E-BOOK

The Cost of Boring Ads

The financial case for more distinctive creative

Klingit.

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Boring ads aren't just less fun... they're expensive.

Most marketing teams do not set out to make dull work. You are trying to hit targets, ship on time, satisfy stakeholders, and keep performance stable. In that environment, the safest route often wins, familiar formats, category language, rational claims, and templates nobody will challenge in a meeting.

The outcome is predictable. The ads are technically correct, strategically defensible, and easy to ignore.

That is where the damage begins. When an ad does not earn attention, it forces the business to compensate with volume.

More impressions. More frequency. More targeting layers. More retargeting. Bigger budgets to achieve the same outcome. Over time, the cost is media spend, slower learning, and weaker brand memory. You end up paying more and learning less.

The goal of this document is simple. Make boring visible, explain why it keeps happening, and give you a practical way to make it harder to ship boring work.

What boring ads cost you and why they happen

Boring advertising costs you money in three ways

Overspending to compensate

First, it forces you to buy your way to results. If the creative does not earn attention, you compensate with reach, frequency, and spend. That can work short term but it is an expensive habit.

Watered down insights

Second, it slows learning. If your ads are easy to scroll past, you get weaker signals. You need more budget and more time to learn what works. That drags out iteration cycles and makes performance feel unstable.

Your brand takes a hit

Third, it weakens brand memory. When ads do not create a clear reason to remember you, you become more dependent on short-term activation. That usually means more targeting, more retargeting, and more pressure to always run offers.

You can see this waste every day.

A retailer runs a "20% off this weekend" paid social flight with the same layout across six formats. Frequency climbs, CPM rises, and the team responds by broadening targeting and increasing spend. ROAS flattens anyway.

Or a B2B SaaS brand launches a month-long LinkedIn campaign with stock photos and vague claims like "All-in-one platform." Clicks trickle in, sales blames marketing, marketing blames the audience, and the budget funds impressions that never had a real chance.

The point is not that offers or performance ads are bad. The point is that boring creative makes everything more expensive than it needs to be.

If boring ads are costly, why do so many teams still ship them?

Often, it is not because people do not care. It is because the system around the work rewards safe and easy-to-approve choices, and because many teams measure what is easiest to count.

Here are four common drivers:

/01

Performance pressure, the legacy of clicks over impact

Most teams are measured on what is easy to report, not what is most valuable to build. CTR, CPL, short-term ROAS. These metrics can be useful. They can also push you toward ads that promise immediate action even when they are forgettable.

The safest way to chase clicks is to over-explain, over-offer, and look like everyone else.

To be fair, more teams are waking up to this. Brand and creative effectiveness are back in the conversation. Still, many organisations are stuck in the old habit because it is familiar, and it is easy to defend internally.

/02
Format sprawl, making everything fit everywhere

Platforms demand endless variations, 6 seconds, 15 seconds, vertical, square, static, carousel, UGC-style, "native" formats.

When production has to cover every placement, the work gets sanded down. A strong idea becomes modular parts you can shuffle around. Consistency is good. Sameness is not. When everything has to work everywhere, it often ends up working properly nowhere.

/03
Fear of choosing wrong

Standing out carries risk. Not only the risk that someone in the market will not like it, but the internal risk of betting budget on the wrong concept.

In crowded categories it can feel safer to mimic the category leader than to challenge the rules. But safe is rarely neutral. Safe ads do not earn attention, so teams compensate with more spend, heavier targeting, and more frequency. Avoiding creative risk can increase financial risk.

/04
Too many approvals, and the wrong approvals

Most boring ads are not ruined by one big mistake. They are diluted by a long chain of small edits.

Each review adds hedging, soften the claim, add qualifiers, include one more message, swap the bold visual for something "more on brand". Often, decision power sits with people who do not have marketing craft in their day job, but still feel comfortable judging it. That is how work becomes designed to offend no one internally.

Unfortunately, the audience is not approving it either.

