
SLIPSTREAM

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AI Can't Sell

It was only a matter of time before AI started to integrate into advertising practices, from helping to summarise interviews, write copy and now reportedly *strategic planning*. Now you have my attention. Call me a cynic (or an optimist), but I just don't see how a machine could compete with a human brain, on creative output.

AI is in a sense the ultimate desk researcher, it can identify and analyse much more information than we would ever be able to do and that is strength. Where to look and what avenue to go down is an intuitive human approach to this task when we are short on time and energy. AI can uncover much more than we can. 1 point to AI.

However, there are 100 possible strategic outcomes. It is a strategist's job to rationalise the most relevant and work through it, creating our argument on the available opportunity and ultimately, selling. It is a subjective process that takes human input to get across the line.

Let's see a strategy for what it is; selling the best route to get something done to solve a problem. This is where I see the biggest gap, as selling is a human process. You're not buying a solution with a rational mindset but an emotional one, and social dynamics cannot be replicated by a machine (yet). There are three areas where AI cannot compete on the art of the sale:

Firstly; the journey. By default, AI tools do not need to give you the workings to their answer. The myriad of data they have worked through, the avenues they could have gone down. The strategic output is usually a group of nicely styled slides, but a huge amount of blood sweat and tears has gone on in the background to get to the refined answer you see before you. If you don't have the context, insight, and anecdotes to go along with it, how do you propose to sell it? In the selling of an idea, it helps to add colour (and humanity) to the pitch and shows your due-diligence.

Secondly, the context. AI may be able to present you with a perfectly applicable strategy, but what it can't do is create the ideal narrative to sell it.

Each selling situation - pitch response, annual plan - is different. Different stakeholders, different requirements and different beliefs. No two ways of selling a strategy should be the same. Even if AI could populate a good narrative (it can), it takes a human touch to tweak this to the situation. The story may even take a specific turn because of a 'look', passing comment, or understanding of wider stakeholder dynamics. A machine would never be able to factor in these human elements.

Finally, *the passion*. If a machine comes back with a much quicker answer with the prompts you have fed it than you could have gotten to, you haven't gone on the strategic journey of testing the problem and therefore I would argue it would be difficult to get behind. If presented with an answer with less effort, you will be a less passionate salesman. The simpler the answer is to come to you, the more difficult the sale. Have you ever tried to sell someone else's work? It's not impossible, but it's more difficult than selling your own.

I make that 3-1 in favour of the strategist humans, and what I would say if AI were to have a pen above my name, waiting to strike it off the list of jobs they can't do. What do you think, have I sold my case?

Bryan Hogg,
Strategy Director

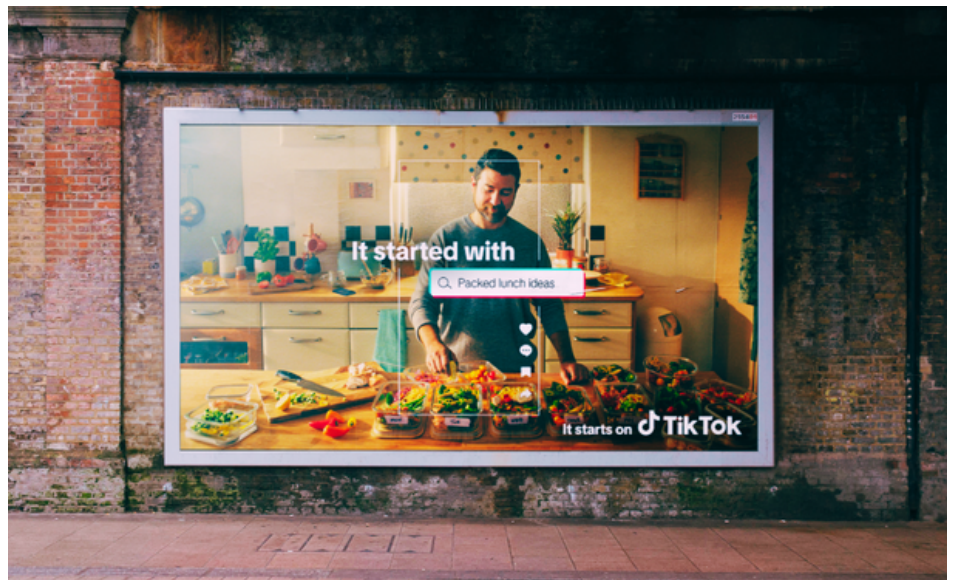


It starts with TikTok, does it end with Google?

