

# Signals in the noise

Doing the right things

# The 45-second read

Advertising effectiveness is rightly at the top of the agenda for marketing leaders — but defining and measuring it gets harder in a complex and fast-evolving media landscape.

We have never had a better scientific understanding of how advertising works.

Evidence-based laws about mental availability, memory formation, attention, reach and frequency give the industry a more rigorous foundation for planning and evaluating communications than it has ever had. But strategies that pursue those goals are persistently challenged by a data environment that makes the measurable the enemy of the meaningful.

The majority of media investment is now dependent on proprietary data. But proprietary definitions of audience exposure create profound noise that undermines informed decision-making about media budgets. Marketing-mix modelling, in the hands of skilled and independent practitioners, offers the most promising route to connecting scientific understanding to real-world investment decisions.

But models are only as good as their inputs — grit in, grit out.

## This paper is a call to action...

- *...for joint-industry bodies to make their data work harder for the data analytics community now at the forefront of effectiveness measurement*
- *...for data analysts to apply the same rigour to assessing data quality that they bring to building models*
- *...for online platforms to make tangible commitments to the joint-industry principles of transparency, objectivity and independence.*
- *...and for the wider industry to invest in, and treasure, the joint-industry currencies*

These actions are necessary so that current and future generations of media planners and advertisers can invest not with faith, but with confidence.

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# Introduction

In 2024, the IPA's report Making Effectiveness Work acknowledged that marketers are well-placed in having many approaches and data sources available to demonstrate value and measure advertising effectiveness. Equally, it recognised that no single approach or silver bullet can answer all the questions posed by a fragmented advertising ecosystem.

The report proposed a framework — MESI: Model, Experiment, Simulate, Implement — that combines the rigour of modelling with the discipline of well-designed experiments, and moves the industry decisively away from its over-reliance on digital attribution. Making effectiveness work, it argued, is less about chasing the perfect evaluation technique than about establishing a decisive effectiveness culture: one that is evidence-based and enthusiastic about data and analytics, but designed to manage its blind spots.

The modern connected world has ushered in a multiplicity of data sources, many proprietary to media owners, online platforms and device manufacturers. This has provided opportunities for more cost-effective collection and reporting of media consumption, while also opening up the possibility of contrasting evidence on matters that are better illuminated by a single version of the truth.

Where Signals in the Noise 2023 advocated for the importance of trusted, joint-industry sources as a foundation stone for strategic planning and campaign evaluation, this sequel highlights the crucial importance of assessing the quality of data inputs when developing models or experiments.

'Grit in, grit out' isn't quite what modellers in agencies say — but it rhymes.

Whether you currently believe — or not — in the importance of focusing on the quality of inputs to understanding outcomes, this paper is for you.

*“Wherever you look at human judgements, you are likely to find noise. To improve the quality of our judgments we need to overcome noise as well as bias.”*

Noise - A Flaw in Human Judgement,  
Kahneman, Sibony & Sunstein, 2021

## Section One

# We understand more than ever about how advertising works

Effectiveness has never been more widely or urgently discussed in our industry. What once seemed the preserve of strategic planners crafting annual awards entries has become an everyday preoccupation across all agency disciplines — monitored continuously, reported in real time, and scrutinised with growing intensity by marketing leaders and the C-suite.

That scrutiny is partly a product of data abundance. The easy availability of performance metrics has sharpened boardroom expectations, shifting attention towards channels that generate the most visible, most immediate evidence of outcomes — often at the expense of longer-term brand-building objectives. The metrics that dominate Monday-morning conversations are frequently proprietary to the platforms that sell the advertising. The question of whether they are measuring the right things, in the right way, tends to get asked less often than the question of what they say.

And yet, at the same moment, we have never been better equipped to understand how advertising actually works.

What was intuitive for creatives and planners in the past has been scientifically proven and codified over the past decade. There is now a substantial and growing body of evidence-based laws about effective communications — from Ehrenberg-Bass on mental availability and penetration, to Binet and Field on the long and the short, to Karen Nelson-Field on attention and memory formation, to the 95/5 rule that reminds us that at any given moment, only 5% of potential consumers are in-market.

