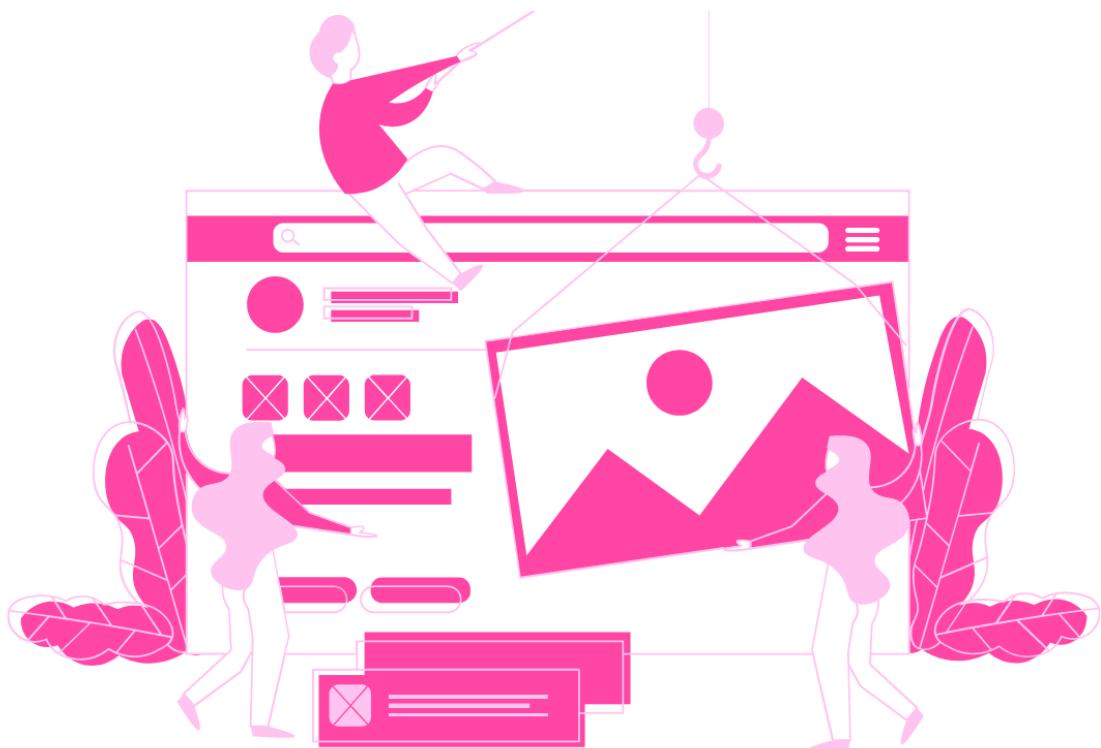


# Advertising Adversity:

## Navigating Productivity and Attention in Advertising



Melanie Topchik | October 2024

# OVERVIEW

## Understanding The Industry

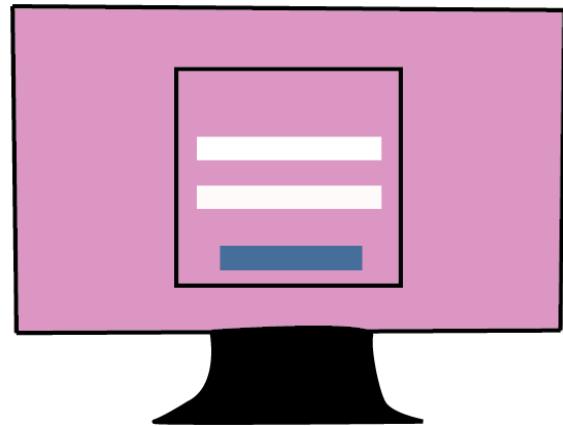
Before I started working in advertising, I didn't give much thought to the advertisements I came into contact with. I would glance at them briefly before moving on. This all changed when I began interning for the Cape Cod Radio Station this past summer. As I made voiceover advertisements for some of our clients, I noticed something interesting about my behaviors. Hearing my own voice made me pay attention to ads like never before. Yet even with that personal connection, I realized something troubling: As an advertiser, I still often don't focus on ads, even though they're part of my industry. This made me question how we, as advertisers, expect to capture the attention of consumers when we ourselves need help to stay engaged.

