



The Myth of Precision: Why Branding Needs a Wider Net

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Abstract

The paper discusses conceptual and practical disjunctions that emerge when the logic of hyper-precision targeting, initially designed for performance marketing, is subsequently imposed unreflectively in the area of brand building. This discussion is inspired by the growing prevalence of algorithmic segmentation and personalization in current marketing systems. While creating enormous short-term transactional benefits, these very techniques have inherent structural limitations and, in some cases, have even proved counterproductive when applied to the task of building long-term brand equity. The study's contribution lies in its articulation of two paradigms of communication that are fundamentally incommensurable. The first is an instrumental paradigm, optimized for rapid behavioral conversion; the second is a symbolic paradigm, oriented toward the incremental accumulation of trust, affective capital, and cultural resonance across extended time horizons. The central aim of the article is to delineate the methodological and strategic limits of precision in branding, while advancing the argument that brand vitality rests less on surgical targeting than on the broad circulation of coherent symbolic narratives. Through an integrative analysis of theoretical frameworks, illustrative case studies (including Budweiser's "Best Buds" campaign and Lincoln's collaboration with Matthew McConaughey), and a corpus of empirical as well as conceptual scholarship, the article shows that excessive segmentation and personalization can undermine message coherence, weaken emotional resonance, and ultimately obstruct the development of long-term mental availability. The principal findings underscore that brand building requires a widened aperture—emphasizing reach, mnemonic reiteration, emotionally saturated storytelling, and symbolic consistency—while recognizing that performance communications, however efficient, cannot substitute for the slow sedimentation of brand meaning within collective memory. The article will be of particular value to marketing scholars, strategic consultants, and practitioners of advertising communications seeking to reconcile the imperatives of short-term efficiency with the exigencies of long-term brand endurance.

Keywords: Branding, Performance Marketing, Hyper-Precision Targeting, Brand Equity, Affective Engagement, Cognitive Availability.

INTRODUCTION

Digital media spaces have transformed the way marketers reach diverse audiences. Real-time plans, deep micro-targeting, and ever-sharper groupings enable a level of personalization not previously seen in ad rules—a setup designed with care for campaigns aimed at achieving quick, measurable results, such as clicks, downloads, or purchases (IAB, 2025). Branding does not yield easily to short-term performance measures; it is an accumulative process in which factors of salience, symbolic resonance, and trust slowly cohere within the collective memory. The dominant digital orthodoxy raises to a principle of effectiveness the maxim "right person, right message, right time". While such accuracy can accelerate conversion in the short term, it often disrupts the slower dynamics essential to brand building (Stengel et al., 2023). Brand equity comes less out of immediate behavioral causality than from durable emotional

ties and mnemonic persistence (Becker & Gijsenberg, 2023). However, different that might be theoretically, in practice, branding is treated as little more than performance marketing extended over a longer horizon, by precisely the same measurability and trigger-responsiveness demands, the equivalence that recent research insists is increasingly being challenged.

The limitations of precision marketing do not affect all factors equally. It accelerates sales velocity but caps brand growth. Metrics like cost per acquisition or return on ad spend shine a light on how well the transaction part is working while totally ignoring any feelings involved and the importance of reputation. Just because an impression was timed perfectly does not mean it will give the brand any long-lasting symbolic value; it could simply prompt the buying of something throwaway. Performance marketing finds and aims at those consumers who are already close to buying something.

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This makes the approach easy, scalable, and practical to use in real-life situations. But its focus stays limited. Brand-building strives for cognitive ubiquity in those audiences not yet in-market but likely to become so. The core task of brand-building is the creation of mental availability, such that when what has been a latent need suddenly comes to the surface, the brand is recalled spontaneously, whether that be now or some extended time hence. Within this *longue durée* horizon, hyper-specific targeting proves not merely superfluous but potentially inimical (Romaniuk & Sharp, 2004). Excessive segmentation can fragment brand identity, compromise message coherence, and erode the emotional foundation that underpins longitudinal preference formation.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in a systematic analysis of academic and industry literature, brand case studies, and conceptual models addressing the intersection of performance marketing and brand communications. The corpus draws from peer-reviewed scholarship (Romaniuk & Sharp, 2004; Becker & Gijsenberg, 2023; Ahmadi et al., 2024), industry reports and standards (IAB, 2025), and practitioner-oriented publications, such as the Harvard Business Review (Stengel et al., 2023). Aggregating these materials enables the establishment of a multidimensional baseline for exploring how hyper-precise targeting can work effectively within the logic of short-term efficiency, but is at odds with the conditions that require a slow buildup of brand equity.