## What planners once handed down through experience and instinct, they can now defend with evidence.

This body of knowledge has profound implications for how effectiveness should be measured, not just pursued. It tells us that advertising builds memories over time, that emotion drives recall, that reach matters as much as targeting, and that the effects of brand investment are often

## Evidence-based laws about effective communications

- Ehrenberg-Bass with mental availability, distinctive brand assets, category entry points; and growth achieved by focusing on penetration not loyalty.
- Binet & Field emphasising the need for fame, emotion and both long and short perspectives; their meta-analysis on the IPA Databank, highlighting general principles like the share-of-voice, share-of-market rule.
- Behavioural science emphasising how to design comms for how people's brains work, relying on their emotional/intuitive System1 brains more than the post-rationalising System2.
- Evidence from Karen Nelson-Field about the importance of attention for memory-formation, requiring measurements of human attention to calibrate impressions delivery data.
- Orlando Wood and the agency System1 building an evidence base about the power of emotion for forming memory.
- A widening appreciation of the limitations of a marketing 'funnel' because people make decisions in chaotic, non-linear, irrational, intuitive ways.
- The concept of 95/5 – that at any moment in time, 95% of potential consumers of a category are not in-market – only 5% are – so there's a much bigger job to do in building future demand with advertising that drives up brand equity, memorability, talkability than harvesting the 5% of the market that's ready to buy.

slow-burn and long-lasting. It points us firmly away from the short-horizon, attribution-led view of what advertising does.

That's the context in which the IPA's 2024 report *Making Effectiveness Work* made its contribution. Recognising that no single technique or silver bullet can answer all the questions posed by a fragmented advertising ecosystem, it proposed a framework — MESI: Model, Experiment, Simulate, Implement — that combines the rigour of modelling with the discipline of well-designed experiments, and explicitly moves the industry

away from its over-reliance on digital attribution. As the report put it, making effectiveness work is now less about finding a perfect evaluation technique and more about establishing a decisive effectiveness culture: one that is evidence-based, optimistic about data and analytics, but designed to manage its blind spots.

MESI is a framework built on the premise that the quality of inputs determines the quality of outputs. Experiments must be designed with scientific rigour. Models must be built on data that is robust, comparable and transparent.

Which brings us to the central tension this paper addresses: we have the scientific understanding to pursue effectiveness properly, and we have increasingly sophisticated tools with which to measure it — but the data environment we're working in is making both harder, not easier.

## Section Two

# The data landscape is working against what we know

The scientific revolution in understanding how advertising works has coincided, paradoxically, with a data environment that makes it harder to act on that knowledge. The industry finds itself better informed about how advertising works, yet less well-equipped to make the comparable, objective measurements that would allow those principles to be applied with confidence.

The modern media plan reflects this complexity. Layered multi-channel constructions combine always-on activity in search, social and retail media with targeted activity in addressable channels, overlaid with upper-funnel, demand-generating activity in mass-reach regulated media. Many of those channels generate a constant stream of data, creating an enormous analytics challenge in correctly attributing exposure to business outcomes. And AI is already accelerating that change in ways we can't yet fully anticipate.

Two problems sit at the heart of this challenge.





The first is incomparability. Platform owners have provided advertisers with proprietary data as a proxy for audience measurement, but reporting definitions are bespoke to each platform and often not fully disclosed. This makes it impossible to achieve meaningful comparability between, say, a view on YouTube, Facebook and TikTok. It is at direct odds with the UK industry's long-term commitment to joint-industry solutions designed to reduce friction around definitions of campaign exposure. As Rich Kirk, Chief Strategy Officer at EssenceMediacom, puts it:

*'ideally you want to try and get as close to some sort of apples-to-apples scenario as possible. Just because the ad has been served doesn't mean it reached a human we wanted to see it. We need some sort of basic viewability standard that we can apply across all media.'*

Attachment to attribution metrics that over-claim their contribution to consumer actions compounds this problem. Advertisers may be paying for demand that was there anyway, with multiple suppliers claiming the same sale or click. From a position of commercial strength, platform owners

have been slow to re-engineer their systems to align with industry standards — leaving advertisers and agencies with a mosaic of datasets and the intractable problem of how to harmonise non-standard metrics.