Productivity and focus are some of the most significant challenges in the advertising industry. With attention spans shrinking and distractions growing, creating content that resonates with an audience has become overwhelmingly complex. Most people are able to recognize that consumers are losing the ability to focus, but this is just as much happening to us as advertisers, too. Staying in a creative flow has become an extremely difficult expectation as we juggle multiple tasks, meetings, and strict deadlines. The pressure to produce effective and engaging advertisements is more problematic, especially when we're battling our own attention deficits in the workplace.

The result leaves workers in the industry in a continuous loop where it takes time to produce high volumes of meaningful, engaging content while also dealing with the same focus issues that affect the exact audience we're trying to reach. If we, as advertisers, are struggling to stay productive and creative, it's no wonder that ad effectiveness is declining. This makes it even more essential that we address the apparent issues of workplace attention and

productivity—not just to allow for more productivity in the workplace but to ensure that our content will stand out among the clutter and connect with consumers.

According to Gloria Mark, a leading expert in psychological studies relating to how digital media affects people's lives, our attention spans are rapidly shrinking. Mark refers to a computer logging technique she began using in 2004, which tracks how long users stay on a tab before switching to another. Over time, the results have shown a consistent decline in the time spent on each tab. Since the advertising industry relies heavily on the ability to focus intensely for long periods, research has made it evident that this has become a struggle when we constantly switch our attention to something else.



## Concepts to Consider

Focusing on concepts like focus, flow, and deep work will be essential to overcoming these challenges in the advertising industry. In an environment where distractions are constant, regaining our ability to focus will allow us to produce higher-quality content that is better able to connect with target audiences.

Additionally, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has made tremendous breakthroughs that have significantly impacted our need and understanding of flow in advertising. In his studies, Csikszentmihalyi identified that we are at our most creative when fully immersed in our work, which is primarily achievable when distractions are as minimal as possible.

It becomes more challenging for the advertising industry when many of the distractions come directly from technology frequently used and needed for work purposes. When we are continually pulled in various directions and are switching over to other tasks, it becomes nearly impossible to develop engaging content, which can be frustrating and can cause a

lot of unnecessary stress. By finding ways to enter a deep, uninterrupted state of focus more frequently, we will improve the quality of content, directly leading to more effective advertising campaigns.

# BACKGROUND

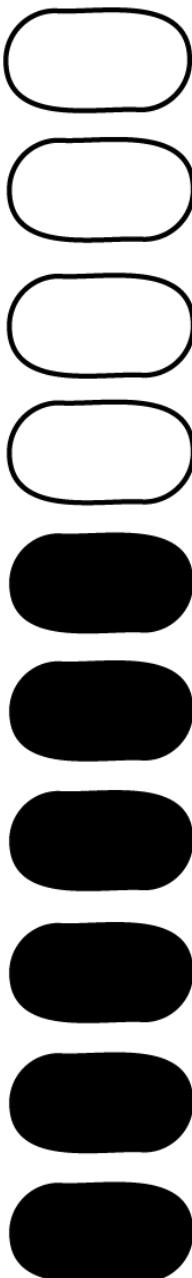
## Productivity & Attention In Advertising

Issues with productivity and efficiency have caused ongoing issues for the advertising industry. Jo Johansson, Senior Content Marketing Manager at Resource Guru, highlights the importance of addressing these challenges. In her article, *Work-life balance in ad agencies—time to rebrand agency life*, Johansson states, “It’s a creative, dynamic, and competitive field that commands innovation and adaptability from its employees.” Her insights further identify why there is a need for increased focus and productivity, which can also help promote creativity and innovation. It will be crucial to start finding solutions, especially to stand out in this competitive industry.

