

VOLVO SUSTAINABILITY CAMPAIGNS: MAKING MAGNIFICENT ADVERTISING, NOT WALLPAPER

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“There is no company whose business model won’t be profoundly affected by the transition to a net zero economy”. Jeff Fink, Blackrock CEO

Yes, this is true. And it is also true that these companies need to do many of the same things to get to net zero. And when they talk about it, it can be hard for consumers to tell them apart.

The volume of brands talking about sustainability has grown in the last few years. They draw from the same pool of actions – usually some combination of sourcing, operations, packaging, community support, renovation, innovation, and/or offsetting. It can be hard to differentiate between brands and even categories because they are all making similar claims.

Sustainability communication has become its own category in the same way that Covid-19 communication became its own category. One that is similarly disconnected from the brand while trying to tap into the human experience. Remember the wave of “here to help”, then “here for you” then “we’re all in this together” ads?

How do you cut through the clutter and show you are genuine? Where is your brand in all of this? And most important of all - **have you made magnificent advertising?**

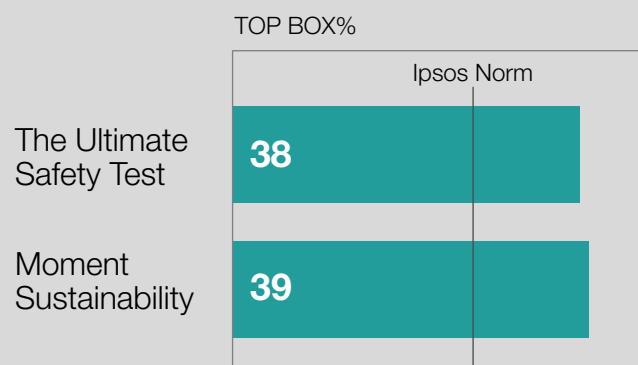
This article draws on two Volvo Campaigns to illustrate effective sustainability communication that inspires without losing sight of the brand. We will cover this in three steps around getting fundamentals, execution and planning right. Ipsos used our signature creative assessment offer Creative|Spark to put this together.

The ads tested are called [‘Moment’](#) and [‘Ultimate Safety test’](#). Moment is a more ‘classical’ piece of communication that uses information to engage the viewer. ‘Ultimate Safety test’ is a roller-coaster ride of an ad with a shocking end. They take very different storytelling approaches, but both deliver positive brand outcomes for Volvo and more specifically a strong association with caring about climate change.

Brand Ratings

“How much did this ad make you think that Volvo”

Cares about the planet and climate change



Higher than series (sig. testing @90% CL)

▲ ▼ = higher/lower than benchmark (index thresholds or sig. testing to norm/PAR @90% CL)

STEP 1 GET YOUR FUNDAMENTALS RIGHT

Don't conform to category convention

The Ipsos creative excellence database shows that advertising that breaks category conventions is more likely to capture branded attention. Category conventions become clichés that people find hard to connect to any brand and ignore as wallpaper. Biting into an apple in a toothpaste ad or a smiling woman in white trousers while on her period are classic examples of these clichés.

When we reflect on how Covid-19 became its own advertising category, we observed from Ipsos trend data that 49% of UK consumers thought that all ads on TV during the pandemic looked and felt the same. Advertisers put out similar messages in an unconsciously coordinated manner. Sustainability advertising appears to be heading in a similar direction in terms of claims made and types of scenery depicted. This includes windmills, farms, farmers and large landscapes.

