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Why do we pay more attention if there's a cute animal?
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WHY IT'S RAINING CATS AND DOGS IN THE AD WORLD

The ad industry has fallen in love with cute animals. McVitie's offers up 'Sweet' kittens and puppies, O2's Be More Dog campaign features a cat acting canine; and IKEA released 100 cats inside a store for its Happy Inside ad. Three has really embraced the trend, featuring no less than a singing kitten, a moonwalking pony, and a hilariously-dressed pug. But why do puppies, ponies and penguins mean such serious business?

Location **Global**

Scope

In the last few years, the advertising industry has fallen in love with cute animals. McVitie's 'Sweet' advert star kittens and puppies, O2's Be More Dog campaign features a cat acting canine; and IKEA released 100 cats inside a store for its Happy Inside ad. Three has really embraced the trend, featuring no less than a singing kitten, a moonwalking pony, and a hilariously-dressed pug.

While these ads are undoubtedly adorable, they can actually have a genuine effect on the bottom line. Cadbury's drumming gorilla increased sales of Dairy Milk by 9%, Compare the Market's meerkats reduced the site's advertising cost per unique visitor from £5.47 to £1.06 in a year, and Aflac's CEO cited the Aflac duck as helping the company to grow by 93% over 9 years in the US and Japan. [1][2][3]

Cute animals can be a great opportunity for brands. Even just looking at a cute picture can make you feel more engaged, according to psychological research. Wouldn't brands want the same for their adverts?

Getting past your brain's gatekeeper

This advertising trend is almost certainly inspired by viral internet content. A [sneezing panda](#) has 210 million views on YouTube, ['keyboard cat'](#) has 37 million, and a [cat riding a Roomba to chase a duck while dressed as a shark](#) clocks in at 7 million. So if cuteness is so successful on YouTube, why not in adverts?

To find out what makes content go viral, researchers monitored the *New York Times*' 'Most Emailed' list. They discovered that more 'emotional' articles – those that really connected with people – were 18% more likely to make the list. [4] But why is this? As science writer Rita Carter explains, "where thought conflicts with emotion, the latter is designed by the neural circuitry in our brains to win." [5]

And on top of this, there's the 'cocktail party effect'. [6] Imagine you're at a crowded, noisy cocktail party. While you're talking to a friend, you hear someone across the room say your name, even though you weren't listening to that conversation. Your brain's 'gatekeeper' network picked it up – it has a VIP list of stimuli (such as your name) that your attention will automatically be directed to.

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Rita Carter, science writer

This effect is used in an [IAMS cat food advert](#). The talking cat is already likely to have people's attention, but when he starts explaining that IAMS contains more nutrition – the advert's key message – he's interrupted by the doorbell. This small addition doesn't affect the advert's narrative or tone – but the sound of a doorbell is on the brain's VIP list, so it automatically makes you pay more attention, helping to get the advert's point lodged in your brain.

Emotional content also sits on that VIP list. In an experiment, participants were shown pictures of either adult animals or baby animals, and then played a game similar to *Operation*, where tweezers were used to remove pieces from small holes without touching the sides. Kittens and puppies resulted in participants spending more time on the task and performing better at it. [7]

The cute animals sent a signal directly to the primal, automatic brain commanding the participants to pay attention. So using pugs in an advert can cause viewers to instantly sit up and listen. Another study had a group watch ten adverts sandwiched in a 30-minute show. Two weeks later, they recalled 11% of ads previously rated as 'neutral', and 24% of ads rated as 'emotional'. [8]



Things that evoke an emotional response, like a talking cat, are more likely to get our attention
O2 (2014) ©

Repetitive cuteness

Is there such a thing as 'too much' cute? A landmark study looked at the relationship between pre-testing metrics and ultimate sales effects for seven Mars ads. [9] Sales appeared to be best predicted by memory metrics, followed by those that indirectly aid memory, like attention and emotion. Engagement and likeability appeared to be least important.

