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WHAT'S HOT!!



Words Matter: How to Communicate with Subtext in a Changing Demographic Landscape

At the turn of the millennium, the population of non-white ethnic minorities in the UK stood at 5%. Today, that figure stands at 17% and rising. The demographic landscape of the UK has undergone change at a rapid pace, and underneath this change sits an ever-evolving sea of sub-cultures and communities.

The UK is not a monolith, and our communications should reflect that. With more of the UK population growing up amid cultural diversity, there is a raft of signals, social cues and contexts that communicators, including marketers and advertisers, should understand. Equally, cultural references that are familiar to some British audiences might not be intuitively understood by those raised in cultures originating outside Britain. To ground this point in something tangible, let us consider high context and low context cultures.

Erin Meyer's book, *The Culture Map*, details how communication styles differ depending upon where in the world you live, building on the seminal work of anthropologist Edward T. Hall. While written to help people navigate increasingly global work environments, Meyer's observations still highlight how different cultures interpret direct and indirect communication.

Take India as an example, a country with a large diaspora in the UK. Indian communication styles tend towards the high-context end of the spectrum, involving subtlety and indirectness, often relying on learned social cues to carry greater meaning than the words themselves. Low context cultures, by contrast, are explicit in their communication, and meaning is conveyed through the precise choice of words.

For communicators in media, this has profound implications for how we address our audiences. On a foundational level, when speaking to communities within the UK who are traditionally from high context cultures, directness will likely fall flat. Conversely, when targeting those accustomed to low-context communication, relying on them to read between the lines risks obscuring the central message.

While this is a broad example, there are tangible benefits for brands that take steps to understand the social and societal cues that underpin diverse cultures. Vaseline's 2025 Cannes Lions Grand Prix-winning *Verified* campaign demonstrated this. Its intimate portrayal of self-care was built on a rich understanding of audiences and culture.

The intergenerational use cases showcased by Vaseline were intrinsic to many but would have been lost on those operating outside of the cultural milieu. This highlights how essential it is for brands and advertisers to ensure voices from the communities they seek to target are represented when making creative decisions. Rich Miles, CEO of the Diversity Standards Collective, said that after showing the creative to a group of white marketers, *'almost all said they'd flag it, unsure if it might be offensive. It struck me that an ad like this would likely never make it past a UK agency as fear and lack of cultural knowledge may have killed it off.'*

As the UK population becomes more ethnically diverse, resonating with distinct cultures is increasingly important for the future of marketing. The UK is a melting pot of people from far and wide. To the majority, words and actions carry certain meaning. To a growing proportion of Britain, they can mean something else entirely.



Advertising's Role in Unbreaking the News

The future of British journalism is at risk. Newsrooms are shrinking, journalists are being made redundant regularly, and the free press is dwindling. At the same time, advertisers are pulling away from news, and investment is on the decline.

A recent debate held at the House of Commons on the motion *'Advertising is breaking the news'* sought to examine the relationship between journalism and advertising. Chaired by Lord Black of Brentwood, a Conservative peer known for his extensive journalism career, the debate was organised by The Debating Group and sponsored by Newsworks.

Adam Foley, CEO of Bountiful Cow, and Monica Majumdar of Reach PLC opened by laying out the landscape of blunt-force keyword blocking and brand safety. 'Advertisers have become frightened of news,' argued Foley. He recalled the genesis of brand safety following a YouTube scandal in 2017 and the fear instilled in brands, despite advertising having been a fundamental feature of the press for centuries.

The collapse of ad revenue has decimated regional news. While, in 2007, news media boasted a 39% share of advertising spend, its share fell to just 6% by 2022. In contrast, Google and Meta now account for half of all UK media investment between them.

The Advertising Association's Matt Bourn went on to state that news must be funded from three sources: the taxman, paywalls and sponsorship. If the £2bn contribution of advertising to the news sector were to decline further, vital journalism would be at risk either of being left unserved or delivered exclusively behind a paywall. This, Channel 4's Katie Jackson argues, could lead to destructive censorship and propaganda proliferating.

Contesting the motion, Jackson argued that fragmentation, digital misinformation, and the decline of trust are killing the free press, not advertisers. The latter sentiment is echoed by the latest data from the7stars quarterly tracker, the QT, which found that net confidence in the nation's media stands at a damning -30, outdone only by the government (-40) and political parties (-57).

While opinions were divided in the chambers, with those viewing in the gallery narrowly voting in favour and those debating voting against, there was concurrence that the decline of quality news journalism poses a fundamental threat to the state.

