

Christmas in Cannes

Lions praise Penguins

by Eleanor Thornton-Firkin & Leah McTiernan



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Not to be outdone by the Super Bowl held every winter in the USA, the UK has its own annual advertising event - or is it an advertising season? The Daily Telegraph has called it an “arms race.” Shortly before the holidays the buzz begins as advertisers, primarily large retailers, seed their annual holiday creative online. That buzz quickly turns to water-cooler and social conversations about which retailer will “win” Christmas. From sentimental to cheeky to downright provocative, many of the season’s ads are not only discussed around the kitchen table but throughout the advertising industry. Recently they have become the darlings of awards shows.

As the pioneer of holiday advertising, the annual John Lewis (a chain of upmarket department stores) campaign is eagerly anticipated for its heartwarming insight into the emotions surrounding Christmas. While each successive year the retailer tackles different perspectives, spots are always tied back to the wonder of the holiday, and (of course) how John Lewis can play an instrumental role in its success.



The retailer's beautiful approach to Christmas has won it several Film and Film Craft Cannes Lions, but last week it followed up its 2015 Gold Creative Effectiveness Lion for "The Bear and the Hare" (2013) with the Grand Prix for "Monty the Penguin" (2014). When asked about Monty, Jury President Andrew Robertson (CEO of BBDO Worldwide) noted, "this was beautiful, emotional work for a retail brand that was proven — and believe me, it really is beyond a reasonable doubt — to have contributed to revenue growth of £132 million, incremental profit growth of £33 million and profit ROI of 8-to-1. And if that isn't what Creative Effectiveness is about, then I don't know what is." At Ipsos Connect we take note of the Creative Effectiveness Lions because we think that communications should strive to help build strong brands. It is evident John Lewis' campaigns are doing just that.

The UK Ipsos Connect team anticipated Monty's seasonal success in November 2014 when it analysed emotional reactions to the ad - captured via Facial Coding through our partnership with Realeyes. The research demonstrated that "Monty the Penguin" comfortably out-performed the already successful "Bear and the Hare" from the year before. The spot piqued interest from the start. Overall engagement was strong throughout as viewers reacted to the arc of the plot - happiness at the quirky moments showcasing Sam and Monty playing, and empathy as Monty's sadness about not having a partner builds. Finally, engagement peaks perfectly – with the Christmas gift of a partner for Monty (in the form of Mabel), the unexpected story reveal (Sam's vivid imagination that has brought Monty and Mabel to life) and, ultimately, the brand reveal.

The continued power behind the John Lewis campaigns is far broader than strong emotional engagement with the story. As the retailer continues to push for fame and emotional connection as a means to build brand salience and desire, we wanted to highlight five other factors that drove their success.

1. Plan beyond the one TV commercial

John Lewis fully integrates its seasonal story with in-store and window design, special products (e.g. Monty the Penguin stuffed toys), interactive brand experiences with technology partners like Samsung, Google and Microsoft. With Monty the Penguin, John Lewis also supported the work of the World Wildlife Fund to protect penguin habitats (Penguin adoptions were up 300% around the time of the campaign).

2. Use consistent creative assets

John Lewis started its Christmas campaigns as recently as 2007, but it has consistently used the same combination of music and film craft to create mood, tone and the emotional journey.

3. Integrate Social Media into the mix

Monty and Mabel had their own social presence, even sending Christmas Cards from Twitter.

4. Seed early to create anticipation

Speculation around Monty the Penguin started as early as September 2014 with ~163 million impressions of the teaser. By the 2016 Cannes Lions the spot had more than 36 million views.

5. Continue to learn from your success

The John Lewis campaigns had been lauded for their creative success, but the retailer and its agency (adam & eve DDB) never rested on their laurels. In addition to pushing the creative boundaries each year, stakeholders constantly reevaluate their media plans, technology and social media partners to deliver the best brand experiences. It allowed them to move from Gold to Grand Prix status in one year.

We look forward to this year's John Lewis holiday campaign which we expect to be seeded in a few months' time. It appears that other retailers are taking note: the 2016 Titanium Grand Prix was awarded to US Outdoor Retailer REI for its #OptOutside campaign. Rather than staying open on the busiest shopping day of the US shopping calendar (Black Friday), REI challenged its customers to go be outside rather than in stores shopping. To live up to the brand promise, it shut all of its stores nationwide and paid all employees to #OptOutside. Meanwhile, as we enjoy the heat of summer, Monty the Penguin still has us dreaming of Christmas.