But why? People actually have relatively limited cognitive capacity for making consumption choices. Experts claim that only 0.0004% of cognitive processing is conscious. [10] As a result, it's likely that most consumer decisions are made automatically, without conscious deliberation. So brands that can find a way into people's brains – like bombarding them with pictures of a tiny, furry kitten – have a significant sales advantage over those that are more forgettable.

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All these pugs and ponies also play another important role: they make great distinctive assets. They're consistent branding elements, like the McDonalds arches – making it easier for consumers to recognise and remember brand communications. The key is repetition. Another study had participants watch an hour of programming containing adverts, and recall was measured a week later. They remembered 8% of adverts shown once, 26% of those shown twice, and 88% of those shown four times. [11]

One brand that used this to great effect was UK cat food brand Felix. [12] In 2001, Felix's competitor Whiskas was the market leader in single-serve cat food pouches. But over the following years, Whiskas produced many different campaigns (including adverts made for cats), while Felix stuck with the same asset – its black and white cartoon cat. Felix continued to spend less than half as much as Whiskas on advertising, but the repetition of the Felix cat helped it eventually overtake Whiskas to become the market leader. So cute animals can help to get an advert noticed and remembered – but a lot of their utility also resides in their consistent use.



Familiar, reoccurring characters show consistency, helping people identify with a brand
Compare the Market (2014) ©

Insights and opportunities

While many successful adverts have used animals, they aren't the only thing that can create emotion. Returning to viral content, the most popular non-music video on YouTube is 'Charlie Bit my Finger', a clip of a baby biting a toddler's finger. [13] Likewise, the Evian babies have been a huge success for the brand. [14]

We're hardwired to attend to personal stimuli, as demonstrated by the cocktail party effect. In the year after Coca-Cola started printing names on cans and bottles, its sales grew by almost 5%. [15] We're also hardwired to pay attention to anything surprising. Research has shown that an unexpected stimulus, like the sentence "Turtles are not as smart as mammals such as socks or dogs", results in a huge spike in brain activity. [16] When GoCompare's opera singer was first introduced, the site's advertising cost per unique visitor fell from £3.34 to £1.94 in one year. [2]

Puppies, ponies and penguins mean serious business, with proven effects on important brand metrics. And given that marketing seems to have a 'proof' problem, with 73% of CEOs believing that marketers can't prove its business impact, this could be a great solution. [17] This realisation could come too late for some brands. GoCompare dropped its iconic opera singer after winning Most Annoying Ad two years in a row, with the brand's marketing officer claiming that "a brand has to listen to its customers." [18][19] But repetition isn't necessarily a bad thing. While research has found that attitudes towards a brand might worsen if an advert is constantly repeated, it also discovered that sales are maintained or even increase in line with ad repetition. [20]

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When I tried explaining to people what we were thinking about, no-one got it. 'Well, there's this duck,' I'd say, 'and he quacks Aflac.' The response was always the same: a silent stare

Dan Amos, Aflac CEO

An extreme example comes from American brand HeadOn, which produced arguably [the most annoying advert](#) of all time ("HeadOn. Apply directly to the forehead! HeadOn. Apply directly to the forehead! HeadOn. Apply directly to the forehead!"). Many brand owners would balk at such a strategy – yet sales increased by 200% in the year the advert was aired. [21]

When it comes to cuteness and repetition, success can be achieved with risk. Aflac's CEO encountered a lot of resistance to his duck – the same duck that's gone on to become the symbol of the brand's success. "When I tried explaining to people what we were thinking about, no-one got it," he says. "Well, there's this duck,' I'd say, 'and he quacks Aflac.' The response was always the same: a silent stare." [3]

The bottom line is that there are significant opportunities to be earned by those who take risks and challenge safe assumptions with science. After all, who would ever have expected a bunch of talking meerkats to be such an effective advertising tool?

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Related behaviour

[Visual Codes](#): The rise of a more visual language.

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