



The Billion-Euro Fine
for Boring Advertising:

Why Marketers Need Cannes More Than Ever

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WPP Media

In recent years, the Netherlands has been only modestly represented in the spotlight at the Cannes Lions. This is not a matter of wounded national pride; it is a deadly serious problem for Dutch marketers. It proves that we have forgotten the most important law of effective marketing.

The Beetle That Defied Logic

It's the fall of 1959. In the boardroom of the New York advertising agency Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB), there is a palpable tension. The gentlemen have been given an almost impossible task: they must sell the Volkswagen Beetle to the American consumer.

In late 1950s America, the car is the ultimate status symbol. The streets are dominated by gigantic, shiny battleships with enormous tailfins and roaring V8 engines. And then there's the Beetle: small, slow, oddly shaped, and burdened with a painful history as the showpiece of Nazi Germany. Logic dictates that this product is doomed to fail. Fortunately, DDB did not fall back on logic to solve this problem. They chose an act of pure, radical creativity.

In the autumn of 1959, readers of American magazines turned the page and encountered an advertisement that would change the advertising world forever. Above a black-and-white photo of the Beetle stood just one word:

"Lemon."

Lemon, American slang for a dud, a bad buy. Not exactly a logical sales strategy. But it turned out to be, in the legendary words of Steve Jobs "insanely



great". The opposite of a good idea turned out to be a brilliant idea (something Rory Sutherland would later redefine as 'alchemy'). It transformed the Beetle into a cult icon and ushered in the Creative Revolution on Madison Avenue.

Creativity as the Sharpest Business Weapon

This anecdote illustrates the core of effective marketing. Creativity is not about making a message look good after the fact. It is the ability to break patterns and turn a disadvantage into an irresistible advantage. In a world today flooded with stimuli, data, and predictable algorithms, creativity is not an artistic luxury; it is the sharpest business weapon a brand has to beat the competition.

That's exactly why we need to talk about the Cannes Lions. A Cannes Lion is the most coveted creative prize in our industry, and thus the ultimate creative ambition for every marketer and creative.

You would think that creativity would now be at the top of every CMO's priority list. After all, marketing science (thanks to pioneers like Donald Gunn, Peter Field, Les Binet, System1, Kantar, and James Hurman) has repeatedly shown that creativity is the main driver of brand growth.

Yet the reality is shockingly different. Recent research by System1, Peter Field, and Eat Big Fish showed that in 2024, still **50% of all ads are no more interesting than a grass-eating cow**. As a marketer, this should send a chill down your spine.

The Recipe for the Creative Multiplier

Let's look at it purely from a business perspective. Why is an original, striking creative platform superior to 'safe and rational' advertising?

The core of every successful campaign is creative quality, a variable that marketers themselves can directly influence with a profound effect. Research by Paul Dyson, for example, highlights the remarkable multiplier effect of 12 on a campaign's profitability, making it a crucial driver, second only to the inherent power of brand size itself (a factor of 18). This underscores the undeniable power of immersive creation to attract attention and resonate with the audience. Creation is thus the most important variable for the success of an advertising campaign.

But no matter how brilliant an idea is: creativity without media support misses its mark. Research by Andrew Tindall ('The Creative Dividend') among 1,265 campaigns proves that 60% of business results come from the combined power of creative quality and media spend. This is not a linear relationship, but an exponential one: creative impact only truly accelerates with the right media strategy. Creation is the spark; media is the conductor that optimizes reach, timing, and

impact. It is at this crucial intersection that the true business value of a campaign is unlocked. As long as media and creation continue to be treated as separate silos in practice, this potential remains untapped. The real gain lies in a holistic approach, where media planning and creative effectiveness go hand in hand from day one.

The ultimate proof of this synergy lies in consumer psychology. When media and creation perfectly reinforce each other, 'buzz' and Word Of Mouth are created. Recent research by WPP Media and Oxford ('How Humans Decide') shows that this kind of earned media is up to three times more effective in increasing sales. The result? The campaign builds 'Fame': the status where a brand enters the culture and becomes the obvious choice in the category.