What this means in practice:

If you want less boring work, asking for "better ideas" is not enough. You need clearer decision rights, fewer rounds, and a shared standard for what good looks like before you spend.
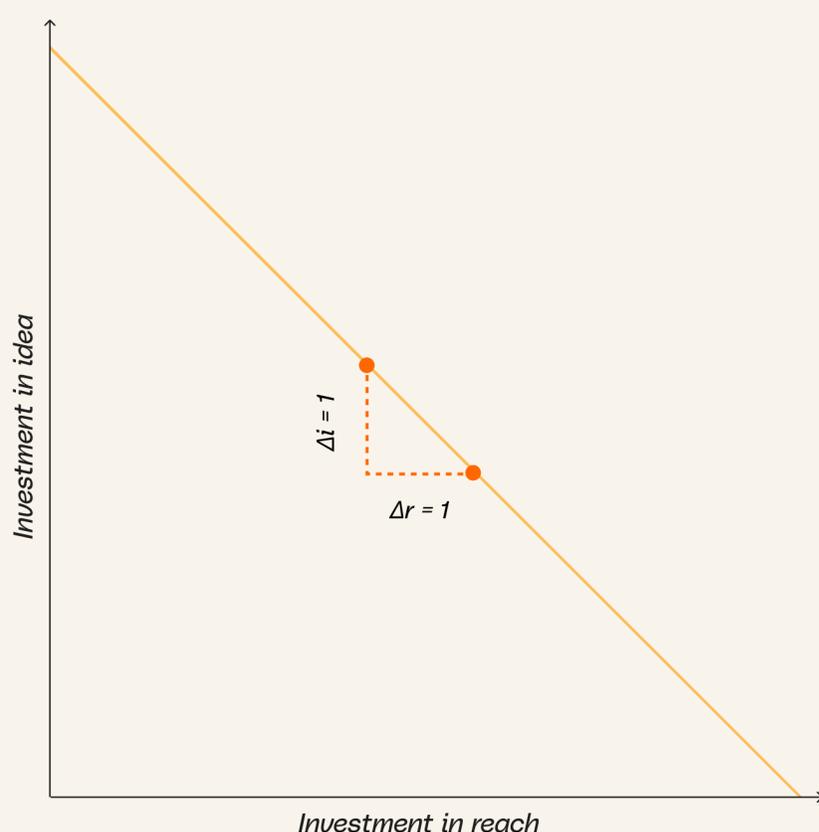
Here's the trade-off

You can invest more in the idea so the work earns attention, or you can invest more in reach to compensate for work people ignore.

Reach has become more expensive in many paid channels over the last decade. More players are buying attention in the same places, and that pushes up auction costs.

At the same time, more teams are improving relevance and creative quality. That widens the gap between brands that earn attention and brands that don't.

In reality, this relationship is rarely 1:1. It also changes over time as competition, platform costs, and audience behavior shift. The figures you see are illustrative. They are not meant to be precise. They are meant to show the direction the trade-off is moving.
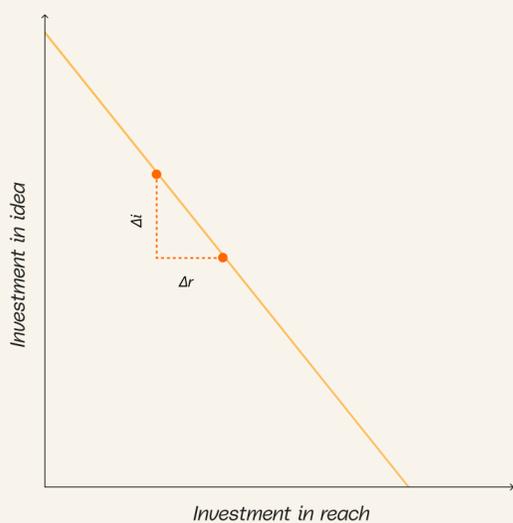

The trade-off between investment in idea and investment in reach: keeping effect constant