The second problem is short-termism. The ready availability of performance data has created a gravitational pull towards channels that appear most measurable, and towards modelling approaches that prioritise what's observable in short time horizons. MMM has rightly been rehabilitated as a more rigorous alternative

to digital attribution, and genuinely skilled econometricians are doing important work in linking scientific principles about how advertising works to real-life models of business performance. But as Aidan Mark, Media Science and Strategy Director at Bicycle, has observed:

*'MMM adoption has some unintended consequences... The biggest watch-out is that MMM undermines the importance of long-term brand-building... As a marketing community, it is highly important that we do not forget this blind spot.'*

This risk is compounded by the rapid democratisation of modelling tools. MMM is regaining momentum, empowered by more powerful processing and bigger datasets — but this risks putting models into the hands of practitioners who may lack the statistical training to adequately scrutinise the quality of their data inputs. And as independent econometrician Alex Vass has warned, the arrival of platform-owned MMM tools introduces a profound conflict of interest:

*'when a platform builds the tool that's supposed to evaluate that platform's performance... what do you think the recommendations will be? Many of these tools lack rigour, overstate impact, or bury assumptions. Some hardcode results. And the term "MMM" gives them the cover they need.'*

These two problems — incomparability and short-termism — are not unrelated. Both are symptoms of an industry that has allowed proprietary data to crowd out the objective, comparable evidence on which sound investment decisions depend.

And both are soluble, not through a binary choice between old and new, panel and big data, brand and performance — but through what the best practitioners already know: that the strongest solutions come from combining sources, and that combination begins with rigorous assessment of the quality of each input.

That's where joint-industry measurement steps to centre stage. And it's why the data analytics community — the modellers and analysts now at the forefront of effectiveness measurement — are central to the argument that follows.



## Section Three

# What sort of data is needed to help achieve the effectiveness conceived in our best practice models?

Our Signals in the Noise programme is informed by an ongoing series of depth interviews with agency strategists, comms planners, effectiveness practitioners and modellers. Building on all these conversations, this section surfaces observations from some of these effectiveness experts about how to plan for effectiveness, inspired by models about how advertising works and supported by relevant evidence.

The ease and accessibility of performance data has created a widespread expectation that advertising is only valuable if an outcome can be directly attributed to it.

According to Jon Waite, Global EVP & Head of Planning at Havas Media Group, the industry has increasingly lost sight of what we used to know – and still know – about how advertising works:

*'the old models of advertising recognise that it can be a long and drawn-out process from someone seeing an ad to actually buying something from that company, but a lot of effectiveness measurement is too rooted in seeing the granular data around which particular placement drove that sale... The reality is that's not how advertising or marketing communications really work, and there's not a great understanding of how rare it is that you can serve an ad and a sale will happen off the back of that'*

Building on that, Rich Kirk, Chief Strategy Officer at EssenceMediacom UK, brings the 95/5 rule to bear on why this matters:

*'it holds true as a rule in most categories that 95% of the people who see the advertising are not ready to buy right now. So advertising works by building positive associations between your brand and moments or need states until the next time the person is in market and wanting to buy, making them more likely to place the advertised brand higher in their consideration set'*

And that's why Kirk sees measurement of reach

and frequency as non-negotiable inputs to any serious effectiveness framework: reach because you need to know how all the elements and layers of your plan are contributing to building those associations and perceptions; and frequency because it takes a certain number of exposures before a message has been effectively delivered – with that threshold varying by channel.

Crucially, the goal is not just achieving effective frequency but avoiding excessive frequency, which irritates audiences and wastes investment.

*'if you're not careful, and this does happen in every campaign in the current landscape, you can end up delivering a lot of your messaging into a small part of the audience at a very high frequency level, and that drags down effectiveness. Very, very important that we don't do that'*

If those are the nuts and bolts of campaign building, addressing people in-market and not yet in market, Peter Field - effectiveness expert, author and analyst of the IPA's effectiveness databank - brings in another strand of how we believe advertising works: by forming memories that can be retrieved at the right moment. Mental availability, as Byron Sharp defines it, is the extent to which a brand comes to mind when people are buying the category. And not all media build memory equally:

*'The more we need to build that brand, the more dimensions, the more subtlety that we need, the more we will need high-attention media that give us the duration of attention that allows us to unpack what we have to say. High attention platforms like TV create memories that last a long time'*

According to Field, that difference between high-attention, longer-duration media options ('where the eyeballs linger longer on the ad') and low-attention, shorter-duration options ('which will evaporate in people's memories very, very quickly and would need to be re-served multiple times') would point comms planners focused on brand-building objectives to favour the former.