This conclusion is powerfully supported by the work of Peter Field and Les Binet. They show that fame campaigns are no less than four times more effective in generating business effects and twice as effective in reducing the brand's price elasticity. All this underscores the need to invest in creativity that resonates and sparks dialogue, to achieve sustainable brand growth. As legendary adman Bill Bernbach once observed: "If your advertising goes unnoticed, everything else is academic."

What Makes Creative Brands Stronger: The Creative Premium

We have re-examined the value of creativity by analyzing what sets the top 100 most creative brands apart. But what exactly is this list, and how does a brand earn such a distinction?

The 'Top 100 Creative Brands' in this article is not determined by the verdict of an expert jury, but by the voice of the consumer. Within WPP's Brand Asset Valuator (BAV), the world's largest and longest-running consumer study on brands, we measure how brands truly live in the minds

of consumers. To determine which brands make the list, we look at the Creative Premium. This is a weighted combination of two crucial BAV metrics:

1. Creativity: The extent to which consumers associate a brand with attributes such as 'creative', 'dynamic', and 'unique'.
2. Most Influential Brand score: The degree to which a brand is seen by consumers as culturally influential and a guiding force in daily life.

Brands that excel on both axes together form this top 100. In the Dutch list for 2026, this results in a fascinating mix. On the one hand, there are established icons that breathe culture and continually reinvent themselves (such as McDonald's, Netflix, Apple, and Samsung), local heroes (like ASML, bol, RTL4, and Tikkie), but also the latest technological trailblazers who are turning our world upside down (such as ChatGPT at number 11).

To demonstrate the power of the Creative Premium, we have examined these top 100 most creative brands across multiple countries. The value of the top 100 most creative brands has been compared to the average of all brands in the Netherlands, the US, the UK, Germany, France, and Belgium.



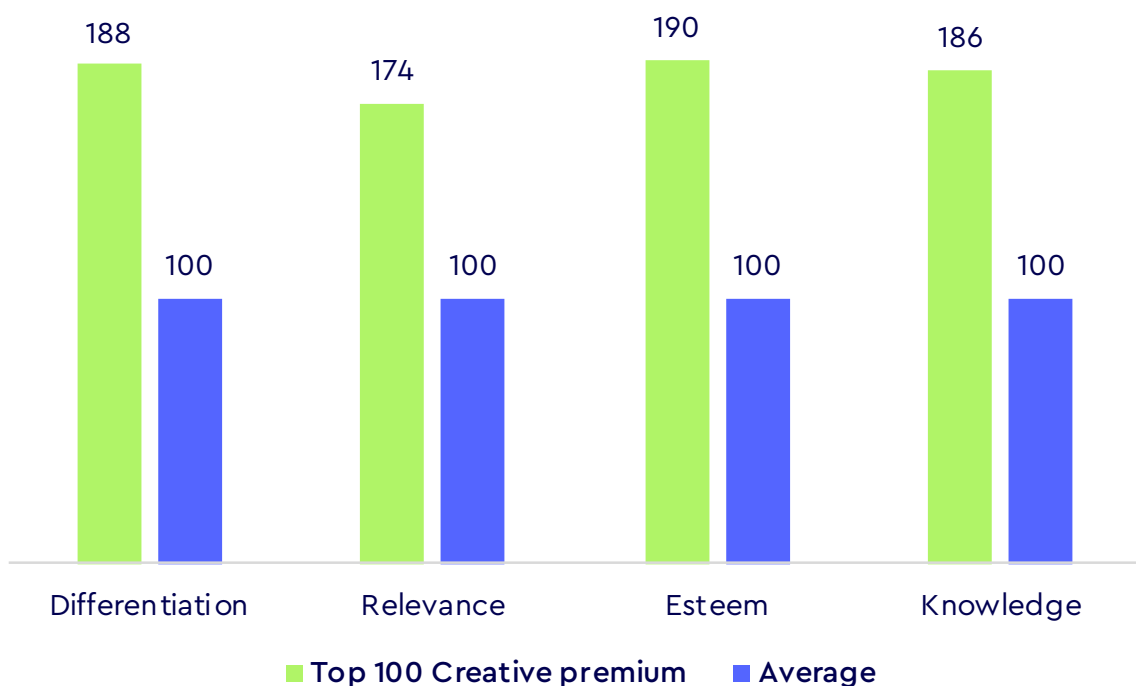
The results are crystal clear: brands that score well on this Creative Premium are significantly better at building pricing power and quality perception. On average, creative brands are 60% more successful at this than the average brand. The highest outlier is in the UK, where a high Creative Premium shows a 72% improvement in both values. France shows the lowest (but still impressive) value with a 50% increase in pricing power and 38% in quality perception. The Netherlands is stable around the average with a 58% improvement in pricing power and 54% in quality perception.

