

# ANTI

THE  
CHALLENGER  
GUIDE TO  
BATTING BANALITY



# DULL

eatbigfish.

100% Hydration

Refreshing  
pure!

Pure mountain  
spring water  
filtered through  
endless feedback  
meetings.



# ANTI DULL

## THE CHALLENGER GUIDE TO BATTLING BANALITY

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# OUR FIGHT

Adam Morgan, Founder & Chair, eatbigfish

# AGAINST DULL

Does a mother really ever approve of her child going into advertising? Don't they really always hope for something just a little more for you?

Some mums say something, some don't, I suppose. Mine never said anything; she was always supportive. But 42 years later, as I was watching Saturday night television with her in 2023, I had, finally, a moment of profound shame about the profession I had spent so much of my life in. The centre advertising break came on – the most expensive airtime you can buy, big sporting events aside – and we sat and watched the ads together.

They were universally awful. Dull, unimaginative dross. Without exception.

I found myself ashamed. So this is what she thinks I've spent my life doing over the last 42 years, I thought. Making this kind of stuff.

It's a wonder she's still speaking to me.

And I found myself angry, too. Why are we all making such a huge quantity of dull marketing communications? Still? It's been almost 20 years since Peter Field and Les Binet helped lead a revolution in understanding the real commercial value of creativity to a brand owner. And that work has been followed by a torrent more from other really stimulating thinkers.

So we all know what works better than this. It's not as if it's some kind of secret. And yet we're not, for the most part, making it. There's the occasional flash of brilliance, and we'll celebrate some of that in award shows and on our LinkedIn feeds, but for the most part, we're making dross. Unengaging to our customers, unengaging to our would-be customers.

And, surely, unengaging to our businesses.

If you think this is an exaggeration, some kind of nihilistic rhetorical flourish, let's look at the System1 data. System1 mostly test television ads, which tend to be better than digital ads, so let's load the dice towards optimism before we start. And they've tested every single TV ad that's run in the UK and the US since 2017. That's over 82,000 ads.

What does that data say? What is the most common emotion people say they feel after seeing an ad?

Absolutely nothing at all. Because it's dull.

Which led to the Cost of Dull project. It started with a conversation with Peter Field. Look, I said, this can't go on. We have to see if we can make some kind of intervention. What if we took Daniel Kahneman's finding that the pain of losing something is twice as powerful as the pleasure of gaining something, and turned your IPA data upside down? Looked less at the



upside you gain from being creative and more at what it costs you if you choose to be dull?

So Peter, in his brilliance, did. He used the IPA data – the most robust database on effectiveness in the world – to show that brand owners in the UK choosing to be dull would need to pay on average an additional £10m in media to achieve the same commercial impact as a brand owner choosing to create an emotional response and be famous for what they do.

From there the collaboration grew. It's become a trilogy. Like Dune, really, but with fewer sandworms.

Part 1, last year, focused on The Extraordinary Cost of Dull Content in collaboration with Peter, Jon Evans, System1 and the IPA. We uncovered that the cost of dull content to the US ad industry was a whopping \$189B –the GDP of Greece – while a very dull video of some cows grazing in a field beat 50% of the ads in the System1 database.

That's a lot of under-performing creative. And some very big additional media bills.

This year, part 2 looks at The Eye-watering Cost of Dull Media, in collaboration with Dr Karen Nelson-Field and Amplified. Karen and the team have put a cost on the difference between ads served on platforms, and those actually seen (for long enough to make any kind of impression).

It's big. Far more than I for one expected.

Next year, we're aiming to explore the Cost of Dull Product, together with looking at the compounding effect of Dull Content x Dull Media x Dull Product together. And, with it, look at whether we are really understanding what is risk and what is responsibility in marketing in the right way.

What's eatbigfish's role in all of this?

Understanding the benefit of adopting a Challenger Mindset is the core of our business. We've spent the last 25 years studying, working with, and writing about Challengers. We call this ongoing research The Challenger Project, and so far it has generated four books, developed a huge number of frameworks and tools which we've shared with the world, and underpins all the work we do with clients.

One of the reasons we continue to be fascinated by Challengers is that they can't afford to be dull. It's existential for them; they are the anti-blah. Of course the product is important. But unless the Challenger can be more engaging than the rest of the category, unless they can generate active attention, they die.

So our contribution to the project is to look for useful and usable solutions, for the antidote to dull. First, by talking to the brands battling dull daily – some of which you'll find in this magazine – and also by finding the people whose expertise is in making potentially dull subjects more interesting: teachers, reality TV show producers, radio presenters, improvisers, documentary makers, experience designers, environmental activists, and more. You can listen to those conversations in our podcast Let's Make This More Interesting (LMTMI).

We then do what we've always done at eatbigfish – turn those insights into useful tools, to help you apply this thinking to your business. You'll find one of these, the Anti-Dull Dial, explored throughout this publication; five questions to ask ourselves as we generate anything that will help us keep on the side of interesting, and away from grey.

We're not saying any of us is dull, by the way. Or have ever run a dull meeting or put out a dull piece of work. Perish the thought. But perhaps we have friends who have, and still do a little more often than they should. Perhaps this is for them. If so, please pass it on.

Because, look, it's not as if we're stupid, is it? Or lazy. Or cynical. The marketing and communications world is full of really smart, hard-working, well-intentioned people trying every day to do the best for their brand and their business. And yet, collectively, we are still putting a sea of drabness out in the world.

Every day. Still.

So come on. Our mothers have been sitting silently too long.

It's time for an intervention.

We're better than this.

# You talkin' to me?

It's taken many months of diligent work – endless troubleshooting with your engineers, some fraught negotiations with your regulators, and not a few sleepless nights in between, but your team has finally done it. Your new smart hub is ready. You can now dynamically prioritise how you route your consumers' data in a way that doesn't only increase the speed, but also the reliability of their connection. When it really matters to them. And you're the first in the market to crack it. The champagne is already on ice.

After all, it's a clear step change in the quality of the offer. Logically, you're the obvious choice. People will love it. And you. Right?

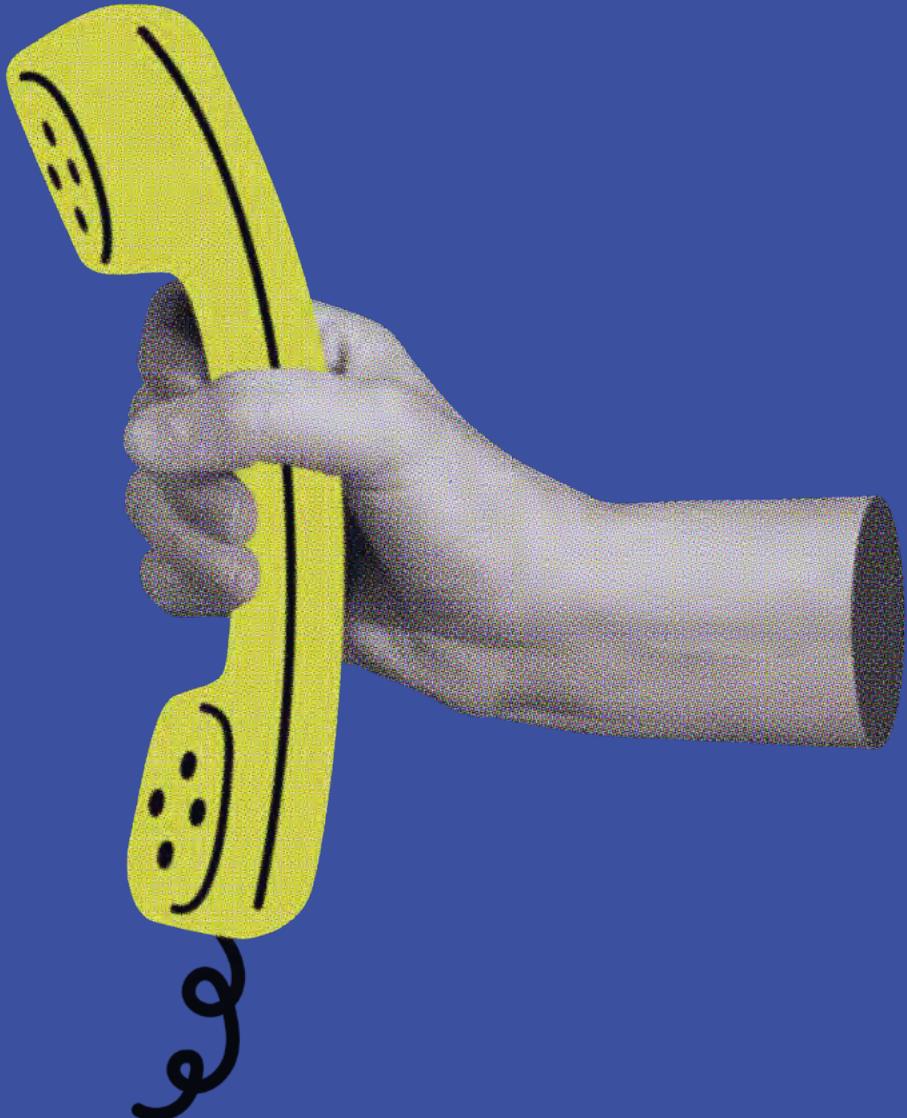
Maybe not. According to research from Grayling, a whopping 56% of UK consumers cannot name a brand that they feel connected to or who they think understands them. No surprise then, that in Iris's global study, Participation Brand Index, they found that 4 out of 5 brands are failing to connect emotionally. So, what's going wrong? Why are so many brands with great products failing to connect with their audiences?

You have to start with something they care about. Addison Brown, science teacher and guest on *Let's Make This More Interesting* explained that to engage his students on topics like physics, he focuses on something they care about first – then gets to his lesson. For example, he starts with a picture of his dog hanging his head out the car window. Why? Because the dog is interesting, and the kids care about what is happening to the dog. Then he can teach them about forces and movement.

Taco Bell's social team understands this need to meet their customers on their level. As their Head of Social Nicole Weltman told us, when it comes to their content inspiration, *"The heart of what we're saying is what people are saying to us. Not every brand gets a comment section so rich that it can lead to briefs for content, but every brand could use the comments in their category as a brief. It's about taking what the internet gives you."*

As Taco Bell show us, it's about consistently understanding how and where they should show up, and when it's done right, it works. Sharing the fact





that a post from their CMO at their Live Más event outperformed one from an ultra-celebrity basketball player, Weltman explained, “*Why? Because it’s us. Why are you following Taco Bell? To see stuff about Taco Bell. It’s very basic, but you can get so distracted by everything that’s going on, the echo chamber that is advertising, AI, celebrities. But that’s the other part of taking what the internet gives you: your audience is telling you what content they want to see.*” You just need to make sure you are listening.

But to really connect with your audience, you first need to get a clear sense of who they are and what that means at every touchpoint – something Challenger brands focus on specifically. Affordable luxury hotel chain CitizenM launched without all the bells and whistles of traditional hotels, instead focusing on the elements of a stay that were most important to their audience – a great bar, an amazing bed and super-fast WIFI. They aren’t for every traveller, they’re for ‘*those who take the train, but drink champagne.*’ Of course, Challengers know who they are for, but more importantly they understand who they are not for.

As marketers, we know our audience is important – crucial even, to our success. We know their demographic, their mindset. We think we know what’s good for them (our brand, obviously, because of x, y, z), and we just want to tell them about it. But we can’t forget that our audience isn’t solely focused on us, they may not understand the intricacies or the jargon of our category – and they don’t need to. They want to feel understood, and that you are actually talking to them about what’s important to them (not you). So maybe don’t tell them about the 1 Gigabit internet speed – do what telecoms provider EE did and show people how their broadband ensures everyone can be online, at the same time, inside the house, when a summer storm kills the kids’ outdoor birthday party vibes. That’s what’s important to the consumer – avoiding meltdowns when plans change.

So, when you’re thinking about all the things you need to get across to your audience in your marketing, first, stop, and ask yourself: Are we meeting them where they care and speaking to them in their language? Or are we just talking to ourselves again?