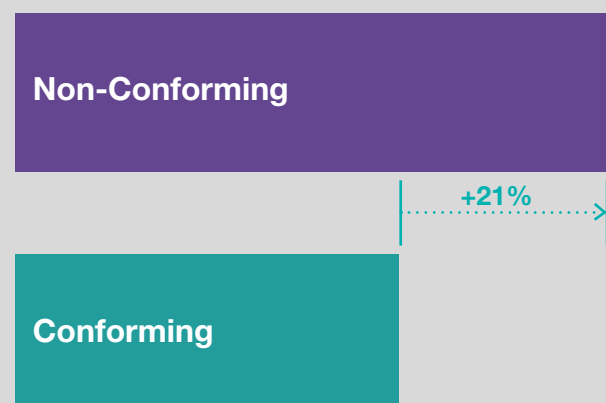
The additional challenge is that these claims and scenes get relegated to 'hygiene factors' quickly. As more and more brands communicate on the sustainability theme, the bar will get higher and higher on what is table stakes vs. demonstrating value and leadership.

The two Volvo ads are different in their use of category conventions. 'Ultimate Safety Test' breaks away from conventional car and sustainability advertising tropes.

It keeps the Volvo brand well integrated throughout the story while doing this. 'Ultimate Safety Test' scores highly on branded attention as a result. The reason Volvo can make this category contravening idea work, comes back to the long-term investment in its overall purpose – to keep people safe.

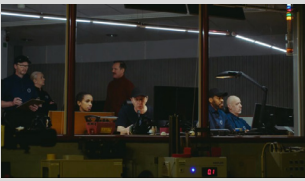
In contrast, 'Moment' references the car and sustainability category and delivers industry updates receiving average attention. It even has windmills in it.

Likelihood of Top Quintile Placement for Brand Attention

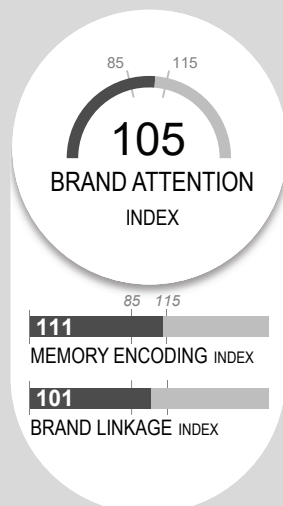


Source: Ipsos Creative Excellence.
Meta Analysis of 2,015 cases

Volvo - The Ultimate Safety Test



Volvo - Moment - Sustainability



Volvo know who they are, and don't lose sight of it for a single moment in either ad.

Volvo do not shy away from the negative impact their products have had on the planet. They are frank, authentic and credible.

Be true to the brand

Brands communicating in the sustainability space fall into three broad categories...

1. **The Sustainability Native** is forged with an ESG mission at its core and typically sails across the gap between profit and purpose.
2. **The Sustainability convert** is actively turning their ship around. They will struggle to find the right balance, but can come across positively and show that they are on a journey.
3. **The Sustainability signaller** is not taking appropriate steps on the ESG imperative. These have systemic issues to fix or come across as untrustworthy in communication.

Sustainability converts make up a large chunk of companies, and Volvo would fall into that category. This chunk must carefully review and firmly establish where they stand in the category and where they have the power and ability to really make a difference. Any communication will need to ladder up from this fundamental thinking and remain true to the brand. Left field communication on sustainability (environmental or social) has the essence of 'greenwashing' unless there is an intuitive link to what the brand stands for and how it is positioned in the marketplace versus competitors.

Volvo is known for safety – it is what they stand for. Volvo have focused minds, time, creativity, and resources around this idea starting in the 1920's. They have remained well ahead of safety regulations and driver behaviour ever since. Depending on where in the world you live, the brand name may conjure up images of 'Swedish landscapes' or 'Soccer Moms' but always in flashing neon, the word '**SAFETY**'.

Both ads take Volvo's brand mission around the protection of human life and seamlessly link it to protecting the planet to keep us humans safe. Linking generations of Volvo creative expression, the urgency around climate change now has the same steel thread of safety running through it. Just as seatbelts, female driver safety or passenger safety did in past campaigns.