In the example the investment is a perfect trade-off where 1 additional unit is replaceable 1:1 in-between reach and ideas. This implies that if you decrease investments in your creative relevancy you can simply off-set the negative effect with an equal investment in reach.
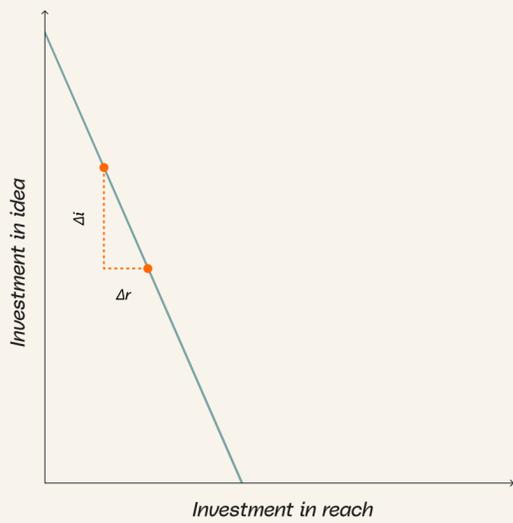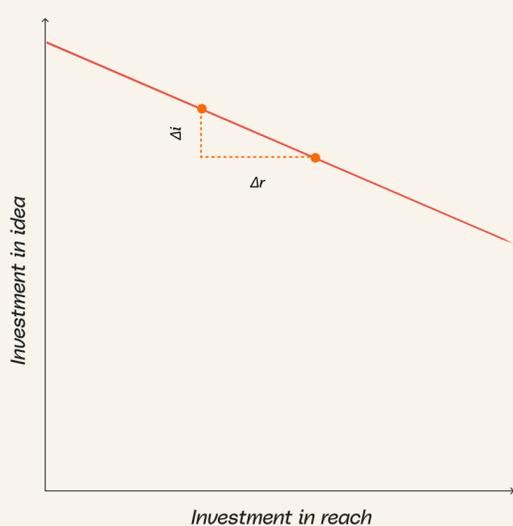
The trade-off between investment in idea and investment in reach: Early Web 2.0

In the early days of digital commerce the case for investing in reach was pretty obvious since less investments in ideas could easily be off-set by increasing reach (with better targeting).

The trade-off between investment in idea and investment in reach: Maturing Digital Markets

As markets matured and the competition for attention in the same channels intensified – the relationship started to shift towards 1:1.

The trade-off between investment in idea and investment in reach: Today

As per today, the case is the opposite for many brands, lowering relevance and creative edge needs to be compensated for by bigger and bigger media budgets, making the trade off much less unappealing.

As the figures above show, the balance between idea investment and reach investment has shifted over time.

In plain terms, reach is giving you less "bang for your buck", which makes the business case for stronger creative bigger.

Let's put this into perspective with numbers

Below is a purely illustrative example. The numbers are made up
to show the logic, not to represent a universal benchmark.

	Baseline performance:	New performance:	Calculated factors:
CPM	$10	$12	12 ÷ 10 = **1.20**
CTR	1.2%	1.0%	1.2 ÷ 1.0 = **1.20**
CVR	4.0%	3.2%	4.0 ÷ 3.2 = **1.25**
	Total budget multiplier: **1.20 x 1.20 x 1.25 = 1.80**		

This means you would need about 80% more budget
to generate the same number of conversions.

If you previously spent $50,000/month, the new required spend becomes:

50,000 x 1.80 =
$90,000/month

This is why "it is only a small CTR drop" is rarely a small problem.
Small hits in CPM, CTR, and conversion rate stack up fast.

How to make boring harder to ship

Five questions to ask before you spend

—

These questions will not create a great concept for you. Creative still needs craft, taste, and time. What these questions can do is catch the most common reasons work ends up bland, before you put serious money behind it.

01/ Are we talking about what the audience cares about?

Boring ads often start from what the brand wants to say, not what the audience is trying to solve.

Start with a real tension, frustration, desire, fear, or a job the audience is trying to get done. Validate it in places like customer calls, reviews, search behaviour, support tickets, and sales objections.

If the ad does not connect to something the audience already feels, you will need more spend to force attention.

02/ Would someone outside the company find this interesting?

You are too close to your own work. "Interesting" needs a quick test.

Simple proxies:

/ 5-second test: show the ad for five seconds, then ask what they remember and what it was for.

/ Feed test: place it next to real content and competitor ads, does it earn a pause.