# CUT THE BABY TALK

**Kim Chappell, Chief Brand Officer at Bobbie**

In a category awash with cutesy baby animals and ABC wooden blocks, US-based infant formula brand Bobbie decided to do things differently and speak to the actual purchasers of their product (parents, not their babies). We spoke to their Chief Brand Officer, Kim Chappell to find out how they consistently meet their audience where they care and break with their category's norms to speak to them in their own language.



Challengers (by definition) challenge something – what assumptions in the marketplace or wider society does Bobbie challenge?

There's an assumption that the formula market is a free market, and it's not in America. 50% of the parents in this country are on WIC, which is our women and infant children benefits program. This program currently props up the two major legacy players in this industry and allows them to continue to serve half of the country, even if those parents wouldn't have necessarily opted for that brand of formula. The industry would look incredibly different, and innovation would have happened at the pace of the rest of CPG, if it were a free market and 100% of parents were able to put their money behind brands that they want to support. And I believe all parents deserve that right, whether you are on WIC or paying out of pocket.

Secondly, there's an assumption in this country that breastfeeding is going to be easy, and it should be beautiful, and it should just happen. Anybody who's

been through that experience, knows that that's most often not the case. We need to do better for mothers to set them up for success – things like expanded coverage and access to lactation support and passing federal paid leave to allow new mothers the time and space to make breastfeeding work. Our set up in this country does not fundamentally support mothers. That is another thing that we get really loud about at Bobbie, not only because we are a team of moms who are living and breathing that experience, but every single person in our community is living and breathing that same experience. So how can we galvanize our community around some of these shared issues, such as passing paid federal leave? We sit here and wonder why breastfeeding rates aren't going up, but the two have a direct correlation. Breastfeeding takes time. It takes focus and energy, and we should give moms that time to be successful. And if we're not, then we certainly shouldn't be placing any judgment or shame on how they choose to feed their babies, which is obviously core to the Bobbie mission.

**Tell us about your customer. Who is Bobbie speaking to and how do you make sure they hear you?**

Typically, we are speaking to a mom, and she's the friend that likes to research everything. She's deep in the spreadsheet and she wants the highest quality for her baby. She wants to double click on ingredients. She wants to support a brand that has a purpose – it's not just transactional. She wants to be surprised and delighted. She's used to getting her monthly deliveries for whatever she needs in her life. She cares deeply about what's in her baby's bottle. It's not an afterthought. So, we try to meet her in that moment and kind of lift the curtain and say, here's what's in your formula. Here are the benefits of that ingredient. Here's where we sourced it. Here's why we feed it to our own babies and build a layer of trust and transparency with them in a way that I don't think the industry as a whole has been particularly good at.

We come in and really try to meet our parents where they're at and not feel like this is a game of dark arts and shadows, but actually, here's how it comes to be, and here's why we're priced the way we're priced, and here's the cow that ate this organic grass in New Zealand that's feeding your baby. Here's why USDA

Organic matters. There's a lot of beautiful and rich storytelling that can go around that, and those little stories and ways in which you can tell people what's happening behind the scenes, builds trust with your customer. This is a product where you need to feel like you can trust this company, because this is going to feed your baby. There's nothing more precious to you as a new parent than: What is your baby eating? Is your baby growing? Is your baby spitting up? Is your baby pooping? It is the centre of your universe for so many months. We recognize that, and we try to educate and meet them through that whole journey.

It's also about how you talk to the parent. What was so perplexing to me coming into this job, was that when we looked at the category, at the cans of formula and the messaging, there were little giraffes and teddy bears and ABC blocks. And I'm like, the baby can't read, okay? The baby doesn't know what's going on. The baby is sitting in a car seat, sleeping while you're purchasing this formula. And I just felt like it was really cheesy, and undermining to women in a way. They're smart, we're smart. We know what we want. We deserve a product that's speaking to us, not to our three-week-old baby. So, I just felt like there was a really good opportunity to just talk to the

#### ON MOTHERHOOD

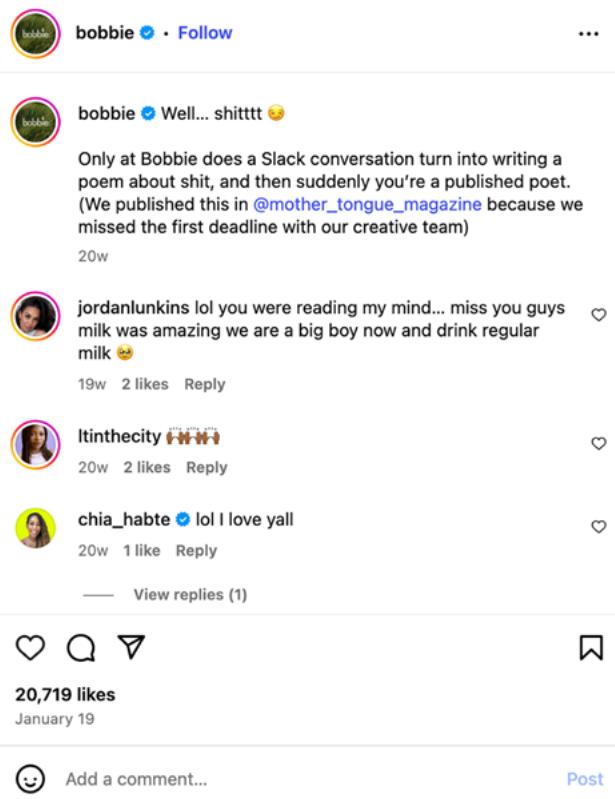
This shit is beautiful.

This shit is hard. And nonstop. And thankless.  
We log shit, pray for shit, worry when there is no shit.  
We take pictures and ask, "Is this shit normal?"

But we learn to take on the shit,  
To give zero shits,  
To trust that we know our shit.  
Turns out we are the shit after all.

Well... shitttt.

- THE MOMS OF BOBBIE



bobbie • Follow

bobbie Well... shitttt 😊

Only at Bobbie does a Slack conversation turn into writing a poem about shit, and then suddenly you're a published poet. (We published this in [@mother\\_tongue\\_magazine](#) because we missed the first deadline with our creative team)

20w

jordanlunkins lol you were reading my mind... miss you guys milk was amazing we are a big boy now and drink regular milk 😊

19w 2 likes Reply

Itintheicity

chia\_habte lol I love yall

20w 1 like Reply

View replies (1)

20,719 likes

January 19

Add a comment... Post

# “We deserve a product that’s speaking to us, not to our three-week-old baby.”

parent. And how do we talk to each other? How do you talk to your friend in your group text? We have a lid sticker that gets a lot of shares that reads “You’re the sh\*t.” And it’s intentionally a positive affirmation for whoever is opening the can, speaking directly to that person, not the baby. And that’s how we talk to our customer, because there’s a level of casualness, friendliness, but also respect – you’re not an idiot and we’re going to just talk to you like you’re one of our friends. That has really been our tone of voice since day one.

**How do you maintain the strong Bobbie brand in the content that you put out into the world, particularly when you are speaking more casually?**

Sometimes I’ll read something that comes through and if there’s anything that gives me the ick or feels so cringe, or cheesy, then it just doesn’t feel Bobbie or it’s just not what we call ‘Bobbified.’ We really try not to be cheesy, but just to have a little fun and playfulness and talk to our customer in the way that we would want to be spoken to. And that is the beauty, I think, of being a mom-founded and led company, we are living and breathing the same experience as our customers.

Everything that we have done since day one has been so customer centric. We have over-indexed on non-scalable things like you wouldn’t believe. And we still do that to this day. So how do we make sure that every customer has a high touch experience? If they DM us, we get back to them instantly with a human, not AI, messaging with them. We pull them into zooms for feedback with our CEO. We surprise and delight and send them gifts in their monthly subscription.

We have Ubered formula to a mom stuck at LaGuardia who ran out because her flight was delayed. These little moments allow us to continue to treat every mom like we would want to be treated.

There’s a level of compassion and care in how we show up as real humans across every touch point. There are all of these companies over-indexing on AI, but it just makes the human touch point so much more valuable. And in a space where you’re a mom, you don’t want to talk to a freaking robot, you want to talk to a mom who’s lived it and breathed it, so our customer success team is all real people that answer the phones and reply to texts. I think that’s been a really big part of how we’ve built a beloved brand. People walk away feeling like they’ve had this really lovely experience with Bobbie. They feel like they understand our values. We’ve asked them to take action with us. They feel like they’ve done more than just buy powdered milk, and then we leave them feeling that they will always recommend us because we helped them accomplish one of the most important things in the first year of life, nourish and feed their new baby. The phrase that we’ve heard used by one of our customers was that Bobbie offered a layer of “invisible support.” She told us, ‘I always felt like I had a layer of invisible support with your brand.’ That was really beautiful to me.

It’s the typical touch points, and how do you reimagine them for a better experience? For us that was when people were cancelling their subscription. And you know, any direct-to-consumer business is like,



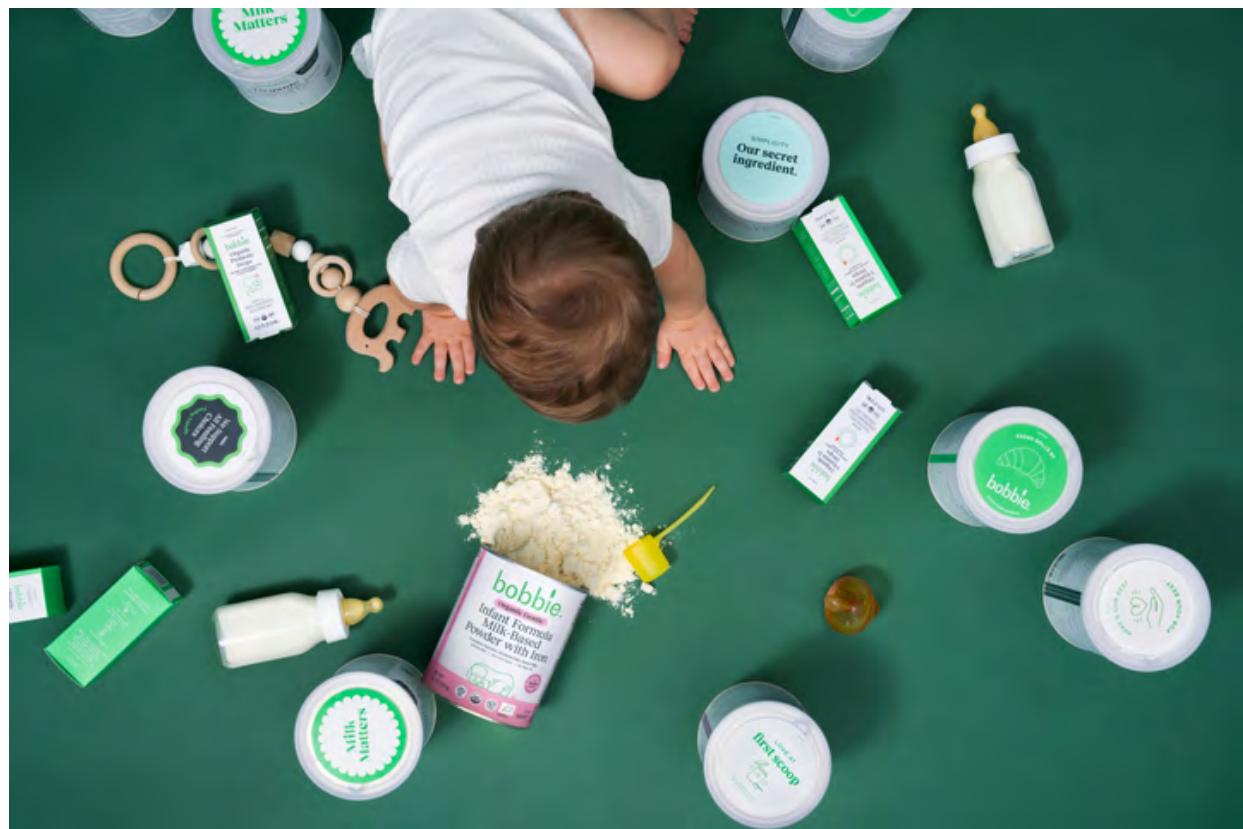
please, please don't cancel. They'll bury the button and make it so hard to find, because they don't want you to be able to cancel. But what we realized was, okay, this is different for us, because this person is cancelling because their baby is now a one-year-old and no longer needs formula. It actually means that it's a celebration, and they're graduating off formula and they're headed into the next stage of parenthood.