The methodological design brings together three complementary strands. The first is constituted as a comparative analysis of theoretical models. Brand salience, as conceptualized by Romaniuk and Sharp (2004), sits against the operational logic of performance marketing encapsulated in the “precision triad” as articulated by IAB (2025) in delivering the right message to the right person at the right time. This juxtaposition serves to underscore the epistemological disjunction between metrics of transactional efficiency and the parameters of symbolic resonance.

Second, a content analysis of brand communication case studies was undertaken. Budweiser’s Best Buds Super Bowl campaign (Luckerson, 2014) and Lincoln’s campaign featuring Matthew McConaughey (Lincoln Media Center, 2014) were analyzed in terms of semiotic framing, affective saturation, and long-term cultural memorability. These cases were contrasted with more functionally oriented campaigns, highlighting structural differences between immediate conversion effects and the cumulative accrual of symbolic stability.

Third, a systematic review of academic and applied studies published over the past two decades was carried out (Stengel et al., 2023; Valenti et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2024). Synthesizing insights from this body of work enabled the construction of a multi-layered methodological framework, spanning cognitive psychology of memory to strategies for cultivating long-term emotional attachment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An obsession with hyper-granular targeting reduces the scope through which potential audiences are envisaged, as an algorithm systematically removes people who do not display immediate purchase intents but will, over time, develop into profitable two segments. Reach is restricted where brand-building requires expansion (Romaniuk et al., 2021). Long-term equity does not depend on microscopic segmentation but broad exposure, repeated mnemonic impressions, and stories laced with effect. It’s about the coherent articulation of purpose over time, allowing for cognitive fluency and emotional alignment that comes with learning, rather than a process of relentless retargeting. Iconic brands don’t intensify audience filters; they are the ones that stand out by recurring in the cultural field with a consistent thematic identity. Data-driven micro-segmentation focuses are too narrow because they work against building up symbolic capital for emergent buyers, peripheral onlookers, and random consumers who are excluded from these calculations, thereby lowering future demand, which is vital to sustaining the long-term ‘brand’.

In modern marketing theory, brand building is increasingly viewed as extending beyond immediate transactions and evolving over longer periods (Valenti et al., 2022). . The typical approach is not to try for quick conversions but to build mental availability so that when people finally make a purchase—often months or years later—the brand comes easily to mind and feels right emotionally. The best brand communications achieve this by focusing on emotional effects rather than limited rational reasons, thereby becoming ingrained in the cultural and emotional memories of their audiences (Valenti et al., 2022).

A paradigmatic example is Budweiser’s “Best Buds” Super Bowl commercial, which dramatizes a narrative of companionship between a puppy and a horse (Luckerson, 2014). “Puppy Love” (often referred to in commentary as part of Budweiser’s “best buds” series) tells a simple, sentimental story: a young shelter puppy befriends a Budweiser Clydesdale at the brand’s ranch; when the puppy is adopted and driven away, the horses stage a gentle “blockade” to reunite it with the Clydesdale. The piece relies on emotion, music, and visual storytelling rather than product claims or calls to action. Significantly, the advertisement contains no overt sales propositions, no functional claims, no promotional discounts, and no urgent calls to action. Instead, it leverages an emotionally saturated storyline that foregrounds loyalty and friendship, thereby aligning the brand with values that exceed the boundaries of its product category. The cultural durability of this advertisement, which continues to be recalled years after its release, illustrates the capacity of affect-driven branding to construct symbolic associations that reinforce the firm’s desired positioning.

This is the ultimate characteristic of successful brand building: creating common meanings that foster trust,

warmth, and identification with something more than the product's function. One does not have to drink or like beer to recognize and emotionally connect with Budweiser's equestrian and canine imagery; they have long become semiotic vehicles of the brand's identity.

