

GET REAL, GET CREATIVE!

Real understanding to climb the
Creative Effectiveness Ladder

By Arnaud Debia | June 2021

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CLIMBING THE CREATIVITY LADDER

For decades, communication agencies, brands and industry festivals have championed creativity as a way for communication to be more effective in brand building. They used a very specific symbol – the ladder. Leo Burnett, one of the most acclaimed legendary ad agency founders, pioneered it with the 7+ creativity ladder (see top right), to encourage excellence in creative advertising. Heineken adopted it too as it identified creativity as key driver of business.

In 2020, Cannes Lions and WARC launched a new ladder, the Creative Effectiveness Ladder, through the initiative of James Hurman and Peter Field. This aimed to help brands and agencies drive greater effectiveness through creativity. Each step of the ladder defined what objective marketers should assign to their campaigns, from changing behaviours, to influencing sales or making the brand an enduring icon. It offered a great way to gauge a campaign's ambition and to set meaningful goals the campaign would achieve.

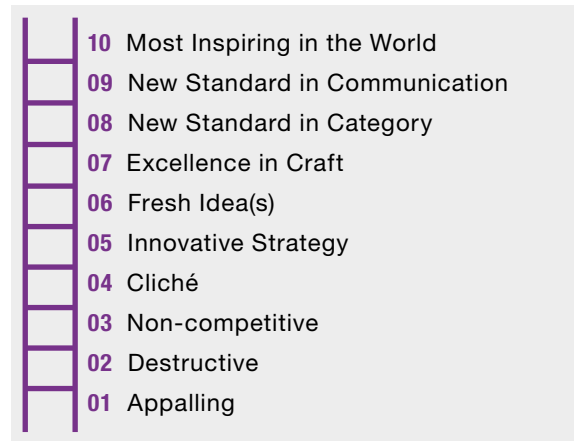
The Ipsos Creative Excellence team fully supports this initiative, as this is at the heart of what we do with our clients and their agencies – helping them build and optimise more effective, more creative campaigns.

Ipsos also would like to add our own contribution, yet not through another ladder or metrics of effectiveness, but rather by having a go at explaining how brands can go further and can climb higher. This includes:

- How brands and agencies can produce more effective creative
- What routes, processes or ingredients they need to get to the top

The combined experience of our global creative researchers has found that while there are many different paths to creativity and effectiveness, there is one particular muscle we have learned time and time again makes a difference as one essential source of creative inspiration: getting “Real”.

Examples of the Creative Ladder



Leo Burnett - last century



Leo Burnett - evolved and updated scale



Cannes Lions and WARC Creative Effectiveness Ladder

THE POWER OF GETTING REAL

In many of the strategies and creative campaigns that Ipsos has explored over the years, what often makes the difference is how much they are rooted in reality. People know the difference, and reward brands that are real, and keep their distance from brands that are not. They will celebrate campaigns that resonate with their lives and turn their heads towards ads that touch and move them.

Indeed, Ipsos video executions research learnings (see Figure 1) identified that creative resonance captured by “it’s for people like me” (an Ipsos creative diagnostics), is one of the top five drivers of getting attention, generating incremental persuasion and building brand relationship.

Figure 1 Top five drivers of Brand Attention, Persuasion and Brand Relationship

	Brand Attention	Persuasion	Brand Relationship
01	Driver one	Driver one	Driver one
02	Driver two	Driver two	Driver two
03	Driver three	Driver three	For people like me
04	Driver four	Driver four	Driver four
05	For people like me	For people like me	Driver five

Source: Ipsos video executions research learnings, 2020

“People know the difference, and reward brands that are *Real*.”

If executional and content factors do play alongside with information value and engagement, real/resonance is the one dimension impacting the three KPIs of effective creative and is in the top three for longer term brand relationship building.

And when it comes to laying the foundations of an effective communication strategy, our early creative development research learnings (on creative idea early stage tests) have proven that the insight and idea relevance and resonance are indeed the two most important drivers of success.