So, we created a whole graduation experience where you go to click Cancel, which is easy to find, you graduate, and you get your whole 'Spotify Wrapped' experience of your first year of feeding. It's how many bottles you made based off of how many cans you ordered, and how many diapers you changed, etc. You get a graduation diploma, and then we invite you to join a graduation ceremony with our CEO, Laura, which we do once a month. It's such a beautiful way to celebrate the shared experience of having gotten your baby to age one. We ask them to put their cameras on because we want to see their faces. And it's this beautiful collage of parents from all over the country celebrating the same moment. We hope that is a finale experience that allows them to go and be an evangelist for the brand.

And is that hugely scalable? I don't know, but it's a great moment. We share it on social. We share it in our marketing. We talk about what it means to be a Bobbie grad, so then it becomes a content engine for us as well.

### What's next for Bobbie's journey?

So, when you grow and change, how does who you're talking to change? It was so crisp for us out the gates: a direct-to-consumer, subscription-based customer. She was the coastal mom. She's probably going back to work at three months. It was very clear, right? And now, as we have grown, we are in Targets nationwide. We're in more local grocers, we're on Amazon, and these are different customers. They are not the same consumer, and we're really learning that. I think now in this next evolution of Bobbie, it's really about nailing the omnichannel experience and figuring out the persona of how to speak to a retail customer that's, quite frankly, not as easy to get in front of as the ones that land on your website, and you get their email, and you start the conversation, you can text them like a friend. It's a totally different muscle for us as a company. And we're really, really focused on how to be a best-in-class retail first company as well.



# SOUL MATES OR BAD DATES?

Do you really know your audience...  
Or are you just talking to yourself?

If we want our brand to make a real connection by speaking in our audience's language, we have to get under the skin of the people we're trying to reach. If you want to meet them where they care, you need to know what they care about.

So how well do you know your audience? Take our extremely rigorous and totally serious diagnostic to find out if you're in tune...or a little tone-deaf.

You spot them across the room at a party. How do you start the conversation?

- A. Get my coolest mutual friend to introduce me, we've got lots in common
- B. Break the ice with something from their LinkedIn profile – I skimmed it on the way to the party
- C. Interrupt their conversation and launch into my elevator pitch. People love a confident opener.

Everyone loves a good laugh. What gets them going?

- A. Weirdly specific in-jokes you wouldn't understand – you had to be there.
- B. The usual: memes, that SNL sketch, cats falling off things.
- C. Honestly, I'm not sure I've ever heard them laugh. We mostly talk business.

It's their birthday. What would you get them?

- A. Something useful and thoughtful that they mentioned in passing six months ago.
- B. I'll find an article about "top ten must-haves" for their type and get something from that.
- C. Probably a gift card? Everyone likes gift cards.

You're grabbing coffee and they ask for their usual. You get...

- A. Before noon? Double macchiato, two sugars. Obviously.
- B. A coffee. I think they're dairy-free now...is it oat or soy?
- C. I consider myself a bit of an expert barista, so I'll get them what I'm getting.

Besides you, what are they into?

- A. We're obsessed with the same stuff. We were just DMing about it.
- B. I researched what people like them like. I've tried bringing it up, but it's been a bit awkward.
- C. How would I know? We only talk about me.

What do they think about you?

- A. I hope they say... great company. Great listener. Says exactly what I was thinking. Can't wait to hang out again.
- B. That I seem nice, but I'm getting more of a casual, non-exclusive vibe to be honest.
- C. Not sure. But I hope they keep me in their consideration set the next time they have a relevant need state and I'm physically available.

## Mostly A's:

You're so in sync. Thoughtful, tuned-in and connecting in ways that feel effortless. Just remember: people don't always want a doppelgänger, throw in a surprise now and then.

## Mostly B's:

You're off to a solid start. You're curious, you're trying, but don't stop there; these are people, not profiles. Spend more time in their world, find shared passions, and relax a little.

## Mostly C's:

Oof. It's not them, it's you. You're stuck in your own head, or worse, your own deck. Time to step out of the echo chamber and into their lives. Go on, ask a question and actually listen.

# Is it time to go off script?

You're not imagining it, *Where's Waldo* got harder. In 2017, Slate's Ben Blatt discovered that, from his debut in 1987 to 2009's *Where's Waldo? The Incredible Paper Chase*, the beloved, bespectacled character shrunk by 80% and was hidden in a crowd nearly four times larger. The needle got smaller. The haystack got bigger. And we were actually looking for him – imagine how overlooked you'd feel as another face in that crowd.

We don't need to tell you how hard it is to stand out right now – the haystack is getting bigger for all of us. Never before have we been tasked with grabbing more attention, on so many different platforms, with so much competition. We are always on, always optimising. We are engaged in a constant "*arms race for attention*," as journalist and author Cory

Doctorow put it, so even when we think we've broken through, the rest of the crowd catches up, expectations rise, new conventions are formed, and the audience gets bored again.

No wonder we're all so tired.

However, Challengers don't have the deep pockets to waste their time and money shovelling more and more ignorable and ignored content into the attention machine. So, how do you get heard amongst the noise when everyone is shouting, all the time?

As humans, our brains are wired to look for patterns, but we are also wired to notice when those patterns break. When something is unusual it triggers a



strong neuro-alert which generates curiosity – we want to make sense of what's happening. Our brains do the work to connect the dots. As Jeffre Jackson, co-founder of Open Intelligence Agency, told us on LMTMI, "*Incongruity is interesting... That's how you get people's attention and keep it.*"

In other words: we need to do something unusual.

To create a little interest through incongruity, what patterns are we going to break? What assumptions about our category, or preconceptions about our brand, leave our customers sleep-walking (or scrolling) past us? Which are the rules (that we've spent so long creating) that we can turn on their heads?

Maybe it's a category 'truth' that's been ingrained and reinforced by decades of messaging that we can flip. It could be at a category level like Omo's classic flipping of the narrative to 'Dirt is Good', or rejecting a marketing convention like Sherwin-Williams did when they highlighted their loneliest (least popular) colour, rather than the latest trend.

Further down the funnel, perhaps we can disrupt the expected in-store with a little of what marketing and venture capital consultant Michael J. Miraflor dubbed 'chaos packaging': challenging assumptions about how we show up on shelf with unconventional formats, like Graza olive oil in squeezy bottles and refill cans or no normal coffee in a toothpaste tube. After getting noticed with their organic tampons packaged in ice cream tubs, Susan Allen Augustin, co-founder and chief brand officer of Here We Flo, explained why small budgets need intriguing packs, "*As a Challenger brand, your packaging is your biggest billboard and most likely your only billboard for a few years, so a sprinkle of chaos is a superpower.*"

Maybe it's the places we show up, or the company we keep, that challenges the assumptions about who we are for, or how we should be used. When Sanlam, South Africa's largest insurer, launched a collaboration with hip-hop artist Dee Koala to promote financial education through music, it wasn't just unexpected. It redefined who financial advice was for.

Doug Martin, Chief Marketing Officer at General Mills, put it like this: "*We are all inundated with a world that is always telling us things. And we are always using our brains to follow ahead and fill in the next blank that we think is coming. And it's only when you surprise people that you can get them to step out of that.*"

In our world, no one is even looking for Waldo anymore. To be found in the crowd, we need to break the patterns. Stop the scroll. Make a different kind of noise.

Are we denying the assumptions of our audience and surprising them?



KHANYISA BUNU

MPHO POPPS

VAFA NARAGHI



# THE SHOW

STAND-UP COMEDY

 **Sanlam**  
Live with confidence

# WHAT THE F WAS THAT?

Mariska Oosthuizen, CMO, Sanlam

We shouldn't talk about money – it's considered taboo, forbidden, uncouth. But Challenger brand Sanlam doesn't agree. The financial services company consistently denies the assumptions of their audience to make financial literacy available to more people to help them live confidently. We spoke to their CMO Mariska Oosthuizen to uncover the many ways Sanlam breaks with the status quo and upends misconceptions in financial services.

How does Sanlam currently fit into the wider financial services category?

Sanlam is a big financial services organisation, originally founded in South Africa 107 years ago. We are the largest non-banking financial services organisation on the African continent, and we also operate in other emerging markets in Asia. The purpose of Sanlam as an organisation is to empower people to be financially confident, secure and prosperous. That DNA of empowerment has always been in the organisation, but the organisation has really reinvented itself over time.

You could say Sanlam is the big fish and we need to therefore, constantly be reinventing ourselves to remain relevant so that we are not eaten by some of the little fish. Right now, the way we are doing that is by going into fintech. We are looking at how we can drive financial inclusion through using digital models, which is, of course, a lot more affordable than our intermediated models that we currently use.

How do you compete for attention in such a competitive category?

As a business itself, financial services have a lot of parity. So, what we offer is not necessarily always that different. It's in the how we do that, that we try and be different, especially from a brand and marketing perspective. So even though Sanlam is, in many instances, the biggest player in South Africa, our spend is not necessarily aligned with that. We are outspent massively by many of our direct competitors. We have to be smart about how we approach our brand and marketing to try and break through in what is a very cluttered and competitive environment.

Whenever we do a marketing campaign, we always start with a core consumer insight. What is the thing that we're trying to solve? And then we look for different and innovative ways to do that. So, what is the latest technology that we can use, or what's a different way of doing it? And we've been doing that for many, many years with great success.

We have an internal saying at Sanlam, 'If you're broke, you can't be boring.' So, because we don't have a big budget, we need to make sure that we break through with what we have and do things differently and make people sit up and take note.

**The F-show certainly wasn't boring! Where did that idea come from?**

For a lot of people, finances are like a dirty secret or a dirty word. We just don't want to deal with it, but we at Sanlam know the opposite is true. We try to break with people's assumptions to say, 'Yes, we know you feel this way about your money, and it is probably because of the way you were brought up, and society and where we are. Sometimes it has to do with guilt of having too much. Sometimes it has to do with guilt of just not having enough.'

So, we took that assumption, and we contrasted it with this idea of, let's talk about money. Let's make sure that people don't see money as a swear word. That's where this idea was born for The F-show. It was a little bit of a lighter way into getting people to talk about money. We got some comedians involved, they created a whole show for us, and we hid financial literacy inside the content. We sold it as a normal comedy show, and we sold out.

People came, they watched it, they laughed. And we did some vox pops afterwards asking, 'If you were told to come and see a show about finance, would you do that?' They were like – 'Absolutely not.' And then we revealed that there was a financial literacy concept that was wrapped in the show.

Of course, if you just look at it flippantly, on the surface, it looks like we just wanted to use a bit of a



shock tactic to break through, which is not true. We got people talking and engaging with the subject that they don't usually engage with.

**Why do you think the F-show and F-word campaign worked so well in engaging your audience?**

The way financial services are usually approached is in a very traditional way. We can't make fun of finances. It needs to be very serious, because it's a very serious matter. So, we take ourselves very, very seriously. But that's why surprise worked, because it was a completely different angle on it to wrap it in a comedy show.

It was very important to use comedians that our audience associates with. They were very authentic as well. We didn't write the show for them. They wrote the show on their own. We gave them a couple of the key things we would like them to talk about, and then we set them free on it. And we only really saw the show when we were sitting in the audience. We unbranded the show and just let it happen with the comedians saying what they needed to and then we used pieces of that show for Sanlam.

There are a couple of things that unite us as humans. There's sport and music that can unite everyone. And then there is laughter and comedy, right? If you can laugh together about something that is big that could be an issue, it becomes easier to talk about it and deal with it. And specifically South Africans, we're very good at laughing at ourselves.

