how people felt about pasta sauce. He returned with not the perfect pasta sauce, but with the perfect pasta sauces.

Most famously, Howard returned with a recommendation to make chunky pasta sauce. No other company had been selling chunky sauce, and pasta sauce makers weren't aware that people even wanted chunky sauce. But because Prego trusted Howard and the research that pointed to this unmet need, Prego launched a line of chunky pasta sauce. And went on to sell \$600 million of it over the next few years.

Horizontal Segmentation for Facebook User Acquisition

So, what does all this sauce talk have to do with user acquisition? Everything, actually. Because in essence, Mos-cowitz had unearthed the following ideas:

- a) People are not all the same.
- b) While people are not all the same, if you study them in large groups you will find they tend to cluster around a certain set of profiles or preferences. Personas, if you will.
- c) With enough data and data analysis, these preference clusters can be found.
- d) If you develop products expressly tailored for each of these preference clusters, you can sell more stuff. A lot more stuff.

Gladwell explains in his TEDTalk that, for example, if his audience was to get together and make one perfect brew of coffee together, they would individually give that brew a collective average score of about 60 on a scale of zero to 100.

But if the group was allowed to break up into coffee clusters based on certain dominant preferences and was able to make coffee expressly designed for each of those preferences, the satisfaction score for those preference-driven brews would rise to about 75 to 78.

As Gladwell explains, "The difference between coffee at 60 and coffee at 78 is the difference between coffee that makes you wince and coffee that makes you deliriously happy." (Gladwell 17:16).

So, to paraphrase what Moskowitz and Gladwell have explained and to bring it into the context of Facebook and Google user acquisition:

- There is no perfect game. There is no perfect way to advertise or marketing for that game, either.
- But there are perfect games. There are perfect ads.
- Finding the persona clusters or player profiles in gaming for these games and ads (and more specifically, finding the motivations of these persona clusters) will let us create ads that make people dramatically happier and take the action we want them to take (click, download, purchase, or view ads).

This is clearly an evolution – if not a revolution – in how most UA and design teams have been doing creative for user acquisition.

Most UA and design teams have been approaching their advertising and creative strategy with the assumption that there was a perfect game, a perfect app, a perfect ad. "A platonic ideal," as scholars say.

What if that's not so? What if there are only perfect apps, perfect games, perfect ads?

What if we could talk to people based on what motivates them to play the game?

What if we could take a video ad – the exact same video – and then adjust the copy or the call to action based on what motivates different users to want to play? By tailoring messages according to what those player profiles will most respond to, could we increase ROAS by... 20%? 30%? Or could we expand the game into a whole new audience segment?

Game Theory and User Behavior Models

If you know your way around game theory, you'll know we already have quite a few detailed studies about different gaming profiles and user personas.

So, we actually have quite a lot of information about what motivates people to play games.

You can look to "Fogg's Behavior Model," or Scott Rigby's Player Experience of Need Satisfaction (PENS) model. Or you can view your users through something simpler, like "The Big Five," or the "Five Factor Model." Paula Neves breaks that model out well in her article Looking at [Player Motivation Models](#)

- **Openness to Experience:** If one is inventive and curious or consistent and cautious.
- **Conscientiousness:** If one is efficient and organized or easy going and careless.
- **Extraversion:** If one is outgoing and energetic or timid and reserved.
- **Agreeableness:** If one is friendly and compassionate or challenging and detached.
- **Neuroticism:** If one is sensitive and nervous or secure and confident.

The five traits, under the acronym OCEAN, are therefore treated on a spectrum where you can be open or closed to experience, conscientious or unconscientious and so on."

Bartle's Player Types, in particular, may be the model that the gaming industry embraces the most.



Image Credit: repignite.com 2014

In fact, given the names of the player types and their descriptions in Bartle's model, it almost seems like some of these player types have already filtered down into ad creative.

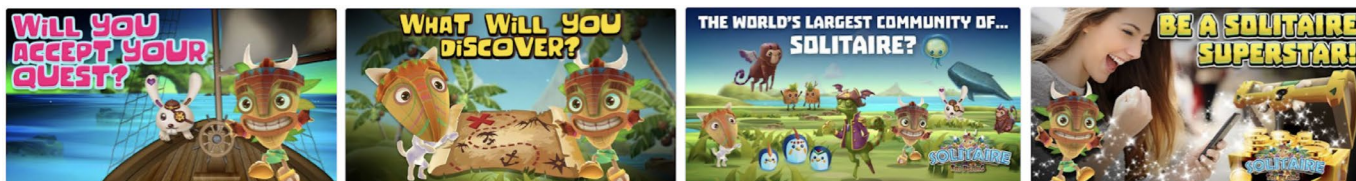


Image Credit: ConsumerAcquisition.com 2020

Or maybe behavior models aren't quite your thing. Maybe you want to view things through the lens of which types of emotional hooks appeal to different player types.