The importance of reality as an inspiration springboard to create magic pieces of creative has been celebrated before. Take Burnett, for example. He preached: “The work of an advertising agency is warmly and immediately human”.

A great Burnett story was putting this into practice and is how he invented the Jolly Green Giant. You could (rightly) think this crazy green mascot has nothing to do with reality and was rather born out of cigarette smoke or a glass of bourbon. Think again. It is born from Burnett himself taking a shot of brand reality.

The reality is that Burnett experienced this himself when he visited the Minnesota Valley Canning Company factories, spending time with its workers, to try and understand why its canned vegetables were different. From this experience he saw how harvesters were delicately handpicking peas one by one. He also learned that one of the vegetables variants was called the Green Giant. Adding the two together, with a strong seasoning of talent, Burnett gave birth to a jolly green giant taking extra care in picking tiny crops with his giant hands. A captivating metaphor of taking extra care in producing premium canned vegetables, rooted in *Real*. Jolly isn't it?!

Much later, in one of the few Hollywood movies starring advertising agency execs, Mel Gibson impersonated an ad agency mad man on a mission to design the next Nike women campaign, putting himself literally in the shoes of his target audience. This is not crazy. It is what every marketer and advertiser should do to create relevant, resonating, inspiring campaigns: get *Real*. Be the target, understand the product, try it, experience it.

Figure 2 Top five Creative Idea Performance Drivers

Creative Idea Performance Drivers	
01	Relevance
02	For people like me
03	Driver three
04	Driver four
05	Driver five

Source: Early creative development research learning, 2020



Source: Jolly Green Giant, 1928 - Leo Burnett
What Women Want, 2000

So, what is *Real* about? How do you get consumers to think and feel the creative is for people like them? And at the same time how do you take what's *Real* as an inspiration to develop more creative and effective campaigns?

We have uncovered four different dimensions of *Real* that matter if you want to climb the creativity and effectiveness ladders and develop award winning, magical, and extraordinary advertising.



FOUR DIMENSIONS OF REAL

01

THE POWER OF **REAL CONTEXT:**



understanding the broader context that people live in – social, tribal, economic trends that affect and excite them

02

THE POWER OF **REAL INSIGHT:**



exploring people's current category and brand experiences, their aspirations, the tension they currently live through

03

THE POWER OF **REAL PURPOSE:**



uncovering what the brand genuinely offers, what it does, the role it can play in people's lives

04

THE POWER OF **REAL DISTINCTIVENESS:**



revealing a real point of difference about the brand, which can be the springboard to telling a unique, more creative story

THE FOUR POWERS OF REAL: HOW TO CLIMB THE CREATIVE EFFECTIVENESS LADDER WITH REAL UNDERSTANDING

Let us demonstrate how these four powers of *Real* are the muscles to enable and nurture creativity, through four great creative campaigns.

1. A REAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE BROADER LIFE CONTEXT

***Real* is about recognising the broader context that people live in – the social, tribal, and economic trends that affect and excite them.**

Rather than operating your brand in a bubble, advertising that understands the context in which people live, that connects to social trends, is more likely to be effective, as Ipsos creative idea and executions learnings show. Budweiser's advertising during the Covid-19 pandemic is a great example of this.

The brand wanted to show support to Americans during the Covid-19 lockdown and decided to repurpose one of its most iconic ads, Wassup (original ad [here](#)), to fulfill that mission. This offered an illustration of how family and friends get closer and connect in these tough times. Indeed 53% of Americans told Ipsos they want to get closer to friends and family as the crisis unfolded (Ipsos March 2020 Covid survey, USA).

Watch ad [here](#)



Ipsos partnered with Budweiser in an agile, four-day two rounds of CreativeSpark assessment (our flagship creative assessment solution) to help the team uncover how best to optimize and fine-tune Wassup. Ipsos' research demonstrated that the message of connecting with friends was more meaningful during the pandemic and could bring the brand positioning alive emotionally. But it also showed that to do so, the brand role had to be made even clearer and more prominent in how it helps in connecting with friends in this very specific context. Building on these learnings, the agency's final edit succeeded in maximizing the creative ability to bring people closer to the brand by insisting on the importance of 'checking on your bud'. It became one of the most successful ads Ipsos researched during the first wave of the crisis.