Storytelling lessons

Don't be afraid to break with category convention while making sure your brand is well integrated into a story. The art is in blending the familiar with the new or dramatic. Read Ipsos 'Power of you'¹ for more detailed guidance on tips on distinctive assets, heightening branded attention and campaign longevity.

STEP 2

GET YOUR EXECUTION RIGHT

Be true to the facts

The two Volvo ads express their ideas using vastly different storytelling. What they have in common is remarkable honesty, no sugar coating of reality and no claims of being better than they are.

This honest tone of voice generate spikes in viewer engagement at key moments, as recorded using facial coding.

Facial coding is a web cam-based capture of real time emotional response that is calibrated to viewer's micro expressions. This technique captures the range of emotional response in a non-conscious way and is a best-in-class indicator of expressed emotion. Engagement in the facial coding measurement is a sum or overall presence of an emotional response. Specific emotions underlie this such as happiness, sadness, surprise, fear, contempt, disgust or confusion. Facial coding is included as standard in Ipsos Creative|Spark.

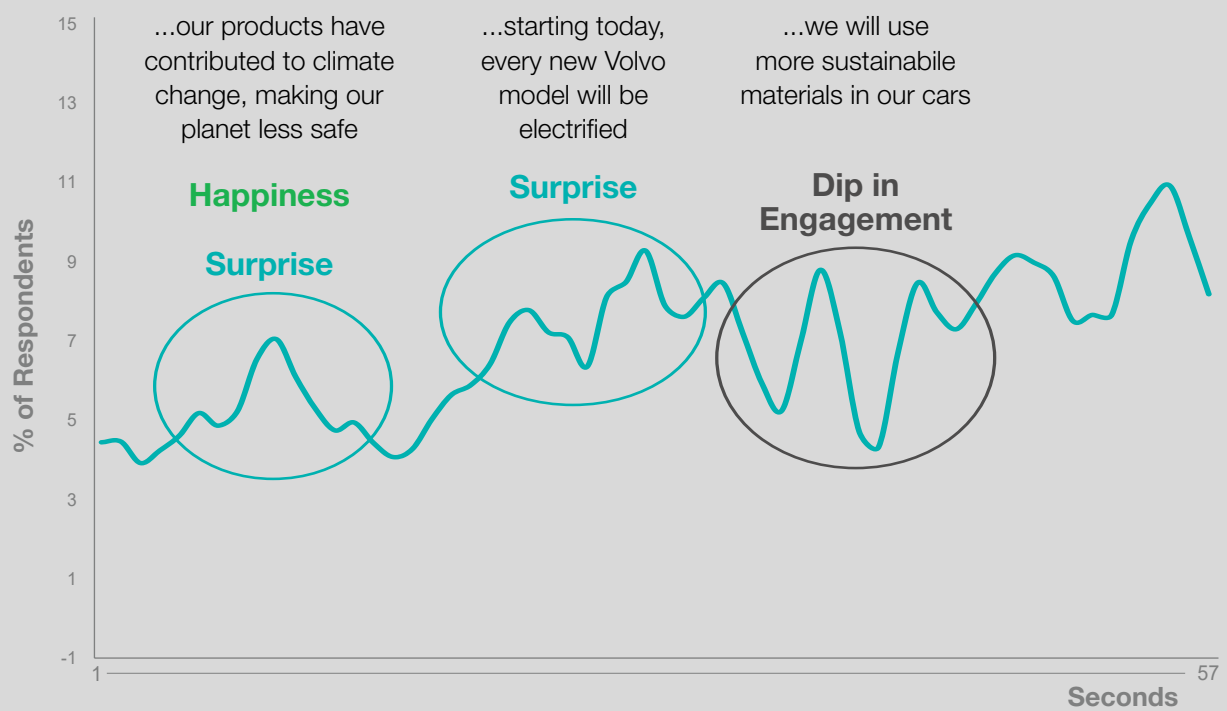
'Moment' makes a matter-of-fact confession in the first 10 seconds. "We have been a safety company

since 1927. Yet our products have contributed to climate change, making our planet less safe". This bold, transparent opening line gets a lean forward from viewers straight away.