/ One-sentence retell: can someone describe the idea in a sentence without using your brand wording.

If people cannot recall anything specific, you do not have a strong hook yet.

03/ Do we look and sound clearly different from competitors?

Line up 10 competitor ads from the same channel. If your copy, visuals, and promises could be swapped with theirs without anyone noticing, you are in trouble.

Difference can come from a:
/ distinctive visual device
/ clear tone of voice
/ point of view
/ specific proof point

The goal is fast separation and recognisability.

04/ Is there a reason to stop in the first seconds?

Attention is fragile. If the opening is predictable, you are asking media spend to do the heavy lifting.

Reasons to stop can be:
/ pattern break in the opening
/ counterintuitive truth
/ bold comparison
/ clear tension right away

Whatever you choose, it needs to serve the message.

05/ Are we using feeling, not only facts?

Facts explain. Feeling moves people.

Even in "rational" categories, buyers still care about things like relief, control, confidence, and progress. This does not mean drama. It means reflecting a real lived experience and pairing it with a concrete reason to believe.

Used together, these questions turn vague feedback into something you can act on. *"It is boring"* becomes *"it is not about their problem"*, *"it blends in"*, or *"it has no hook early on"*.

Two examples &
why they work

01/ "Should've gone to Specsavers"

This platform is built on a simple repeatable idea, everyday mistakes caused by poor eyesight or hearing, shown in a way that is easy to recognise, then tied back to the brand line.

Brand: Specsavers
Year: 2002 - Present

COMMON STRUCTURE:
a) Someone confidently does something slightly wrong
b) The situation becomes awkward or funny
c) The reveal makes the point clear
d) The line lands and the brand is remembered

WHY IT WORKS:
a) It is relatable without talking down to people
b) The line has become something people say outside ads, which gives the brand repetition it does not pay for
c) It stays consistent while allowing new executions, which keeps recognition high

Source

02/ "När du får oväntat besök"

This Swedish platform is built on a clear behavioural truth, coffee is the social safety net. If someone drops by unannounced, you may not be prepared, but you can always offer coffee.

Brand: Gevalia
Year: 1985 - 2018

COMMON STRUCTURE:

a) Someone confidently does something slightly wrong
b) The situation becomes awkward or funny
c) The reveal makes the point clear
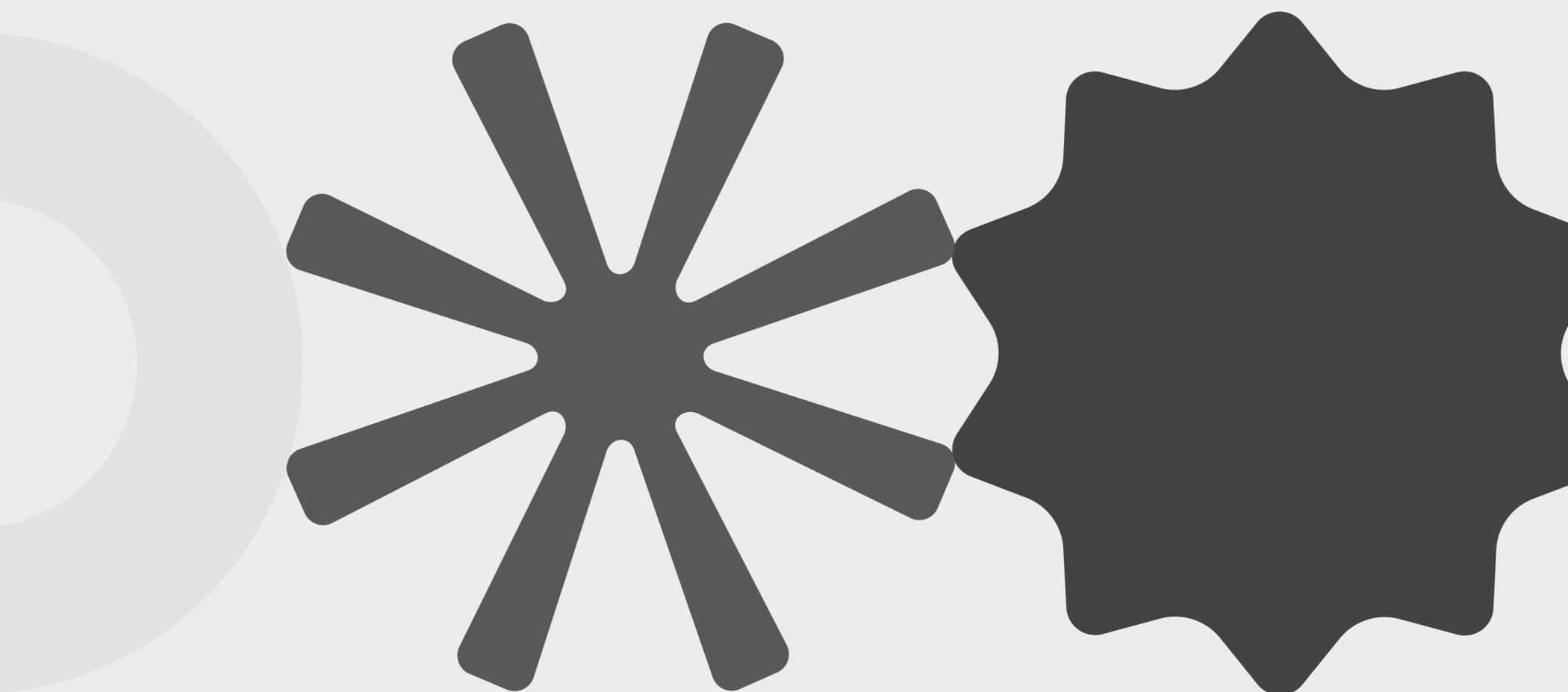d) The line lands and the brand is remembered