6 Gaming Emotional Hooks

Excitement	Social Connection	Expertise	Success	Escape	Creation
Action	Play with friends	Strategize	Be the Lord/King/Boss	Live your fantasy	Design avatars
Fast-paced	Compete with friends	Think ahead	Get collectibles	Be the characters	Customization
Surprise weapons	Make new friends	Make decisions	Complete missions	Be in the Story	Exploration
Explosives/effects	Chat	Conquer difficult levels	Powerful characters	Extend big plots	Tinker
MOBA	Form allies/teams	Side quest	Powerful equipment	Non-Player-Character	Experiment
MMORPG					
DISCOVERY, WAR/FIGHTS, EVENTS, LEADERBOARD	COMMUNITY, CLAN, PVP	ADVANCED BATTLE, SCENARIOS, FORMATIONS, MULTIPLE COMBOS	CLEARING STAGES, LEVELING UP, WINNING	IMMERSION, ESCAPING, FPS	AVATARS, CUSTOMIZATION, EXPERIMENT

Image Credit: ConsumerAcquisition.com 2020

As a UA manager or designer (or even a game designer, but that's another article), you can start seeing your user base through any of these different models. And you can start customizing your creative and your advertising tactics accordingly.

Examples of Player Profiles

Cutting-edge UA and design teams are already exploring these different models and applying them to their user base. When we polled our clients, we learned that about 10% of them have these sort of persona profiles in place. Typically, these models are being generated in marketing departments through the use of user surveys.

So, here's what an actual player profile might look like. This is sample data, but it gives you an idea of what information gets included and how detailed these profiles tend to be.

Psychographics	Engagement	Payer Demographics
Motivations for Playing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenge: I enjoy using my brain to solve puzzles or problems 35% Stress Relief: Let's me relieve stress 25% Achievement: It feels good to complete levels or beat my score 22% Kill Time: It gives me something to do while waiting for other things 19% Escape: Helps me forget about "real life" 17% Social: Lets me socialize with friends, family or other people 08% Distinguishing Traits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The main reason I play is to show myself what I can do 56% I see myself as someone who loves solving puzzles and problems 55% I most enjoy playing games alone 52% I'm motivated by the achievement I feel after accomplishing something difficult 50% I'm motivated to finish all levels in the games I play 48% I prefer trying to beat my own past performance 46% Top 5 Favorite Game Genres Played <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Card (Solitaire, Spades, UNO, etc.) 89% Match-3 (Marchington, Candy Crush, Homescapes, Cookie Jam, etc.) 46% Word (Words with Friends, Scrabble, Boggle, Wheel of Fortune, etc.) 39% Puzzle (Jigsaw puzzles, Crossword, Sudoku, etc.) 33% Trivia (Trivia Crack, QuizUp, Jeopardy!, SongPop, etc.) 17% 	Game Elements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete Quests 96% Use Boosters 93% Track Leaderboards 92% In-Game Rewards 84% Play Mini-Games 69% Participate in Events 60% Collect Characters 49% Clubs/Guilds/Social <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In a Club 90% Complete Club Quests 88% Gather Perks 83% Completed in a Club Contest 78% Gifted Club Members with Items from the Club Shop 55% 	Gender <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Male 30% Female 70% Age <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Under 18 03% 18-25 06% 26-35 17% 36-45 28% 46-55 30% 56-65 22% 65+ 09% <p>Mean age: 47</p> Income <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less than \$25,000 15% \$25k to less than \$35k 08% \$35k to less than \$50k 13% \$50k to less than \$75k 16% \$75k to less than \$100k 06% \$100k to less than \$150k 04% \$150k or more 03% Prefer no to say 32%

Note how the graphic shows what this particular player profiles most cares about in the game. The Demographic info is included, but what will really shape our creative is in the left column. Demographics might help a little, but user motivations are the driver.

So, we can take the motivations from these different player clusters and look at what's unique about them. We can also see which other titles they're playing. This helps us come up with new creative ideas and a new list of competitors, which in turn lets us do better [competitive analyses](#).

Armed with this information, almost any designer would immediately understand that they need to create different ads for these different player segments. These are different audiences. Even if the ads are ultimately meant to sell the same game to all the different profiles, ads tailored to each profile are going to perform dramatically better than one ad designed to try to please them all.

Even being able to swap out different bullet points for each player persona could result in tremendous improvements to ROAS.

People Can't Always Tell You What They Really Want

Before you try to apply all this by launching a user survey or research study, know this: People may not be able to tell you what they really want. Because they don't know.