Top 100 Creative Premium



These value perceptions are mainly driven by the fact that creative brands are much more strongly associated with attributes such as 'dynamic', 'visionary', and 'innovative'. They are more often seen as the undisputed leader in their category and significantly more often as 'hip', 'trendy', and 'cool'. This demonstrates that creative brands are uniquely equipped to move in step with the consumer, adapting to shifting cultural currents and evolving expectations. The result? Brands with a high Creative Premium score on **average 74% higher on relevance, enjoy 86% more awareness, are 88% better at building differentiation, and enjoy no less than 90% more prestige.**

Top 100 Creative Premium



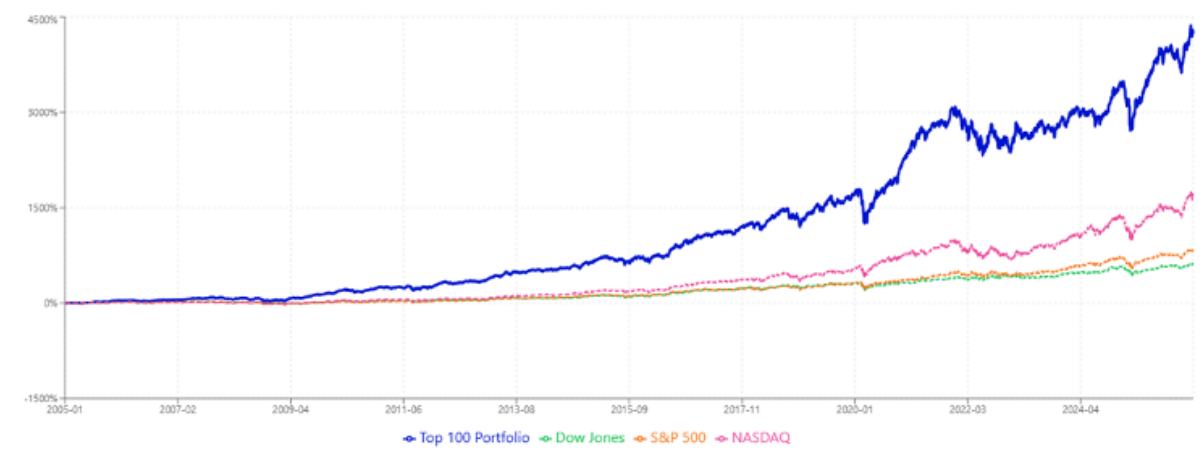
Not unimportant: these top 100 creative brands consistently outperform the financial markets. The 100 most creative brands in the US have a combined stock price that is 9x higher than the Dow Jones, 6x higher than the S&P 500, and 3x higher than the Nasdaq. In the Netherlands, we see the same trend: here, the top 100 creative companies collectively outperform the AEX by a factor of 10. A pattern we see in every individual market we analyzed.

It is crucial to note here that in this analysis, creativity is not the sole cause of this financial performance but rather acts as the ultimate multiplier of brand growth. Established brands with strong market foundations leverage high creative quality to exponentially accelerate their business momentum and build an insurmountable competitive moat. Crucially, this law of gravity does not only apply to multi-billion-dollar empires like Apple or Nike. On the contrary: for brands with tighter budgets, creativity is the only viable market-entry strategy. While market leaders can temporarily compensate for dull assets through sheer media weight and deep pockets, creativity is the ultimate equalizer for challengers. It allows you to outsmart the competition, rather than outspend them.