The second engagement peak occurs when the ad states "starting today, every new Volvo model will be electrified". Volvo presents a clear action they are taking **now**, which surprises traditionally cynical British viewers. Ipsos research² done in the wake of COP26 showed that people have no appetite for greenwashing and that 'delayism'³ will not serve organisations then. Immediacy is active and generates engagement.

The air goes out of the tyres somewhat when speaking about 'working with suppliers to use renewable energy' and 'using more sustainable materials in our cars'. A small meander from the punchy and specific start of the ad to more generic sounding promises. But overall, the ad shows a steady build of engagement, ending on a positive note.

FACIAL CODING ENGAGEMENT 'Moment'



Be true to the people and take them on a journey

‘Ultimate Safety Test’, takes the viewer on a humorous rollercoaster journey. It shows different safety crash tests that Volvo performs on its cars, with the narrator asking, ‘is this the ultimate safety test?’. The crash tests get more and more elaborate with each one generating surprise from viewers. The ad then delivers a shock ending showing a huge crumbling iceberg and the twist in the tale is revealed - “Climate change is the ultimate safety test”. To close, it shares the immediate action from Volvo “That’s why we are changing to all electric. Starting today”.

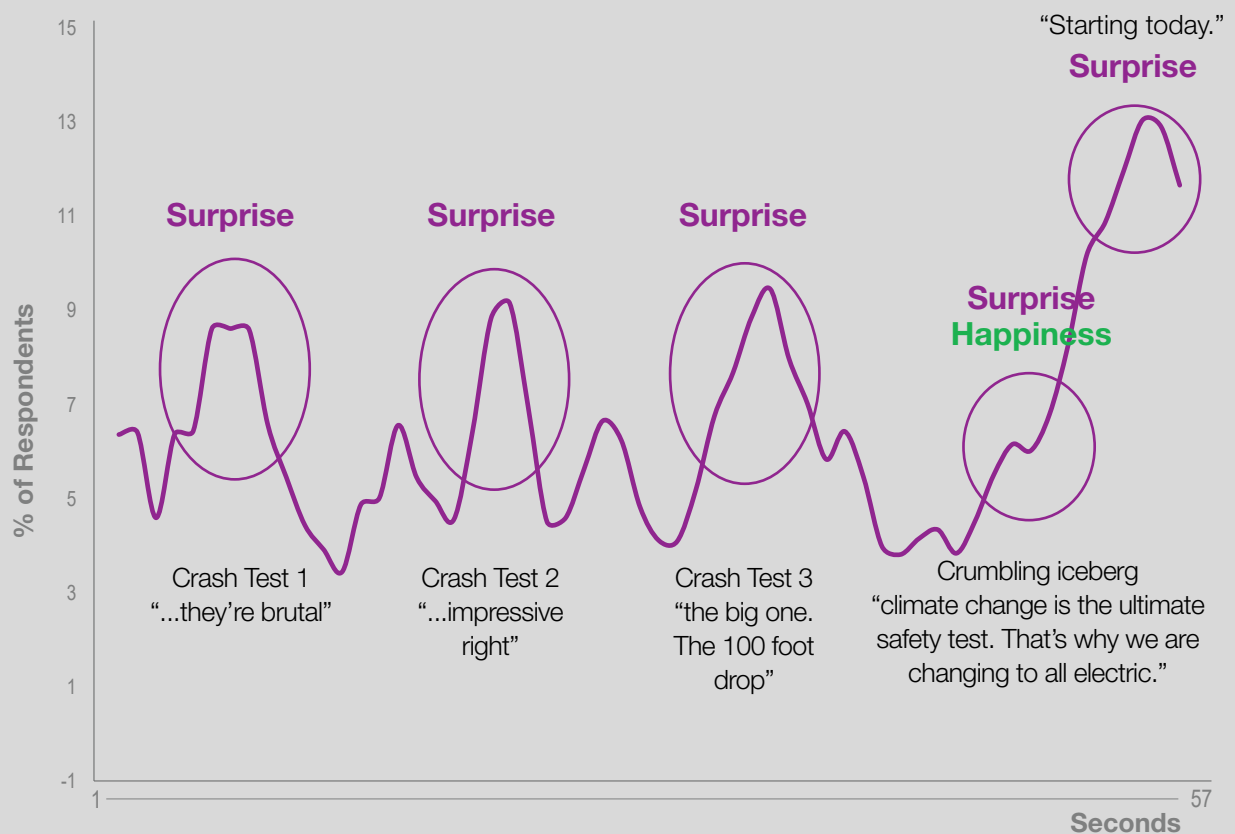
Ipsos know from our creative database that a sense of immediacy / limited time is a well-used tactic in promotional advertising for motivating people. It also appears to be effective in sustainability advertising. The motivating action in this case taken by the brand, on consumer’s behalf.