Sometimes, you don't know what you really want until you happen to stumble upon it.

For example, Moskowitz, the pasta sauce researcher, discovered that many people wanted chunky pasta sauce, not the perfectly smooth pasta sauce that was only available at the time. Only with some unusually clever research was Moskowitz able to unearth this desire.

Gladwell describes this elegantly by talking about coffee. As he explains, if you ask the typical American what type of coffee they like, they'll say "I want a dark, rich, hearty roast." (10:40). But in actuality, most of us don't really want a dark, rich, hearty roast. Only about 25-27% of us actually like a dark, rich, hearty roast. Most of us like milky, weak coffee. But we'll never, ever say that.

All this, of course, turns standard product research on its head. It means all those surveys and focus groups and other tactics we've been using to figure out what people want from our games are not the full story.

But this is exactly the principle that put Apple on the map. Steve Jobs didn't go find out what people wanted from a better cassette player. He built them something beyond their imagination: The iPod.

Henry Ford is often quoted with a similar sentiment: "If I had asked them what they wanted; they would have said faster horses."

So what we may be aiming for here is a quantum leap, not an iteration. Whoever can figure it out, systematize it, and apply it to game design and creative strategy could well become a billionaire. Or another Howard Moskowitz.

Player Profiles as “UA Creative Strategy 2.0”

For the past two years, we’ve watched Facebook and Google move towards fully automating UA advertising. And because the algorithms of those two ad platforms have been getting better and easier to use all the time, much of the qualitative side of UA management is now [best done by machines](#).

Creative, however, is still [best managed by humans](#). This includes all aspects of creative – creative development, creative strategy, and creative testing. Creative is our best competitive advantage now that the ad platforms have removed the competitive advantage third-party adtech used to deliver.

But now, with player profile theory, there’s a whole new dimension to creative. It takes everything to another level.

Once we can see into what’s motivating people to play games, we’ve discovered a whole new level of creative theory. It makes getting overly focused on button colors look downright shallow.

All the creative elements we’ve been focused on up until now (colors, sounds, even ad copy) need to be realigned to serve these customer motivations.

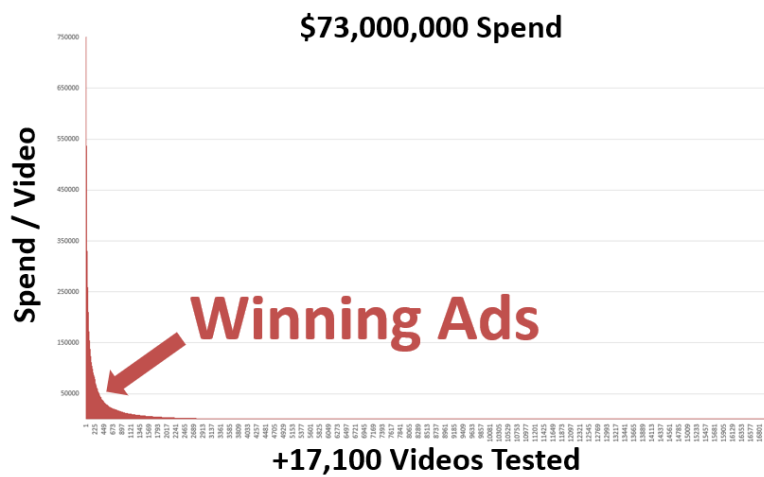
With player profiles theory and player motivations, we have crossed into Creative Strategy 2.0.

SECTION 4

Creative Testing and Why the Control Is So Hard to Beat

High-performance creative is a rare thing for social advertising. In our experience, after spending over \$3 billion dollars driving UA across Facebook and Google, usually only one out of twenty ads can beat the “best performing control” (the top ad). If a piece of creative doesn’t outperform the best video, you lose money running it. Losers are killed quickly, and winners are scaled to the moon.

The reality is, a vast majority of ads fail. The chart below shows the results of over 17,100 different ads. Spend is distributed based on ad performance. As you can see, out of those 17,000 ads, only a handful drove a majority of the spend.



The high failure rate of most creative shapes creative strategy, budgets and ad testing methodology. If you can't test ads quickly and affordably, your campaign's financial performance is likely to suffer from a lot of non-converting spend. But testing alone isn't enough. You also have to generate enough original creative concepts to fuel testing and uncover winners. Over the years, we've found that 19 out of 20 ads fail (5% success rate), you don't just need one new creative: You need 20 new original ideas or more to sustain performance and scale!