Jon Waite shares evidence from a piece of investigative work done by his agency Havas with attention consultancy Lumen and research company Brand Metrics:

*'we've recently published work that showed the importance of frequency in digital display. If you serve just one impression, there's a high likelihood that no one has actually seen that impression. You haven't reached anyone. And it actually takes a frequency of more than three impressions served to get to what you class as reaching someone who's actually looked at it. So you had to buy three or four impressions in digital display to reach one person, where you bought one in TV to reach one person. So you've got to weight it to make it comparable'*



That finding — that a single TV impression and a single digital display impression are not equivalent units of currency — goes to the heart of why comparable, objective audience measurement matters.

As Peter Field argues, without a reliable way of valuing different impressions against a common standard, rational investment decisions become impossible:

*'it's profoundly untrue that the value of one or two seconds of someone's attention is worth a jot in comparison to the value of, say, 10 or 20 seconds. Once we've got this data, and planners and marketers can start making fully informed choices, then I think we'll get back to, dare I say it, a rational market. We've got to get back to this because we're chucking money at things and we have no understanding of the value of them'*

Even more recently, Dr Grace Kite, working with Tom Roach, VP Brand Strategy at Jellyfish, brings fresh evidence of how effective communications can be built from 'lots of littles' – exposures spread across many channels, perhaps appearing on small screens for short durations.

As Jeremy Bullmore famously put it many decades ago:

*'People build brands as birds build nests, from scraps and straws we chance upon'*

The implication is not that high-attention and low-attention media are interchangeable – they are not – but that the choice between them should be driven by evidence and strategy, not by the availability of data. Horses for courses, properly informed.

There's one last challenge that our experts highlighted. It is perhaps the most consequential data gap in the current ecosystem: the erosion of share of voice as a reliable strategic tool. The relationship between excess share of voice and market share growth was, as Peter Field and Les Binet established, one of the most robust rules in marketing. Field reflects on what has happened to it:

*'if you go back 15 or 20 years ago, the relationship between extra share of voice (ESOV) and share of market, and the kinds of market share growth that could be driven, were rock solid. They weren't*

*just strong, they were off the scale strong. But that correlation between ESOV and market share growth has withered and withered and withered'*

That's not because the rule no longer applies – it's because share of voice can no longer be calculated across the full media ecosystem. Joint-industry audience data makes it possible for established media channels; walled-garden platforms make it impossible for the rest. Here's Dr Grace Kite:

*'it is really predictive, and it does work in data – if you buy excess share of voice, you do get growth. These days you can still get your share of voice for traditional channels, but not for the whole range of media options that people are using nowadays. Not being able to plug part of the ecosystem into that is a problem.'*

The implication is clear. What effectiveness experts need from audience data is consistent, comparable evidence of how many people have seen an ad, how often and for how long; insight into effective levels of exposure across different channels; and the ability to calculate share of voice across the full media mix. These are not luxuries or refinements – they are the foundations on which sound investment decisions are built. And they are precisely what joint-industry measurement, at its best, is designed to deliver.



## Section Four

# Time to remember why we created joint-industry measurement

If there is one underlying theme to this paper, it is that the greatest barrier to understanding the contribution of different media to effective advertising is the friction that comes from the competitive audience claims made by businesses that sell media advertising. Just as shoppers in a Turkish bazaar look for points of certainty in the face of sometimes-bewildering claims of market traders, advertisers and media agencies benefit from having consistent definitions and standards.

This isn't a new problem — it's one our industry has come together to solve before, repeatedly and successfully. The solution it developed is the joint-industry model.

The word "joint" reflects the way these bodies have been developed, and continue to be governed, by the sell-side and buy-side of

the industry working in genuine collaboration — agreeing the operational nuts and bolts of methodologies, exposure definitions, panel samples, data collection and questionnaire design.

By necessity, these evolve to keep pace with the changing media landscape, and any changes to methodology are developed and agreed by representatives of all parts of the industry.

The word "industry" reflects the fact that ownership and governance lies with a collective rather than a proprietary interest. Independently-governed audience measurement forms part of the collective evidence infrastructure that supports a healthy media market. In that way, the joint-industry ecosystem is a public asset that belongs to the whole industry — not a privatised offering competing on its own commercial merits.