As one YouTube comment puts it: "Such a good ad put smiles on a lot of people's faces during a tough time".



**BUDS SUPPORT BUDS.
CHECK ON YOURS.**



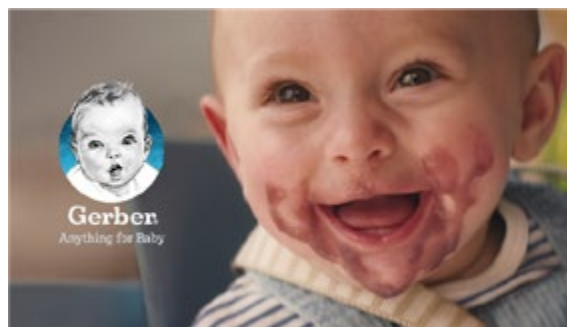
2. A REAL INSIGHT ABOUT PEOPLE

***Real* is about connecting your brand's offering to people, what their current and real brand experience is, their aspirations, and the tensions they currently face.**

It means searching and exploring about how people really feel about the brand, the category in real life, instead of going for a shortcut, copy-pasting category conventions, or just putting your brand unrealistically at the centre of people's lives.

On the contrary, successful advertising is all about capturing the reality of people's lives with the brand. It is about being smart and echoing how the brand can serve people's realities, how it can help them in their lives.

A recent US Effie winner and Ipsos client, Gerber, managed that. Gerber has been a long-standing baby milk and food icon in Americans' lives, yet it needed to recreate that bond with modern parents. Through early exploration (in Ipsos Creativelabs) and great strategic planning, it identified what it means for US parents to have a baby – a commitment to do everything to raise their baby to the best of their ability. It is common knowledge that healthy food plays an essential role and is a shared commitment of parents and in this case Gerber towards babies.



Click to play ad [here](#)²

Ipsos' big idea research confirmed this was fertile ground for the brand to connect with parents and echo parents' commitment with its own brand commitment with its own brand commitment: an obsessive dedication to produce flawless, perfect products for baby and do everything for baby too. This is how the Everything For Baby campaign was born and very successfully, reversing the close to a decade long slide in sales and market share, and in the process becoming a 2019 Effie Gold winner.

Similar to the Jolly Green Giant, it all starts with a strong connection to what the brand does particularly well. Consumer immersion confirmed how the brand could uniquely echo parents' dedication and find how it could express that common aspiration through what it does and offers.

3. A REAL BRAND PURPOSE

***Real* is about uncovering what you are genuinely doing as a brand, and doing what you are really saying.**

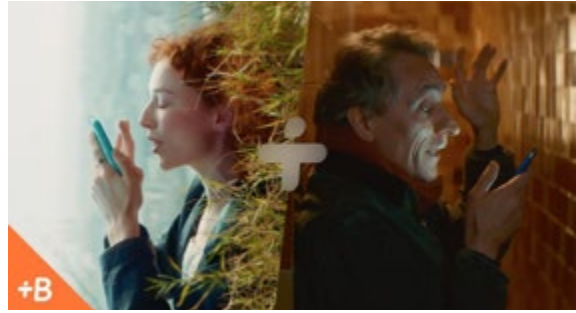
Many marketers have understood that brands cannot exist without acknowledging the role that brands can have in people's lives. They have taken on the journey to express their purpose beyond just offering a product or service to people.

It also has become clear with so many brands wanting to be purpose-led, to win people's hearts and minds that they have to be true to what they stand for. This means that the brand needs to act, to live up to what it promises, with a purpose that is real and tangible.

Some brands have been successful in harnessing the power of purpose-led positioning. For example, Carling Black Label in South Africa from ABInBev (read more in [Be Bold, Be Creative, Do Research Ipsos Views](#)). And another good example is the language learning app from Berlin, Babbel.

