Let's make this more interesting

British Brands Group

Adam Morgan is the Founding Partner of eatbigfish, an international consultancy that specialises in bringing a Challenger Mindset to client problems in the areas of strategy, culture and innovation.

His first book, *Eating The Big Fish: How Challenger Brands can compete against Brand Leaders*, first popularised the term 'Challenger Brand.' In the 20 years since it was first published he has continued to share the findings of his research into challengers in *The Pirate Inside* (how to develop a challenger microculture in a large organisation), *A Beautiful Constraint* (how challenger teams turn apparent limitations into sources of opportunity) and *Overthrow*, which looks at 10 different kinds of challenger narrative. His latest project, the podcast *Let's Make This More Interesting*, is out now.

Let's make this more interesting

Adam Morgan

Author and Founder of eatbigfish

Let me start with what I want.

I want all of us to see the vast undertow of dull and mediocre around us for what it is and what it is costing us. It is costing far more than we think.

I want us all to be much more intentional about intercepting dull and about turning the dull into the interesting. Not everywhere, but where it really matters to us, where we cannot afford to be dull anymore.

I will offer some simple tools which, together with Peter Field, I have started to put together and which may be helpful to you when having the conversations needed to change those around you.

While my focus is on brands and advertising, this is obviously a much bigger conversation in the world around us. I have been in the advertising business for forty years and I am struck by the fact that, for all we have learned from Peter and Les Binet and their analysis of IPA data on what makes marketing effective, the reality is that the amount of the dull and mediocre around us is as big as it ever was, possibly bigger. It may only increase, the way the world is going.

If we step back and look at the bigger trends in the world, below right is a typical range of headlines on how the world is becoming more homogeneous, how every category is beginning to look the same and how blandness is creeping over the world. It's everywhere. It is one of the reasons living in the world of challengers has been so enjoyable for me.

There is an excellent article by the strategy director Alex Murrell called 'The Age of Average' where he pulls this together and illustrates how every Airbnb from Finland to Peru looks exactly the same. I think this is known as Australian Coastal as an aesthetic, if you are looking to apply this to your own home.

And if you think of twenty-five different brands of small SUV, which ones really stand out to you?

I thought not.

The tyranny of the algorithm: why every coffee shop looks the same

THE AGE OF INSTAGRAM FACE
How social media, FaceTune, and plastic surgery created a single, cyborgian look.

Welcome to Your Bland New World
Why do disruptive startups slavishly follow an identikit formula of business model, look and feel, and tone of voice? Because it works, sort of.

Why have buildings become so boring?

The age of average

Britain is plagued by bland, box-ticking television. Bring back weird TV

The Tyranny of Terrazzo Will the millennial aesthetic ever end?

Blanding – The hottest branding trend of the year is also the worst

Why Do All Chefs Cross Their Arms in Photos?
A completely serious investigation of the most popular pose on restaurant websites, TV cooking shows, and photo ops

What are 'beige flags?' What to know about TikTok's relationship trend

And is it a coincidence that most tend to be white? Absolutely not. Thirty years ago half of us used to have a colourful car. Today, most of us have a car that is grey, black, white or silver.

Car Colours By Year

Source: Alex Murrell, Jokul Solburg and Orlando Wood

Finally, have a look at these eight tech brands and seven fashion brands.

Source: Velvetshark

We think of a logo as the heart, the essence, of a brand and you can see that any ounce of character that existed on the logos on the left has been removed in their most recent iterations. And you can also see that, in doing so, all the logos in the columns on the right are almost identical.
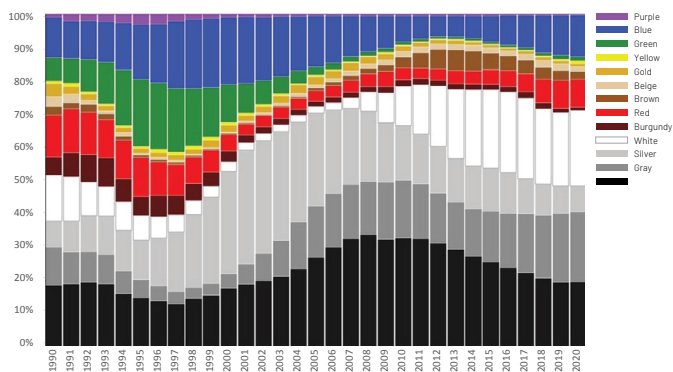
You might also have listened to the podcast from Thomas Heatherwick, 'Building Soul,' in which he talks about the 'global blandemic' of architecture. And he's right. There really is a global blandemic. But what does it have to do with us and what are we going to do about it?

My premise is that beige is the big elephant in the middle of the marketing room and it's up to us to do something about it.

In thinking about what to do about this, I thought that the first thing we have to do is make dullness itself more interesting. What a delicious challenge that is.

So, our starting point here is this. If you are familiar with the work of Daniel Kahneman, you'll know that one of the points he makes is that the pain of losing something is twice as powerful for us all as the pleasure of gaining something. So, I was having a conversation with Peter Field and asked, "All that wonderful work you and Les have done with the IPA about the benefits of creativity – could we turn that data on its head, flip it upside down, and look at the *cost of dull*? Can we put an actual concrete pound sterling cost on dull and, if so, what would it tell us?"