And you need all that new creative fast because [creative fatigues](#) quickly. You may need 20 new creative concepts every month, or possibly even every week depending on your ad spend and how your title monetizes (IAA or IAP). The more spend you run through your account, the more likely it is that your ad's performance will decline

Creative Testing: Our Unique Way

Let us set the stage for how and why we've been doing creative testing in a unique way. We test a lot of creative. In fact, we produce and test more than 100,000 videos and images yearly for our clients, and we've performed over 10,000 A/B and multivariate tests on Facebook and Google.

We focus on these verticals: gaming, e-commerce, entertainment, automotive, D2C, financial services, and lead generation. When we test, our goal is to compare new concepts vs. the winning video (control) to see if the challenger can outperform the champion. Why? If you can't outperform the best ad in a portfolio, you will lose money running the second or third place ads.

While we have not tested our process beyond the aforementioned verticals, we have managed over \$3 billion in paid social ad spend and want to share what we've learned. Our testing process has been architected to save both time and money by killing losing creatives quickly and to significantly reduce non converting spend. Our process will generate both false negatives and false positives. We typically allow our tests to run between 2-7 days to provide enough time to gather data without requiring the capital and time required to reach statistical significance (StatSig). We always run our tests using our software AdRules via the Facebook API. Our insights are specific to the above scenarios, not a representation of how all testing on Facebook's platform operates. In cases, it is valuable to retain learning without obstructing ad delivery.

To be clear, our process is not the Facebook best practice of running a split test and allowing the algorithm to reach statistical significance (StatSig) which then moves the ad set out of the learning phase and into the optimized phase. The insights we've drawn are specific to these scenarios we outline here and are not a representation of how all testing on Facebook's platform operates. In cases, it is valuable to have old creative retain learning to seamlessly A/B test without obstructing ad delivery.

Let's take a closer look at the cost aspect of creative testing.

In classic testing, you need a 95% confidence rate to declare a winner, exit the learning phase and reach StatSig. That's nice to have but getting a 95% confidence rate for in-app purchases may end up costing you \$20,000 per creative variation.

Why so expensive?

As an example, to reach a 95% confidence level, you'll need about 100 purchases. With a 1% purchase rate (which is typical for gaming apps), and a \$200 cost per purchase, you'll end up spending \$20,000 for each variation in order to accrue enough data for that 95% confidence rate. There aren't a lot of advertisers who can afford to spend \$20,000 per variation, especially if 95% of new creative fails to beat the control.

Stat Sig Is Expensive	Non-Stat Sig: Cheap IPM Testing
95% Stat Sig: Game Averages	95% Stat Sig: Game Averages
1% Purchase Rate	0.5% Install Rate
100 Purchases	100 installs
\$200 \$/Purchase	\$2.00 \$/Install
\$20,000 / Creative	\$200 / Creative (\$20 Int'l) BOOM

So, what to do?

What we do is move the conversion event we're targeting for up in the sales funnel. For mobile apps, instead of optimizing for purchases we optimize for impression per install (IPM). For web-sites, we'd optimize for an impression to top-funnel conversion rate. Again, this is not a Facebook recommended best practice, this is our own voodoo magic/secret sauce that we're brewing.

IPM Testing Is Cost-Effective

A concern with our process is that ads with high CTRs and high conversion rates for top-funnel events may not be true winners for down-funnel conversions and ROI / ROAS. But while there is a risk of identifying false positives and negatives with this method, we'd rather take that risk than spend the time and expense of optimizing for StatSig bottom-funnel metrics

How We've Been Testing Creative Until Now

When testing creative we typically would test three to five videos along with a control video using Facebook's split test feature. We would show these ads to broad or 5-10% LALs (Lookalike) audiences, and restrict distribution to the Facebook newsfeed only, Android only and we'd use mobile app install bidding (MAI) to get about 100-250 installs.

If one of those new "contender" ads beat the control video's IPM or came within 10%-15% of its performance, we would launch those potential new winning videos into the ad sets with the control video and let them fight it out to generate ROAS.

We've seen hints of what we're about to describe across numerous ad accounts and have confirmed with other advertisers that they have seen the same thing. But for purposes of explanation, let's focus on one client of ours and how their ads performed in recent creative tests.

In the two months, we produced +60 new video concepts for this client. All of them failed to beat the control video's IPM. This struck us as odd, and it was statistically impossible. We expected to generate a new winner 5% of the time or 1 out of 20 videos – so 3 winners. Since we felt confident in our creative ideas, we decided to look deeper into our testing methods.

The traditional testing methodology includes the idea of testing a testing system or an A/A test. A/A tests are like A/B tests, but instead of testing multiple creatives, you test the same creative in each "slot" of the test.