The principles of the joint-industry model aren't bureaucratic niceties — they are the conditions that make trust possible. And as David Fletcher, former Chief Data Officer of Wavemaker UK, has observed:

*'Many of us feel besieged by data and at risk of not seeing the wood for the trees. Joint-industry measurement has been forged in the fire of consensus building and the collaborative effort that goes into them really pays off.'*



### Joint-industry model principles

- ✓ By the industry and for the industry
- ✓ Funding and governance includes buy-side and sell-side partners
- ✓ Transparent methodologies that don't discriminate for or against any media services
- ✓ Consistent audience building blocks that allow comparable evaluation across media
- ✓ Equitable, objective access to data for all users

So why does any of this need to be said? Because in late 2024, IPA research conducted primarily among media agencies found that these industry assets have become less salient, less well known and less well understood than at any point in their history. That finding should give the whole industry pause.

It is perhaps not surprising. The established joint-industry systems provide audience measurement for media channels that now account for less than half of total advertising revenue. The growth of online media, underpinned by proprietary data, has inevitably led to greater reliance on platform dashboards and tools.

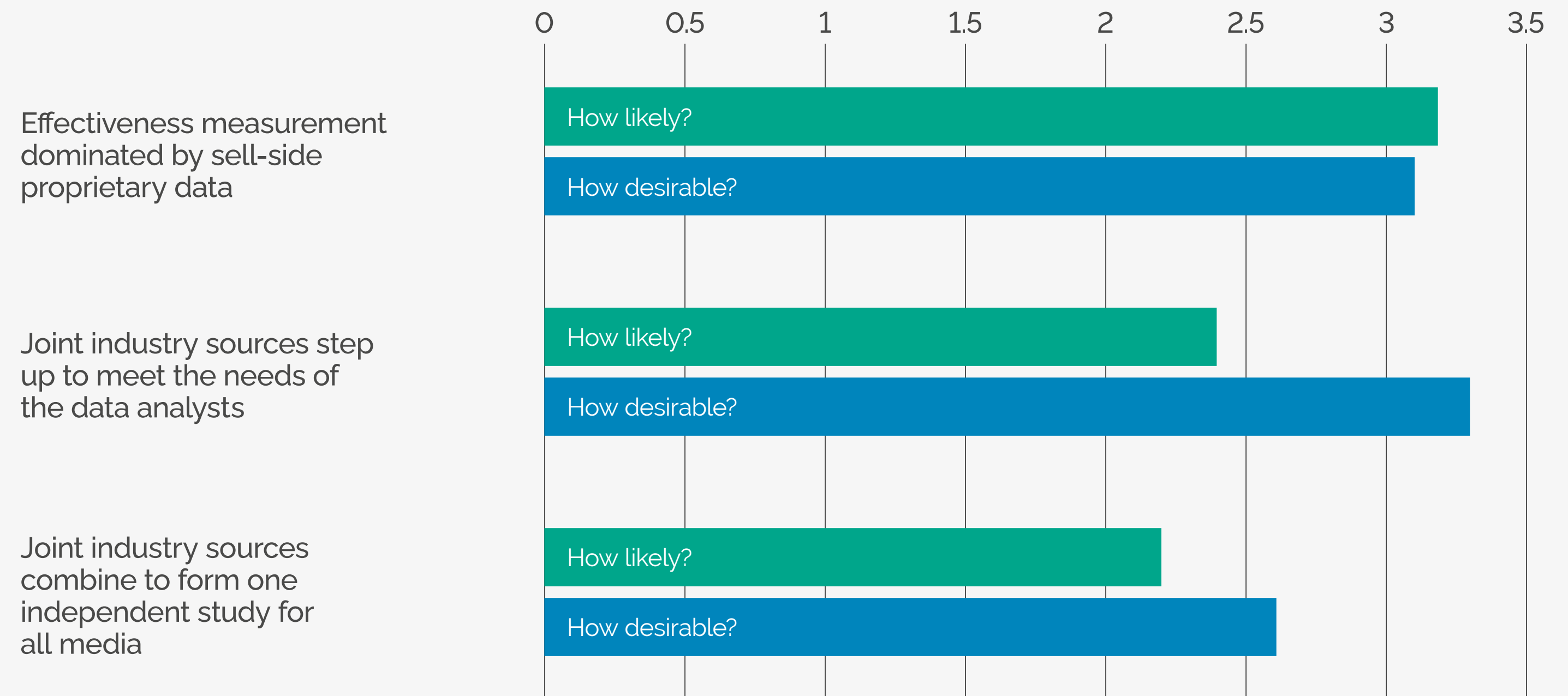
And as agencies have energetically recruited teams of younger data analytics professionals, the institutional memory of what the joint-industry sources are, how they work and why they matter has thinned. The most senior practitioners who've spent their entire careers in agencies are much better acquainted with these sources — but they are now in the minority.