**Can you tell us about your Money Meetups campaign? How did that help to challenge preconceptions around financial advice?**

Many people are not engaging with financial advisors because they feel it's only something for certain people. It's only if you've got a lot of money, or it's only if you've got a big question. But we just wanted to get people to engage with their financial advisors and start a relationship with a financial advisor, because we have seen that if you've got a good relationship with your advisor, then you are better off financially.

Tinder was all the rage at that point so, we created Tinder for advisors so that somebody could find an advisor who was not intimidating to them, but an advisor that feels like them. So instead of just giving



# “We have an internal saying at Sanlam, ‘If you’re broke, you can’t be boring.’”

you a number to call or just pushing an advisor to you, we gave people an opportunity to go and have a look at different advisors and go, ‘Oh, I’m looking for someone in my area, that’s my age, that’s interested in fishing.’ Because then, at least as a human, we’ve got some kind of connection, and it’s not so intimidating to speak to a financial advisor.

It all really comes down to finding the key things that are important for us as a business and the challenges from a consumer perspective, and linking that with what is happening in the environment at that time, whether it’s a WhatsApp drama, Tinder or the Metaverse. It’s just different ways in to talk about one single topic – money, because we have to keep on reinventing how we talk about money and making sure people engage with their money in the right way.

**Do you have anything holding you back? What are the barriers in getting your message across, and how do you push past them?**

Finance is not a very exciting subject to talk about. It’s really hard to sell finance and especially longer-term financial planning and insurance. People don’t want to talk about insurance because it’s usually linked to something that happens in life that you don’t really want to think about. They are big, heavy topics to deal with and people don’t want to engage with them.

So, it is about finding ways to get people to engage with them and doing that in a more authentic and more human way. I always say it’s a lot easier to sell a chocolate bar or a cold beverage that people are interested in, than to try and get them to engage with some of these heavy topics that we have to get them to engage with.

Having a diverse team that’s very empowered is so important, especially in a country like South Africa with its 13 official languages. We always make sure that we’ve got a good, diverse team that comes from different backgrounds with different perspectives,

then we create an environment where people can bring those perspectives to the discussion.

Then what’s very important is the people who you partner with. I believe in partnering with strong creative agencies that can come up with big ideas, and that challenge us, rather than having to push them. Because otherwise, if you don’t do that, they’re going to just bring you what you want and what you expect, and that’s not going to leave you in any good space. So, I think the key to successful work is about diverse perspectives, opportunities for that, and then having a good relationship with your agency.

## What’s next for Sanlam?

We need to take this new digital business model of ours to market. So, how do we take a brand that is known for life insurance and investments, that’s quite traditional, into a completely innovative, digital, modern, aspirational kind of space.

As Sanlam steps into this new fintech world, we will be competing with anyone that can give you an amazing digital experience. So, it’s everyone and anyone. It’s the technology companies. It’s the really great retailers that deliver your groceries to your door in 60 minutes. It is entertainment companies, the Netflixes of the world. Those are the guys that we need to compete with, the ones that grab attention. Consumers don’t distinguish between a financial experience, an entertainment experience and a retail experience. They expect their experiences to be amazing no matter who it is.

I’ve adopted the eatbigfish idea about fighting bland, dull advertising, because imagine a world where every piece of communication you saw when you’re driving, when you’re listening, when you’re scrolling, was something that entertained you or left you with a lesson or made you feel better, or surprised you or delighted you – life would be so much better.

# STAR-FLUENCERS

Where your KPIs meet your KPIs (Key Planetary Instructions)



## GEMINI

May 21 – Jun 20

With Mars lighting up your sign and Mercury retrograding in Leo, your brain is buzzing like an over-caffeinated Slack channel. Focus on your own brand strategy and what your audience is actually interested in. Chasing your competitor's metrics won't get you results – it'll get you burnout.



## LEO

July 23 – Aug 22

Mars in your sign = boss-level confidence meets action. You might be tempted to mirror a flashy campaign from a rival brand. Resist. You were born to lead, not to echo. Your audience wants your signature sparkle, not a watered-down version of someone else's stunt.



## LIBRA

Sep 23 – Oct 22

Venus trines Neptune which is ideal for romanticizing your own strategy. Think about what emotions fuel your brand. How can you amplify them in this highly emotive time? You may think balance is about staying neutral, but this month be bold and own your story.



## SAGITTARIUS

Nov 22 – Dec 21

The Full Moon lands in your sign this month putting you in the spotlight whether you like it or not. But while your competitors may seem louder, remember: louder doesn't mean better. Trust your strategy, stay true to your brand, keep it interesting and your target audience will follow.



## AQUARIUS

Jan 20 – Feb 18

Uranus squares off with Venus this month, bringing unexpected insights into how you connect with your audience. But don't let competitors make you question your authentic voice. Your weird is your weapon. They can't copy what they don't understand.



## ARIES

Mar 21 – Apr 19

Darling, if your campaigns feel like reheated leftovers, it's because you've been too safe. You were born to set trends, not follow templates. This month, flip the norms of your category. Shock your audience. They'll love it, once they've worked it out.



## CANCER

Jun 21- Jul 22

You've been nurturing your brand like a well-watered fern, but babe – it's time to throw some glitter on it. What's your unexpected move? A spicy collab? A hilarious meme? A noisy innovation? You're allowed to be heartfelt *and* unpredictable.



## VIRGO

Aug 23 - Sept 22

You've optimized everything, Virgo – even your spontaneity. But this month, the universe dares you to throw logic out the window and drop something unexpected. Trust the unpolished version. Let surprise be your new tactic. Deny the assumptions of your audience.



## SCORPIO

Oct 23 - Nov 21

Scorpio, you're the marketing equivalent of a slow burn thriller – but your audience needs a jump scare. Drop a surprise launch. Tease something that never comes. Play with suspense like it's your job – because it is.



## CAPRICORN

Dec 22 - Jan 19

Full Moon in your sign = time to own your narrative. You're glancing at competitor benchmarks and thinking, Should I pivot? Not so fast. Your plan is a long game. Don't compare someone else's Q2 sprint to your yearlong climb. Brand building isn't a sprint – it's a marathon.



## PISCES

Feb 19 - Mar 20

You've been coasting on vibes and visuals, but it's time for a jolt. This month, introduce the element of surprise. Something raw, funny, even messy. Dreams only matter when people stay awake for them. Make a splash Pisces.



## TAURUS

Apr 20 - May 20

Venus is in Cancer, which has you craving a deeper relationship with your audience. That other brand's slick campaign? It's not your aesthetic anyway. Authenticity is your currency – don't trade it for copycat vibes. You be you, you're in a category of one.

Blend into the  
background with  
this season's most  
indistinguishable  
shade.



**COSMIC LATTE**  
from  
**DRABCO**  
PAINT COMPANY

# Fading to #FFF8E7

Billions and billions of stars. Red, blue, yellow, small, large, some even giant. Galaxies should really be a kaleidoscope of colours. But to us, standing on earth (and to the scientists from Johns Hopkins University who conducted the study), all that rich vibrancy blurs into a light beige – specifically hex triplet code #FFF8E7, Cosmic Latte.

And as above, so below. Though we'll all have a deck saved somewhere with a list of our distinctive brand assets, it's likely they're more distinctive to us than they are to our consumers. According to research from Ipsos and Jones Knowles Ritchie, only 15% of brand assets truly stand out.

Because standing out is easier said than done. While we all know that distinctiveness is something we ought to be striving for, we only have to look around us to be blinded by all the beige-y sameness.

Everyone is singing from the same hymn book, some are just louder: we have faster internet; we make your whites whiter; our pillows are softer. We're the same, but better. You just can't hear us over the cacophony.

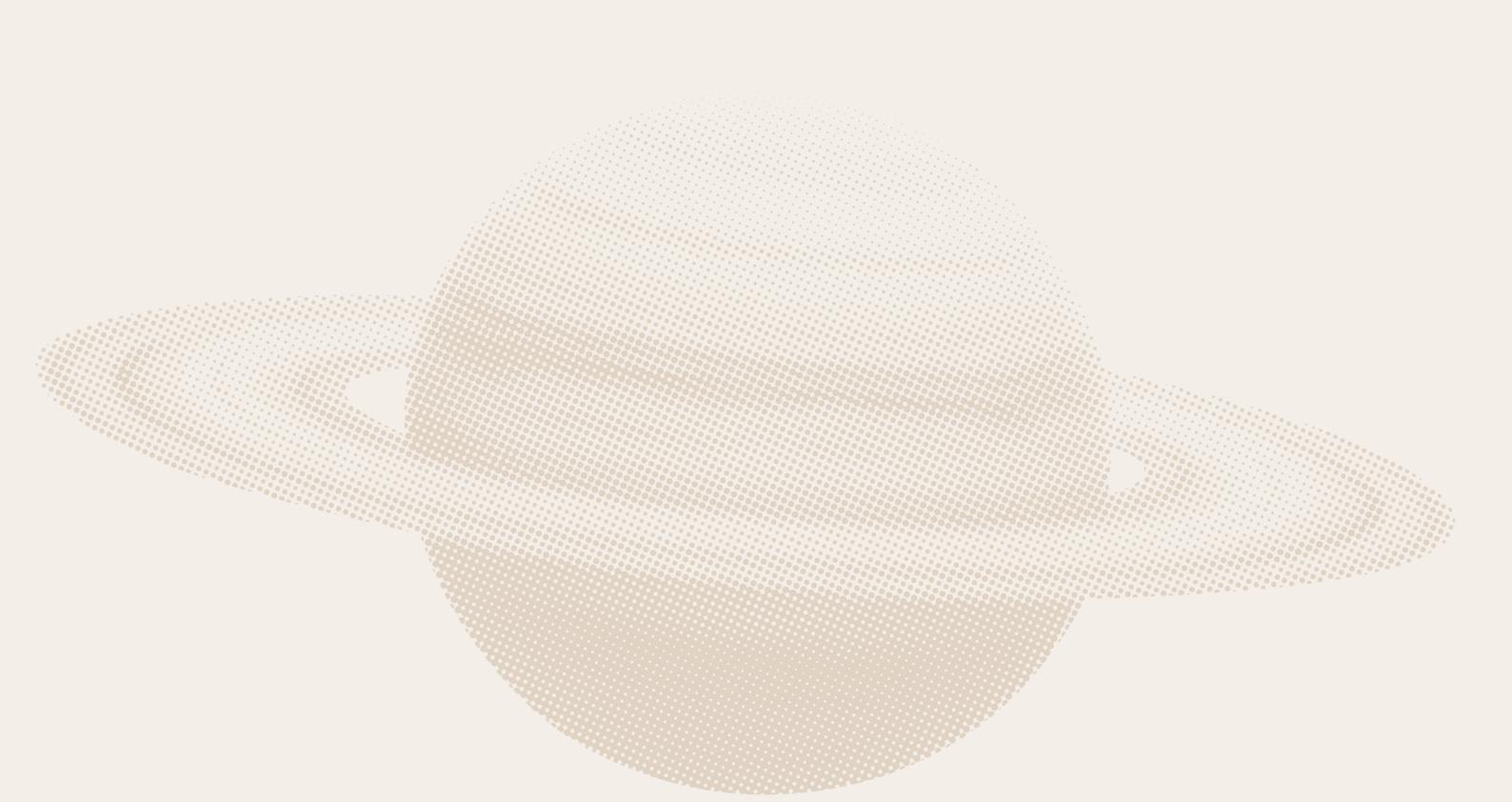
So, what's the trick? How can we break free from the frothy but dull beigeness?

If you're launching a new brand, then your job may be somewhat easier – just be radical from the outset. Take Scrub Daddy – entering a (some would say) very low interest category, how did they stand out? They put a face on their sponges.