‘Ultimate Safety Test’ does well at playing to the peak-end rule. This is a cognitive bias in which people judge and recall an experience based on how they felt at its most intense moment (peak) and at the end. In this case there were plenty of surprising peaks and a shocking, not entirely pleasant surprising end. More on this in the next section.

Storytelling lessons

Create a sense of immediacy, create peaks of engagement and end on a high.

FACIAL CODING ENGAGEMENT 'Ultimate Safety Test'



You don't always have to be agreeable

'Ultimate Safety Test' takes a very different tack to 'Moment', using surprise, humour then shock to deliver its message. Creative|Spark uses natural language processing to classify reactions to the creative by valence and intensity. While both ads generated a strong intensity of response, 'Ultimate safety test' was significantly more polarising and generated more negativity with several referencing the uncomfortable ending in the ad.

It leaves people with residual discomfort, having enjoyed the first portion so casually. It is highly effective at getting branded attention and more likely to be talked about because of it. There is strong brand linkage to Volvo in the ad as well as a high degree of social power which is an indicator of potential virality.

One watch out with making an uncomfortable ad is to ensure the brand does not get overshadowed by the issue. A quick litmus test for this is to imagine what the comments section might look like once the ad is live. In the case of 'Ultimate Safety Test', the ad and the brand remain the focus.

Storytelling lessons

A calculated risk resulting in negativity can work well to drive conversation. The brand shouldn't be an 'aside' in this conversation, relative to the bigger issue.

SOCIAL POWER

How likely is it that people will talk about the creative online?

Volvo - The Ultimate Safety Test



128

HIGH
SOCIAL POWER
INDEX (85-115)

Volvo - Moment - Sustainability



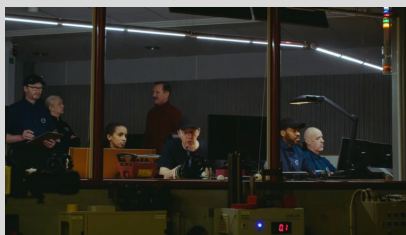
107

MEDIUM
SOCIAL POWER
INDEX (85-115)

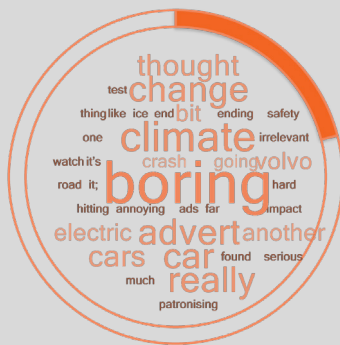
OPEN END: SPONTANEOUS REACTIONS

What did people feel after seeing the creative?