> "
> 'Interesting' gives you six times the bang for your buck that 'dull' does. "

How much? How can we tell? And why?

This is a little play in three acts. The first act is about 'How Much?' Just how expensive is dull?

The second question was one I was asked by a planner that might seem obvious but is also brilliant: "How do you know if you are dull or not?"

And the third act is 'Why'? It's not as if the brand world is full of stupid people. It's also not as if we have bad intentions. So how can it be that so many smart, well-intentioned people can produce such dross?

1. How much?

Let's start by looking at how much dull costs. To assess this has been very much a collaboration, and we are actively looking for more collaborators. The IPA and Peter Field have been at the heart of this, with a lot of help also from the ad testing company System1. Let's start with Peter's work: he has taken around five to six hundred digital cases from the IPA data bank, looking at two different kinds of cases.

In the chart below, the first dataset, in the blue column on the left, features effectiveness cases that succeeded primarily using factual information. Let's call them 'rational' cases, and we can use that as a proxy for 'dull' here. They make no attempt to engage the audience emotionally – their aim is to convince you by using facts. The green column, conversely, represents examples of cases which are emotionally engaging enough to inspire people to talk about them or share them with someone else. We are using these cases as a proxy for 'interesting.'

Dull ads don't work very hard
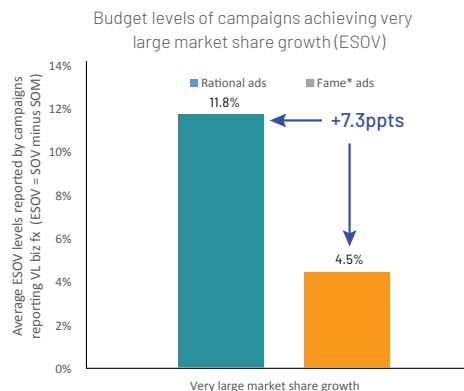
Share Growth per unit of Ad Investment
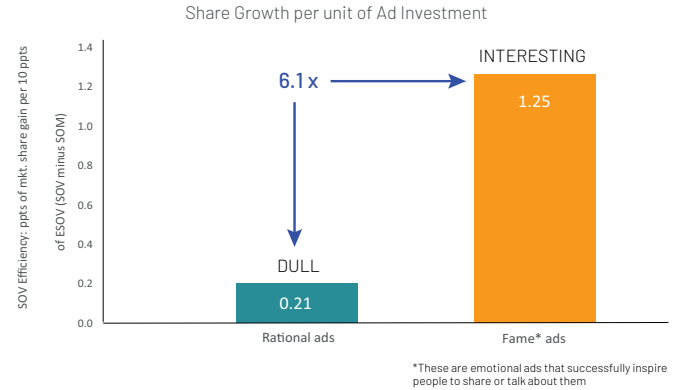
Source: IPA effectiveness databank, 1998-2022 cases, N=249, 215

What this chart looks at is bang for your buck – what you get for the same amount of money, in terms of share increases, for both dull and interesting advertising. And you can see from this that dull ads don't work very hard. 'Interesting' gives you six times the bang for your buck that 'dull' does.

Well, I can hear you say, that's kind of interesting, but it's not what you promised me. What was promised was not the upside of interesting, but the cost of dull.

So what Peter then did was look at the cases that actually created the greatest amount of share increase and what it cost both dull and interesting campaigns to drive the same amount of share gain.
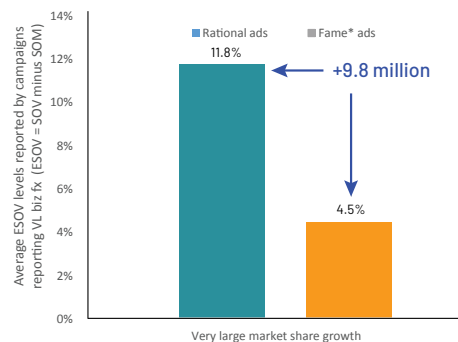
The true cost of Dull

Budget levels of campaigns achieving very large market share growth (ESOV)

Average ESOV levels reported by campaigns reporting VL biz fx (ESOV = SOV minus SOM)

■ Rational ads ■ Fame* ads

11.8% ← +7.3ppts

4.5%

Very large market share growth

Source: IPA effectiveness databank, 1998-2022 cases

What does this mean in £fe?

Average ESOV levels reported by campaigns reporting VL biz fx (ESOV = SOV minus SOM)

■ Rational ads ■ Fame* ads

11.8% ← +9.8 million

4.5%

Very large market share growth

*These are emotional ads that successfully inspire people to share or talk about them

And what you can see is it takes 7.3 percentage points extra of share of voice for a dull campaign to create the same impact as an interesting campaign. And that what that amounts to in money terms is roughly £10 million.

What I love about this as an idea is that it says, "Look, it is okay to be dull. You may have good reasons for that. But do it with your eyes wide open – you can still be effective and be dull if you're prepared to pay the extra money."