The new campaign from the brand goes beyond technological features, or performance-related marketing or even a service promotion. It is in fact a rallying cry to what Babbel and many of its users across the globe stand for: "Understanding changes everything".

Watch the ad [here](#)³ and the second concept [here](#)⁴



But what matters most is that they uniquely describe what Babbel as a brand can offer to Brits, Brazilians and Germans alike: opening new businesses, leisure and travel opportunities through learning and understanding new languages. It is the connective tissue that has the potential to bring the world back together. And it's the anchor of the mission Babbel assigns itself to: "understanding – understanding yourself, understanding others, understanding the world" by overcoming language barriers.

To achieve that, the brand and their creative team already had the idea and inspiration, but they needed to uncover how to tell that story in a meaningful way that is easily understood by many different cultures. Babbel embarked on a four-day learning journey across multiple countries with the Creative Excellence team at Ipsos using our latest InstantILabs solution, enabling same day real-time insights in a hybrid design of quantitative and qualitative research.

The goal was to help Babbel get a clear and deeper understanding of how people experience language learning and how this could make a marked difference in their lives. Getting in touch with different people from different cultures and countries enabled the team to see how their creative ideas could best evoke people's aspirations when it comes to language learning and underlining the cultural nuances. For example, Brazilian consumers are more convinced by the idea of seizing more life changing opportunities, while British consumers were moved by the idea of opening up to diversity. It also enabled the team to understand how Babbel could uniquely own that space and differentiate itself from its competition.

"The brand needs to act, to live up to what it promises, its purpose needs to be real and tangible."

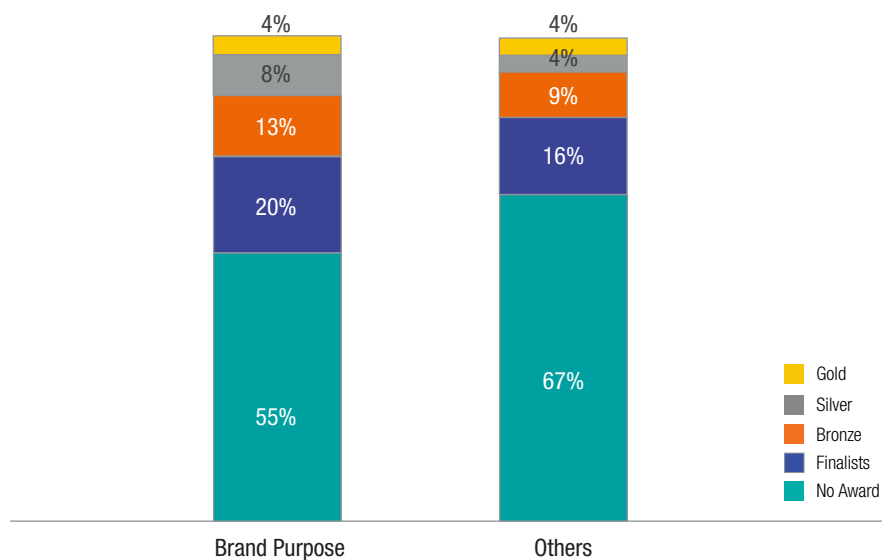
As Serena Li, Head of Insights of Babbel puts it:

“Research helped us explore how the creative idea would resonate across the world. It provided guidance to our creative teams on how to best execute the concept, on what to take forward.”

