Is Your Brand on Mute?

We live in a visual world. From the moment we wake up until we go to bed, we're bombarded with pictures, videos, words and flashing lights.

Sight is efficient: We can absorb a ton of information in the shortest amount of time. *A picture is worth a thousand words*, the saying goes. And so we pile on pictures. And endless pile of pictures. On movies, TV and social media. On paper and screens. So many screens.

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The visual fire hose we're exposed to is reprogramming our brains. It's conditioning us into a "headline culture," where we'd rather read 20 headlines than one story, or watch seven video clips than one show.

This phenomenon has implications for advertising: If share of voice still matters, brands feel they need maintain their sliver of that fire hose with an increased number of messages. Before, TV alone could get you there. But now, how could you reach young consumers without using YouTube? And Facebook? Oh by the way, we need to add a line for Instagram. And Snapchat. And research and production, since vertical videos are different from horizontal, which are different from TV.

Since budgets are finite, brands have been shifting TV dollars to TV substitutes – ad units that are supposed to deliver the full "sight, sound and motion" power of TV, and reach consumers on their smartphones or other devices.

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Two things have happened in that shift. First, ads have become

shorter – from 30 to 15 to now six seconds. Even on TV!

Second, an outstanding share of those ads are seen with the phone on mute.

So, if you are one of those advertisers, you have to wonder: Is your brand on mute?

Can you talk to your consumers when they're not listening?

Sound is where the emotion comes from – sound stimuli are the first to be perceived by the brain, at 0.146 seconds. Then touch at 0.149, *then* sight at 0.189.

If you want to test the emotional power of sound at home, try watching a horror movie with the sound off. It's not scary at all.

However, TV and its substitutes provide great reach and value, and few large brands can get their message across without them.

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Some hacks help – adding subtitles on smartphone ads – while others annoy the consumer – auto-play with the sound on. Yet, neither comes close to what brands need: a *sound strategy*.

It starts with a closer understanding of the effect and the art of sound, even for audiovisual media. Ask yourself how many graphic designers work on your brand for every sound designer who does.

It may include a sonic identity. Many brands have developed memorable sonic identities over the years, from Intel to AT&T to Apple. Ask yourself if you need one.

And from the media perspective, ask yourself if you're using the whole palette of sound media: passive listening (streaming

music, music radio) and active listening (podcasts).

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Podcasts listeners chose to engage with the content they select for 20, 30 even 60 minutes at a time. They're leaning in. And that's why they're much more likely to listen to our 30-, 45-, 60-second ads in their entirety, and act on them. Some brands have gone further and told their story in their own branded podcasts.

According to Nielsen, 50 percent of homes consider themselves podcast fans. In a meta-study of 46 podcast campaigns, more than half out-performed video pre-roll ads. And according to a comScore survey commissioned by my company, Wondery, two-thirds of podcast listeners took some action as a result of a podcast ad.

At a recent DMexco conference, P&G's Marc Pritchard said "two seconds is not enough," speaking of the length of time people spend with the average digital media ad. I agree. But, if you need to be noticed and your budget is limited, what are you supposed to do? Use only audiovisual media that will let you run longer ads, thus limiting reach?

One solution may be to put sound to work, both in audio-only media, as well as a way to supercharge your audiovisual media. And to ensure your brand is never on mute.

As you try to cut through that visual fire hose, consider that the best way to get consumers to notice you may be to talk to them while they're listening.

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