Now potentially that makes for some interesting conversations at the beginning of media planning cycles, doesn't it. "You know what, our CEO is very risk averse. We know he will want it to be a bit dull, so we've asked him for £7 million more". Can we start to have that conversation in a more data led way?
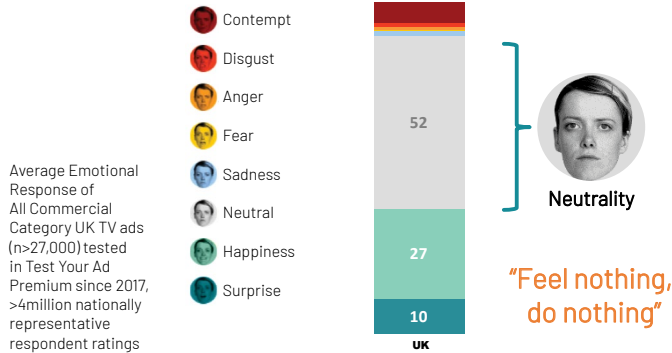
Let's look at another data set. System1, if you don't know them, are an ad testing company with huge data sets. They have tested 27,000 ads in the UK since 2017 and that's the sample size behind this piece of work.

A key metric in the work they do is the primary emotional response from the viewer once the ad has been seen. There are negative responses such as fear or contempt (a charity ad, for example, may be upsetting) or positive responses, perhaps of happiness or surprise. In the middle are neutral responses, which we'll use as a proxy for dull: "I feel nothing at all after seeing this."
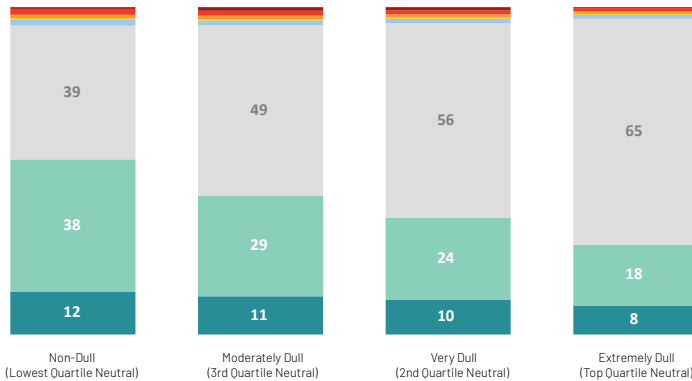
So, looking at the data from 27,000 ads in the UK, what is the average response? How many people feel neutral after seeing an ad? The answer is 52%. It is the majority feeling.

Emotion builds brands but Neutrality – feeling nothing – is the main response to UK TV Advertising

Average Emotional Response of All Commercial Category UK TV ads (n>27,000) tested in Test Your Ad Premium since 2017, >4million nationally representative respondent ratings

Contempt
Disgust
Anger
Fear
Sadness
Neutral
Happiness
Surprise

52

27

10
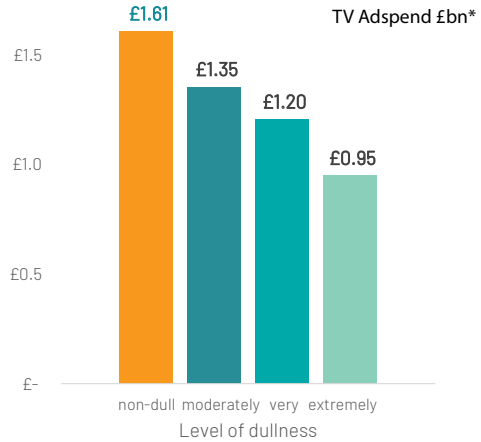
UK

Neutrality

"Feel nothing, do nothing"

Our next question was whether we could put a cost on how much dull is costing the branding and marketing industries in the UK over a year. The ads were broken into four quartiles ranging from 'non-dull' to 'extremely dull' and System1 estimated how much spend was put behind each.

The cost of Dull TV advertising to UK Brands

TV Adspend £bn*

£1.5
£1.0
£0.5
£-

£1.61
£1.35
£1.20
£0.95

non-dull   moderately   very   extremely

Level of dullness

*Average Estimated annual spend on All UK TV Commercial ads (n>27,000) tested in Test Your Ad Premium since 2017. c7200 ads per quartile. Spend estimates projected from Nielsen ad-level spend estimates for ads monitored in Test Your Ad, extrapolated to total UK TV Commercial spend estimate for 2022 (Statista)

Encouragingly, people are prepared to back the more interesting advertising, though there is still over £3½ billion spent every year on the duller stuff, as we can see from the figure on the left here

In the central figure, below, you can see that the least dull stuff gives you a lot more bang for your buck than the dullest quartile – which, frankly, isn't working very hard at all.

What is that costing the business? What would it cost brand investors featured in the three columns on the right to have the same kind of impact as the non-dull stuff? The answer is it would cost about £13.3 billion a year.

Grouping UK TV ads into Dullness quartiles, Happiness and Surprise suffer as Neutrality rises (see key above)

39
38
12

49
29
11

56
24
10

65
18
8

Non-Dull
(Lowest Quartile Neutral)

Moderately Dull
(3rd Quartile Neutral)

Very Dull
(2nd Quartile Neutral)

Extremely Dull
(Top Quartile Neutral)

Average Emotional Response of All Commercial Category UK TV ads (n>29,000) tested in Test Your Ad Premium since 2017. >6700 ads per quartile.