Adding to the challenges, client demands and expectations often don’t align with the creative concepts and strategies developed by agencies. This can lead to tension between the two groups and results in the client deciding to work with a different agency. According to Setup’s *Marketing Relationship Survey: Agency-Client Relationship in 2023*, over half of the brands surveyed stated that they were likely to switch the agencies they work with in the next six months. When combined with the existing pressures of tight deadlines and high workloads, this disconnect not only causes huge stress for advertising professionals but also interferes with productivity and creativity within the agency.

Factors like stress, misaligned expectations, and lack of focus are causing the quality of work in the industry to decline, leading to client dissatisfaction and, ultimately, agency turnover. Moving forward it will be crucial that we create a

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work environment that can allow advertisers to more easily achieve states of focus, flow, and deepwork.

## Diving Deeper

Focus, flow, and deep work allow us to be in our most productive states. Most of us have probably experienced each of these at one point or another in our lives, but our struggle to put full attention into tasks has made achieving these states a lot less frequent and much harder to do. It might make more sense to break each concept down a little further:

### Focus

To give a brief definition found in the article, *The Psychology Behind Focus* on the PsychoLogs website, focus is “the ability to concentrate on a certain stimulus or the ability to center attention on an object or stimulus.” Focus allows us to specifically stay attentive to one topic without getting disrupted by other outside factors. This is one of the most known concepts when considering what factors need to contribute to the building back of our attention.

### Flow

Similar to focus, flow highlights our ability to concentrate on a specific subject. However, compared to focus, it is much easier for flow to be interrupted by surrounding distractions, making it much harder to stay in a state of flow for very long. Flow is also unique in the fact that we are able to accomplish tasks that are more difficult, without feeling as exhausted or uncomfortable as we would usually be.

### Deep work

According to Cal Newport, an expert in the field who identified and named the concept; deep work is “... a state of distraction-free concentration when your brain works at its maximum potential.” It is important to recognize that it is a skill in which we will need to practice and train ourselves. By doing so, we are able to strengthen our ability to use the

time that we have in the best ways possible. There are many techniques that can be done to help us build our capability to do so, and this will be a huge part of the solutions that are later mentioned.

## THE TROUBLES

### Too Many Ads to Handle

Whether passing a billboard on the highway, flipping through a magazine, or scrolling on social media, it is easy to see that, in one way or another, there is constant exposure to advertisements in our society. Therefore, it's no surprise that creating strong campaigns that capture consumers' attention has become more difficult. According to the Forbes article, *Finding Brand Success In The Digital World*, on average, most Americans should expect to be exposed to around 4,000 to 10,000 advertisements daily. With those numbers in mind, we can better understand that there is an overwhelmingly high number of advertisements that are rapidly being planned and produced daily.

### Repetition is Not The Answer

One common solution proposed to overcome the challenges advertisers face in attracting attention, is to increase the frequency and repetition of ads to make them more memorable among the overwhelming amounts of content. The assumption is that the repetition of exposure toward a brand showing the same message over and over again will eventually make it stick. While this approach may lead to temporary visibility, it will be ineffective for advertisers to continue doing this in the long term and more often than not leads to ad fatigue.

Ad fatigue is a commonly debated topic in digital advertising. Many marketing professionals stress the importance of repeatedly showing ads as a way to enhance brand recognition and engagement. However, too much exposure

has shown to lead to overall reduced effectiveness. As identified through previous studies in the Retail Touchpoints article, *Facebook Ads Creative Fatigue: How to Identify and Combat It*, “After managing more than \$100 million in Facebook advertising campaigns, we see this pattern every time: As spending increases, ad fatigue sets in and performance drops.” Companies have been known to waste large amounts of money as a result of spending too much on increasing the frequency of times ads are exposed to an audience.

## Planning Before Producing

Another major consequence of the rapid creation and release of many ads in a given time is that advertisers are rushing to produce large amounts of content, and are often sacrificing the depth and effectiveness needed to genuinely engage with a specific audience. Derek Anderson, a content marketing and SEO manager at Invoca, mentions in a blog that 87% of marketers say that data is their companies most under-utilized asset. More time can be spent analyzing and implementing this data when there is more focus being put towards quality.

