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## Pushing the Culture Button: Rebooting the Creative Process

*A new research approach that identifies cultural nerve endings and drives brand growth.*

*Northstar Research London*

### In a Nutshell

*This study reveals how understanding the cultural parameters of a market can transform the potential of creative ideas.*

*This is a new approach to communications research enabling us to assess how the culture of a particular country impacts on the hearts and minds of its people, and how this affects the way they engage with advertising.*

*It was initiated in Russia, a country going through an accelerated consumer revolution, but also needed to be rolled out in other culturally 'different' territories. This meant designing a methodology which could, independently of the country, identify cultural filters that would strengthen the bonds between consumers and brands.*

### The Question

In late 2009 Publicis London were experiencing difficulties with their strategy and advertising across some of their key accounts in certain crucial, yet more atypical and emerging markets. Their ads were encountering awareness issues and, compounded by steady brand decline on some of these key accounts, they needed to take action.

The research approach in place – quantitative pre testing – was the sole channel of insight to understand the success and failures of an ad, and its outputs lacked a diagnostic view of the reasons behind the low awareness levels. With not enough input to get to more solid conclusions, the team at Publicis were struggling to progress their brand and ad strategy efficiently.

After initial discussions with Northstar, the Publicis team - led by Roo Mackie and Nathalie Gil - set about championing the powers of explorative research and secured budget to conduct a pilot study in one of the most important, yet one of the most unfamiliar markets: Russia. If effective, they would roll it out across all other struggling markets.

So, Publicis posed this question to us: **what is the key to Russian advertising recall?**



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## The Answer

The breadth of this question, combined with tight timing and a modest budget, meant research design was a challenge. First and foremost, this study was not about ad testing, it was about helping Publicis recalibrate the creative process by drawing a line under current assumptions and giving the team a new set of parameters from which to work.

We needed to give them true and long lasting insight to the team surrounding the Russian way of interpreting advertising.

### *Step one: Cultural Immersion*

As an international researcher, I am a true believer that the only way to ensure true success in a market is to understand it in all its fantastic, culturally nuanced glory. Understanding cultural differences should not be about sense checking that an ad will not offend or have a diluted message in that particular market, but rather cultural differences should be extensively explored, harnessed and *capitalised* upon to understand what will truly motivate consumers in that market.

Consequently, the first ingredient to solving the problem was full cultural immersion and understanding.

This had 2 threads:

1. **Culture Mining:** Both we and Publicis researched the Russian market including historical themes, cultural trends and current consumer habits (general and category specific). This gave us a robust background to use in subsequent phases and during consumer contact to help us uncover cultural motivations for opinion and ad interpretation.
2. **Cultural Sherpas:** Budget and timing would not support lengthy ethnographic interviews, so as a surrogate for this we organised informal immersions with English speaking Muscovites. They showed us a typical day in their life all the while giving explanations that helped us to understand the Russian perspective on things. However, it was important that our contact with these cultural sherpas did not end there, so we invited them to get involved during the consumer contact phase to help give a real time interpretation of how the respondents expressed their views on ads with relation to Russian outlook and culture.

### *Step 2: Multiple Hypotheses*

With such a broad objective, we needed to find a structured and systematic way of conducting the research. To create some focus, the team formulated hypotheses based on a combination of: the cultural immersion process; Publicis' knowledge and experience; and prior research studies conducted by Northstar in Russia.

Around 10 hypotheses were created with regards to how Russians relate to advertising; they included both broad and more detail focussed hypotheses.



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We then needed to establish a way of testing these hypotheses, which had been distilled into 'themes'.

### *Step 3: The Advertising Hygiene Test*

We needed to stress test these themes. We decided the best way to do this was to create show reels of different ads that represented one or more of the themes. We did this in 2 phases – reels for general ads and reels for category specific ads, and we ensured there was enough contrast to spark discussion and understand thresholds.

When testing category specific ads, we included ads from Publicis' accounts that had failed the quantitative pre testing. We had a suspicion that these ads were actually succeeding in a lot of ways, particularly those in the more formulaic categories as - to an objective eye - they were breaking the formulaic mould which surely would be cutting through? What we needed to uncover was the cultural elements at play that were causing the ads to fail in a pre test environment, and that ultimately were hindering recall.

Cut through and recall is all about emotional engagement, and through this exercise we gained a vivid understanding of what spoke to the heart of the Russians and also what caused them to switch off.

However, while this gave us a rich understanding of recall in the sense of emotional engagement, we also wanted to see which ads had sticking power and would be remembered independently by consumers.