Volvo - The Ultimate Safety Test



125 / 200
INTENSITY
INDEX (85-115)



74% POSITIVE
21% NEGATIVE
75% NORM
15% NORM

Volvo - Moment - Sustainability



134 / 200
INTENSITY
INDEX (85-115)



81% POSITIVE
11% NEGATIVE
75% NORM
15% NORM

- D** [redacted] 6 months ago
Holy shit that went from cheery to existential crisis.
👍 24 🗨️ REPLY
- D** [redacted] 7 months ago
This gave me chills.... No pun intended...
👍 11 🗨️ REPLY
[View reply](#)
- T** [redacted] 8 months ago
By changing to All-Electric, does this means Volvo won't be selling any combustion cars or all vehicles.
👍 18 🗨️ REPLY
[View 7 replies](#)
- L** [redacted] 6 months ago
so good! I was at the cinema when they showed this and the whole audience applauded.
👍 46 🗨️ REPLY
[View 3 replies](#)

STEP 3 GET YOUR PLANNING RIGHT

Horses for courses. Design for different objectives.

The two Volvo ads deliver a similar and equally credible message on Volvo's commitment to sustainability. When it comes to influencing behaviour and relationship change, 'Moment' has the edge. It does a strong job at delivering information and generated a higher-than-average positive sentiment. It adds to the brand's existing mental network by reinforcing long-held beliefs around the brand, alongside setting up positive expectations from them on sustainability.

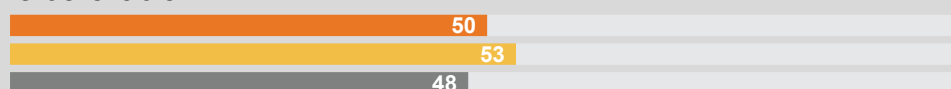
'Ultimate safety test' does a good job delivering the desired brand positioning but its strengths lie in being seen, potential to get talked about and shared. It doesn't do as strong a job on priming the Volvo brand as it is specifically designed to surprise and start a conversation.

**Planning lessons –
Wireframe your campaign for success by
using different stories to meet different
communication objectives.**

AD RATINGS

What did people think about the creative?

Is believable



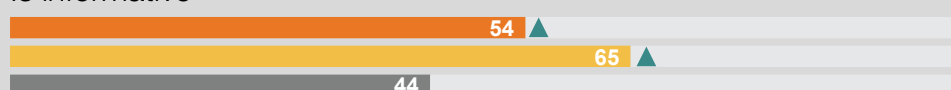
Is entertaining



Is unique



Is informative



Is for people like me



Is confusing



Ultimate Safety Test

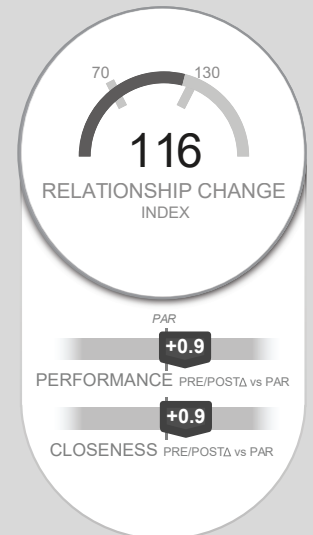
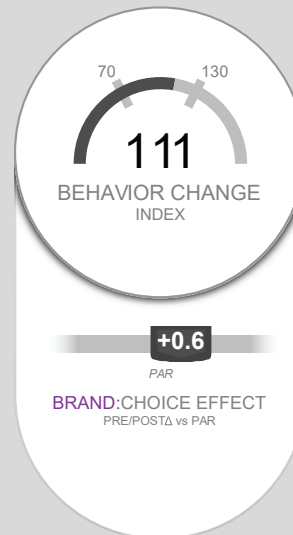
Moment