Video is the simplest form of information consumption. People watch videos to learn, to be inspired and to discover. It's why YouTube and TikTok have evolved into search engines in their own right. This is also why the latter in particular, has made the jump to claim this user behaviour as endemic to their platform.

'It Starts on TikTok' is their latest campaign and celebrates being 'a place to be inspired and discover new things'. This isn't an empty claim; Google's SVP of search has stated that "almost 40% of young people, when they are looking for a place for lunch, they don't go to Google Maps or Search, they go to TikTok or Instagram". Couple this with TikTok's wide pulling power, with users being twice as likely compared with other channels to recommend something they've found on the platform and the opportunity to leverage this type of behaviour becomes evident.

TikTok have a clear ad opportunity here and have already started productising this screen real estate. Search ad units have been available through the in-platform Search Ads toggle, leveraging existing in-feed creative to serve alongside organic video search results. However, this is an extension to an in-feed buy, as opposed to its own search-first format. A more direct integration of Search is in its infancy; a third-party integration between TikTok and Google is being beta tested across several markets.



Among the TikTok search results users will see a link to continue their search on Google. This makes some sense for both platforms - TikTok benefits from Google's database to lean into being a starting point for exploratory searches, while Google receives a piece of the metaphorical pie by picking up that traffic later down the line. Whether or not there is enough of said pie to go round remains to be seen; both businesses will be looking to retain as much of the available traffic as possible, but ultimately this integration happens on TikTok's terms.

Both platforms will benefit from the integration of data to improve relevance to the end-user, but as advertisers we need to ensure we are maximising this behaviour shift. Operationally, we need to ensure we break down the cross-channel barriers that too-often keep Search and Social in silo. Teams need to be sharing Google search query data that indicates the needs of in-market users to inform our TikTok creative strategy. Meanwhile, flexibility of budgets and targets across the two channels gives us the room to capitalise on emerging trends, instead of being fixed to rigid channel-specific KPIs.

Creatively, if people are coming to TikTok to be inspired then it is that we do just that. As a food & drink retailer for example; if people are searching for recipe inspiration, it's important that ads showcase the product as it would be used, rather than simply as packshots. This is another evolution of consumer behaviour that requires an even more nuanced approach to marketing. Another channel specific consideration, on how to creatively tap into the user journey.

This may hold additional complexity for larger brands but in this complexity, smaller brands may benefit from lower barriers to entry and their greater flexibility. Size of brand aside, to win in this area you must get closer to the end consumer to capitalise on this new behaviour, because a one-size fits all approach won't work. As with everything we do at Bicycle it is all about 'the power of AND', a new frontier where Social and Search can be utilised to greater effect.

George Lilley-Moncrieff,
Programmatic Director

Pitching: A love letter to the all the good ones

Pitches can be a pain, right?

Long drawn out process, badly handled chemistry meetings, absurdly protracted commercial conversations.

It doesn't have to be like that.

We're pretty selective about what we do and don't pitch for. Our people are the most important thing to us and if we believe the pitch isn't going to be run fairly, the timings are obscene or the ask is too onerous then, often, we'll just say no - not from a position of arrogance, but from a position of protection.

That said, when they're run well, they can be a delight. I talk a lot about pitches allowing for the purest expression of strategy; a space totally unencumbered by legacy thinking and driven only by the business problem in hand. And sometimes, they also stretch you to think in a different way.

We're in the middle of a pitch process at the moment that's been a delight so far. We may win, we may not. But the journey so far has been invigorating. Take the chemistry meeting, for example. Instead of asking us to fill the time with slides, we were asked ten 'acid test' questions, which the team had to answer on the spot in the room. We were judged not only on the answers, but our ability to work together to problem solve in realtime. Perhaps most interesting of all was the 'wild card' question, designed purely to test our ability to think laterally.