Top 100 creative brands in USA:

BAV Factor – Top 100 Brands – Creative Premium

Cumulative daily growth (%) since 2005, equal-weight per brand. All values in USD.



Top 100 Creative brands Netherlands

BAV Factor – Top 100 Brands – Creative Premium

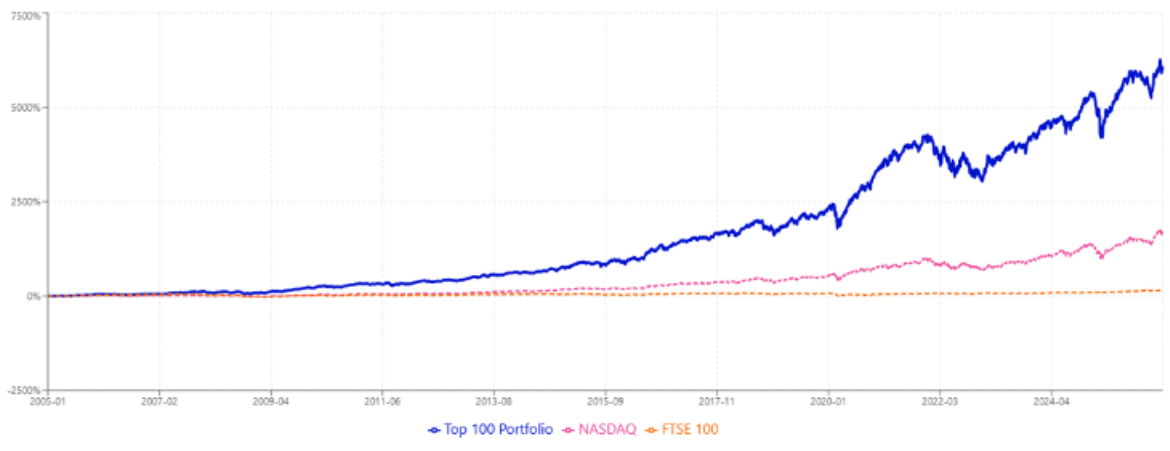
Cumulative daily growth (%) since 2005, equal-weight per brand. All values in USD.



Top 100 creative brands – UK

BAV Factor – Top 100 Brands – Creative Premium

Cumulative daily growth (%) since 2005, equal-weight per brand. All values in USD.



The Extraordinary Cost of Dull

Despite this overwhelming evidence, Kantar's figures recently showed that marketers grossly underestimate the impact of creation. Andrew Tindal showed in his book *The Creative Dividend* how persistent this problem is: 41% of marketers in Europe and the US still see creativity as a 'risk', and 40% feel uncertain about its impact. Data that Mark Ritson used a year later during a presentation at Cannes. The worrying result? Risk-averse, boring creations.

With the rise of AI, it is easier and cheaper than ever to put together a rational, logical ad. No need for an 'expensive' creative agency anymore, right?

That is a notorious misconception. 'Boring' are ads that evoke no emotion, cannot hold attention, and feel like a shopping list read out by the sales department.

And boredom comes with an astronomical price tag. According to research by System1, Peter Field & Eat Big Fish, a creative campaign is on average 13 times more effective at growing a brand than

a boring campaign. Only 25% of advertisements are perceived by consumers as 'not boring'. Yet, these ads account for 32% of the total budget we invest in supporting non-boring campaigns. That means we spend 68% of our marketing budgets ineffectively by investing in creations that fail to evoke any (useful) emotion.

To illustrate this waste: System1 calculated that the extra media investments needed to compensate for boring creations in the US are greater than the entire GDP of Greece (\$189 billion). Translating this to the Dutch market, we collectively require an additional €6.5 billion in budget simply to compensate for the lack of creativity with increased media pressure. To put this in perspective: that figure equals the entire annual media spend of the Dutch marketing industry today. In other words, it would demand a doubling of total marketing investments in media, or 0.6% of our national GDP. On average, this costs a brand €10 million extra per year in media buying to achieve the same effect as one truly creative campaign. In the words of James Hurman: Doing nothing is not a safe option. The biggest waste of marketing budget is making ads that no one remembers. Creativity is not a risk; it is actually the ultimate risk-avoidance tool.