Performance advertising and brand advertising will further delineate the dynamics at play by revealing substantive differences in intended outcomes. The structures vary as well. Performance ads solicit immediate behavior responses—clicks, purchases, or signups—while brand ads create emotional equity for the brand over time. Product features, urgency, and transactional incentives dominate within performance campaigns but are displaced by narrative, repetition, symbolism, and other means of affective storytelling that prevail in brand campaigns. Herein lies the dual yet complementary function of advertising ecosystems, where immediate conversion on the one hand and long-term brand capital have to be meticulously balanced within a marketing strategy.

A systematic comparison between performance- and brand-

driven advertising reveals not only a difference in styles but also different logics of communication and consumer engagement. Performance advertising is typically bound to very narrowly defined campaign windows. It elicits short-term behavioral spurts that dissipate just as quickly after exposure. Brand advertising seeks symbolic endurance; the narratives and imagery of brand advertising are meant to be remembered for years, long after their campaigns have ended, when they ultimately become part of the collective cultural consciousness. Different associative mechanisms accompany this temporal difference. Where performance ads pivot on immediate utility, discount, and urgency, brand ads hope to create enduring emotional connections that rewrite consumer perception and loyalty long after the campaign has ended. The intent is similarly differentiated: performance advertising is calibrated toward quick conversions. In contrast, brand advertising aims to cultivate strategic bonds between the brand and its audience, positioning itself as a long-term relational rather than transactional activity. The comparison between performance ads and brand ads is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison between performance ads and brand ads (compiled by author)

Parameter for comparison	Performance Ads	Brand Ads
Longevity	Specific campaign window	Forever memorable for years
Association	Emotional Connection	Immediate Utility
Intent	Quick sales	Strategic bond
Behaviour	Spike early and fade	Build slowly, peak, and stabilize

The behavioral trajectories resulting from these orientations underscore the divergence. Performance ads tend to exhibit sharp but ephemeral peaks in engagement, reflecting their tactical function in sales cycles. Brand ads, conversely, build resonance gradually, reaching a point of stabilization in which they continuously reinforce awareness and preference without requiring immediate calls to action. This falls in line with the larger scope of theories about consumer psychology, which have indicated that while affective associations may take longer to develop, they are more enduring than rationally induced transactional behavior. Creative element reviews accentuate these contrasts further: In an immediacy logic, brevity has a place—performance advertising favors short ad lengths, early and conspicuous display of brand logos, and directive messaging often culminating in explicit calls to action. This aligns well with its focus on efficiency,

measurability, and minimizing cognitive load. Brand advertising normally uses long formats unleashed to allow for a narrative arc. Logos might come late and therefore are subsumed under the primacy of story; messaging favors taglines, punchlines, and symbolic cues rather than overt instructions. By contrast, brand campaigns cast a much broader net—across demographic and psychographic boundaries of attitude.

Campaign temporality illustrates the final dimension of differentiation. Performance ads are generally short-lived, deployed once or for limited cycles, reflecting their tactical utility. Brand ads are designed for longevity, with repetition and frequency enhancing recall and emotional salience. The comparison of creative elements in performance ads and brand ads is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of creative elements in performance ads and brand ads (compiled by author)

Parameter for comparison	Performance Ads	Brand Ads
Ad length	Shorter	Often longer
Brand Logo appearance	Early, prominently	Later, the story is the hook
Messaging	Direct call to action	Taglines, punchlines
Audience	Narrow	Broad
Campaign Duration/Frequency	Once, limited	The longer the better

This comparative framework suggests that the two advertising forms should not be seen as competing. Still, as complementary, the former excels in immediate commercial returns, while the latter constructs the symbolic and emotional infrastructure that sustains market presence and consumer loyalty over time.

A rigorous consideration of the oft-invoked triad—delivering the right message to the right audience at the right time—reveals that its temporal leg behaves very differently in brand advertising than in performance advertising. In performance contexts, “time” denotes a narrow window of transactional receptivity: the instant in which attention, intent, and frictionless conversion align. Brand advertising, by contrast, treats time less as a point than as a field. Its objective is not to intercept purchase but to prefigure it—to cultivate mental availability, associative meaning, and durable preference such that the eventual buying moment, whenever it occurs, is already biased in the brand’s favor.

From this perspective, the notion of a single “right time” verges on a category error. Brand communications operate through cumulative exposure, semantic framing, and affective resonance, mechanisms whose effects unfold asynchronously and persistently. The task is to install the brand in memory structures and cultural schemas that outlast any isolated episode of shopping (Ahmadi et al., 2024). Hence, temporal optimization cedes primacy to the coherence of the message and the precision of the audience fit, both of which are marshaled toward building salience that travels across occasions rather than spiking within one.