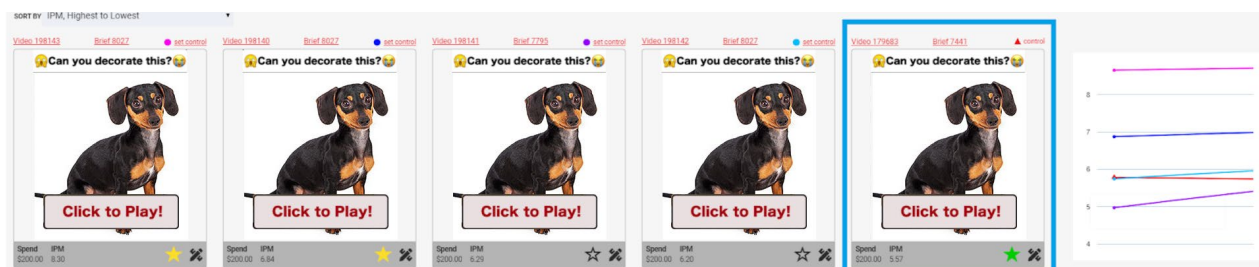
If your testing system/platform is working as expected, all "variations", should produce similar results assuming you get close to statistical significance. If your A/A test results are very different, and the testing platform/methodology concludes that one variation or another significantly outperforms or underperforms compared to the other variations, there could be an issue with the testing method or quantity of data gathered.

First A/A test of video creative

Here's how we set up an A/A test to validate our non-standard approach to Facebook testing. The purpose of this test was to understand if Facebook maintains a creative history for the control and thus gives the control a performance boost making it very difficult to beat – if you don't allow it to exit the learning phase and reach statistical relevance.

We copied the control video four times and added one black pixel in different locations in each of the new "variations." This allowed us to run what would look like the same video to humans but would be different videos in the eyes of the testing platform. The goal was to get Facebook to assign new hash IDs for each cloned video and then test them all together and observe their IPMs.

These are the ads we ran... except we didn't run the hotdog dog; I've replaced the actual ads with cute doges to avoid disclosing the advertiser's identity. IPMs for each ad in the far right of the image.



Things to note here:

The far-right ad (in the blue square) is the control.

All the other ads are clones of the control with one black pixel added.

The far-left ad/clone outperformed the control by 149%. As described earlier, a difference like that shouldn't happen. If the platform was truly variation agnostic, BUT – to save money, we did not follow best practices to allow the ad set(s) to exit the learning phase.

We ran this test for only 100 installs. Which is, our standard operating procedure for creative testing.

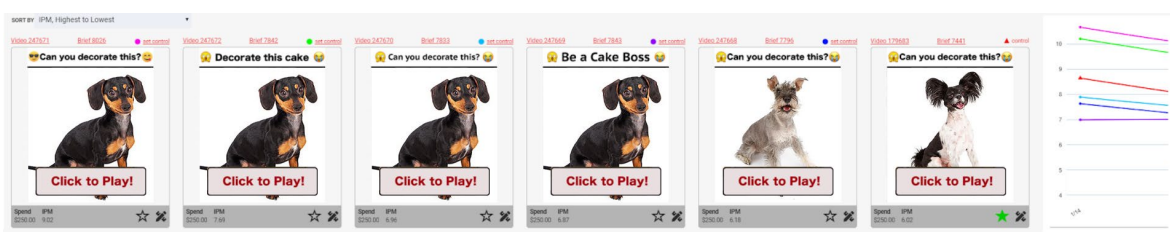
Once we completed our first test to 100 installs, we paused the campaign to analyze the results. Then we turned the campaign back on to scale up to 500 installs in an effort to get closer to statistical significance. We wanted to see if more data would result in IPM normalization (in other words, if the test results would settle back down to more even performance across the variations). However, the results of the second test remained the same. Note: the ad set(s) did not exit the learning phase and we did not follow Facebook's best practice.

The results of this first test, while not statistically significant, were surprisingly enough to merit additional tests. So, we tested on!

Second A/A test of video creative

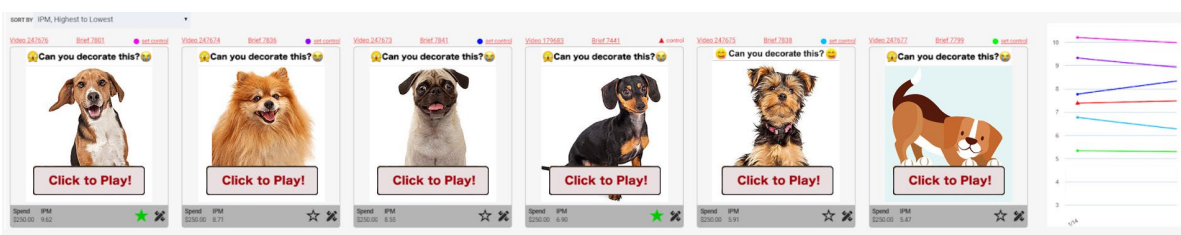
For our second test, we ran the six videos shown below. Four of them were controls with different headers; two of them were new concepts that were very similar to the control. Again, we didn't run the hotdog dogs; they've been inserted to protect the advertiser's identity and to offer you cuteness!