This piece of Babbel research is also resonating with one key finding of the Ipsos 2019 Effie Report, brand purpose communication can be a great driver of effectiveness if the underlying position is credible and *Real*:

- 25% of all Effie submissions were communicating a brand purpose
- Half of them managed to be at least finalists, compared to only a third of the others

Figure 3 Effie Performance by Brand Purpose and all other campaigns



Source: 2019 Effie US report in partnership with Ipsos

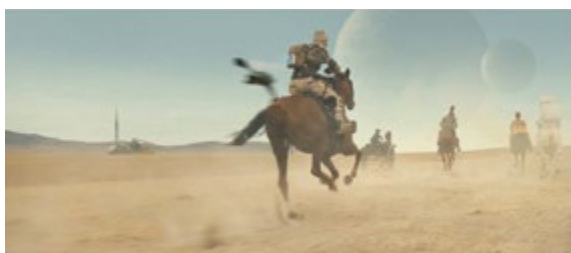


4. BREAKING CATEGORY CONVENTIONS

A real point of distinctiveness can be the catalyst to both making the brand stand-out versus the competition and a fantastic driver of telling more creative, unconventional stories.

If *Real*, in-depth understanding is essential to build a sound communication strategy, it doesn't need to act as a muzzle for creativity, and that you need to film or make a poster banner of the insight, literally. It can also act as a wonderful creativity springboard and help make the brand expression stand out and capture its uniqueness.

Creative agencies know this well. Buzzman, for example, has shown with every assignment that they seek to nurture distinctiveness of the brands they work for, by pushing differentiating ideas and unconventional creative executions. Their campaign for PMU, *The Calling*, awarded in Cannes and international festivals, is a great demonstration of that.



Watch the ad [here](#)⁵

If the core idea is very much to celebrate the unique passion and tension people feel in horse racing bets, the agency also found in the brand DNA and racing experience the inspiration to tell a distinctive and eye-catching story, no one else but PMU could own. Even if horses from the past and future are featured throughout, they leveraged another very specific and distinctive PMU experience to make the campaign stellar. Names of racehorses are very unusual and often crazy (as they need to have a name not previously used and depending on their breed they must start with a letter of the year they were born) such as Lady Marianne, Hairy Soldier or Future Soldier. And this is the starting point of the story – every PMU race thus becomes a multi-dimensional race across space and time between unexpected and spectacular horse riders, capturing the unmatched emotions of horse betting races.

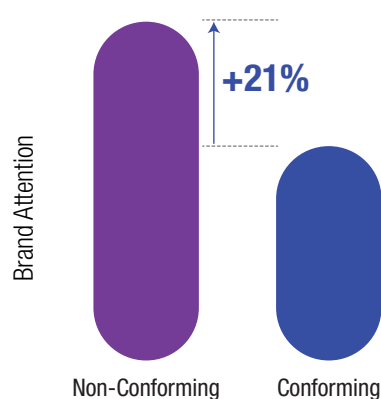
As Julien Levillain, Buzzman General Manager explains:

“The communication challenge with this campaign was to capitalize on the PMU cultural heritage yet to modernize the brand and project it into the future, capturing the spectacular dimension of horse racing. It then naturally came to the creative teams that the uniqueness racehorse names could be the anchor point for the brand’s past, and at the same time the catalyst of an epic, intense, sci-fi horse racing campaign.”



What is certain is that using *Real* as a springboard for distinctive yet non-conforming creative campaigns is a winning bet. In today's world where politics and media can be very vanilla, where channels are crowded with many "look-alike" ads and commercials, advertising that breaks category and advertising codes is more successful in terms of brand attention.