The Lincoln campaign featuring a well-known Academy Award-winning actor, author, and entrepreneur, Matthew McConaughey exemplifies this logic (Lincoln Media Center, 2014). The series stars him as a reflective, first-person narrator driving the new Lincoln MKC. Rather than listing features or issuing calls to action, the spots use McConaughey’s calm, conversational voiceover and cinematic, often ambiguous vignettes to create mood and a sense of character around the car — an approach that privileges tone, atmosphere and emotional association over explicit product claims. Three of the five initial films were directed by Nicolas Winding Refn and the work was developed with agency Hudson Rouge; the campaign was intended primarily to raise awareness and spark conversation about Lincoln’s entry into the small premium-utility segment.

They avoided features and commands. Another point of their success was leaning on mood, symbolism, and narrative minimalism to portray Lincoln as a state of being—elegant, mysterious, contemplative—rather than just a specification sheet. Viewers are miles and miles from an auto purchase. This does show associative links and a tone of voice that are cognitively retrievable later on when the category does become relevant. In semiotic terms, the ad privileges connotation over denotation; in behavioral terms, it nurtures recognition, liking, and category-entry readiness rather than immediate response.

Consequently, brand building should not be judged by its capacity to coincide with the transactional instant but by its success in shaping that instant in advance. The work is longitudinal, establishing identity, accruing trust, and embedding meaning so that, when the consumer eventually encounters the buying situation, the choice feels less like an evaluation and more like a recollection. Thus, for brands, the right time is not an ephemeral now but a future engineered—built patiently with messages to the right audience until the moment of purchase finally comes, already predisposed. The right message has become industry code for hyper-personalized communication keyed to transactional triggers. The logic works beautifully in direct response settings, where persuasion is connected to adjacent intent and informational efficiency. When transposed to branding, however, the presumption of a singular, optimally tailored message becomes conceptually unstable. Brand meaning is not a variable to be endlessly re-parameterized by microsegments; it is an evolving, public-facing identity that must remain legible across contexts. Semiotic coherence—consistency of values, tone, and promise—does more to cultivate trust and long-term salience than a cascade of narrowly personalized variants that, in aggregate, fracture recognition (Tran et al., 2024).

The Lincoln campaign with Matthew McConaughey illustrates this principle with unusual clarity (Lincoln Media Center, 2014). The creative resists the didactic grammar of features-and-benefits and refuses the tempo of urgency. Instead, it orchestrates mood, cadence, and symbol to stage Lincoln as a disposition—refined independence—rather than a mere assemblage of specifications. For some viewers, the spots are puzzling, even oblique; yet this indirection is the point. By privileging atmosphere over argument, the campaign establishes a durable tonal signature that is recoverable in memory, irrespective of momentary category needs. In semiotic terms, connotation precedes denotation; in behavioral terms, recognition and affect are prepared in advance of choice.

If the “right message” for brands is correctly understood as coherent rather than customized, the notion of a narrowly circumscribed “right audience” also warrants revision. Contemporary audiences are not static buyer personas traversing a linear funnel; they are itinerant participants in overlapping media ecologies, whose intentions oscillate with context. Pursuing only acute intent signals confines brand presence to the convenience of the advertiser’s conversion window and neglects the audience’s longer arc of meaning-making. Brand building, therefore, requires reach that is broader than the immediate market and more persistent than episodic performance bursts. The task is to install the brand within cultural and cognitive repertoires—through repetition, narrative continuity, and emotional cues—so that when relevance becomes situationally acute, the brand is already mentally available.

Budweiser's "Best Buds" work exemplifies this temporal and effective strategy. The narrative—friendship between a puppy and a Clydesdale—does not prosecute a claim about product attributes; it rehearses a feeling, binds it to heritage, and thereby extends the brand's associative network beyond any single purchase occasion. The effect is not a spike in instantaneous conversion so much as the slow accretion of goodwill and recall. This affinity lingers and reactivates when the category is later entered (Becker & Gijzenberg, 2023).

Because branding is oriented toward long-term memory, its relevant audience necessarily exceeds those poised to buy. Future customers, non-customers, and social influencers of choice all contribute to the construction and diffusion of brand meaning. Within the conventional funnel metaphor, this is the logic of building broad awareness at the top—an area that is not a prelude to performance so much as its precondition, as shown in Figure 1.