A Cannes Lion as an Effectiveness Guarantee

Admittedly, in the colder corridors of corporate boardrooms, Cannes sometimes carries the reputation of being an elitist, self-congratulatory festival for creatives celebrating ideas that rarely convert in the real world. A healthy dose of skepticism is understandable. However, when we look strictly at the numbers, the data proves the skeptics wrong. But a fair question remains: why should you care? What does an award like a Cannes Lion add?

The answer is simple: every marketer should set a Cannes Lion as a goal to reach. If only because it forces the agency and the organization to rise above mediocrity. But we can also support this with hard data.

Institutionalising creativity within your organisation and embedding creative ambitions into your objectives delivers extraordinary advantages. To begin with, a comprehensive analysis of the Gunn Report, spanning sixteen years, reveals that creative campaigns which secured awards were, on average, seven to eight times more efficient at generating market share than their non-awarded counterparts. In their subsequent work, Peter Field and Les Binet demonstrate that this efficiency multiplier can peak at an astonishing eleven times. Field further concludes that creatively awarded campaigns become increasingly effective over time, widening the gap with those that lack such recognition. James Hurman adds a compelling layer: the most frequently awarded creative agencies are no less than 2.1 times more likely to win effectiveness awards than their less creative competitors.

In other words, the data is unequivocal, creativity institutionalised is not a luxury, but a strategic imperative. The brands and agencies that make creativity a core part of their culture and ambition are not just winning trophies; they are building a compounding advantage that translates directly into business growth and market leadership.

The Business Case for Cannes Lions

The link between creative recognition and proven effectiveness is therefore undeniable, both for agencies and for the campaigns they develop. But what does this creative excellence mean concretely for the financial performance of the brands themselves? McKinsey has focused precisely on this question and investigated what distinguishes Cannes Lion winners from the rest. They looked at how successful brands were at Cannes and the consistency with which they managed to repeat this success over the years.

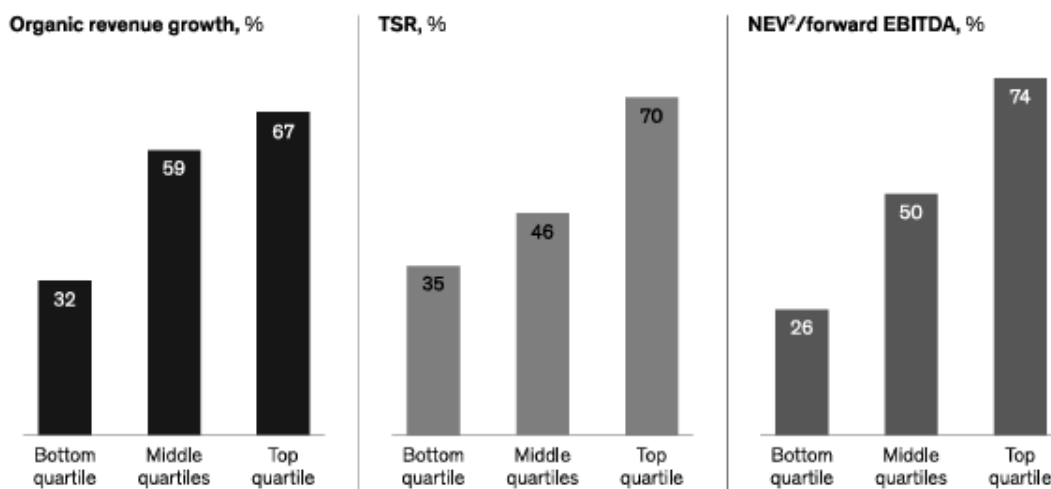
The outcome was nothing short of remarkable. Companies that consistently performed well at Cannes proved to be financially much stronger and more

innovative. In hard business terms: the highest-performing creative brands achieved 67% more organic revenue growth, delivered a 70% better return to shareholders, and outperformed on EBITDA by 74%. James Hurman, in his book, takes this even further: he found that the absolute elite, the companies crowned 'Creative Company of the Year' outperformed the stock market by a staggering factor of 3.5.