Although already unique from others on the market due to their material, to break free from the hundreds of other cleaning supplies, Scrub Daddy focuses their efforts on making cleaning funny, giving their smiley face a place to shine in all their marketing. As founder Aaron Krause said, *“People have hated their sponges for the last 40 years. They’re stinky, smelly and gross, and people hide them. Scrub Daddy people put them out on display. It doesn’t just clean well, it makes cleaning, which is a pretty mundane task, a little bit nicer, a little bit happier, and a little bit brighter.”*

However, for the rest of us, without much hope of winning the ‘let’s totally redesign our product to have a smiley-face’ argument, then where do we look for inspiration? As John Yorke, Founder of the BBC Studio Writers’ Academy, told us on our podcast LMTMI, *“There’s a shorthand for creating distinctive characters. The way to do that is the Dickensian lesson: you take something, and you exaggerate it.”*





In other words, focus in on one thing that makes you different – and then make it everything.

One option: follow the example of Ardbeg. As a 200-year-old single malt whiskey brand from the Scottish isle of Islay, they had many of the qualities a brand in their category might have been expected to trumpet. But instead, they did something else. They found their most distinct equity - their remarkably peaty taste - and leant into it to the near exclusion of all else. As Gemma Parkinson, Global Marketing and Business Director at Moët Hennessy told us, “*It all starts with the liquid. It's the zenith, the nucleus which kicks off the rest of the plan.*” A plan they’ve had fun with, describing their strongest and most pungent whiskey with a taste like “*biting down on a spiky ball*”, and naming it Ardbeg Hardcore with a punk rock aesthetic and label to match.

Being distinctive doesn’t have to be the preserve of those seeking to stand out on the shelf though. Dishoom is a growing UK-based Indian restaurant chain, inspired by the Irani cafés found in Bombay in the ‘60s. Despite having created an experience that’s already a distinctive proposition for the category, each restaurant then goes further by blending that DNA with the unique essence of

their locale. They draw from their fertile source of inspiration to imbue character into every little detail, even the type of screws they use, to create richly layered unique experiences. In our interview with Sara Stark, their former marketing and creative director, she told us, “*Often, with a brand, you start with an idea at the centre, and you dilute it as you get bigger. But actually, we really doubled down on that idea of Bombay and Bombay café*”. Certainly a creatively challenging and involved process, it’s one that has allowed them to stay interesting, while also remaining recognisably themselves as they grow.

By exaggerating one of your unique characteristics, you can sacrifice the elements which don’t make you stand out, in favour of overcommitting to those that do. Brands with a Challenger Mindset don’t have to be everything to everyone – that leads to bland, vanilla branding and strategy. You just need to be more authentically you.

So, make your brand a star – not part of the universe. Be memorable and dial up what makes you different. Ask yourself, are we showing real distinctiveness and character? Or are we blending into the (beige) background?

# DISGUSTING, DIVISIVE, DISTINCTIVE.

Anna Sokratov, Head of Marketing, Jeppson's Malört

Hundred-year-old brand Malört is a liqueur hailing from Chicago, which sees its distinct (some might even say disgusting) flavour not as a liability but as one of its greatest strengths. We caught up with Anna Sokratov, head of marketing at Jeppson's Malört, to find out how the brand overcommits to their unique characteristics in order to stand out from the crowd.





How would you describe Malört to those who've never had the pleasure?

There are a lot of ways people describe it. One that's commonly said is that Malört tastes like drinking gasoline out of a shoe. Or that it tastes like the Chicago River – and you don't want to go in there.

But I think it tastes like biting into a grapefruit that's only the peel – just very bitter, but also a little floral in a way. It's not bad at first, and it smells like almost nothing, but there's a lingering aftertaste that's there for maybe five minutes. And that's what really gets people. You'll see people be like, 'Oh,' and then, 'Oh, *disgusting*.'

Weirdly, Malört sort of creates community. I encourage you guys to go out to a bar and order a shot of Malört. People around you will immediately start telling you the story of their first Malört shot and the crazy night they had. The bartender is going to look at you like you just said something terrible and question your sanity. If you go to a bar and you get a shot of vodka or a shot of tequila, it's almost something that you want to get over with quickly – you forget about it. But with Malört, I would be shocked if anybody's forgotten their first shot of it. And I'd be shocked if

anybody hadn't made some sort of connection or friend with the people around them who've tried it too. So, it's really special in that way.

There's a mystique around Malört that creates a curiosity for it. When we market ourselves, we never give a real description of what it tastes like. I think when someone says something tastes "like drinking blended dog food out of a shoe," you're so interested in what would make somebody say that, that it makes you want to try it.

There's a genuine curiosity and a playfulness, and that makes people want to keep trying something that's known to be objectively disgusting.

Some people would say it's risky to lean into the fact that your flavour profile is something many people are actually repulsed by. How and why did you do that as a brand?

In a way, we were lucky enough to have this ingrained into who we are – from those first ads that were a little tongue-in-cheek back in the mid- to late-1900s, and then, while Pat Gabelick owned the brand, from a man named Sam Mechling. He did stand-up comedy in his free time and, during sets, would give

# “With Malört, say what you want, we don’t care – we’re just going to be us.”

people shots of Malört and ask them to write down what they thought it tasted like. And that's where some of those slogans that we still use now come from like, 'Tonight's the night you fight your dad,' or 'These pants aren't going to shit themselves,' or 'Kick your mouth in the balls.' He helped give way to this humorous, edgy, self-deprecating marketing style that we use now.

For us, marketing it in this way isn't risky. If we marketed ourselves in a more conventional style, that would be risky for us.

**How does the internal culture at Malört foster this brand behaviour?**

It makes sense that the marketing happened this way. We've never tried to convince people to like Malört. Because the responses that we get from people are all sort of the same. It's never, 'Wow, what a delicious spirit.' Or 'I want to put this in a cocktail.' It's a visual, visceral reaction – a shock reaction. So, we put that experience into our marketing. If there's a liquor brand putting up a poster, it's usually some beautiful shot of a bottle. Our posters have the word 'balls' on them. People are surprised when they see this, and then curious to learn more.

There's a line that we don't cross, but the line is pretty far away in comparison to other brands – and we're really lucky to have that freedom. If we're in a brainstorming session, nothing is off the table, which is helpful in fostering the creativity that goes into all of our campaigns. They're always very fun and crazy, because everyone just says the first thing that comes to mind, no matter how insane it is. And that allows people to be as authentic as Malört is.

As many brands grow, they sometimes lose what makes them distinctive. How does Malört maintain its distinctiveness as it grows?

Something that's very important for us is that Malört stays Malört. The recipe will always be the same – we'll never change it to be anything different. And I think that also feeds into why we are who we are now. In life in general, an important piece of advice is to "just be yourself." Issues arise when you try and be something that you're not. That's why this is working so well for us – we know what people say about us, and we know who we are, and we're so okay with that. We love our quirks and celebrate all opinions.

That's what we really want to do: get people to stay curious about us. And that falls in line with how people talk about us: people will say, 'It tastes like pencil shavings dipped in gasoline' – I've never tried that, but I want to know what it tastes like.

**Can you tell us about how you came up with some of your most memorable recent advertising campaigns?**

The first big thing that I did at the company was the opportunity to advertise on the side of a truck. It was a pretty big deal for us, because we hadn't



*Greatest liquor campaign ever . . .*

*This message will appear in  
your daily newspapers, on windows,  
backbars, counters, and billboards.*





yet done any out-of-home advertising except for the occasional poster. Our CEO Tremaine Atkinson and I sat down for, honestly, about six months, trying to figure out what we could do that would capture people's attention. We ended up with the idea of highlighting the 'Malört face' that's such a big part of taking a shot of Malört. That face and your opinion of what it tastes like – that's the Malört experience. And then we created a tagline out of "Please Enjoy Responsibly" and changed it to "Do Not Enjoy. Responsibly." to fit our branding. We used one of our employees as a model – her name is Bunny and she's been with the company for years.

Last year was an election year for us, and we came out with our 'I Malörted' campaign. We created a fake campaign video, which was basically encouraging people to "do their civic duty and Malört today." And then we did on-premise programming where we created posters and 'I Malörted' stickers that looked like the I Voted stickers and gave these to a bunch of accounts that wanted to participate. Every time you would take a shot of Malört at the bar, you would get your I Malörted sticker. This was a great tool for social media – we saw a lot of photos and videos, including one bald guy's head just covered in I Malörted stickers.

### What makes Malört so quintessentially Chicago?

It has been in Chicago for so long, starting back in the 1920s. The people who really brought us up were Chicago bartenders and hipsters and all those people who just really wanted to try something different and have something unique. People can get really tired of mundane drinks at the bar, but the personality of Malört's brand really made people feel seen in a way or heard somehow. It just really got ingrained into the culture, and now it's the iconic liquor that comes out of the city, our little not-so-secret secret.

There's a grit that you need to have when living here, and there's a grit about Malört that really goes hand in hand. It's in the way that people carry themselves here – people are so passionate about their city and persevere through some tough weather to stay in a city that is so wonderful. You just do your thing here and that's great. And I think with Malört, say what you want, we don't care – we're just going to be us.

### Is it hard to convince distributors to start carrying Malört?

Yes and no. I think once you try the shot, you understand. But if you've never heard anything about it, our marketing and uniqueness are what convince people. We typically provide accounts that sell Malört with posters, shelf-talkers, table tents. If you're at a liquor store, you'll see a bunch of advertisements for brands the store carries. You'll see a beautiful beach and a bottle of Corona, but then, right next to it, you'll see a poster that says 'Tonight's the night you fight your dad' with a bottle of Malört. Then you're like, 'What did I just read? What is that?' It makes you ask questions, get curious, and encourages people to buy it and be a part of the fun.

### What's next for Malört?

Our main goal is to grow like crazy. But, ultimately, what we want people to do is just try it. Give it a go and, if you don't like it, that's totally okay. I have a hunch you'll probably be drinking it again in the future though – Malört has a weird way of finding its way back to you.

Does our story  
need more  
dog?



In 1969, a radical experiment was launched: a social-justice driven TV show that set out to “foster intellectual and cultural development in preschoolers”. It was an experiment that borrowed from advertising to teach the alphabet with jingles and introduced the world to a diverse urban neighbourhood where an 8ft yellow bird lived with his friends.

Welcome to Sesame Street.

Sesame Street is one of the longest running and most successful TV shows of all time. It raised educational standards across the world and upended our ideas about what preschoolers were capable of learning. But how has Sesame Street made an educational show a must-watch for over 4,000 episodes?

Muppets, of course. But beyond that, each 1 minute segment, written to a tight educational brief, doesn't just set out to teach, it sets out to make you feel something.

Norman Stiles, head writer on Sesame Street for over 20 years, explained on LMTMI that the writers approached every sketch as a ‘little drama’, a comedic challenge that we will them to overcome. He explained, “*If your character doesn't want something, well, then they are just standing there talking to each other. And if they don't really want it, or care about it, or there isn't some emotion involved in it, well, you're not going to care about it either.*”

We all know that storytelling is one of the most effective ways to communicate. As advertising guru Peter Field says, to build brands we need to tell “*engrossing stories*” so that people “*want to follow the story that you're weaving.*” But, as we've seen from System1's data, half of all TV advertising in the UK and US elicits no emotional response. So, the question isn't just whether you're telling a story. It's: does your story make people feel anything?

Challengers know how to do this better than most, because fundamentally, at their core, they want something. They aren't content with the status quo. The clue is in the name – they set out to challenge something on behalf of all of us. And that tension, that need to stir things up, makes their story a whole lot more interesting. What Challengers do really well is telegraph not only what they want, but what's getting in the way.

Technology refurb company, Backmarket could tell us a simple story about the lower prices of their marketplace, or the expertise of their refurbishers, but instead, they call on us all to reject big tech and ‘Screw New’. Beauty brand Billie could easily have shown us how smooth their razors make our legs, or they could recreate a classic *Ten Things I Hate About You* scene to share all the things they hate about how the beauty industry makes us feel. Australian sunscreen brand Slather could have reminded us again about the dangers of sun exposure, but instead they turned the sun into a creepy lazer-eyed monster who is most definitely ‘not your friend’.