The IPA's subsequent research, conducted with data analysts in UK media agencies in late 2025, sharpens the picture further. Asked to consider three scenarios for audience measurement by 2030, those professionals were clear about what they expect and what they would prefer — and the gap between the two is telling.

They expect effectiveness measurement to become increasingly dominated by sell-side proprietary data. What they would prefer is for the joint-industry sources to step up: to get better at providing data that analysts can easily incorporate into models, systems and tools.

## Data analysts expect platform data to become even more dominant, but they'd prefer the JICs to up their game

Your thoughts about three different scenarios for just five years from now. How **likely** do you think each one is? And how **desirable**?



Source: IPA, Survey of Data Analytics professionals in media agencies, September 2025. N=c45



That gap between expectation and preference is the opportunity this paper is pointing to. The data analytics community is not hostile to joint-industry sources — quite the opposite. But it needs those sources to be more accessible, better documented, more readily integrated into the modelling and analytics workflows that now sit at the heart of effectiveness measurement.

As the Market Research Society's Campaign for Better Data has framed the broader challenge: misinformation and data quality issues pose a growing risk, which technology has the potential to magnify. The call is for greater vigilance, stronger skills and a renewed commitment to data accuracy and quality — so that the research sector remains trusted, transparent and fit for the future.

Walled-garden data from platforms does not currently meet the standards of transparency, objectivity and independence that joint-industry principles demand. Nor do the global platform businesses appear focused on aligning with joint-industry approaches, preferring to pursue their own rules and resist what they can portray as inconvenient local-market constraints.

That makes it all the more important that the industry reasserts the value of what it has built — and invests in making it work harder for the next generation of practitioners who will depend on it.

## Closing remarks

# Invest with confidence

Looking back over the arc of our industry, the journey from the intuitive craft of the mass-media era to the data-saturated complexity of today has been defined by a recurring tension: between what we know about how advertising works and what the prevailing data environment makes it easy to measure.

For much of the past two decades, that tension has been resolved in favour of the measurable — with consequences for effectiveness that the industry is still working to correct.

The good news is a correction is underway. We have never had a better scientific understanding of how advertising builds brands and drives business growth. The evidence-based laws assembled by Ehrenberg-Bass, Binet and Field, and the growing body of work on attention, memory and mental availability, give the industry a more rigorous foundation for planning and evaluating communications than it has ever had.

And the rehabilitation of marketing-mix modelling — in the hands of skilled, independent

econometricians applying genuine statistical rigour — offers the most promising route yet to connecting that scientific understanding to real-world investment decisions.

But models are only as good as their inputs. And that is the central challenge this paper has addressed. The data environment that practitioners are working in today — dominated by proprietary, incomparable, often opaque audience metrics from platforms with a commercial interest in the outcomes — is not adequate to support the quality of decision-making that the science of effectiveness now makes possible.

The gap between what we know and what we can reliably measure is the defining problem of our moment.

The joint-industry systems are not a rigid solution. They are a living, evolving set of industry assets, built on principles — transparency, objectivity, independence — that are more needed now than at any point in their history.

The IPA's research shows that the data analytics community understands this. They don't expect proprietary platform data to serve their needs well; they would prefer the joint-industry sources to step up and meet them where they are — more accessible, better documented, more readily

integrated into the models and systems that now drive effectiveness measurement.

That is the call to action this paper makes.

- *To the joint-industry bodies: invest in making your data work harder for the next generation of analysts and modellers who need it.*
- *To the data analytics community: bring the same rigour to assessing the quality of your inputs that you apply to building your models.*
- *To the online platforms: engage seriously with joint-industry principles rather than treating transparency and comparability as inconvenient constraints.*
- *And to advertisers and agencies: remember that the freedom to invest with confidence — rather than with faith, or with resignation — depends on the quality of the evidence on which your decisions are based.*

Trust breeds confidence, which in turn breeds accountability. In a world of data abundance, the industry's joint-industry approach to audience measurement remains the most reliable way to deliver signals in the noise.



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