The cost of Dull TV advertising to UK Brands

TV Adspend £bn*

Level of dullness

non-dull: £1.61
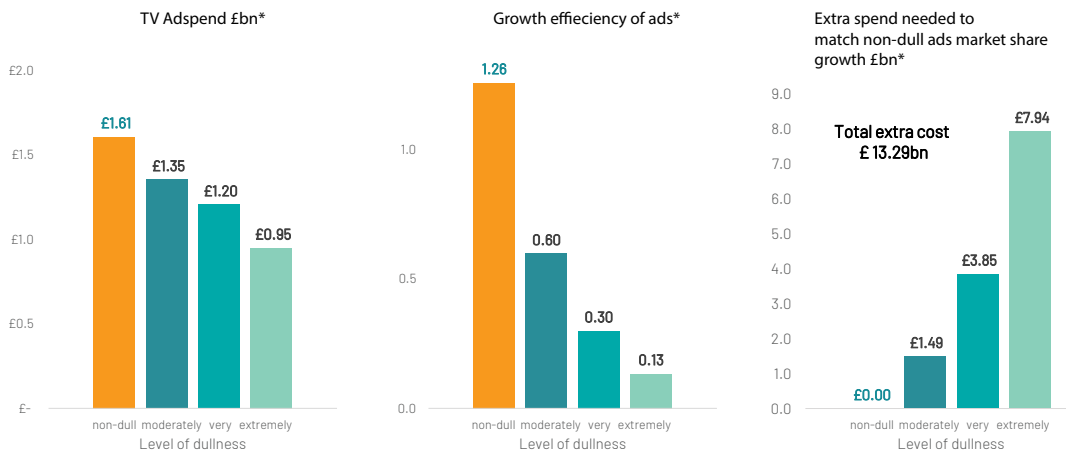moderately: £1.35
very: £1.20
extremely: £0.95

*Average Estimated annual spend on All UK TV Commercial ads (n>27,000) tested in Test Your Ad Premium since 2017. c7200 ads per quartile. Spend estimates projected from Nielsen ad-level spend estimates for ads monitored in Test Your Ad, extrapolated to total UK TV Commercial spend estimate for 2022 (Statista)

Growth effieciency of ads*

Level of dullness

non-dull: 1.26
moderately: 0.60
very: 0.30
extremely: 0.13

*Annualised SOM gain points projected from Star ratings assuming a brand of 5% SOM and 15% SOM = +10 ESOV

Extra spend needed to match non-dull ads market share growth £bn*

Total extra cost £ 13.29bn

Level of dullness

non-dull: £0.00
moderately: £1.49
very: £3.85
extremely: £7.94

*Estimated extra annual spend over current levels needed to match forecast growth potential of non dull campaigns

We are just a few months into this research, starting at the top of the funnel and are going to be really interested to look at areas further down the funnel next. There's fascinating brand experience work being done by a company called Mesh, who have data that suggests that, in terms of brand experience, 'neutral is the new negative.' In other words, merely having a neutral experience within a totality of brand experiences is a mark against you. One can conjecture that people now expect more as consumers, are looking for some kind of positive reward in return for their attention.

And if any of you are sitting on a mine of in-store data that can help us understand the cost of dull in-store, we'd love to see that.

We are also interested in the other kinds of costs of dull beyond the financial. In The Examined Life by the psychoanalyst Stephen Grosz, he talks about a series of cases he has worked on and what can be learned from them. One involves a patient who is really boring. They are so boring, in fact, that the psychoanalyst finds himself almost nodding off in the middle of their sessions. He then realizes that the patient has become dull with people, whether consciously or unconsciously, in order to exclude the world.

I'm struck by this idea that dullness is a form of exclusion. That unconsciously, by being dull, we are actually excluding our customers and internal colleagues from engaging with what we have to offer. A fascinating – and, I think, important – idea for us all.

> "We need to sit up and learn from a much broader set of experts if we're going to turn the tide of dullness"

So dullness is everywhere. Dullness is much, much more expensive than we think. And dullness is a choice. It is a choice we are making, consciously or unconsciously, or allowing to be made around us. Nothing is inherently dull. We just allow it to stay so or we make it so ourselves.

Oh, and by the way, there is another kind of choice to be made. If you don't want to be interesting, there's a Facebook group called the Dull Men's Club, which for some reason is only open to men. It has 600,000 members worldwide and in it you can share your fascination for eccentric rubbish bins, pot-hole art or whatever. So there is a choice...

2. How can you tell?

Let's turn to the second question: how can we tell we are dull? You sometimes hear dull being explained away by quite simple statements such as 'There is not enough storytelling here. Making things interesting is all about story.'

Well, certainly story is something that we can use. However, it is only one way of talking about dull. So I want to lay dull out on the surgeon's table – dissect it into four constituent parts, drawing from my learning from the podcast I've been doing, 'Let's Make This More Interesting,' which is really a response to what we are seeing in dull around us.

I deliberately looked at a broader group of interviewees for the podcast than just marketers. Up to now, the research in the books I have written has looked at challengers in the brand world. The podcast looks at a different group of people: experts from outside our business who make dull subjects interesting, such as science teachers, talent show producers, the makers of wildlife documentaries, industrial theatre writers, storytelling experts and journalists.

Take reality TV show producers. Let's imagine that Adam turns up to audition for Britain's Got Talent. And it turns out that Adam has the voice of an angel but boy is he dull... So the reality TV producer's job is to make sure that, by the time Adam walks out on stage six weeks later and Simon Cowell asks, "So Adam, tell us about yourself," the audience feels something about Adam in under 60 seconds. If he fails, that's bad television.