Advertisers owe the news nothing, but it offers them so much. Advertising may not be breaking news, but it has a vital role to play in safeguarding the future of the fourth estate. Investing in quality journalism can enable legitimate news to regain credibility and win confidence among wider audiences. Over time, that circle of trust can gain momentum.

When we neglect the oldest, trusted form of media, we neglect the brands we advertise. When we neglect the brands we advertise, we neglect our industry too. News can be trusted – by brands, by advertisers and by readers.

Readers can be trusted to understand that brands who advertise alongside articles on attacks, assaults or arson do not endorse the events being reported. Editors can be trusted to make the right calls on where ads should or should not be shown.

The message from this debate was compelling: in news we trust, and in newsbrands we can trust too.



AI is Adding to, not Replacing the Christmas Shopping Journey

The rush of the high street on a mid-December weekend. The nerves of ordering priority delivery and hoping the package arrives before the big day. The making of lists, and checking them twice. The last-minute gift cards to the rescue for long-forgotten cousins.

Christmas shopping has always mixed pressure with excitement. Everyone wants gifts to feel thoughtful and personal, yet finding them means juggling budgets, ideas, recipients, and an ever-growing number of places to search.

A new whitepaper from the7stars, *Human Magic, Machine Help,* finds that AI is becoming an increasingly important part of festive shopping journeys, but that consumers still reserve the final decision on gift-giving for a more personal touch.

Relieving the load
the7stars' proprietary research finds that one in four (25%) Brits will use an AI assistant at some point during the Christmas gift purchasing journey. Yet only 8% will start their search with AI, showing that popular chatbots are joining, rather than replacing, existing touchpoints.

Some groups are embracing the technology earlier than others. Some 43% of 25-34s and 40% of parents say they would consider using an AI chatbot for Christmas gift recommendations, compared with just 9% of over-65s. As the countdown to the festivities approaches, it is the stretched society who are turning to AI for assistance.

In 2026, this assistance will extend well beyond presents; many plan to use AI to plan Christmas dinners and manage the festive workload.

The power of human
This efficiency, however, has a limit. Brits take pride in finding that special something: 63% say a thoughtful present should reflect something the recipient likes, while 54% say it should feel personal or unique.

Even when using large language models (LLMs) to shortlist gift ideas, most will still turn to other, trusted sources to verify recommendations. Over three-fifths (61%) said they intend to read customer reviews before purchasing a gift recommended by AI.

Depending on the recipient, this relationship can change. Those surveyed felt relatively comfortable using AI to plan for Secret Santa recipients, but partners were seen as a bridge too far.

The race to be mentioned
As AI's role in the Christmas gifting journey grows, so too does the importance of brand visibility. So far, it is the largest brands that are most frequently winning that fight.

Testing 60 identical prompts across four popular LLMs revealed AI's preference for recommending household names. While the models produced a range of gift ideas, the retailers behind the products were more familiar; John Lewis appeared in a staggering 78% of responses, with Amazon and Boots not far behind. For smaller retailers and brands selling direct-to-consumer, this pattern is alarming.

AI may therefore be expanding the way consumers seek recommendations without broadening the brands they consider.

For audiences, particularly time-poor consumers, AI's insertion into the gifting journey is useful, narrowing infinite possibilities into manageable options, all within budget. But while AI can shortcut the work, it cannot replace the meaning. For brands, the opportunity is to remove friction without removing the humanity that makes the occasion so meaningful.

The future of Christmas is not human or machine. It is human magic, with a little machine help.
The full whitepaper, Human Magic, Machine Help, can be freely accessed here.



Why The Climate is Now Everyone's Brief

We are in the middle of a national emergency.

That is the driving truth behind the National Emergency Briefing, a film developed through a cross-sector collaboration between leading scientific experts, designed to build national awareness of the scale of the challenge facing us. In the face of such wide-ranging socioeconomic impacts, the way we think about future-proofing brands has to change too.

The film, which was recently screened at the7stars for clients and media owners, lays out the impacts of climate and nature breakdown across categories we rarely consider together, exploring everything from our health and food systems to national security, infrastructure and the economy.

The National Emergency Briefing asks businesses to consider one question throughout: 'How confident are we that our business is prepared for the climate we are heading into, rather than the climate we have been used to?'