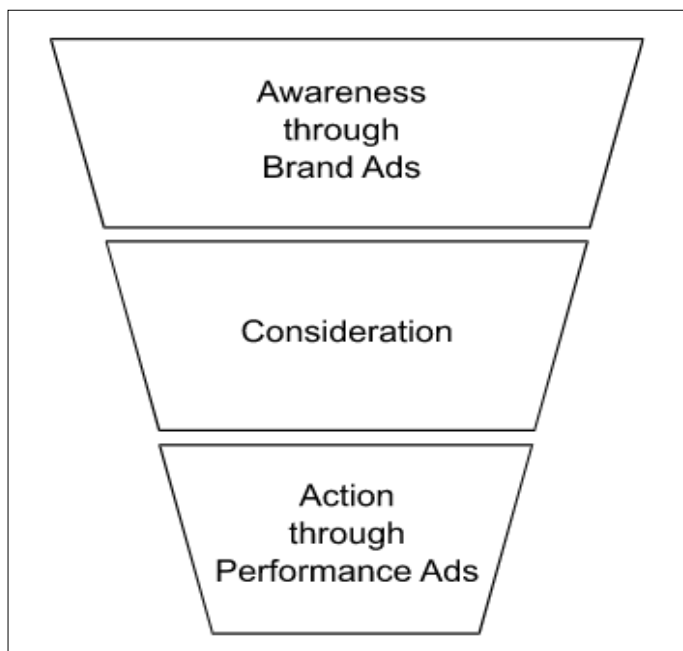


Fig. 1. Conceptual Model of the Marketing Funnel: Awareness via Brand Advertising, Consideration, and Action via Performance Advertising (compiled by author)

Debates about budget ratios between brand and performance, consequently, tend to misfire when they seek a universal formula. The two modes are not commensurable in cadence or objective: performance tends to be episodic, contingent on campaign mechanics and demand elasticity; brand activity is best understood as continuous, compounding, and temporally decoupled from immediate sales response (Valenti et al., 2022). Portfolio thinking—recognizing distinct time horizons, metrics, and mechanisms—is therefore more appropriate than ratio optimization.

These dynamics are particularly pronounced in categories with infrequent, high-stakes, or emotionally freighted decisions—automotive, healthcare, and financial services. Here, the path to purchase begins long before a search query is typed or a comparison table is consulted. Risk, identity, and

trust loom large; information alone rarely settles the matter. Brands that cultivate a stable voice and broad, sustained presence create the cognitive and affective groundwork upon which later evaluation rests. In this sense, effective brand campaigns do not chase surgical precision; they practice durable storytelling that saturates culture gently but persistently, ensuring that when the buying moment finally arrives, the choice feels less like discovery and more like recognition.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis substantiates the claim that the logic of hyper-precise targeting, so triumphantly effective within the operational circuitry of performance marketing, proves epistemologically inadequate when transposed wholesale into the domain of brand construction. The oft-invoked triad of "the right message, to the right person, at the right time" reveals its heuristic insufficiency. While in transactional contexts it accelerates conversion throughput, in the longitudinal register of branding it constricts the brand's horizon, reducing its symbolic vocation to momentary behavioral acts and depriving it of the cumulative sedimentation upon which durable equity depends.

Evidence across both empirical observation and theoretical scholarship converges on the recognition that the vitality of brands is not indexed by velocity of response but by the persistence of cultural and affective memory traces—semantic associations and reservoirs of trust that accrue incrementally. Advertising strategies oriented toward breadth of reach and temporal reiteration generate cognitive fluency and affective resonance that remain retrievable at deferred moments of demand crystallization. In this respect, brands become available not by intercepting the transactional instant, but by having already colonized the mental and cultural repertoires through which future choice is navigated.

The comparative framework between performance-driven and brand-oriented communication underscores their structural non-substitutability: the former delivers tactical, short-term commercial returns. At the same time, the latter fabricates a symbolic and emotional infrastructure that secures market salience across temporal spans. To collapse branding into the metricized vocabulary of conversion is to commit a category error. What is measurable in the immediacy of dashboards remains silent on the affective consonance and mnemonic stability that render brands socially legible and commercially enduring.

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