If you're questioning what we in marketing can learn from these outside experts, just take a moment to read this letter:

Making maths amusing
To The Times

Further to your report "Give maths a less scary name," "maths' is intimidating and "numeracy" sounds boring. My daughter's school once introduced a lunchtime maths club. No one turned up. The school then introduced a lunchtime puzzle club. Everyone came.

Sharon Footerman, London

Isn't that brilliant? I think far too many of us in marketing are selling the lunchtime maths club and not enough are selling the lunchtime puzzle club. We need to sit up and learn from a much broader set of experts if we're going to turn the tide of dullness.

So, let's look at the four ways we can be dull.

Dull #1: It's a subject they don't care about

I'm going to stick with the teaching theme. The first kind of dull is where the subject is something in which your audience is not interested.

Let's go to Addison, a science teacher in Leigh, Greater Manchester, who teaches science to teenagers. He tells me that, in a class of 13, 14, 15-year-olds, only 20% of them are interested in science, let alone the topic he's actually teaching. So, if he's teaching 'forces' for example, there's no point in him putting up a picture of Sir Isaac Newton or an equation representing forces. He must start somewhere completely different, with something they are actually interested in, and hook them that way.

So, he said, "I put a picture of my dog up. They know my dog, they see the dog around town they like my dog, and in the photo the dog's head is out of the car window. We're driving along, and his ears going in one direction, jowls and tongue in another. And I ask, "What's going on here?" "It's the wind, Sir," one of them says. "Quite right" I say, "and why is the wind doing that?" And so we get into a conversation about forces through something they can relate to."

The solution to teaching somebody a subject they are not naturally interested in, he told me, is to make it relatable. You need to speak in their language. I'm really struck by how many people are starting to do this in really interesting ways.

There is a fascinating couple of Kiwis with a podcast and a book called 'Girls That Invest.' My 24-year-old goddaughter told me about them as she is beginning to get interested in investing. I thought, really? At 24? That's impressive. She told me she had never been remotely interested in investing, mainly because middle-aged people like me have been gatekeeping it by using arcane and very complicated language which she didn't find very accessible. But these two Kiwis talked her language. For instance, when they're talking about blended investments, they say, "Blended investments are like the other Jonas brother. It's nice to know he's there but you don't need to worry about him." Fantastic right? Make it relatable and talk to them in their language.

And I'd suggest this is much more important to all of us as marketers than we might think. Look at the following data point:

"56% of people in the UK can't think of a single brand they feel connected with or understood by." Grayling Survey, August 2023, 2,000 UK consumers

I think this is striking. You may be tempted to skip this kind of dullness, believing it's not relevant to you, but actually that figure is telling us that people are not half as interested in our category as we would like to think they are.

We need to do much more than we are doing to find our equivalent of the dog with his head out of the window, and much more to talk to people in their

language. It is a fundamentally different approach and even bigger issues like the environment need it.

The other day I was on a Diageo podcast with an extraordinary woman, Clover Hogan, who at the age of eleven decided she was going to be an environmental activist. She's now the grand old age of twenty-four, so she's been an activist for 13 years. Her point was the reason the environmental message isn't getting through is because no one understands what 1.5 degrees means. We're not talking to people about climate change in their kind of language, or making things relatable to their lived experience, she says.

So, to recap, the first kind of dull concerns subjects people don't care about, where they are being spoken to not in their language or in a way that is relatable to them. And let's be really honest with ourselves – are we guilty of doing that?

To the second way of being dull, then

Dull #2: It's a perspective they already know

An American sociologist, Murray S. Davies, in 1971 looked at what he called 'social theories' from over the last one hundred years. He considered everybody from Marx and Freud all the way to RD Laing (bear in mind the study ended in 1971). He concluded that the theories which are still talked about and remembered are those that are not only true but also interesting.

Interesting theories are those that deny a key assumption of the audience and the dull ones are those that *confirm* them. As an example, Marx' "property is theft" certainly wasn't my assumption about property (or theft, come to that). Freud's "disgust is repressed desire" counters my existing assumption – I had thought disgust was the opposite of desire.

Let's just apply this to some of our own more recent equivalents of 'social theories' in the marketing world. I think it holds up pretty well. In Peter Field and Les Binet's book 'Marketing in the Era of Accountability,' for instance, a key finding was that communication is actually not so much about messages, it's much more about emotion – that wasn't what the marketing world had thought up to then. Or Professor Byron Sharp in his book 'How Brands Grow,' who challenged our belief that loyalty was a thing. No, he told us – if you want loyalty, get a dog. In each case the assertions are true but have undermined a key assumption we held.

We can look at this in terms of communication too. This is the blunt force trauma that was Tiffany's relaunch.

This very successful relaunch denied our assumptions not only about the choice of model but also the kind of environment in which this ad would be seen. It denied our assumptions and surprised us.

DIRT IS GOOD

Another (older) example comes from Unilever, a company that spent years educating us – like every other detergent – that dirt was bad. They flipped the whole model, told us dirt is good and denied our key assumption.

One recent, interesting example is Zoe, the nutrition app. As a 65-year-old, I think I know quite a lot about food. I've read a lot and I have some assumptions that I'm pretty sure are right. (And if they're wrong, I have a partner who puts me right…) But, Zoe says, "No. We're going to deny some of those assumptions." They specifically address and dismantle them.