Figure 4 Likelihood of Top Quintile Placement for Brand Attention



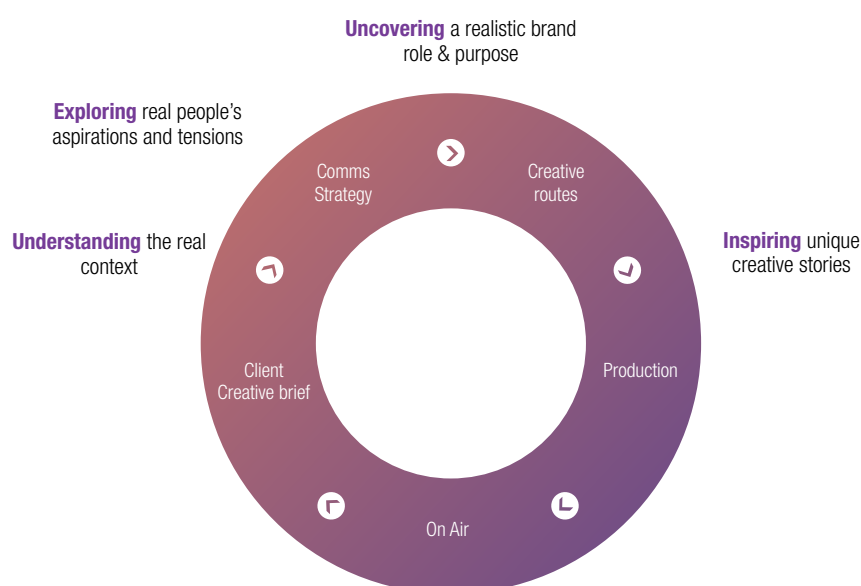
Source: Ipsos Creative Excellence Meta-Analysis, March 2020, (2,015 cases)

These four stories do highlight to us why brands and agencies need to get *Real* – expressing a brand purpose grounded in reality, and touching a tension people really feel, by taking into account the context of the moment. They can count on understanding reality to help them find what can make the brand more distinctive and make the creative execution more unique. It must be creative, yet it must be creativity that serves the brand and what it stands for, to build long term impact.

Real is not only a lever to inspire creativity, but it is also a pertinent way to get effective and climb the creativity ladder. And this is exactly how and where creative research can help – putting advertisers and agency teams in sync:

- with the reality of the context of the moment
- with the reality of how people live, their aspirations and tensions
- with the reality of how the brand can help in that context and in people's lives, what purpose it can have
- with the reality which can inspire unique, distinctive stories for the brand

Figure 5 Ipsos Creative Development communication cycle and research roles



Source: Ipsos Creative Excellence

CONCLUSION – A PLEDGE FOR CREATIVE RESEARCH THAT GETS REAL TOO

If creativity can benefit from getting closer to reality, this is definitely the case too for creative research. Best in class research is the one closest to *Real*:

- Using real human people understanding
- Using live or near live real interactions with people
- Researching advertising in the wild, in the context of the moment

Research using real people understanding.

***Real* starts with understanding people with people.**

Recently, some research companies put forward Artificial Intelligence (AI) solutions to replace human insights-led research, yet in Ipsos' experience, if AI can support and replace some of the analytics, it cannot predict human reactions to truly new, groundbreaking pieces of advertising or in new situations or context. Our experience has shown that AI cannot (yet?) get under the skin of true human emotions or tensions making it difficult for it to get to the crux of understanding deep human realities.

But human intelligence can. Take how we can leverage cognitive empathy with consumer immersions from the Ipsos Ethnography Centre of Excellence. By bringing alive the context of consumers from any part of the world,

by illustrating their experience within the category, with the brand, or how they go about their lives, ethnography can be a unique starting point to devise breakthrough communication strategies and inspire creative teams. In its purest form, carried out by anthropologists and semioticians, ethnography can reveal what the untrained eye often misses and what the consumer struggles to articulate themselves.

The best exploratory research uncovers the untold stories of life. Applying cultural intelligence reveals the unseen, the unsaid, the unasked. But more than anything, video as a medium brings to life the *Real* - it has a unique power to contextualise and inspire. Words alone cannot properly illustrate the intensity of feeling that our ethnographic film depicts about Brazilians preparing food for their pets from a Mars case study – so if you want to meet Roger the cat and know more about what he eats everyday, just call us! Lock a creative in a room with a playlist of these films and they'll come out inspired with *Real* insight. Indeed, it's an approach we use, Video Excursions, to great effect – co-analysing video playlists of consumer behaviour with clients and agencies for communication insights.



