

Should our Brand use Humour?

A quick and simple way to find out

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Introduction

Brands often think long and hard before using humour

Humour is present in every culture on Earth. It's a major part of pretty much every social interaction.

But brands get headaches about using it in their marketing. These fears tend to fall into four categories:

- **Social: there might be a backlash**
- **Personal: people might not 'get it'**
- **Geographical: the notion that humour doesn't travel well**
- **Moral: 'we're a *purpose-led* company not a humorous one!'**



But there's a but



Say hello to Martin Eisend. He's a marketing professor.

In 2009 he published a meta-analysis of humour. He sifted through 38 papers by 57 academics, written over 40 years, all looking at how humour works in advertising.

What did all these papers find? They found that humour:

- **Increases warmth towards your brand**
- **Increases warmth towards your communications**
- **Makes people more likely to buy what you sell**

What about the bottom line?

You might be thinking:

“OK, but that’s the *academic* view. What about the business results? What about profit and loss?”

In 2010 Snickers launched their funny *You’re Not You when You’re Hungry* campaign.

Global sales increased by 15.9% – and that was just in the first year.

Not bad going, that.



But!

You might be thinking:

“Isn’t humour just ‘this is funny, that isn’t funny?’”

With respect, no.

As a subject we know more, *far* more, about how humour works than ever before (see opposite). Our ability to study its emotional, cognitive and social power within advertising is extraordinary.

So!

Let’s see if it’ll work for you.

The number of academic articles containing the words ‘humour’, ‘humor’ or ‘laughter’ published between 1900 and 1909.

2

The number of academic articles containing the words ‘humour’, ‘humor’ or ‘laughter’ published a century later, between 2000 and 2009.

440

...That’s an increase of 21,900%*

* Source: Martin, Rod & Ford Thomas, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrated Approach*, Second Edition, London, Elsevier, 2017, p. 15.

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How this works

It's super-simple

All you need is a pen or pencil.

You have 11 statements, divided into four groups:

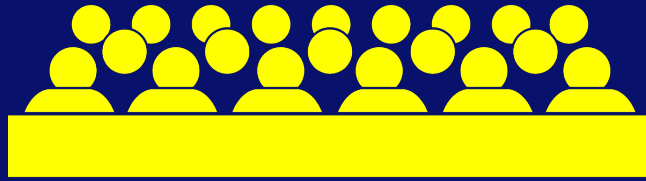
- **Your audience**
- **Your brand**
- **Your product**
- **Your value proposition**

You just mark down your answer on a 1-5 scale.

- **1 = Strongly disagree**
- **5 = Strongly agree**

The more 5's you get, the stronger the reason to consider using humour in your communications.





Your Audience

Statement 1:

We want our audience to like our product and/or our brand.

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neither agree nor disagree

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

Why ask this?

It might seem that every brand wants their audience to like them. But what we're looking at here is a *deeper emotional connection*. If you're selling bath-plugs, you might not need your audience to like you (or even recognise your brand); if you're selling holidays, though, it'll be crucial.

Statement 2:

Our audience has a low need for cognition (= interpreting the brand message through in-depth thinking).

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neither agree nor disagree

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

Why ask this?

In advertising, the use of humour bypasses in-depth rational reasoning, instead creating a more emotional relationship to the brand. If you're selling sweets, it's very likely your audience has a low need for cognition; if you're selling hydro-electric processing plants, it's fair to say your audience will indulge in some very in-depth thinking.

Statement 3:

We want to get people to engage with a brand that they might not *necessarily* feel is for them.

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neither agree nor disagree

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

Why ask this?

In other words: do you want to increase your audience?
Humour helps to do this because it disarms people.



Your Brand

Statement 4:

As a brand, our most important goal is to attract audience attention.

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neither agree nor disagree

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

Why ask this?

It may seem that every brand wants attention. But note the key word here is *attention*, not *in-depth interpretation of the brand message*. Humour works quickly: if you want quick response and recognition, this is for you.

Statement 5:

As a brand, we want to generate awareness and recall of a relatively simple message.

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neither agree nor disagree

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

Why ask this?

This statement is twinned with statement no. 2. (above). But while that was looking at the subject from your audience's viewpoint, this is looking at it from your viewpoint. If these viewpoints align: great.

Statement 6:

Our brand is in a category that is widely considered controversial.

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neither agree nor disagree

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

Why ask this?

Humour bypasses rational processing. So if you're in a category that might be considered controversial (e.g.: fast-food, confectionery, petrol-driven cars, alcohol), humour is a key tool. It's no coincidence that McDonald's use it.





Your Product

Statement 7:

Humour can easily be *thematically* related to our product or service.

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neither agree nor disagree

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

Why ask this?