Let's have a look at these diet myths, Zoe says to us. You thought it's all about counting calories? Not so much. You thought fat was bad and carbs are unhealthy. No, wrong. And if I double click on their 'Diet Myth 2: Fat is bad', what is my assumption about dairy fat? Well, I know a cheeseboard is a heart attack waiting to happen. No, Zoe says. 'Eating full-fact dairy products may actually reduce the risk of developing heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and poor bone health, despite the high saturated fat content.' And what is their (rather smug) comment at the end of it? "That's interesting."

To recap then, the second way to tell we're dull is when the perspective around the topic is something our audience think they already know. Are we denying assumptions and surprising them? Are we really leaning hard enough into this to make us more interesting?

Dull #3: It's presented in the same way as everything else

Maz Farrelly, the reality TV producer, was a guest on my podcast, in episode two. She said, "I've done probably 12,000 auditions for reality shows now, and I'm fed up with people coming in and saying exactly the same thing as each other when they audition. I've got to the stage of putting signs up in reception telling them beforehand what not to say when they come in."

DON'T SAY… I'M A PEOPLE PERSON DON'T SAY… I'M GOING TO GIVE IT 110% DON'T SAY… I REALLY WANT TO WIN THIS

> "Are we denying assumptions and surprising them? Are we really leaning hard enough into this to make us more interesting?"

"Don't say, "I'm a people person.," for instance. Don't say, "I'm going to give 110%." Don't say, "I really want to win this." If you say these things, you are not going to get through. Say something different, or I'm not going to remember you"

We all know that is one of the basics of communication and advertising. But I go back to that sea of sameness and blandness and ask, "How are we really going to make the way we show up and what we say as different as it needs to be?"

I would like to offer two ideas. The first comes from a time when I was a frustrated novelist. I had decided that I would take a sabbatical every five years to write a novel and I found that, if I asked my CEO for a sabbatical in five years' time, that was so far beyond their usual horizon that they just said, "Sure, whatever."

One of my novels was written in response to a competition in a UK newspaper to write a blockbuster. For this blockbuster, you had to follow the precepts that Al Zuckerman, an agent for Ken Follett and a lot of blockbuster writers of the time, had laid out in his book, 'Writing the Blockbuster Novel.'

He gave five key themes that we had to follow, the second of which was about having larger-than-life characters. And I'm just going to read this out because it's so nicely written. It's the opening of that chapter:

> "Readers of popular fiction are rarely content to be immersed in the lives of the nice little couple next door. Readers remember a wonderful book's characters long after they forget the story's exciting plot or even its climax. Those characters who do remain in our minds for years and years appear in more than one way to be extraordinary."

My suggestion to you is that far too many of our brands are in effect the "nice little couple next door." Very few of them are actually these extraordinary characters. And I want to draw your attention to two extraordinary characters that I love as brands which might give us some stimulation and inspiration.

The first example is Ardbeg, a very smoky, peaty whisky from the west coast of Scotland on the island of Islay: A wonderful challenger. It doesn't have a long and unbroken continuum of history as a brand. It was mothballed twice in its history before the Glenmorangie Company bought it, and then Glenmorangie itself was bought by LVMH. Ardbeg does not have the rich stories that many other Scottish whisky brands have. So they needed to talk about themselves in a different way, and to do so they leant into their unusual product quality and character (the distiller actually describes the taste of Ardbeg as like 'biting into a spiky ball'). They wrapped that sense of fierceness into a very interesting personality. They called their five-year-old "Wee-Beastie", for example.

I don't know if you've walked through the whisky section of a duty-free in Heathrow or Dubai. I think Interbrand says there are some 500,000 brands in the world, and you'd get the impression from the average airport duty-free that about 490,000 of those were whisky brands. And they all look exactly the same. But this Wee Beastie is just completely different in tone and feel. So full of character.

Then the following year they did the *Monsters of Smoke* tour. Brilliant. Full of distinctiveness, yes, differentiation, yes, but mostly all about character.

The other wonderful character is Dishoom, the restaurant business, which uses character in a different way. It's a love letter to an enormous character, the city of Bombay, with the co-founders revelling in and celebrating everything about the Irani cafes there. This is an article that one co-founder wrote at the beginning of the year, reflecting on what they do that makes them different. It's so brilliantly written.

> "Some of you will already know that each Dishoom we open, we write a story which is rooted twice (like immigrants, perhaps): once in Bombay history and culture and once in the locale of the restaurant. In *Carnaby*, for example, Bombay's rock scene of the '60s and '70s is the backdrop, while our *King's Cross* goods shed tells the story of India's independence movement. The story informs all aspects of the the restaurant's design. We spend months in Bombay researching the period and ferreting out the right furniture and fittings, vintage and new. In a way, we walk acrdoss the threshold into our stories."

What a brilliant idea is that. Real distinctiveness, real character, but the point about this is that it takes work. This is not about some people being naturally characterful or naturally interesting while others aren't. It always takes work. Everyone I interviewed, the teacher, the reality TV producer, all put in the work when turning up to do the podcast to show up in an interesting way.