### *Step 4: Memory Games*

This exercise was about learning the rules for long lasting engagement. Before the groups, we asked respondents to remember ads they loved, ads that really caught their eye and, as it was important to learn the parameters of negative recall, ads they hated. We asked them to do this both in general terms and within certain categories, particularly to understand which ads were cutting through formulaic moulds. We also asked them to remember an ad from at least 5 years ago to help us really understand what was standing the test of time.

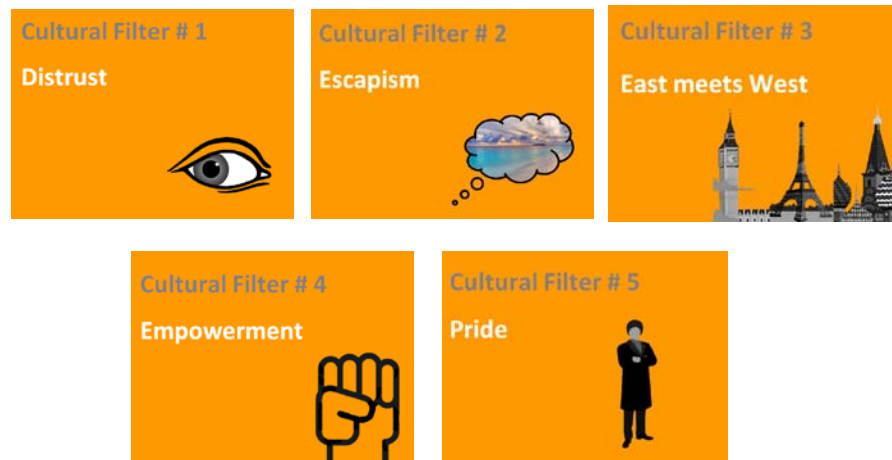
This exercise was invaluable. A lot of consistency was revealed as to what stuck in consumers' minds and also the cultural motivations behind this; this was also effective to see which of our hypothesised themes were raised without prompting from our show reels.

### *Step 5: Targeting on the Savvy Spectrum*

In order to ensure we had water tight findings, we needed to sample well. Publicis work with a segmentation model which we reflected in our recruitment. However, perhaps of more importance was the need to talk to the spectrum of advertising literacy from non savvy to savvy, to ensure future campaigns did not isolate either extreme.



## Recalibrating the Creative Process



Given the challenge of helping the team recalibrate the creative process, it was imperative to provide well structured and long lasting insight. To do this, we needed to convey the importance of Russian culture on the success of advertising.

We established cultural motivations, which we called 'filters', that clearly outlined the drivers of Russian engagement with, and opinions on, advertising. We gave solid descriptions of these cultural filters and explored the repercussions they had for the team creatively and strategically.

It was then important to bring this back to the ramifications on their clients' advertising. Previously their ad's 'pass' or 'fail' would be supported by verbatim that would - sometimes - give the team a superficial read on why the ad had received its score. We designed our results so the Publicis team could (and do) look back on the cultural filters to make sense of these verbatim and understand the deeper motivations for why the comments were made. Since the research was completed, they have found that if an ad fails, the comments can always be linked back to the issues outlined within the cultural filters.

The creative team also needed to know how to best *execute* and *apply* an idea in the Russian market. So, to help practical use of the research, each filter had one bottom line rule for them to abide by. These were then backed up by off shoot guidelines for successful advertising - again, all based on the cultural context and Russian outlook on life. With these guidelines, the creative team have since found it easier to apply their ideas in a culturally relevant way.

We used a large library of ads to exemplify our guidelines and bring the insight to life. As a separate deliverable, all the ads were clustered into their themes so they could be used by the team if needed at a later date.

To the testament of its effectiveness and value, this research has since been completed in Turkey with Saudi Arabia next in line.



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## A Word from Publicis London

“ Usually, a research company would send us a basic analysis based on the patterns found by the interviewees’ answers and we should be the ones who should make the link to our business. This format has 2 flaws:

1. They have very shallow assumptions, fully based on behaviour (not motivation)
2. They are not bringing any concrete solution to our problem

*Through their methodology, Northstar offered us robust anthropological thinking - they crossed the learnings from the research with the country's historical facts; explored group behaviours to find a possible motivation behind them; and found relevant cultural threads to better understand the reason behind the facts. This allowed them to come up with more realistic and down to earth solutions to answer our problems ”*

Nathalie Gil, Regional Strategic Planner, Publicis London

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