The IPMs for all ads ranged between 7-11 – even the new ads that did not share a thumbnail with the control. IPMs for each ad in the far right of the image.



Third A/A test of video creative

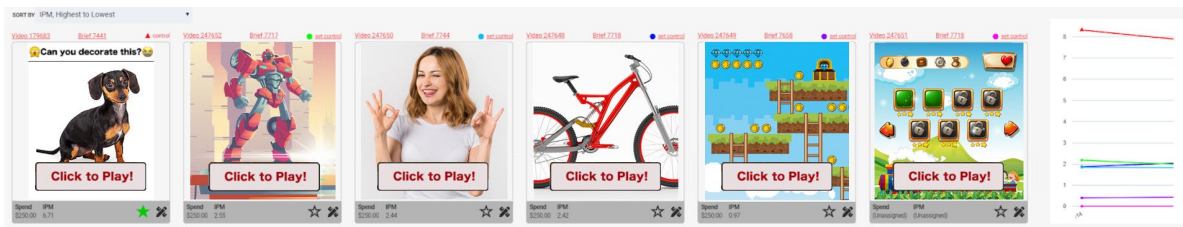
Next, we tested six videos: one control and five visually similar variations to the control but one very different to a human. IPMs ranged between 5-10. IPMs for each ad in the far right of the image.



Fourth A/A test of video creative

This was when we had our “ah-ha!” moment. We tested six very different video concepts: the one control video and five brand new ideas, all of which were visually very different from the control video and did not share the same thumbnail.

The control’s IPM was consistent in the 8-9 range, but the IPMs for the new visual concepts ranged between 0-2. IPMs for each ad in the far right of the image.



Here are our impressions from the above tests:

Facebook’s split-tests maintains creative history for the control video. This gives the control advantage with our non-statistically relevant, non-standard best practice of IPM testing.

We are unclear if Facebook can group variations with a similar look and feel to the control. If it can, similar-looking ads could also start with a higher IPM based on influence from the control — or perhaps similar thumbnails influence non-statistically relevant IPM.

Creative concepts that are visually very different from the control appear to not share a creative history. IPMs for these variations are independent of the control.

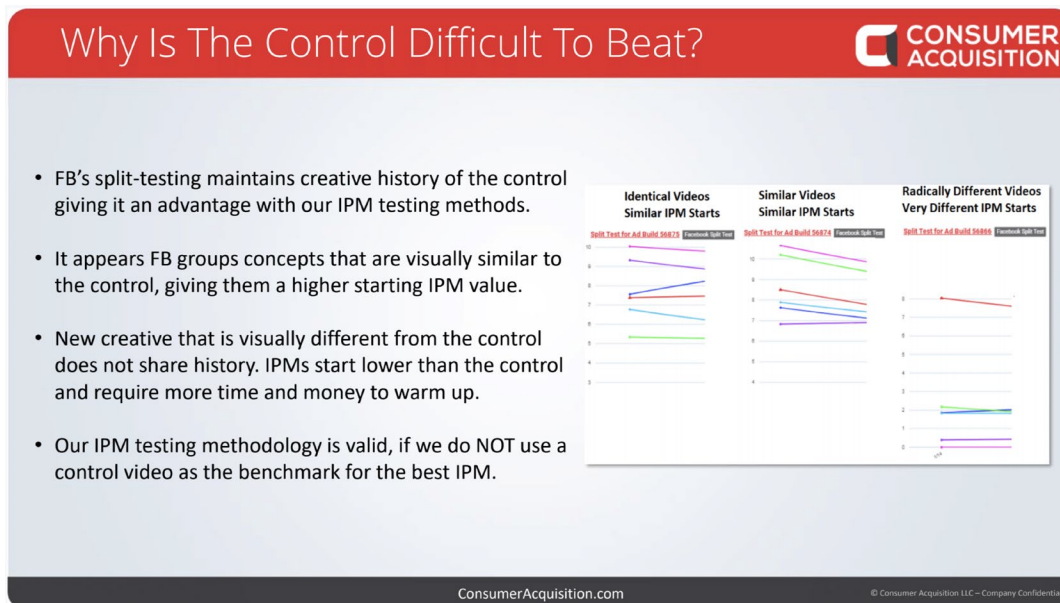
It appears that new, “out of the box” visual concepts vs the control may require more impressions to quantify their performance.