The latest book by Peter Biskind, a commentator on American film and TV, Pandora's Box, is about the rise of cable and streaming in the US. One of the things that he notes is that, in terms of our most popular characters on TV, being interesting has become more important than being likeable. The most important and most successful cable and TV show characters over the last 20 years are not *likeable* characters, they are *interesting* characters. That's a huge switch in the entertainment industry's understanding and thinking about what success looks like.

And of course it's not just confined to TV. You could say that the election in the US is going to be both interesting and boring as we contemplate the return of Trump. We will see who wins, but I was struck by Robert Shrimsley's comment in the Financial Times back in January 2021:

> "Washington without Donald Trump will be like *The Silence of the Lambs* without Hannibal Lecter; we may feel safer, but it's a lot less compelling."

> **"**
> Everyone I interviewed, the teacher, the reality TV producer, all put in the work when turning up to do the podcast to show up in an interesting way.
> **"**

Dull #4: It's presented in an uninvolving way

The fourth kind of dull is where we are presenting something in an uninvolving way – rationally, factually, rather than engaging the emotions of the audience. Which brings us finally to storytelling.

I did a fascinating interview with some ex-BBC people who talked about the evolution of natural history programmes. In the '90s, natural history programming was primarily about animal behaviour and was really in the doldrums. Viewers and broadcasters were losing their enthusiasm for them, with some major broadcasters even talking about 'resting' natural history programmes altogether.

Then something very interesting happened to the flagship BBC programme, Big Cat Diary : it was rescheduled from a nine o'clock slot to a seven o'clock slot. Now, the seven o'clock slot has an entirely different competitive set, mainly focused on soaps and game shows. The people behind Big Cat Diary were very concerned, thinking they didn't know how to compete against this very different

kind of competition. So they went to talk to a famous producer at EastEnders, Mal Young, and asked him how he made EastEnders work and succeed? What's the secret of your success? "It's very simple," he said. "You start each episode with a fight or a f**k, and you finish each episode with a hook or a hold – a sense of Oh My God, this world will never be the same again: I'm going to have to tune in tomorrow."

He taught them, in other words, that what you must do is tell stories. And what shifted for Big Cat Diary and all of BBC's subsequent natural history programmes was they then became about drama and storytelling and less about animal behaviour. Animal behaviour is still in there of course, but it is much more like a drama than a factual TV programme these days. That is a complete transformation.

When I interviewed Norman Styles, the head writer at Sesame Street, I asked, "At its heart, what made Sesame Street successful?" He answered, "Little dramas – a character really wanting something, and having to overcome an obstacle to get it. You have to know what the character wants. If you don't know that, it's just somebody standing around talking." I thought that was really interesting for us. How many of our customers know what our brand really wants?

So you have to know what the character wants. And then you must put an obstacle in their way which creates a little drama. Out of that drama, you can create the attention and engagement you really need to be more interesting.

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'The timing was impeccable': why it took a TV series to bring the Post Office scandal to light

Here is an example of the power of drama. Did any of us know or care about the sub post-masters before the programme came along ? No. A piece of drama elevated it to a sense of national outrage.

Max Fisher's book 'The Chaos Machine' is worth a mention here. It is an analysis of Facebook and the social media engines and tells us what the most powerful emotions are that drive the algorithms. The most powerful emotion of all apparently is moral outrage – and it is this here, too, of course, that drove so much of the popular feeling about the Post Office scandal.

So, while storytelling is not the answer to everything, it is a very powerful way to elevate people's interest in what could be quite boring categories. Back Market, for example, is a challenger brand that is essentially selling cheaper, reconditioned tech to us.

But they don't say that. What do they say? They cook up a wonderfully dark conspiracy about Big Tech trying to pull the wool over our eyes, which makes us much more interested in what they have to offer.

I just want mention humour here as an emotion in this area, partly because there is a lot of commentary about it at the moment (Cannes has just introduced a humour category, as you may know) and there is a lot to read on the relationship between purpose and humour. I love Peter Ustinov's quote, "Comedy is just a funny way of being serious." If you look at the most successful challengers over the last 20 years, the ones that have really changed categories have combined an almost religious fervour about that category with a sense of humour.

Whether it is Who Gives a Crap, Brewdog, Elon and his 'Ludicrous Button' or Tony's Chocolonely, what is really interesting is the relationship between purpose and humour in each of them. The reason they are so powerful a combination is because we do not think those two things should belong together.

There is a fascinating study about whether religious fundamentalists have less of a sense of humour than we do. And the answer is, they do. We do not expect someone with a religious fervour, with purpose, to

have a sense of humour. So that's one of the reasons why those challengers work so well.

It also raises interesting questions on what is going on in the world outside marketing. The US Federal Highway Authority debated whether it is okay to have funny road signs. The previous view was that you are not going to look at a dull 'Slow Down' message, but you might pay attention to these in Ohio and talk about them to your colleagues:

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> the more Spotify and Netflix know about us, the more they pump things to us they think we will like, so our peripheral vision gets smaller and smaller and smaller
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But the Federal Highway Commission has just produced a 1,100-page document on the subject, and on page 519 it says that in two years you must stop being funny because it is distracting. That must be wrong, surely. You have to make it more interesting.

Are we dull?

Let us do a quick self-audit of our brand. How many of the following are we really doing, and what is the opportunity to lean into them to make them more interesting:

Are we meeting people where they care and speaking to them in their language?

Are we denying assumptions, surprising them?