To cut through, we need that conflict. As John le Carré told the New York Times back in 1977, “*The cat sat on the mat is not a story, the cat sat on the dog's mat is.*” Where's the dog in our story? Where's the little drama that Norman Stiles told us is necessary?

Is your brand just telling people what it does – or are you giving your audience a reason to root for you, to feel something? Because in a world full of noise, the brands we remember are the ones with tension, with purpose, with a story worth following.

Sometimes, the simplest questions are the most impactful, so always ask yourself: Are we using emotion, drama and storytelling? Because if not, why should anyone feel anything about us anyway?

Time to add some bite.



# SPICING THINGS UP

Jessica Wheeler, Marketing Director, Nando's South Africa

A Challenger brand from the beginning, global restaurant brand Nando's has always had ambitions that outweighed its resources. From its founding in Johannesburg in 1987 to the now over 1,000 shops worldwide, they've continually demonstrated their ability to tell stories with passion and enthusiasm. We interviewed Marketing Director Jessica Wheeler to understand how Nando's uses their Challenger Mindset to speak on behalf of their audience when it matters most.



**Nando's is a successful global business now, but it has its roots in South Africa. How did the brand start?**

Nando's will be 38 in September and the company started much like any Challenger brand would, with two guys having lunch at this peri-peri chicken place and thinking, this is amazing, and the world needs to know about it. These were two guys who had no business being in the restaurant industry at all – neither of them had any experience in it. They just fell in love with the product, and they knew that this was something that firstly, South Africa, and now, eventually the world, deserved to have a taste of. So, the brand was born out of that Challenger Mindset. It's almost nonsensical, the way the brand has grown and become what it has, considering where it started in this tiny, little chicken shop, in this little suburb called Rosettenville, in the south of Johannesburg, which still stands today. We still have that store open, because it's such an important reminder to all of us of where this brand came from.

They bought that chicken shop, and really, right from the onset, they had no choice but to do marketing in a different way. They had no money. They had no experience. Their first ad agency was paid in shares in the brand. Everything was patched together out of enthusiasm, and this will to share this amazing

product with the world, and it's still very much the philosophy of where we're at today.

We have a philosophy of acting like shop owners – imagine this was your one peri-peri chicken shop, and you were in charge of it. You have to make those decisions for this one store, instead of thinking about the 300+ we have in South Africa and the more than 1,000 we have around the world. You've got to think of it as that one little chicken shop. What decisions would you make, and how would you go to market if you were just doing it for this one little thing with no money?

**How does that entrepreneurial, Challenger spirit influence the Nando's brand, and how do you keep it fresh?**

That enthusiasm is reflected in the way we communicate. It's reflected in our marketing strategies. We've got to be bullish. We've got to be positive. We've got to be optimistic, often, in spite of the world crumbling around us at the best of times.

The one thing that we often don't speak about is our Challenger Mindset. You don't have it and then just have it forever. You've got to consistently work at it. As we go along with time, that big monster in the room changes. It may have at some point been





a big category player or a big competitor, but right now it's more of a societal impact. The role that Nando's as a brand, plays in South African society is very different now, because we're bigger, and we're a little bit more grown up. We've got more scale, so we have the opportunity to actually have real impact and influence the sentiment of the country on social media channels, in particular.

The monster changes over time, because if you keep fighting the same monster, you feel it in the work, and you feel it in the teams, and you feel it in the way you go to market. It gets formulaic, and other people catch up. Other people start doing it, and you lose that Challenger positioning pretty quickly. You've got to keep looking out for the next monster. So, for us moving forward, that monster has a lot more to do with society and the impact that we can have, rather than pushing directly against a category competitor.

#### How has your social commentary strategy developed?

Our approach, particularly with social commentary, came from the fact that we were this Challenger brand. We were looking for ways to be involved in the conversation that didn't require oodles and oodles of media money, which we never had back in the day, and, quite frankly, we still don't have today. So, you've got to find interesting and smart ways to be a part of that conversation.

It's really easy, particularly in this day and age, on social media to have a handful of listening tools which

will just spit out the things that are trending or the things that people are talking about. But often, that's not what people want to hear. If you just latch on to the next trending topic or the football results, or the political climate, you'll get a pretty surface level thing, but we really try and uncover what it is that people want to be said on their behalf.

There may be a topic of conversation about politics, and there's a lot of chatter about it online, but perhaps what people want said on their behalf is something slightly different. Hypothetically speaking, people may actually want to have a conversation about South Africa being strong enough and bold enough to stand on its own two feet. So, perhaps we don't need to engage with international politics and those kinds of things. It's always about finding that little layer underneath that is what people want to be said on their behalf. Because if you just reflect back what they're saying, it doesn't really get very far.

We still say, we want to be part of the conversation. We don't want to lead a conversation; we don't want to start a conversation. We just want to give an interesting point of view or say what our audience wants to be said.

#### Do you ever face any barriers to that strategy internally? How do you make sure you push far enough to get noticed?

It's difficult. The more grown up and the bigger you get, the more the system is almost hedged against





that. So, particularly from a marketing point of view, we can be super bullish about something, and we almost have to be. We have to be overly bullish, because we know that the process to get there, it's going to pull it back, right?

You'll have finance people in the way and ops people and franchisees, and all sorts of people that may chip away at that idea. So, you actually have to overshoot it, knowing that there's a little bit of flex for it to be pulled back and to be something that realistically we can execute at scale. So, we've always got to overshoot, knowing it's going to be pulled back. If you start with average and it gets nibbled away, then you have nothing. You almost have to go for the absolute shock factor, knowing that you're probably going to land on something special by the time everyone's had a bite at it.

We've been very deliberate in making sure that everybody that has a role to play in the entire Nando's ecosystem, understands the vision, understands what it is that we're trying to do, understands how we do it, and why we do it differently to everybody else. So then in the day-to-day, it's reinforced, rather than roadblocked along the way. So absolutely, keeping the team motivated is really important, but it's infinitely easier if you have the whole system motivated and aligned with the same goals. We're lucky in that the marketing ambition or the brand ambition is the business ambition.

Are there any topics you avoid or won't comment on?

It is very difficult and time consuming and particularly with the proliferation of social media, there are 40,000 opportunities a day to do something, and it can become quite overwhelming. So, we have a shortcut now to pick out the things that we'd like to engage with.

We are now a global brand. We have a responsibility to be very conscious of the fact that we operate in other markets and that there are sensitivities there, culturally as well as societal, which we may not have an idea on. So, we've had to give ourselves guardrails, especially as the tone of some of the social media channels can be quite negative and bullying. We try to stay away from those ones, in particular.

Our approach has shifted over time, but I think the ambition is still strong to be a part of the conversation and be the voice of the people – to say the things that people want to be said on their behalf when it matters. If it doesn't feel right, we kill it from the beginning.



# “Our ambition is to be the most loved brand, not the biggest, not the most profitable, just the most loved.”

## Has the strategy evolved for different generations of customers?

If you want people to remember something, you tell them a story rather than just rattling off some facts. So, storytelling is really important, but I think the format of storytelling has changed. We're always going to play catch up with a new generation of people that just seem to tell stories in six seconds and get it and move on and just have this insatiable desire to be entertained. So, it's different, but I don't think that the fundamentals of storytelling have changed. I think it's been part of, certainly from our culture in South Africa, it's part of how we share heritage. It's part of how we connect with people – around a fire, sharing a meal, telling stories. It's what we do. So, it's always going to be a part of how we communicate, but I think the channel changes and that may change the way you tell a story.

We've got to be agile enough and also humble enough to take a step back, and let the young people have a voice on how we can tell stories to a new generation of customers that, quite frankly, may not have a reaction to the way that we've normally told stories.

## What advice would you have for marketers who want to stand out and get noticed like Nando's?

It's a considered effort. It's not a one off. We've been doing this for 37 years, and you've got to work hard at it every single day, because the world will throw things in your way that will tell you to change and tell you to conform. It will tell you to go back to the tried and tested and often overly measured way of doing things.

It's a lot of hard thinking, and it's not something you just shoot from the hip for either. It sounds very sexy and glamorous and agile and creative, but it's a thoughtful decision, and you've got to consider it. I've seen brands who have tried to go there, but it was clearly not thought through. It comes across as being crass or controversial or meaningless, because what they're trying to do is get attention rather than have impact.

Of course, we want to get more attention, to box way above our league in terms of a spend perspective, but it's got to have a brand impact, not a short-term result. It's got to have some kind of equity building come from it. Otherwise, it's just noise, and you get stuck in a habit of just putting out rubbish work. And that's not only dull, consistently done, but it can actually be detrimental to your brand as well.

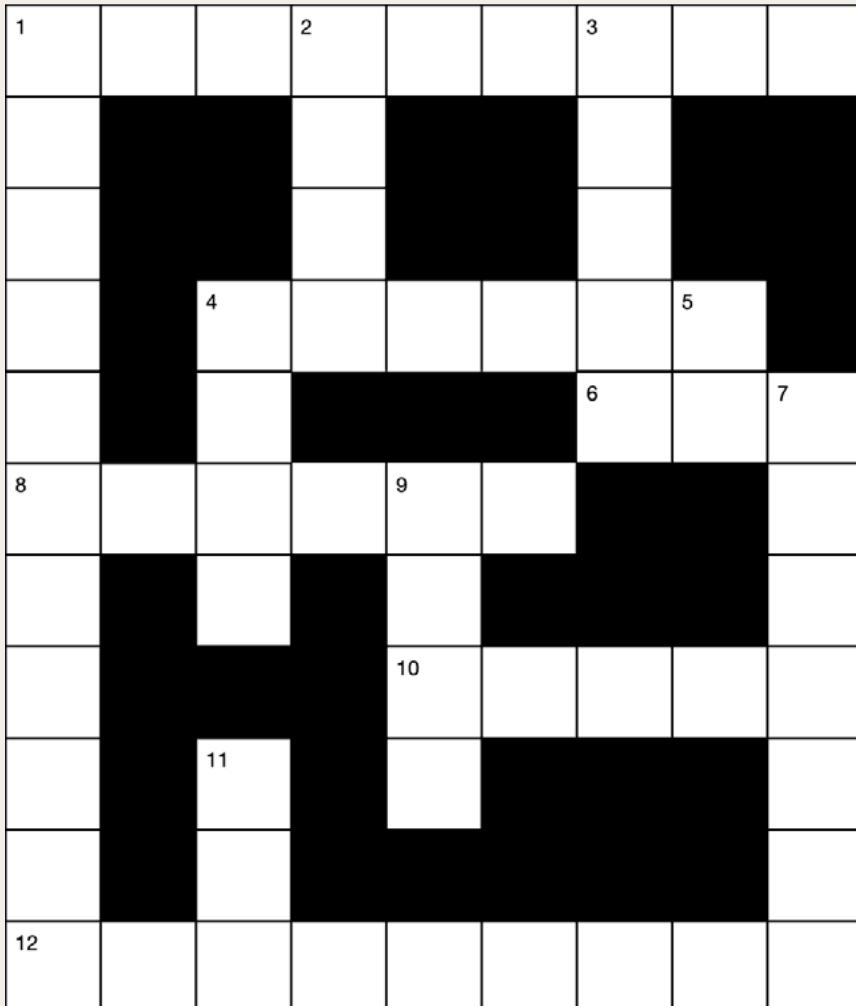
You can't just do it from a comms perspective. You have to do it throughout your experience. It doesn't help if you're a Challenger brand on the outside, but inside you're just a cookie-cutter, standard-operating-procedure-driven, robotic company. That kind of tension is always going to be cognitive dissonance for anybody. So, it's not a quick decision. It's got to be well thought through, and you've got to work at it every single day, because the world will put up those roadblocks. They will tell you, 'No, just do something different. Just try this.'

It's hard. It's hard work, but it's absolutely worth it.