Additionally, advertisers often forget the importance of media planning- this includes finding the best times to upload content to social media platforms, understanding which platforms work best for the company, and analyzing how competitors are planning advertisements in comparison to the client. By not having or taking enough time to focus on these areas, this not only weakens the overall message but also reduces the potential success of each campaign.

The demand for constant output pressures advertisers to prioritize speed over strategy, which often leads to campaigns being rushed through without a solid foundation or a clear understanding of how to best advertise for a specific company. This lack of preparation reduces the effectiveness of the ad, as it is not carefully structured to consumer behavior, market trends, or the emotional impact that is necessary in order to engage audiences.

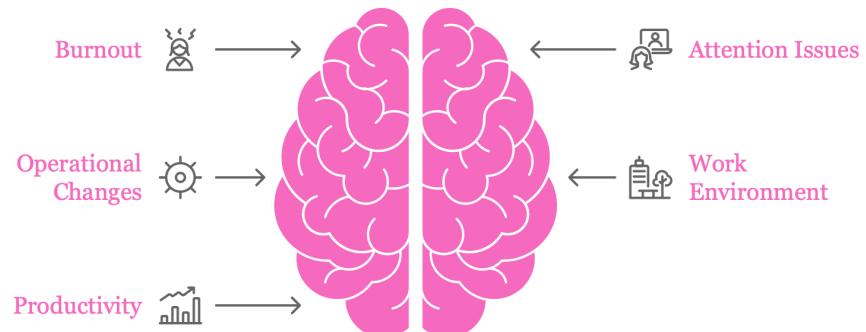
## Burn Out Rates

Burnout in the advertising industry has always been a significant issue, worsening over time. The hectic pace makes it difficult to focus on one task, which is essential considering we aren't as able to complete multiple tasks at once as much as we may think we are able to. In the book *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention—and How to Think Deeply Again*, author Johann Hari speaks with Professor Earl Miller, an expert in neuroscience research. Miller comments on our inability to actually multitask, stating that multitasking is more of a myth. He states "We're very, very single-minded. We have very limited cognitive capacity." While many of us may think we are good multitaskers, we have actually just become far better at switching our focus quickly between the tasks we are doing. For that reason, it's not actually multitasking and it's hard to get work done when we quickly move our focus elsewhere.

As burnout sets in, the ability to engage in deep, focused work decreases. This lack of concentration not only hurts individual performance but also contributes to a cycle where decreased attention leads to reduced productivity. The entire agency suffers from these challenges, impacting overall effectiveness and success in a competitive field. This cycle of burnout and attention issues highlights the urgent need for changes in how the industry operates. Addressing these factors can help create a healthier work environment and improve overall productivity.



### Enhancing Agency Productivity



# FINDING SOLUTIONS

## Quality Over Quantity

Shifting advertising practices to focus more on quality over quantity will help solve many of the struggles that stem from the industry's lack of attention and productivity. This approach focuses on producing fewer, high-impact ads rather than drowning consumers with numerous low-quality ads. This will also be important in creating content that can truly align with those who are viewing it. Rock Content, a company that creates marketing products and services, writes further on the subject in their blog post, *Quality vs. Quantity in Marketing: Should Your Content Marketing Plan Focus on Both?* They write that "It is much easier to attract the right audience when you create high-quality content as opposed to low-quality, high volume content."



### When advertisers prioritize quality, they can:

#### 1. Craft more creative, relevant, and engaging content:

Instead of spending excessive work time producing large amounts of content, advertisers can benefit from applying more of a focused approach, which can then lead to more flow and deep work. This ultimately saves time and resources while delivering stronger results.