You will have doubtless seen an ad which takes a product, adds a random joke and thinks it's funny. It's not. The best products work with humour *thematically*.

Statement 8:

We make and sell a low-risk product.

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neither agree nor disagree

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

Why ask this?

Typically, brands that use humour sell low-risk products. This is why, incidentally, you don't see funny ads for sky-diving.



**Your Value
Proposition**

Statement 9:

Our proposition makes people consider an unpalatable topic.

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neither agree nor disagree

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

Why ask this?

Do you have an unpalatable problem that you solve? If so, great: humour can cut through people's objections. This is why it's used particularly well by businesses that carry out sewage and septic tank removal. (You don't have to be in that business yourself, though).

Statement 10:

**Our proposition is for a serious topic,
e.g.: financial services or insurance.**

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neither agree nor disagree

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

Why ask this?

Once upon a time, advertisers thought humour was just good for selling chocolates or beer. Now, no longer. In the US, GEICO is a great example of a brand that uses humour to sell a serious product: insurance. Indeed, often the more serious the product, the more humour is needed to even start to get audiences interested.

Statement 11:

Our proposition might be considered offensive if communicated directly.

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neither agree nor disagree

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

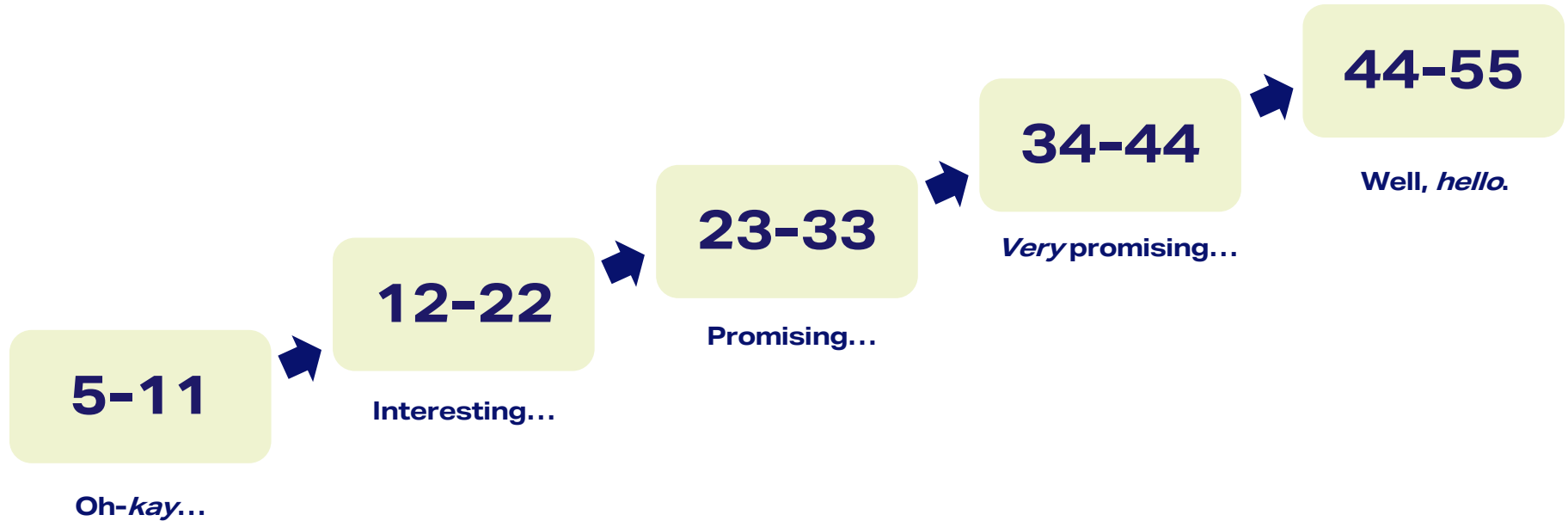


Why ask this?

This is best explained via this famous *Economist* ad (above). The proposition is: *if you don't read the magazine, you're a failure*. Communicated directly, this would be downright insulting. Communicated with wit, it works brilliantly.

So!

...Now add up your scores



I hope this has helped you

...And I hope it has helped in two ways:

First, to better understand your brand.

Second, to better understand a little about how humour works in advertising.

Should you have any questions, or would like to know more about what I do, please don't hesitate to get in touch: my contact details are on the next page.

Thank you,

Paddy



Heinz: Cupboard, 2006

Contact details



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Biography

Paddy Gilmore is the founder of Studio Gilmore, The Humour Consultancy. He helps brands become more profitable by advising them on how, when and where to use humour in their communications. Bringing 23 years' experience in advertising, and a Master's degree investigating humour, he has worked with numerous brands including Allied Irish Banks, Three, Tele2 and Getty Images.



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