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# CROSSED WORDS



## ACROSS

1. Imperceptible, transparent, or an ad that gets zero attention [9]
4. Delivered a meal (or a digital ad) [6]
6. Your brand story might need more bite—or more of this [3]
8. Mediterranean country whose GDP equals the annual wasted \$ spend on dull creative [6]
10. The Mephisto \_\_\_, a dance of death where two black holes (or brands) become an indistinguishable vacuum [5]
12. Low-attention media activity; where dull doesn't deliver [9]

## DOWN

1. That was unexpected! (What you need to be to surprise your audience) [11]
2. Killing time, with nothing much going on [4]
3. How you never want your customer to feel [5]
4. Viewed (not just 4 across) – the only KPI for ad impressions that matters [4]
5. Take action [2]
7. (with 9 down) This pastoral scene beat 50% of ads in System1's database (yes, really) [7]
9. Nonchalant herd in 7 down [4]
11. To win the battle for attention, you need to raise the \_\_\_ [3]

# Aiming at the wrong target?

You're following best practice. Playing by the rules. And you're hitting the bullseye (or pretty close anyway) with the consistency of an old hand.

But that's not enough. This isn't pub darts. It's the big league. Everyone else is a pro too. And they're playing the same game. So how do you win?

Sports analogies aside, nailing that campaign that places you firmly alongside the rest of your category isn't a job well done – it's the bare minimum and it's not going to convince people to buy you instead of your competitor. Frankly, it's just ho-hum, everyday marketing that isn't impressing anyone. Even 54% of marketers believe that most advertising work doesn't stand out, according to data from The BetterIdeas Project.

If all you do is compare yourself to what's already out there in your category, then your bar is too low – you're aiming for the wrong target. Sure, you might clear the hurdle, but will anyone be cheering you on in the stands? As Steve Jobs once said, *"Your customers don't care about you. They don't care about your product or service. They care about themselves, their dreams, their goals."*

Your competition isn't Brand A or B in your category. It's what's trending on TikTok, what happened in the school pick-up line or that stressful deadline their boss just emailed them about.

You have to change your criteria for what will actually grab their attention, because as Faris Yakob, co-founder of Genius Steals told us, *"Attention is a finite resource."*

Let's look at the sunscreen category. Picture traditional sunscreen ads and you'll see endless images of smiling families responsibly enjoying sunny beaches. Enter Vacation and their 'leisure enhancing sunscreen'. Sure, their product ticks all the boxes when it comes to sun safety, but are they showing you yet another cheerful family outing? No. Instead, they immerse you in a multi-layered tongue-in-cheek brand world straight out of Miami Vice, sound-tracked by Poolsuite FM. Do they package the product in a standard plastic bottle like everyone else? No, they make it foam from a whipped crème can. And does it smell predictably like cocoa butter? Not even close. They partnered with ARQUISTE Parfumeur to develop a signature fragrance blending 'coconut, banana, pool water, pool toy and swimsuit lycra' that's intriguing enough to sell as a cologne.



Why all this extra effort? Because applying sunscreen might be necessary, but it's also usually the most boring part of a beach day. Buying into Vacation's playful, stylish world makes it far more enjoyable. So people buy it, they use it, and they enthusiastically post about it. They challenge themselves to entertain their audience, not just market to them. As co-founder Marty Bell told Glossy, *"If we're going to be putting our brand in front of people every day on Instagram, we have to entertain them. We can't just post bottles of sunscreen every day. It's unfair to just throw it in your followers' faces every day, saying, 'Here's another photo of my product on a beach. Here's another photo. Are you going to buy it today? Here's another photo. Do you want to buy it today?"*

By setting their sights on a new level of success, Challenger brands change the game. Duolingo, the language learning app, could have stayed in its lane – apps that teach you how to do things better ('there's an app for that' is a phrase for a reason.) Already, they are the world's most popular education app with more than 116.7 million monthly active users. But instead of remaining in their app world, they have jumped ship with their irreverent Duo the owl mascot, who now shows up everywhere from TikTok to the Super Bowl to the Charli XCX concert. Their goal according to Katherine Chan, Duolingo's senior director of brand marketing, is to make *"Duo more famous than Mickey Mouse."* An ambitious target, for sure.

Sometimes it's about reframing who your competition is, like Bold Bean Co does. Founder Amelia Christie-Miller might be bean-obsessed, but she knows her audience cares more about brunch: *"I don't want people to have beans because they have to. I want them to want them. I don't see our competitor as canned beans. I want beans at all mealtimes so our competitor is things like avocado toast, scrambled eggs or a piece of fish."*



That's a much more interesting competitive set, one that forces the brand to show up in occasions where the expectation for interesting is already much higher.

Challenger brands intentionally raise the bar by recognising that their real competition is the attention and interest of their consumer, not whatever their category measures it as. They redefine high ambitions as going beyond their category to find their competitive set.

So next time you start to worry that everyone seems to be reaching for the same target, trying to get over the same bar, ask yourself: Are we using the real bar to judge what's interesting or simply benchmarking against our category?



# FANS FIRST. ENTERTAIN ALWAYS.

Kara Heater, VP of Marketing at Fans First Entertainment

The Savannah Bananas were founded in 2016 to shake up the slow and sleepy world of baseball. With over 3 million fans joining their waiting list every season, they sell out every stadium, every time. We found out from their VP of Marketing Kara Heater how they keep on breaking the rules and raising the bar every game.



The game of Banana Ball is always such a unique experience for both fans in person and on social media. How do you make sure you are consistently surprising and delighting your audiences?

Everything we've done has been a test. It's really about making sure that we're scaling our growth and making sure that the fans first experience is growing along with us.

A lot of that comes from just listening to our fans – what the fans are liking, what they're not liking. It's making sure that we adjust our show and the experience for the fans when they're coming to games or even online as well, and we're not just doing the same thing every single night.

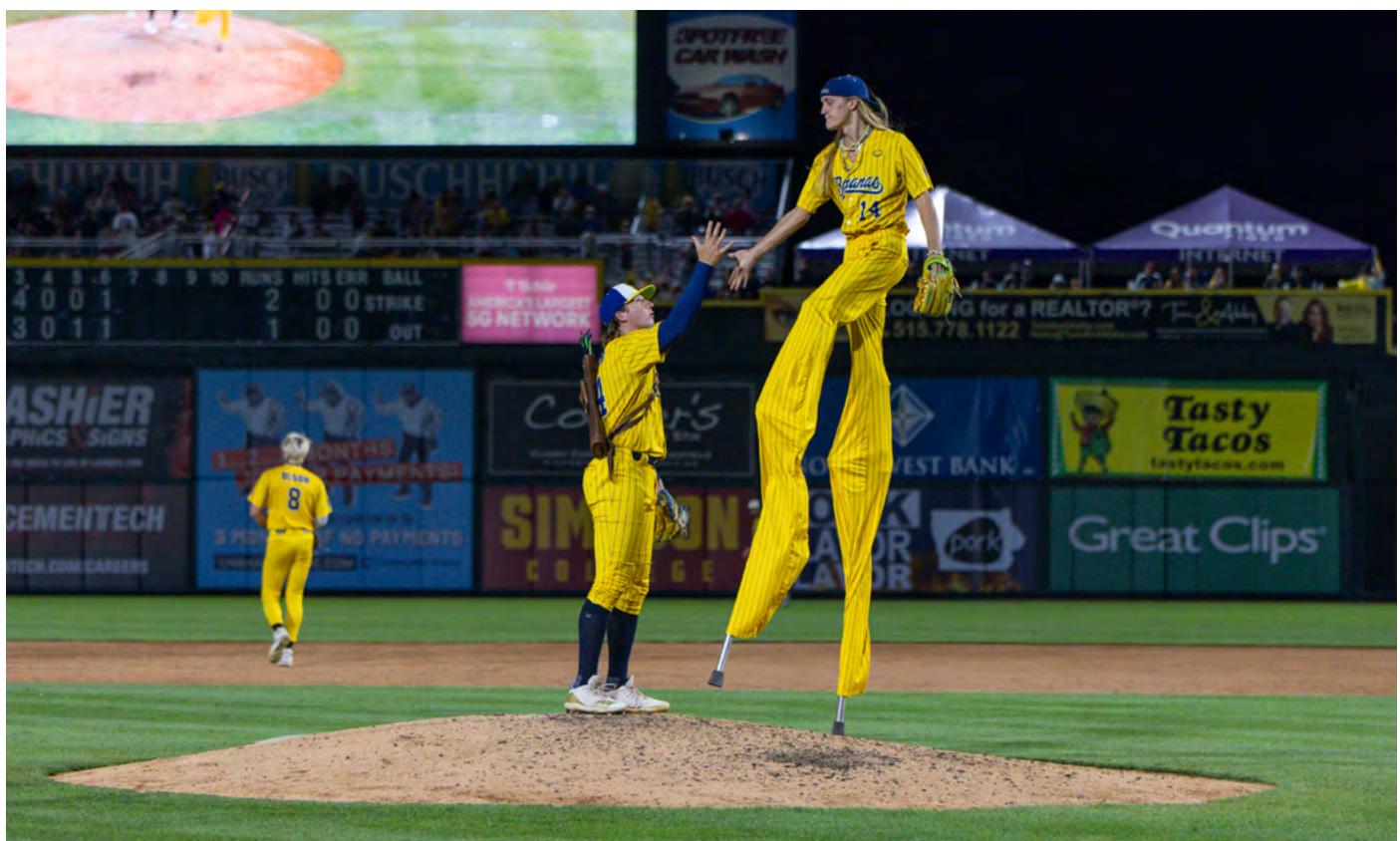
Our entertainment team, our marketing team, our video team, we make it a point to add in at least 10 new things to the script every single night. A lot of the things are staples that stay the same when you're at a Savannah Banana show, but then you also see very new things every time you come. And then, obviously, with it being a baseball game or a Banana Ball game, the game is going to be different every time too, which helps.

The Bananas head coach Tyler Gillum always says that we want guys who can flip the switch. They can go into a game and put on the best performance of their life and be competitive about baseball and want to win, but the second they walk off that field, they flip that switch to dance with fans and sign autographs and be fans first for everyone in the stadium. We're always trying to just 'plus' the experience for our fans and make sure that it is a different experience every single time they come.

Where do you get your inspiration for all this new content every week?

All over. We actually have weekly idea session meetings called OTT meetings. OTT stands for over the top, so pitching crazy things that we can do in the game. We have one person represented from each department, so one from the video team, one from the entertainment team, one from the marketing team and one from our broadcast team.

Basically, we are just sitting down and pitching as many ideas as we can think of for each team. Sometimes, we'll have specific buckets like: this week we're bringing trending ideas from Tiktok.



# “We’re trying to do things people have never seen on a baseball field before.”

Other times, we’re bringing ideas for walk ups that involve a hose. So, we just did a whole video of a guy getting soaked in the walk up, so stuff like that. And then from there, we basically choose what’s going to go into the game that weekend, and then we have rehearsals. And then it’s showtime on game day. It’s very similar to how SNL does their idea pitching, table read, rehearsals, showtime. Things can get cut in rehearsals too, if they’re not up to standard. So, we have those meetings for content pieces and then the entertainment team specifically does another idea set for promotion, or what happens in between each half inning like dizzy bat or stuff like that. They come up

with some wild ideas and that definitely keeps it fun and crazy during the game too.

I would say we pull more inspiration from industries outside of the sports world, more than we do the sports world, just because, again, we’re trying to do things people have never seen on a baseball field before. So, that means pulling some inspiration from Cirque du Soleil or the Britney Spears show in Vegas or something like that. We’re always looking for things that are totally outside of the box, that you would never imagine would happen in a baseball game.





What are the other touchpoints that Savannah Bananas delivers differently on? How does the brand experience go beyond the game itself?

We want to make sure that we are providing the best show ever. And that doesn't always mean just in the game. So, we've actually added the Before the Peel Show just last year, because we're continuing to grow the show around the actual show, I guess you would say.