At the highest level, creativity is simply the best business case there is. Or, as McKinsey puts it with characteristic understatement: "Great creative work can be a key to winning the battle for initial consideration."

Companies that perform well on the Award Creativity Score tend to outperform their peers on financial metrics.

Financial performance, by creativity score quartile¹



¹Using only companies with a creativity score >0.
²Net enterprise value.

McKinsey & Company

Conclusion: From 'Lemon' to Culture, How to Avoid the Billion-Euro Fine

The impressive financial results observed by McKinsey among Cannes Lions winners are no coincidence. They are the outcome of a deliberate strategy. McKinsey's research shows that the best-performing brands distinguish themselves in crucial ways. Two of the most important pillars that emerge are a deep, almost forensic understanding of consumer identity, and the institutionalisation of creativity within the company culture.

This conclusion aligns seamlessly with the core thesis of James Hurman. Both McKinsey and Hurman independently demonstrate that creative excellence is not the lucky strike of a lone genius, but the result of an organisation that has made creativity a formal, deeply embedded part of its DNA.

Herein lies the key for Dutch marketers. Winning a Cannes Lion is not an exercise in vanity; it is the ultimate guarantee of effectiveness. By setting the ambition to win on this global stage, you force your organisation to rise above mediocrity. Creativity becomes not a one-off project or a decorative afterthought, but a hardcore, institutionalised business objective.

In a world that is rapidly digitising and automating, avoiding creative risk is the greatest risk a brand can take. Creativity is not a gamble; it is the ultimate risk-avoidance tool.

But how do you engineer that success? It starts with understanding 'culture' in the broadest sense. It's about an internal company culture that breathes creativity, but equally about the external culture of the consumer. To connect creativity with the culture of your audience, you must become an expert in the lived reality of your target group. What truly matters to them? What are people talking about, which media do they trust, how do they communicate, and what unwritten codes do they follow? Only when you truly grasp the culture of your consumer and understand the communities they belong to, can your brand move in sync with their world.

This requires letting go of dry demographic profiles. Where the traditional marketer stops at abstract target groups like 'women, 25-35', the creative frontrunner digs deeper into genuine cultural identity. With advanced methodologies such as Community Mapping, a WPP Media approach that transcends conventional segmentation, we unravel these groups into vibrant communities with shared passions, be they 'urban runners' or 'eco-conscious DIYers'. Only by truly entering this deep experiential world do you

lay the foundation for brands that resonate within culture.

Our own BAV data proves this works. Consumers experience that creative leaders (brands with a high Creative Premium) understand their world like no other. Brands like Apple, Ben & Jerry's, McDonalds, and in the Netherlands, Booking.com or Bol, do not top the rankings by accident. They understand that data without context is just numbers, and that a powerful cultural insight is always the starting point of a brilliant idea.

This brings us back to New York, 1959. Logic dictated that a small, odd-looking German car was unsellable in America. The safe, risk-averse route would have been a rational list of low price and fuel efficiency. The result would have been an early death in obscurity. DDB chose creative alchemy. They dared to enter the (street) culture of the consumer with a single bold word: "Lemon."

The billion-euro fine for boredom is real, and the marketing industry pays it every day we approve mediocre, risk-averse campaigns. It's time to challenge spreadsheet logic, truly enter the consumer's world, and give creativity the strategic starring role it deserves. Because if your campaign doesn't get noticed, everything else is academic.

Onwards to Cannes, and far beyond.

About the author

Pol Juffermans is a Strategic Insights Director at WPP Media. As an expert and thought leader in fact-based marketing & advertising, media and creative effectiveness, he helps brands translate complex data into profitable growth strategies. Pol does not believe in the artificial separation between media and creation; he is passionate about uniting these two worlds into one unbeatable business weapon. In his thought leadership role at WPP Media, he shares this passion and these insights to inspire the market and consistently raise the bar for effectiveness.

Want to stop the fine for boredom for your brand, spar about cultural target group and community insights, or raise the bar for Cannes together?

Contact Pol at pol.juffermans@wppmedia.com or connect via LinkedIn.

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