#### 2. Build focus on more consumer specific campaigns:

By reducing the amount of content that needs to be produced, advertisers can shift their focus to creating more strategy in their campaigns. This shift allows for focus on crafting more thoughtful and targeted campaigns, also leading to higher-quality messaging that can connect with audiences. Instead of rushing to make content to meet deadlines, advertisers can spend more time understanding consumer behavior, editing brand messaging, and aligning their creative direction with what the client is looking for.

#### 3. Reduce stress caused by the high volumes of work:

A lot of the stress and pressures that occur in the industry happen due to the lack of time advertisers have to provide strong, meaningful content to their clients. This is especially

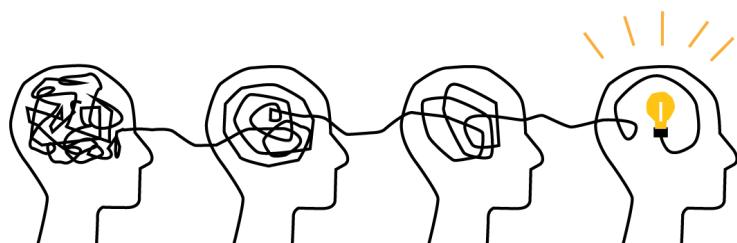


the case since clients have many demands and directions that need to be followed while creating the content. Reducing the amount of work that needs to be produced at one time can help reduce stress advertisers

## Ad Frequency Control

By strategically managing ad frequency, advertisers can deliver fewer but more relevant ads, reducing the need to constantly create new content. Beyond just focusing on quality, advertising professionals can work with various media vehicles to find ways to reduce how frequently consumers are exposed to advertisements. For example, if advertisers can work with social media platforms to find ways to cut back on how often users are interrupted by an ad, this can in return help to reduce the clutter while allowing for users to be more engaged when ads appear on their screens.

In effect, social media platforms can charge more for their advertising rates, and companies won't have to worry about having to purchase excess amounts of exposure with the understanding that less ads can produce more success if done using the proper strategies and techniques. Ad frequency control also offers a significant benefit, as it minimizes the number of ads consumers are exposed to while increasing the impact of each ad. This strategy reduces the clutter and allows for more targeted advertising, which can enhance consumer engagement without needing to overwhelm the market. Focusing on fewer, more impactful ads also boosts productivity, as it removes the pressure to constantly produce new content and gives professionals the time needed to refine and optimize their campaigns. In the long run, this approach leads to more efficient advertising strategies and better returns on investment.



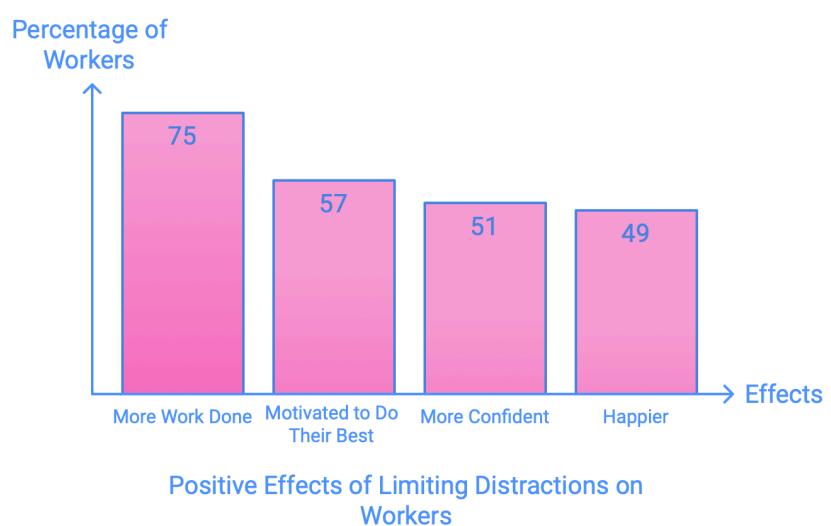
# STRATEGIES

## Why Use Deep Work

Incorporating more deep work into the workplace can significantly increase an agency's success. Beyond extending periods of focused concentration, deep work promotes better structure, organization, and overall workflow improvements. There has actually been a significant amount of research done on how effective deep work can be.