The question? 'How many Big Macs are being eaten around the world right now?'. We've still no idea of the correct answer, but it was fun in the room trying to piece together an answer that made sense - and it gave the client an excellent sense of how we worked.

What can we learn from all this? Try something surprising, even when the usual process is tried-and-tested. It just might make things more interesting (and effective) for everyone. Creativity can, and should, exist everywhere.

Doing it differently? We're lovin' it.

Erika Mari,
Chief Client Officer



BBC: The beginning of the end for the licence fee?

The BBC has recently reported that they will begin to run advertising on some of their podcast content in the UK. If plans go ahead, ads will start appearing on podcasts hosted by third-party providers such as Spotify, Google Podcasts, Apple Music and Amazon Music. However, listeners will still be able to avoid the ads (in the UK) by downloading and listening to podcasts on BBC sounds.

It sounds like a confusing user experience, one that may cause reputational damage. It certainly seems to have sent shockwaves throughout the industry.

Global, the UK's leading commercial radio company which has been aggressively growing their podcast stable in the past years, is one of a number of industry voices to vehemently oppose the idea. CSO Sebastian Enser-Wight told the House of Lords communications committee in March that the move would be a "market distortion" to use "licence-fee payers' money to generate content that is then supported by advertising."

That may not be how the average consumer sees the move, yet they may be upset to know that the same content is available ad free elsewhere. Much like how you would turn to BBC One for the World Cup Final to avoid the ads on ITV. So what benefit is there to the BBC? To understand we must think more broadly with our marketing hats and what this could spell for the future of the broadcaster.

Advertising is not beyond the BBC. The BBC currently carries advertising on its World News Channel and also on programmes sold internationally. This venture will be the first time content will run in both ad and ad-free formats simultaneously. This in effect would act as an A-B test, to see where content streams would be damaged or hindered when running advertising. If it proves successful and profitable, then editorial decisions could be led by revenue figures rather than streams. Or perhaps making the production job an extra bit tricky to balance the two.

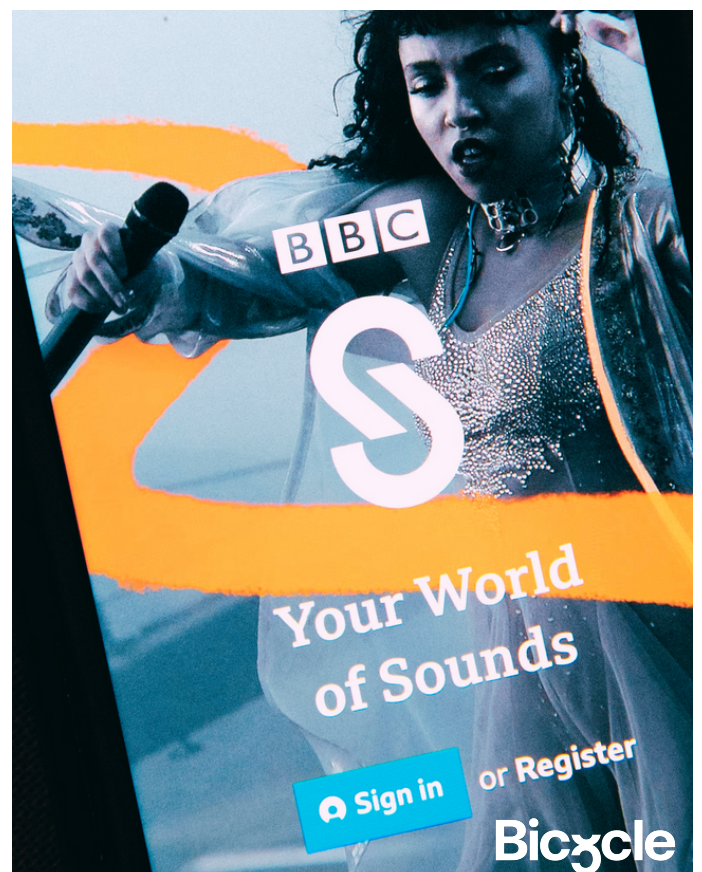
As for the future; with the licence fee model reported to be under review from 2027, this first move into advertising could be what we can expect from the state broadcaster as it looks to bolster or replace the licence fee model. Could we start to see ad-funded tiers on the BBC broadcasting? Perhaps you can waive the licence fee in lieu of receiving

advertising, for instance. In this regard, the model is no more confusing than the dual revenue streams of the biggest players on the market.