Interestingly, the pandemic has forced our hand here with interesting results. No longer able to send our ethnographers out into people's lives, we have asked people to send their lives to our ethnographers. [CovidWatch⁶](#), a digital self-ethnographic syndicated study, has been a fascinating insight into people's lives round the world during lockdown, but it has also shown us that *Real* can be found remotely. You're limited to what people are willing and able to share with you, but you get more people and more footage which is where technology and human understanding comes together. AI helps us theme and code the *Real* behaviour for these video excursions, and interpreted through an expert ethnographic lens, the output is inspiring creative fuel for both agency and clients.

Live creative research is ideal for people, brands and agencies to interact together with early ideas.

Innovative, tech-enabled, live research such as Ipsos InstantILabs is a completely new way for people, ad agencies and marketers to interact and explore early ideas or early story executions. In just hours, from anywhere across the globe, teams can explore live how people perceive their early strategic and creative work, interacting live with the research, adding deep dives, quantitatively or qualitatively, and workshoping together (agency, marketer, researcher) to find how to best progress the idea and creative forward.

Researching creative in context, in the wild.

When we research more final advertising, we believe that it's best to research advertising in the context it will be used, as if Creative is King, Context is Queen. Many advertisers and agencies have learned in time that a video ad made for TV will not work in the same way on a Facebook page or on YouTube. Thus, Creative Assessment solutions such as Ipsos CreativeSpark make sure the ad performance is measured in the context in which it will be aired.

We also believe that the best available benchmark to define a reference point for measuring the attitudes and behaviours of people towards the brand is their current, in the moment perceptions.

We can use that current reality, in the form of a pre-exposure measure, to quantify the incremental impact the idea or creative has. We just then observe the difference it makes on people's attitudes and behaviour, by comparing exposed results vs non exposed. This is much more accurate and reflective of people's real context than relying on models and databases (using previous years' backdata) which may not be fully representative of how people are thinking and acting now.

“It's best to research advertising in the context it will be used, as if Creative is King, Context is Queen.”

Early research is the best moment to help creative work to be infused by *Real*, to make a marked difference and pay-off.

One of the best moments for creative strategy to get infused with context, people and brand reality is as early on in the process as possible. And that's where creative research can really make a difference.

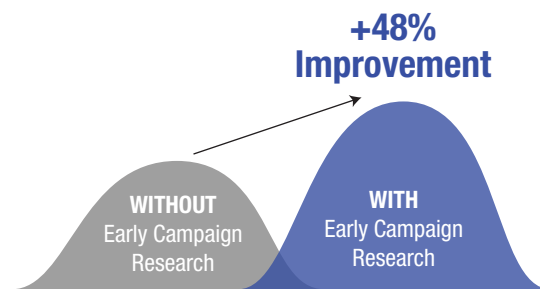
In the 2019 Ipsos Effie report, we found out that non-awarded work was over-indexing on not doing any research, while the Silver and Gold winners were over-indexing on strategic communication research.

And it has been a consistent lesson learnt published by Ipsos that conducting early strategic research (early insight and big idea exploration, creative routes investigation and selection) improves creative quality significantly – almost 50% (See Figure 6).

This is why we believe it is time for brands and agencies to get more *Real*, and do this earlier, with research closer to *Real*, to nurture the creative magic and climb up the creativity and effectiveness ladders.

Really!

Figure 6 Creative Assets Performance



Source: 2019 Effie US report in partnership with Ipsos

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

Get *Real* in your creative development thanks to research that will help:

- 01. UNDERSTAND THE REAL CONTEXT** of the brand and category
- 02. EXPLORE PEOPLE'S REAL ASPIRATIONS** and tensions
- 03. UNCOVER A REALISTIC BRAND ROLE** and purpose
- 04. INSPIRE** unique creative stories

Use research that truly gets *Real*, by using:

- 01. REAL PEOPLE** understanding
- 02. LIVE OR NEAR LIVE INTERACTIONS** with people
- 03. RESEARCH IN THE WILD, IN THE CONTEXT** of the moment and in which creative will air
- 04. EARLY RESEARCH** as the best moment to be infused by the *Real*

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5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDmWJqK0ITc>
6. <https://covidwatch.ipsos.com/>

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Real understanding to climb the Creative Effectiveness Ladder

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