**According to the Udemy Business 2018 Workplace Distraction Report, limiting distractions has numerous positive effects on workers:**

- **75%** of workers are able to get more work done
- **57%** are motivated to do their best
- **51%** are more confident in their work abilities
- **49%** feel happier



## Increasing Deep Work

This first step in finding more ways to increase deep work, is cutting away any distractions that steer our focus away from work. More specifically, we can use apps and other forms of software to help to reduce the amount of notifications we receive or how often we are checking our emails.

Another way we can help stop distractions in the workplace is by setting more boundaries within ourselves and with others. In setting boundaries for ourselves, we can limit how often we check our emails to a certain number of times per day, or can make schedules that allow us to be more precise with when we are taking time to do tasks that take us away

from the main work we are trying to complete. Setting boundaries with colleagues could involve having discussions about reducing social distractions in the workplace. This might include agreeing on quiet periods or making efforts to minimize non-work-related interruptions during focused tasks, allowing for a more productive environment where everyone can maintain better concentration.

We can also increase our amounts of deep work by utilizing project management techniques and software. These tools guide our work, improve organization, and reduce the likelihood of missed deadlines and mistakes. By breaking down larger projects into manageable tasks and assigning them to team members with clear deadlines, project management software allows everyone to be more aligned with the same objectives and goals. This approach minimizes confusion and reduces the need for constant check-ins, which can be distracting and reduce deep work. Software like Asana, Trello, or Monday also allows teams to track progress, manage resources more efficiently, and optimize time as easily as possible. As a result, teams can remain focused on high-priority tasks without becoming too overwhelmed.

## Fostering Focus & Flow

Fostering focus and flow in the workplace is essential for improving productivity, especially when tackling more complex tasks. As mentioned previously, flow is the state of deep focus where individuals are fully immersed in their work. Flow makes difficult tasks feel more manageable and allows employees to produce high-quality work more in a more productive way. By creating an environment that encourages flow, like reducing distractions, advertisers will be better able to concentrate for longer periods without interruption. This leads to a smoother, more enjoyable workflow. Especially since the brain is able to focus better when it isn't constantly switching between tasks.

Achieving flow can be done by using several strategies, such as implementing focused work periods with no distractions,

creating clear goals for tasks, and breaking larger projects into manageable chunks.

Having a dedicated space for deep work and limiting non-essential meetings or interruptions can also help employees to reach a state of flow more easily. According to the Asana article by MacNeil, there are also a lot of benefits to creating daily rituals and routines. By doing so, we are able to put ourselves a lot quicker into environments that can trigger flow and long periods of focus.

## COSTS & BENEFITS

### ROI of Quality Over Quantity

Quality over Quantity, as an advertising technique, is going to continue to gain popularity. Agencies have become a lot more aware of ad fatigue and are beginning to recognize the need for increased media planning. In fact, numbers are already showing the benefits of using quality focused approaches in marketing. According to HubSpot's 2024 State of Marketing Report, 50% of marketers plan on increasing their investment in content marketing in 2024. This means that half of advertisers today are already making efforts to focus more on strategy when creating content.

In another State of Marketing Report by HubSpot made in 2020, the statistics show that ad placement and audience targeting are the top ways that advertisers can drive more demand. This directly shows how important it is to focus more on strategy and why there is a reason to cut back on the amount of money and resources being invested into the quantity of advertisements.

High-quality content, which is well-researched and strategically targeted, tends to have higher engagement. When advertisers focus on creating fewer, but more impactful ads, they can expect better results in brand awareness and consumer trust. Furthermore, quality-focused

content is more likely to be shared, remembered, and acted upon, which increases the value of each ad impression.