For example, in Tampa Bay, fans started showing up at 11am. They were tailgating in the parking lot, and then our pre-show started at 12. We were like, "Okay, we're going to entertain them for two hours, because they want to be here, and they want the full experience. We're going to make it the best we can." So, that means all of our cast going out there. Some of the players sang karaoke, some of them did dances, some of them did trivia. Our broadcasters even got out there. So, there's a lot of cool opportunities just to continue 'plus-ing' the experience for those fans. We really want to make sure that we're continuing to break down that fourth wall. We want our players to feel like real people, like fans can get to know them, and a lot of that is just human interaction. So, whether it be before the game or in the game or after the

game, players are always bumping around to different parts of the stadium. They are making those 'fans first moments' with our fans, whether that be just sitting down and chatting with them for a bit, signing a ball, taking a picture, any of that fun stuff.

And then after the game, we also have what we call our Post-Game Plaza Parties. So that's when the Banana Band, our DJ, and the Party Down Band (the Party Animals band), go out and play a full set, and fans can just not leave if they don't want to leave. So, it's a lot of fun and all the cast and crew just goes out and dances. It's one final hurrah, and then at the end of each night, all the fans, cast and players put their arms around each other, and we sing 'Stand by Me'. At the end of that, we give one little countdown that says "Fans first on three." And all the fans and the players and cast get to shout out "Fans first!" It just makes fans and us as staff, cast, players, feel a part of something special. And that's what sets us apart, in a lot of ways, is just trying to do things that are so different from the experience you would get elsewhere.

For our tickets, we have a lottery system and when we announce our schedule in October of each year, we do a full-fledged, almost NFL draft, where we come



up and a player or a cast member announces the city pick. And so that night, the lottery list actually opens and fans will go online and pick their city of choice and enter all their information, and then it closes about a month or two later. And two months before the event they find out if they were selected in our lottery and have the chance to purchase tickets. It's a completely random draw and we actually limit how many tickets they can purchase, just to make sure that all fans are getting the opportunity to purchase and so that we don't have any scalpers.

When it comes to the food, when we're on the road, the stadium takes care of the concessions, but in Grayson Stadium, here in Savannah, we

actually do all-you-can-eat food. So, all hamburgers, cheeseburgers, hot dogs, chicken sandwiches, chips, soda, water, and cookies are free, and you can have as many as you want. Again, it goes back to Fans first. Entertain always. Nobody wants to come to a game and pay \$20 for one six-ounce beer or one hot dog and French fry meal. We don't want them to feel sold to. It's similar to how we do our merchandising and our tickets. We don't charge tax. We take care of all the tax and fees that come with all of our tickets and merchandise. We also offer free shipping across the US, and we don't jack up our prices because of that.

One of your core values is 'fewer things, done better' which we would call 'sacrifice to overcommit'. Can you give us an example of where you've actioned this?

The best example I can give is through our partnerships and sponsorships. So, when we first started, we had ads on the outfield wall and some ads in the game. We had to post things on social. But in 2020, we actually eliminated all traditional sponsorships and partnerships. We took all the ads down, because we felt they weren't providing any value to our fans. So, we took a very different approach to partnerships, and now we only have three official partners: Dunkin', Bodyarmor, and Wilson EvoShield and Louisville Slugger who provide our equipment.

So, with Dunkin' Donuts for example, what we do is, in the game, we have a donut batter. So, for whoever the Bananas are playing, one hitter on the other team is designated the donut batter, and if he strikes out,





the crowd gets free donuts through vouchers we hand out. And the players actually go and throw Munchkin donut holes into the crowd for people to eat right then and there. And so not only is that providing value for the fans, but it's also creating an experience. They get to remember that 1,000s of people were just screaming "Donut!" at the same time in hopes that this guy strikes out. They got excited when he did strike out. And then they get to remember it all when they go to the Dunkin' the next day and cash in their voucher for a free donut.

So, that's an example of fewer things, done better. We had all these partnerships, and we felt that this is just not working, but now, we can fully focus on making these three partnerships that we have the best of the best, not only for us, but for our fans as well.

**Brands with a Challenger Mindset often view constraints as fuel for creativity. How do the Savannah Bananas see them?**

Our team owner always says constraints foster creativity, so we're on the same page there. For us, playing in new stadiums is always a different experience. We always have to figure out how we're going to film things, how we're going to create this walk up, how we're going to activate fans in different areas of the ballpark. We have also started to put some constraints in play for ourselves with having new teams come on board.

So, we started with the Bananas. We added the Party Animals. Now, we also have the Firefighters and the Tailgaters. And we realized with the Bananas and the Party Animals, that while their brands and brand tone and strategy are very different, they do a lot of similar things. It's dancing. It's a lot of the similar show pieces, just in a different way. So, with these new teams, we really want to make sure that the experience fans will get is completely different from what they've seen in a Bananas or Party Animals game.

Obviously, you're still going to get Banana Ball and the fun stuff. But how do we make it not just a 'rinse and repeat' for a different team? And that's for everything from their live show, their social media presence, their email, everything. So, we've put some red tape down for ourselves. We said for the Firefighters team, they won't dance. It doesn't make sense for them to dance. They're a heroic team. They're all about strength and that all-American feel. They can bop around on the sideline if a good song comes on, but they won't be doing the lip-syncing walk ups that the Bananas do. Instead, they will be flying through a ring of fire, maybe on a dirt bike – that kind of stuff.

So, the biggest constraints we're setting this year are these new teams and making sure that we're really 'plus-ing' the experience and pushing the bar to create a whole new experience for the fans.

# THE ANTI DULL DIAL

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You've read the interviews, you've done the quizzes (maybe even the crossword if you were feeling clever), but what happens now? You're a smart cookie and overall, you understand that the problem of dull marketing exists, but what do YOU do about it? How do you know if your strategy, your creative, are falling into this trap?

At eatbigfish, we are constantly inspired by the way Challenger brands get a disproportionate share of attention. While the incumbent brands may choose the status quo, the 'safe' route, Challengers can't afford to. They must do things differently.

So, taking all the learnings from our research into battling dull, we have pulled together a simple framework, five key questions you can use to diagnose the problem of dull in your brand and category comms and seize the opportunity to do something much more interesting.

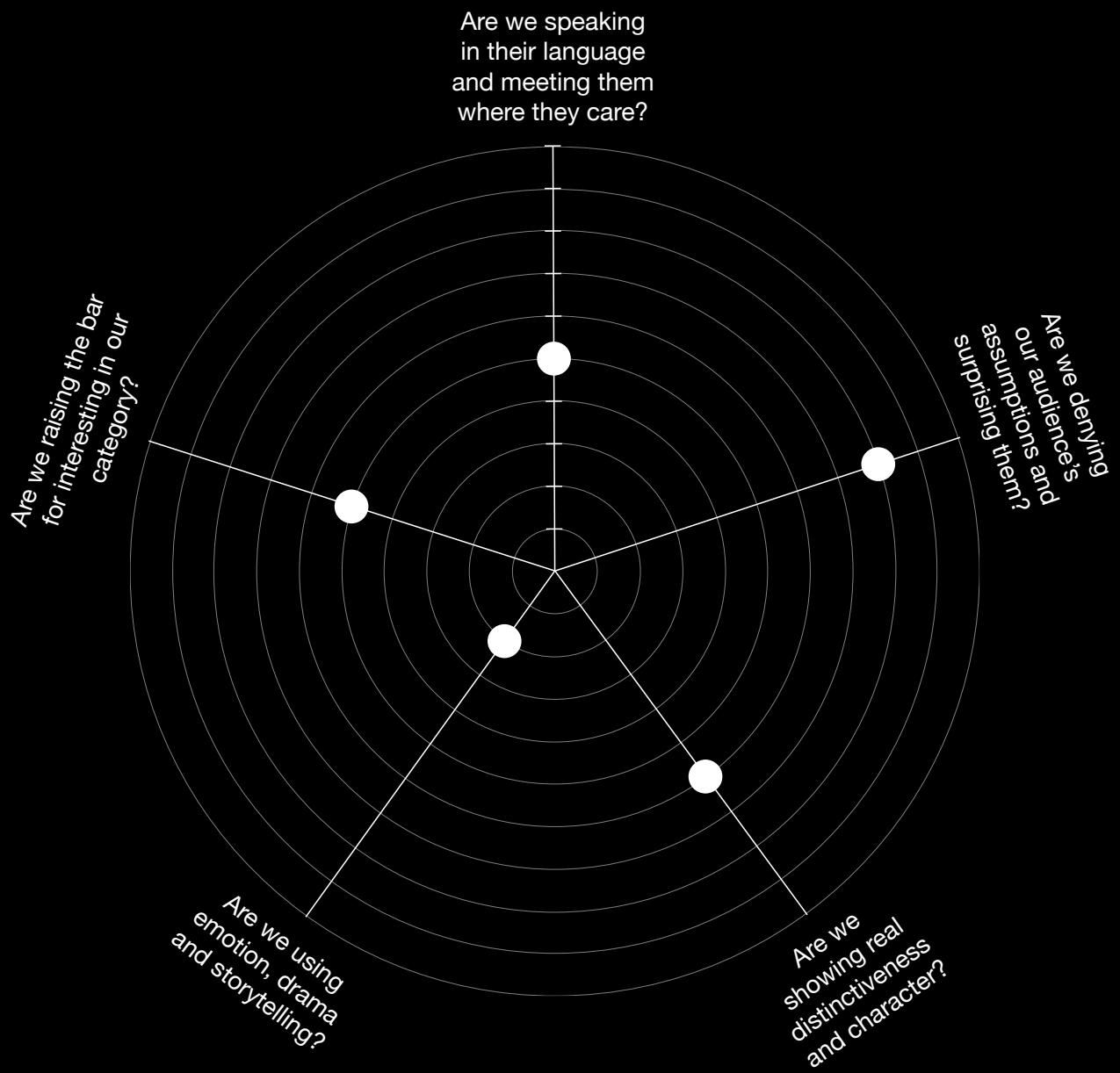
As you are looking at your latest campaign, your current strategy or next year's brand plan, rate yourself out of 10 (with 1 being 'We're not doing this at all' to 10 'We're nailing this'). Crucially, you must be honest with yourself and your team – you and your brand deserve better.

Think about your category. Where are there opportunities? Is there anywhere you are over- or underachieving? Where could you subvert the expectations of your audience to be more interesting? Where could you push your strategy further?

Once you've pinpointed where you can push, we can help you to go further with practical workshops that get your team thinking like a Challenger, and banishing banality in your brand plan for good.

Contact us on [hello@eatbigfish.com](mailto:hello@eatbigfish.com) to find out how.





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## Editorial Team

Toby Brown, Head of Offer & Strategy Director  
Sarah McAllister, Research & Insight Lead  
Adam Morgan, Founder & Chair  
Helen Redstone, Head of Brand

## Contributors

Tara Henderson, Strategist  
Liston Pitman, Strategy Director  
Ellie Simmons, Strategy & Innovation Lead  
Jenna Stephan, Strategist

## Design & Creative

Helen Redstone, Head of Brand  
Ellie Simmons, Strategy & Innovation Lead

## Copy Editor

Ruth Morgan, Researcher

## Cost of Dull Collaborators:

Kerry Collinge, Jon Evans, Peter Field, Dr Karen Nelson-Field, Jenny Tsai

## With thanks to the interviewees whose insights are included in this publication:

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Brand images courtesy of Bobbie, Sanlam, Malört, Nando's and Fans First Entertainment

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eatbigfish is a global consultancy that helps the world's most ambitious brands unlock growth by thinking and acting like Challengers.

We don't just believe in the Challenger Mindset, we defined it. Today, through our proven methodology and distinct, collaborative approach, we use it to help brands overcome internal barriers, sharpen strategy, align teams, and build belief. The result? Distinctive brands, energised teams, and the momentum to finally move things forward.

Are you ready to defy convention, break through in your category, and drive real progress? We'd love to talk.

[hello@eatbigfish.com](mailto:hello@eatbigfish.com) | [www.eatbigfish.com](http://www.eatbigfish.com)





Goes with everything. Tastes of nothing.

# Milquetoast

Interest-free, stodgy and a bit dry.

**NOW WITH ADDED PROTEIN**



# ENNUI

The new fragrance from Maison Dull