WHY IT WORKS:

a) It starts from a real situation people recognise, not a product claim
b) One simple line supports many types of executions, stress, warmth, embarrassment, pride
c) The line became strongly associated with Gevalia, which helps memory even between flights

Source

A practical plan to reduce boring, in four steps

Audit what you are running

Pull your current and last 60 to 90 days of campaigns into one audit document, one row per ad or asset. For each, capture goal, audience, channel, spend, and the creative.

Run the five questions on each core asset and score 1 to 5. You will quickly see patterns, generic promises, no early hook, same visual structure as competitors, feature dumps, no feeling.

From that map, pick:

a) 3 fast fixes you can refresh immediately
b) 1 to 2 bigger bets to develop next

Reduce dilution by fixing approvals

Decide who owns final creative approval, one person. Set a rule that most campaigns only need two approvals, brand and channel owner. Pull legal in only when required.

Write down decision rights:

a) who decides the concept
b) who decides final copy
c) who decides the final cut

Add early checks for attention and clarity

Keep performance metrics, but stop letting CTR be the only judge.

Before you scale spend, run lightweight tests:

a) 5-second recall

b) feed comparison against competitors

c) one-sentence retell

Add a simple weekly scorecard that combines:

a) attention, recall

b) clarity, what is the message

c) distinctiveness, could it be a competitor

Make it part of the operating rhythm

Put a short weekly review on the calendar:

a) what earned attention

b) what was remembered

c) what blended in

Then make a clear call, iterate, replace, or scale.

Keep a small internal collection of examples that worked for your brand. Not a bank of templates, but a record of what you did, why it worked, and what you learned. That helps you stay consistent without copying yourself into boredom.

PS. This is not a guarantee.

It is a plan that makes it easier to spot boring work early, reduce dilution, and learn faster.

A few notes to end on

Key Takeaways

The cost of boring ads

Boring ads cost money because they do not earn attention. You end up compensating with reach, frequency, and budget.

The cost is media spend, slower learning, and weaker brand memory.

Boring happens because the system rewards safe choices, legacy metrics, format stress, risk avoidance, and approval bloat.

Small performance drops compound fast across CPM, CTR, and conversion rate.

You need a clearer standard, fewer rounds, and simple checks before you spend.

Final note

Pick one live campaign. Run the five questions. Fix the biggest weakness you find, then cut one approval step that is diluting the work. That combination beats another round of "make it more on brand".

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