Our IPM testing methodology appears to be valid if we do NOT use a control video as the benchmark for winning.

IMP Testing Summary

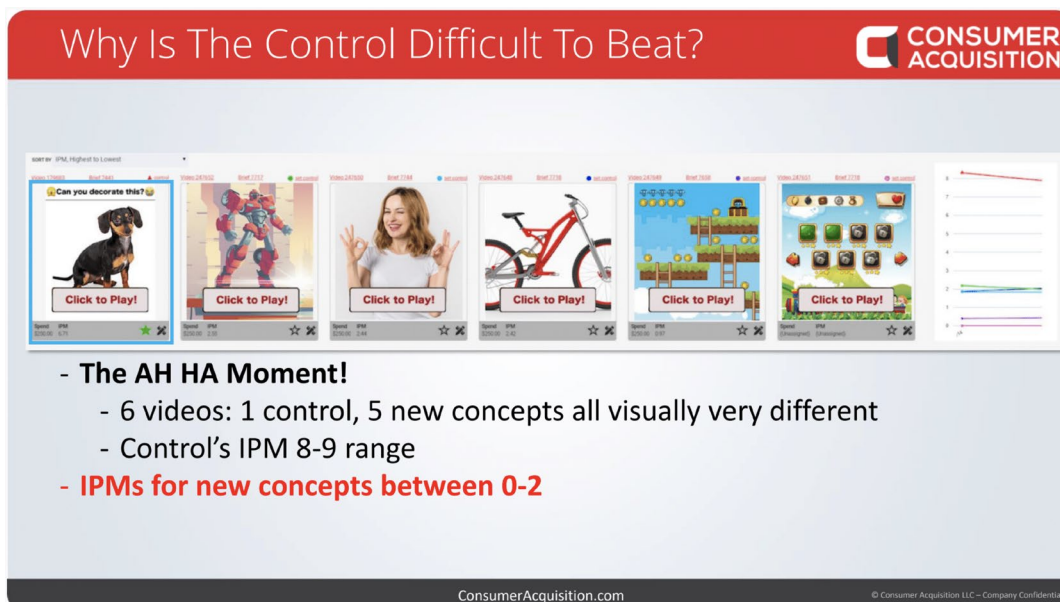
1. During our testing, we noticed that Facebook maintains creative history for the current video winner during an A/B test. This makes the control video very difficult to beat when using our IPM testing methodology.
2. Ads that are visually similar to the control appear to be grouped together in terms of how the algorithm treats them. They are also automatically given a higher IPM (impressions per thousand) value, even at the very start of a test.
3. Any new creative that is visually very different from the control does not share this creative history. This “very different creative” will start the test with a lower IPM. As a consequence of this, any creative that is visually very different from the control will require more time and money to “warm up” its creative history. It will also require more time and money to get out of the learning phase and into the optimized phase before it ever has a chance of competing against the control.

Here's what this all looks like in terms of the performance of different ads:



If the split-testing did not maintain creative history, the starting value for IPMs would be much closer. But as you can see in the chart above, this is not what our tests show is happening.

This feature causes test results like the one below, where we have set up a brand new test with an existing control, and right at the start, the control is granted an IPM around 8-9, but all the other (visually very different) ads get IPMs around 0-2.



Interesting, eh?

This discovery forced us to retest a lot of creative and re-think our testing methodologies. The good news is that after re-testing a lot of our old creative, 95% of the newly retested creative that had previously failed to beat the control, actually improved its performance to a 85% failure rate (as opposed to the 95% failure rate all that creative had had before). This all resulted in a 29% lift in ROAS thanks to our new approach to testing, which takes into account the “creative history” factor in Facebook’s testing algorithm.

It took us a lot of work... but ultimately, we got a 29% lift in ROAS.

So how can you work with creative history being maintained? [Watch our video](#) for the step by step process, but basically, don't use a control video as the benchmark for testing new creative. Don't put your control inside the split-test of your new creative concepts. Instead, run all your new creative concepts against each other – without the control. Then let these “challenger” videos build up enough learning to effectively compete with the control “champion video.”

Creative Testing 2.0

Given the above results, those of us testing using IPM have an opportunity to re-test IPM winners that exclude the control video to determine if we've been killing potential winners. As such, we recommend the following three-phase testing plan.