Building a sustainable economy means building more sustainable businesses. With a task this big, it can be hard to know where to start. For our industry, Ad Net Zero's five action points provide a guide: tackle operational emissions, produce advertising more sustainably, reduce the carbon impact of media, rethink sustainability approaches across awards and events, and use the power of advertising to encourage more sustainable behaviours from consumers.

In recent years, the media industry has made many positive strides towards decarbonisation. Many companies, including the7stars, have set Science-Based Targets (SBTs). The Campaign Ad Net Zero Awards recognise campaigns leading the way in sustainable advertising. And yet, on the fifth point of the action plan – using advertising to encourage more sustainable behaviours – the industry has often lagged behind consumer intent.

Advertising is a reflection of culture, and it also plays a key role in creating it. The industry is built around influence, and it has a unique ability to make sustainable behaviours feel easy, desirable and mainstream. As brands chase cultural relevance, they also have the ability to shape sustainable choices. According to the7stars Quarterly Tracker (August 2026), 71% of Brits believe climate change to be everyone's problem, and 49% are actively seeking ways to personally help the environment.

Despite this, the Kantar Sustainable Behaviours Ad Tracker found that just 4.5% of ads globally feature any form of sustainable behaviour. Worse, that figure has been falling, as many brands renege on past sustainability commitments. The research also reveals that some of the strongest creative comes from brands that are clear about what they stand for and demonstrate a commitment to sustainable behaviour.

This year's Ad Net Zero awards highlight this. Many winning campaigns revolved around renewable energy, electric vehicles, and nature. While these were all deserving of honours, their prominence suggests how few campaigns outside of explicitly environmental sectors made the climate part of their brief.

Delivering a talk to the7stars, Mark Breen MacCormick, Head of Food at environmental charity Hubbub, emphasised this: 'The behaviour change work that actually lands rarely leads with the environmental message. There is an environmental angle to be had on all briefs whether they have sustainability written at the top or not.'

For the advertising industry, the opportunity is far bigger than simply reducing the footprint of our own sector. The National Emergency Briefing is our brief, and we, as marketers, are uniquely placed to answer it.



Winning the Great Brand Race

Most of the time, consumers aren't deciding between brands. On the rare occasions when they do, their minds have likely already been made up.

That was the opening message of a new landmark report, *Winning the Great Brand Race*, a major channel effectiveness study from the IPA and Bauer Media. By analysing over 500 campaigns submitted to the IPA's effectiveness databank over a fifteen-year period, the report finds that campaigns combining audio, out-of-home and publishing in a varied media mix are 33% more likely to report large brand effects than those which do not use any of these channels.

The report was the first published by Bauer since its acquisition of Clear Channel's Northern European outdoor operations last year and sought to showcase the power of combining the three trusted media channels in a single campaign.

The findings support the notion that maintaining a constant presence in consumers' lives, through audio, visual, and editorial touchpoints, is essential to building long-term mental availability. If 95% of the time consumers are out-of-market, ensuring a positive association with the most common category entry points is crucial. The 5% of time spent in-market is simply the home stretch, where a timely reminder can prompt the customer into a purchase.

Such learnings follow a well-trodden path of marketing science, but too often these principles are forgotten. Brands grow through penetration, not frequency. A niche cultural play might drive connection, but it won't drive mass reach. A strong media buy won't rescue a subpar creative.

It has been thirteen years since Les Binet and Peter Field's seminal work, *The Long and Short of It*, popularised the 60/40 rule for brand vs. performance marketing. The findings from Bauer Media and the IPA bring to light that, contrary to this optimum split, campaigns which resulted in very large brand effects typically spent a higher proportion of their budget on brand.

Campaigns which combined audio, OOH and publishing got far closer – achieving a 65/35 split vs. 73/27 for those without these three channels – freeing up valuable investment for vital conversion-driving activity during the home stretch when consumers enter the category.

Bauer found that the benefits of this combination held regardless of brand size.

The report calls this *the Bauer Effect*: a set of five principles to engage audiences whether they are in- or out-of-category, and all underpinned by reach. These principles, the findings suggest, help build long-term relationships with audiences, attract new consumers into the category, and reinforce brand associations when buyers enter the market.

The marketing science that underpins *The Great Brand Race* is well understood but still all too seldom applied. Through broad reach, emotional creative and a healthy pairing of brand and performance activity, brands foster lasting presence in the minds of their buyers. An optimum media strategy thus blends a wide variety of channels to reach as broad an audience as possible, in as many places as possible, as often as possible. Bauer's portfolio of audio, publishing and out-of-home inventory puts it in a strong place to deliver on this demand.