For advertisers and brands, surely this move should be seen as a positive one? The content from the BBC is held in a relatively high regard and access to this (and its listeners) should be of benefit. This new revenue stream also allows us to understand listeners of BBC content in a way we haven't before. Although it may be a slightly nuanced consumer in this respect, understanding them early could spell an advantage later down the line. Aside from this it will definitely provide greater detail to the podcast landscape.

With something so intertwined with the identity of the UK, it is no wonder that this news has caused a bit of a stir. However much like the failing British high street, there is no point lamenting its demise after the fact. Testing advertising in one specific vertical seems like a valid approach to see what other possibilities are out there and let's face it, it's not a radical one! If this is a step to save the institution of the BBC, then I for one welcome it wholeheartedly.

Elliott Worthington,
New Business & Marketing



Navigating the First-Party Data Revolution

Pedro Avery,
Chairman

The demise of the third-party cookie has turned the spotlight on advertisers' first-party data and the information they collect directly about their customers. Marketers must address several critical challenges to unlock its potential in an increasingly privacy-focused landscape. First and foremost, GDPR compliance is non-negotiable. Building a successful first-party data strategy means making transparency and consumer consent your top priorities. Failure to do so risks significant fines and irreparable damage to the brand's reputation.

Additionally, it's essential to ensure a brand's first-party data is clean, accurate and well-maintained. Inaccurate or outdated data leads to poor targeting decisions and wasted resources, undermining your entire marketing effort. Breaking down internal silos between departments like marketing, IT, and legal is also crucial to ensure alignment and a compliant approach to data collection and use. Finally, don't underestimate the need for technological expertise – investing in the right tools is essential for organising and effectively leveraging first-party data.

Alongside these challenges, the evolving world of first-party data presents exciting new technologies and trends. One key development is the rise of zero-party data.

This refers to information that customers intentionally and proactively share with a brand, such as their preferences, interests, or purchase intent. Collected through interactive experiences, surveys, or quizzes, zero-party data offers unparalleled insights for personalisation and building strong customer relationships.

Another emerging trend is the use of data clean rooms – secure environments where businesses can collaboratively analyse their first-party data without directly sharing sensitive customer information. Clean rooms enable audience expansion and accurate campaign measurement, all within the confines of strict privacy standards. AI and machine learning are also transforming the first-party data landscape. Advanced algorithms can help clean, enhance, and uncover hidden patterns within your data. This fuels predictive analytics, allowing you to anticipate customer needs, deliver highly targeted offers, and maximise marketing ROI.

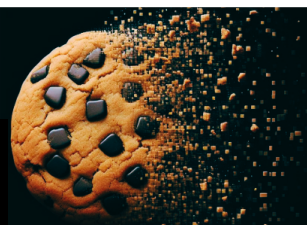
Forward-looking agencies can play a pivotal role in accelerating advertisers' first-party data journey. They can help brands conduct privacy audits to ensure GDPR compliance, offer guidance on technology selection and integration, and leverage your first-party insights to create more effective and measurable digital advertising campaigns.

Moreover, a good agency will help advertisers understand that first-party data has applications far beyond advertising. They can help brands weave insights into every aspect of your marketing mix, from content personalisation and email marketing to product development and customer experience design.

To thrive in a privacy-centric world, UK marketers need to embrace change and focus on building trust with their customers. Demonstrate transparency by being crystal clear about how you collect and use data, always ensuring users have clear choices and granular control over their data. Offer a compelling value exchange when requesting consumer data. Think loyalty programs, exclusive content, or highly personalised product recommendations. And finally, invest in the right technology infrastructure to securely collect, manage and activate customer data while fully complying with evolving regulations.

The shift toward first-party data represents a seismic change in marketing, but it also creates immense opportunities for those willing to adapt. By meticulously navigating this new landscape, marketers can establish a competitive advantage. This in turn will foster stronger customer relationships, drive greater marketing efficiency and achieve long-term success in a privacy-first world.

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