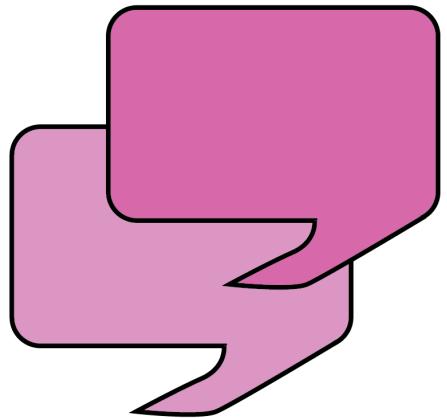
In addition, this approach helps in promoting productivity. Instead of spending excessive time on producing large volumes of content, advertisers can focus on crafting messages that are more meaningful and aligned with their objectives. This shift leads to greater job satisfaction for creative teams, reduced burnout, and a more flow and deep work, making the organization overall more efficient.

## IN CONCLUSION

Solving the productivity and attention issues in the advertising industry will require a shift in how creative work is approached. Instead of relying on traditional methods that prioritize quantity and constant output, the industry must focus on strategies that will allow for more focus, flow, and deep work. These concepts, when properly implemented, can allow for both better quality of the work being produced and the overall well-being of advertising teams and agencies.

By reducing the overwhelming amount of content production, advertisers can focus on delivering well-thought-out, strategically planned campaigns. This allows agencies to enter a state of deep work, where distractions are minimized, and the mind can fully engage with complex tasks, leading to more innovative and engaging content. Flow, the optimal state of concentration, can further improve productivity by allowing creative professionals to immerse themselves in their work, resulting in faster, more efficient processes without feeling the mental exhaustion that occurs when we are constantly switching between the tasks we are doing.

Ad frequency control plays a key role in this shift. Instead of bombarding audiences with repeated ads, advertisers can strategically time their campaigns to ensure that each interaction is meaningful and memorable. This reduces the pressure on teams to constantly create new content, allowing

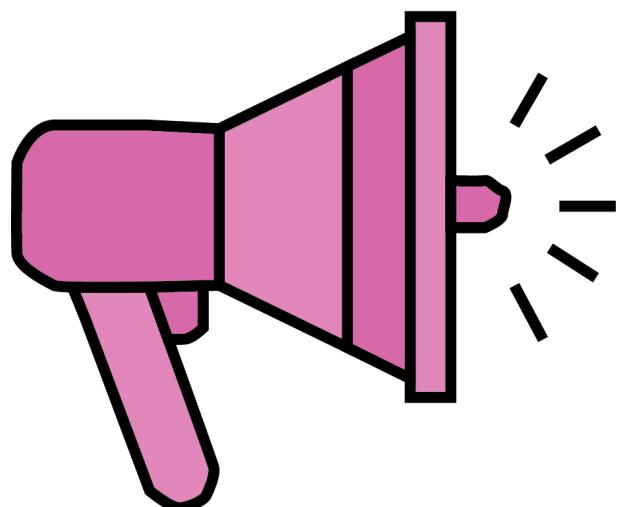


them to devote more time to perfecting each campaign and aligning with consumer attention spans more effectively. The focus on quality over quantity, along with carefully managed ad frequency, fosters a more productive environment where creative work is not only more impactful but also more sustainable for both employees and the business.

By incorporating these strategies, the advertising industry can adapt to modern challenges and reclaim its ability to produce high-quality, effective content in a world where attention is increasingly scarce. It offers a long-term, sustainable approach that balances the need for innovation with the importance of maintaining productivity and reducing burnout within creative teams. This shift will ultimately lead to more engaging campaigns, better client relationships, and higher returns on investment, allowing agencies to thrive in a highly competitive marketplace.

In order for advertising to gain back the ability to have more attention and productivity, changes are going to need to be made. Agencies, advertisers, and creative professionals must begin to start moving forward with practices that support deeper focus, flow, and allow for more meaningful productivity. By doing so, the industry can overcome the growing pressures that often lead to early burn out and can deliver stronger, more innovative advertising solutions that resonate with consumers.

While there are still so many other factors that contribute to the success of advertising, being able to thrive in this industry starts with advertising professionals and their willingness to make the changes necessary.



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