Ipsos Norm

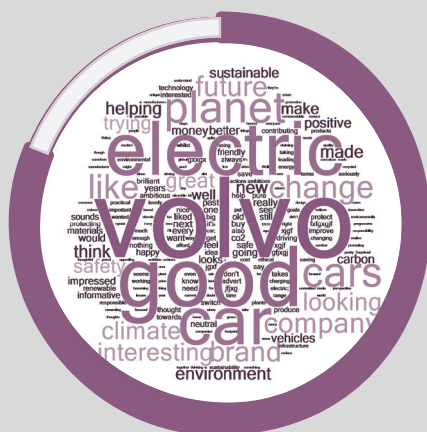
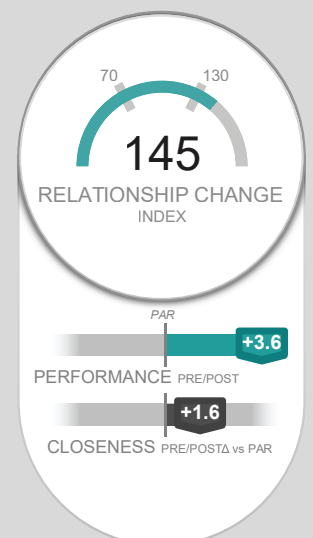
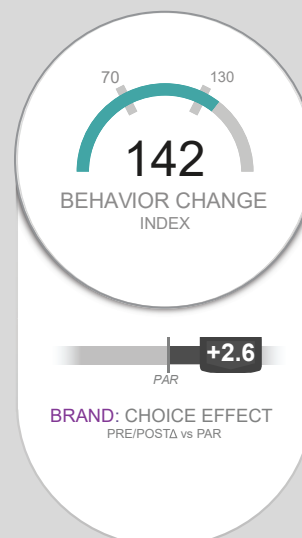
Higher than series (sig. testing @90% CL)

▲ ▼ = higher/lower than benchmark (index thresholds or sig. testing to norm/PAR @90% CL)

Volvo - The Ultimate Safety Test



Volvo - Moment - Sustainability



81%  POSITIVE

75%
NORM

What did people feel after seeing the creative?

Be true to the brand, be true to the facts, be true to the people

Volvo did a stellar job on these two pieces of sustainability creative. A large part of this success is down to the goodwill it has built over the years by championing safety. Their mindset is “how can we be better?” not “what can we get away with” which has kept them ahead of regulation and shows integrity. All brands should think about their own vision and how they can be most credible in the sustainability space. Once that is established, here are some principles to help create more effective sustainability communication:

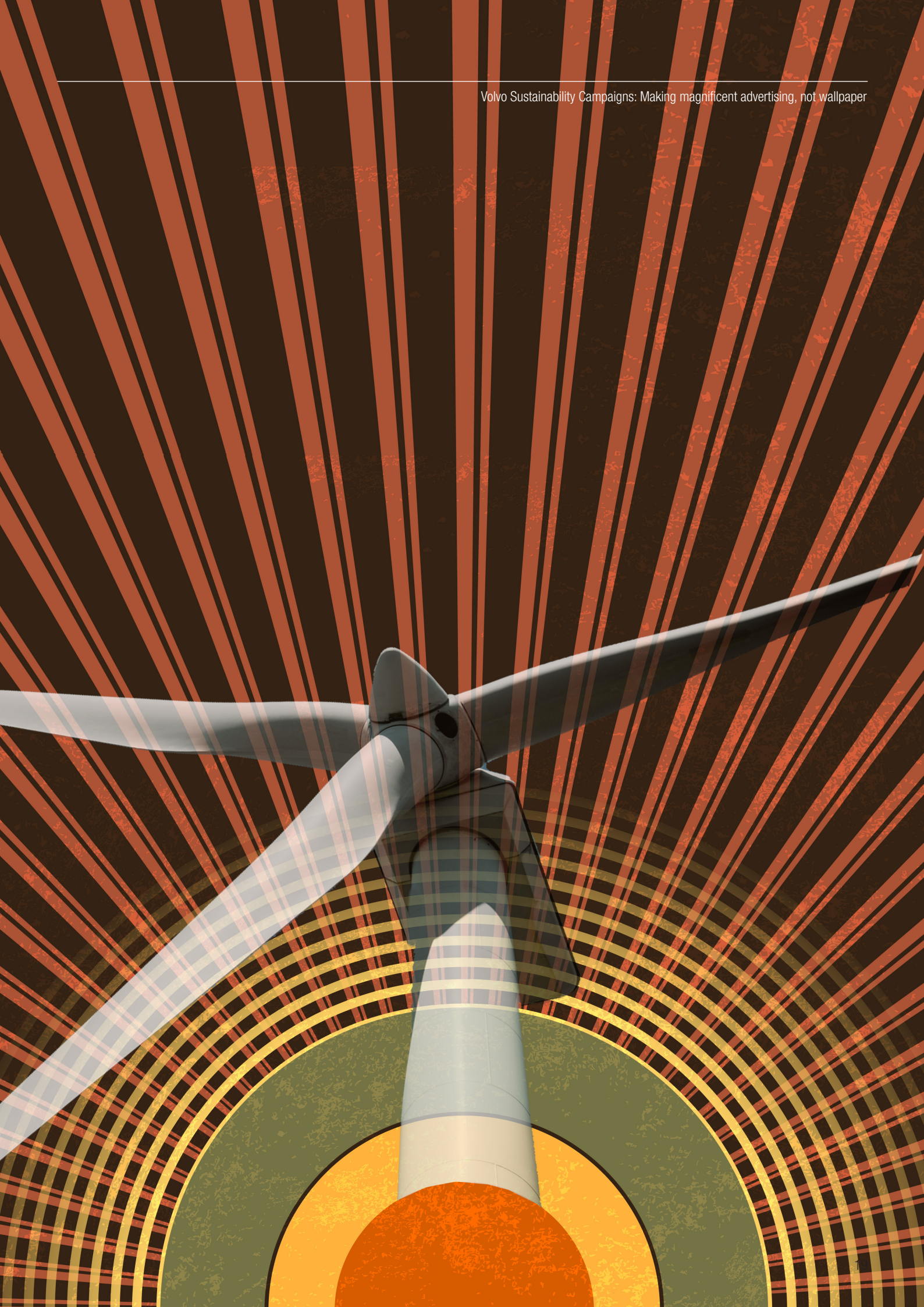
- 1. Be specific, honest and frank in your claims. It shows strength and integrity, not weakness.**
- 2. Avoid clichés and have a strong, active voice.
Talk about now, not later.**
- 3. Be sure to ask yourself “where is my brand?” at regular intervals.**
- 4. Don’t be constrained by a serious tone of voice. Humour can also help achieve goals but needs more empathy and judgement.**
- 5. Sustainability can be an uncomfortable topic. Take calculated risks to stand out and drive conversation**

All the above needs to build on the brand’s foundation, mission, and identity. Consumer feedback on your sustainability communication is important – particularly when it comes to points 3, 4 & 5 on this list. It is a sensitive subject which can either spark a negative response for your brand or worse – become wallpaper.

With the right balance of brand fundamentals, creativity, and insight, you can provide your consumer with a credible and compelling experience. Here’s to bolder, braver, better sustainability communication and making truly magnificent advertising.

References

- ¹ Ipsos 'Power of you' <https://www.ipsos.com/en/power-you-why-distinctive-brand-assets-are-driving-force-creative-effectiveness>
- ² EDF & Ipsos UK study Aug/Sep 2021 <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/climate-and-public-opinions-gb-observatory-report-edf-ipsos-2021.pdf>
- ³ "Delayism is in some respects the political equivalent of greenwashing ... the proliferation of false solutions that – in the same vein as greenwashing – contribute very little to curb emissions, while creating a false sense of progress that undermines the effective action we need."
[Guardian])



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You act better when you are sure.

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