Creative Testing Phase 1: Initial IPM Test

- Use 3~6 creatives in one ad set with MAI bidding (NEVER include the control in the ad set)
- Less expensive than Facebook split testing but not a best practice and will not achieve statistically relevance
- 5% LAL in the US (for other countries, still use 5% LAL)
- This will give you an audience reach of 10M or smaller (other geos)
- Isolate one OS (iOS or Android)
- Facebook Newsfeed only
- Generate over 100 installs (50 installs are acceptable in high CPI scenarios)
- 100 installs: 70% confidence with 5% margin of error ° 160 installs: 80% confidence with 5% margin of error
- 270 installs: 90% confidence with 5% margin of error
- Lifetime budget: \$500~\$1,000 to drive installs that reach more than 70% confidence level
- The goal is to kill IPM losers quickly and inexpensively and then take top 1~2 IPM winners to phase 2

Creative Testing Phase 2: Initial ROAS Test

- Once you have high IPM winners identified, you can move into initial ROAS testing to see if high IPMs also will generate revenue
- Create a new campaign
- Test IPM winners from Phase 1 with AEO or VO
- 10% LAL, auto-placement, Android or iOS but do NOT test using WW audiences, chose only one country
- 1 ad set with IPM winners from phase 1
- Create new campaigns for new IPM winners from next rounds – do not add winners from other tests
- Lifetime budget: \$800~\$1,500

Creative Testing Phase 3: ROAS Scale Test

- Choose winners from Phase 2 with good ROAS
- Use CBO, create new ad set and roll them out towards the target audiences that produce good results for the control
- New ad set for new creative winners from different testing rounds
- Never compete against control in an ad set, instead, have them separated and compete for more budget within the same campaign

Note:

We're still testing many of our assumptions and non-standard practices.

- Is it helpful to warm up IPM winners and establish “creative history” by purchasing installs in inexpensive countries?
- How long should IPM winners be “isolated” from the control to allow time for learning to be built up?
- 5-10% of LaL is contingent on the population of the country being tested?
- Results don't appear to change being run as 1 ad per ad set or many ads per ad set?
- Will lifetime vs daily budgets matter?
- Does a new campaign matter?
- Does resetting the post ID matter?
- Should creative testing be isolated to a test account?

We look forward to hearing how you're testing and sharing more of what we uncover soon.

Conclusion

Once you understand how the social advertising platforms, Facebook and Google, are changing their AI and tools, and you understand the power of testing, it's clear: **CREATIVE IS KING.**

So you know creative is the best path to high ROAS. Creative trends allow you to effectively steal ideas from competitors. Player profiles extend the audience and performance of your ads, while enhanced creative testing saves time and money.

These elements should all be shaping your creative strategy. You know all this requires a lot of testing – and efficient testing, at that – to surface the high-performance creative you need to keep your campaigns alive.

We've gotten to know it well after performing more than 10,000 A/B and multivariate tests on Facebook and its competitor, Google. We produce more than 100,000 video and image ads every year. We have managed over \$3 billion in paid social ad spend.

Hopefully the learnings from our work have helped you understand the landscape and the trends rising in “Creative Strategy 2.0” and “Creative Testing 2.0”.

If you'd like to learn more about our creative testing system, and what we've learned about Facebook's testing algorithm, [check out our fun explainer video or read our white paper on the subject.](#)

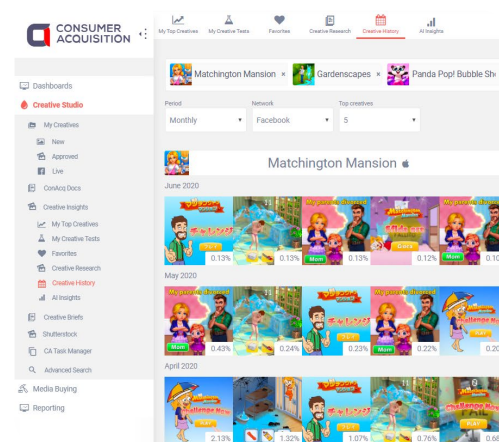
FREE CREATIVE TESTING

- For the first time, anyone who becomes a client will have access to FREE Facebook Creative Testing.
- You can remove the burden of A/B testing creative from your internal UA team.
- You cover the media fees, and Consumer Acquisition's world-class UA team will manage the media buying of creative split tests for FREE (0% of spend) using our proven 3-step methodology detailed above.
- Contact: Sales@ConsumerAcquisition.com if you would like to take advantage of this offer.



FREE CREATIVE INSPIRATION

- Want to know which of your competitors' video creative really drive their best performance?
- View +1,000,000 video ads from competitive apps and see which creatives work.
- To get full access to all FREE Creative Inspiration, please register for a free AdRules account or contact Sales@ConsumerAcquisition.com for more information.



FREE MOBILE APP INDUSTRY BENCHMARKS

- Ever wonder how your mobile game or app KPIs perform vs industry benchmarks?
- Check out our "Mobile App Industry Benchmarks" dashboard and it is 100% FREE.
- See competitive KPIs like CTR, CPM, CPC, CPI, IPM, Conv%, country breakdowns, and more.
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