Are we showing real distinctiveness and character?

Are we engaging their emotions through storytelling and humour?

So, this is an example of a tool which can start a conversation. It is crude, perhaps – we are just at the beginning of this collaboration – but nevertheless it may be an interesting and productive conversation to have with your colleagues.

3. So why, then?

So here we are at Act 3: What on earth is going on? Why do so many smart, well-intentioned people do such dull stuff?

Well, the compassionate answer comes from Derek Thompson, the writer from the Atlantic, who says it is all to do with the category and with tech. The smarter we get in the category, he says, the duller we get. So, the more Spotify and Netflix know about us, the more they pump things to us they think we will like, so our peripheral vision gets smaller and smaller and smaller. He undertook an analysis of baseball in the post-Moneyball era, finding that what was revolutionary at the time has led to baseball becoming much more dull, as everyone now plays in the same way. It is all about the percentages. That may be a part of it.

But that's not what everybody we spoke to said. For most of them, there are three key themes that came out of people we spoke to outside branding and marketing.

The first reason they suggested is that we are being too dull because we are not really **respecting our audience**. We are not respecting the time we have with them and not honouring the fact that they are giving up a chunk of their life to listen to us. I like that fundamental grounding and foundation of 'honour your audience.' We are not putting in the work needed to really honour our audience.

The second reason we are being dull, in the brand world in particular, is that we have become too conditioned by performance marketing, by **performance think**. This is Peter Field's view. In performance marketing, it is assumed you don't need to get people too interested in the category because we are working on the basis that they already are. We have become used to showing up in a certain kind of way that is completely wrong for how brand building needs to work.

And the third reason we are being dull, which came from the person running the leading viral content studio in the US, is that, in our companies, we are simply **setting the bar too low**. What we *think* is the bar for being interesting is in reality much lower than the real bar. That is much, much higher. The bar for being *really* interesting is not by and large being set by brands at all, but by people outside the brand world.

This rather chilling statement appeared in the very early days of Facebook, by its very first president, and endless engineers ever since then worked towards this objective. Now, they are not even the most interesting player in social media anymore. That bar is much, much higher than you think it is. How I would love to do some work trying to quantify that: it seems to be the holy grail in terms of unpacking 'interesting.'

And finally, **it takes work**. There is a reason I am not suggesting we try to be much more interesting in everything we do because it takes time, effort and thought to do that. We just do not have enough time or energy, but in the things that really matter to us, big or small, where we are more interesting, we know it is going to make an impact.

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'How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?'

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Sean Parker, Founding President, Facebook

Photo by Becca Tapert on Unsplash

What happens next?

Peter Field, System1 and eatbigfish are all looking for collaborators to further this work. If you are sitting on a great data set, we would love to hear from you. We are also going to work with others like WARC to interpret their data and we want to develop more tools for interventions in different areas such as the environment and sustainability.

If you like podcasts, I would love you to listen to 'Let's Make This More Interesting.' Season 2 is soon to be released exploring some of these themes and the guests have some incredible insights.

And finally, I would just like to reflect on the fact that the cost of dull is a very real issue for us. We have been talking in a brand context this evening, but its broader impact around us is huge. I referred to the forthcoming American election earlier, which essentially is a contest of boring against interesting. Our forthcoming election in the UK, on the other hand, is boring against boring. And there's a price we're going to pay for that: low voter turnout.

I talked about Stephen Grosz's book earlier and his analysis that his patient had been using dull as a form of exclusion. He said, "My conclusion was, at the end of it, this patient was being dull because they were refusing to let the present matter." They were *refusing to let the present matter*.

Let us not refuse to let the present matter. Let's be more interesting. Let's see this undertow of dullness for what it is and let's make a change.

Thank you very much.

Low general election turnout likely with 'dull as dishwater' Sunak and Starmer

Polling expert says similarity between two main parties and clear Labour lead also likely to suppress voting numbers

Source: The Guardian

This is the twentieth in the Brands Lecture series. Previous lectures include:

Are brands good for Britain?
Tim Ambler, London Business School

Posh Spice and Persil
Jeremy Bullmore, WPP Group

100% marketing
Rob Malcolm, Diageo

Hybrids, the heavenly bed
and purple ketchup
David Aaker, Prophet

Brands beyond business
Simon Anholt, Earthspeak

The Lovemarks effect
Kevin Roberts, Saatchi & Saatchi

They think it's all over…
Martin Glenn, Birds Eye Iglo Group Limited

In brands we trust
Lord Bilimoria CBE DL, Cobra Beer

Can brands save the world?
Let's hope so.
Richard Reed, Innocent Drinks

Brand new: Innovation in a
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Fiona Dawson, Mars Chocolate

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Rory Sutherland, Ogilvy Group UK

Sports marketing – unleashing
the passion
Austin Lally, Procter & Gamble

Brands, capital and crises
Rita Clifton CBE, BrandCap

Consumers, brands and trust: happy
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Peter Vicary-Smith, Which?

Brands & CEOs
Professor Patrick Barwise, London Business School

Never mind the quality, feel the
personalisation. The future of retailing
Alan Giles, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford

Are brands a form of corporate bullsh*t?
Evan Davis, Economist, journalist and BBC presenter

Should brands take a stand?
Gary Coombe, Gillette

Brands – Falling in love again
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