



# How Should Voiceovers Be Used in Ads?

Voiceovers are commonly used in ads across the world, and they seem to aid the communication of factual messages. However, voiceovers are less commonly associated with distinctive ads, and continuous voiceovers can result in lower engagement.

Additionally, the manner in which a voiceover ties in with an ad’s visual content is critical: When voiceovers and visuals compete, the voiceover message can get lost.

The voiceover is a very common feature of TV advertising across the world. Of the ads in our Link database, 89 percent include voiceovers. Since they are so common and can be edited relatively easily, voiceovers are a worthy topic for scrutiny.

## What Voiceovers Do Well: Aid Communication of Information

Voiceovers are often used to convey information, and they can do this effectively. On attributes related to news and information, ads with voiceovers score slightly but consistently higher than ads without voiceover. Not only are key messages communicated better, but ads with voiceovers score higher on credibility, conveying new information, relevance, and persuasion. The indexes on these measures for ads with and without voiceovers are compared in the table below.

Link Metric	Index			
	With voiceover	Global Base	Without voiceover	Global Base
Key Message Communication	101	13982	98	1565
Credible	101	35151	97	3195
New Information	101	50643	94	6270
Relevant	101	50444	95	6254
Persuasive	101	49640	96	6246

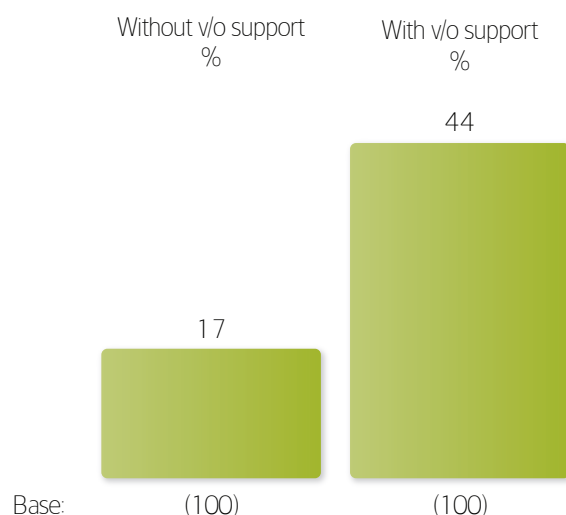
Changes made to a voiceover can lead to dramatic improvement in an ad’s performance. When a taste message came through only weakly for an ad for a new biscuit in China, adjusting the voiceover made a difference. In the original ad, the intended message registered with just 34 percent of respondents, well below the norm of 55 percent. When this new voiceover was added: “delicious but does not leave

the mouth feeling dry,” communication of the taste message shot up to 53 percent. When the voiceover was modified further, to “really delicious,” communication reached 61 percent. The advertising contributed to a successful product launch; trial levels for the new cookie reached 80 percent within six months.

A change in voiceover also made a huge difference for a personal care brand. Two versions of an ad were tested. Both had the same end frame, but one had a voiceover to support the written message of “developed with experts.” The takeout of the message was more than twice as high for the ad with voiceover, 44 percent versus 17 percent, as shown in the chart below.

## When supported by the voiceover, the message was taken out at much higher levels

Prompted communication - “Is developed with experts”





### But Voiceovers Don't Do It All

While the figures in the table above showed that, in respect to information, ads with voiceovers seem to outperform ads without voiceovers, we must remember that not all ads are intended primarily to communicate information or to be persuasive.

The fact is, it is not always appropriate to use a voiceover. If your primary goal is to entertain people or remind them of your brand, a voiceover may actually interfere with the achievement of your objective. As shown in the table below, ads without a voiceover are more likely to be enjoyed and more likely to be seen as different to other advertising. However they are also less likely to be understood. So in deciding how and when to use a voiceover, keep your key objectives in mind.

Link Metric	Index
Enjoyment	103
Different	104
Easy to Understand	97

### Voiceovers Should Work with the Story

Voiceovers don't always aid communication, particularly when they compete with an engaging or compelling story being shown in the ad. An Indian ad was designed to communicate that the brand contained ingredients that helped enhance immunity. The commercial showed a husband feigning sickness and his wife catching him in the lie. A voiceover explained the brand's benefit, but most viewers seemed to be focused on the story being told on the screen, because they did not pick up either the voiceover or the message. The ad was modified so that the wife explained the benefits to her husband as part of the ad's story, and the edited version performed substantially better on both impact and persuasion.

### Timing with Visuals

The voiceover needs to complement the visual content of the ad. If it doesn't, the message it intends to communicate is unlikely to register. This is the most common problem we have observed with voiceovers. One personal care brand tried in several ads to convey that it was 75 percent more efficient, but in none of the executions did the visual content support the message, and as a consequence, the message was lost. Ads tend to communicate far more successfully when they both show *and* tell—i.e., when the visuals dramatize what the voiceover is saying. One personal care ad in Indonesia was failing to communicate its intended message. The ad was revised to cut down the voiceover, and to tie the communication of the key “confidence” benefit with a relevant scene. Communication of the “confidence” message improved from 58 percent to 73 percent, and the revised ad was more persuasive.

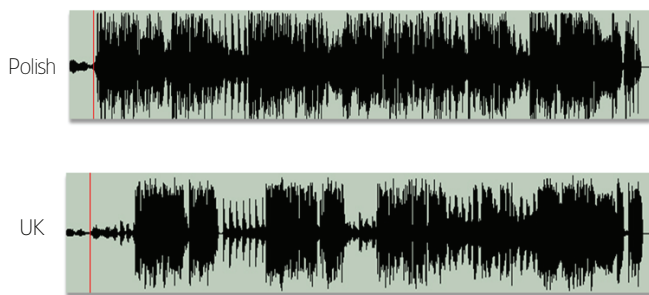
Television tends to be a far more expensive medium than radio—this is partly due to its wider reach, but it is also because it gets moving images, accompanied by sound, into people's homes. You pay more for those images, which are often the most memorable parts of the ad, so it is crucial that the voiceover and visual content work well together.

### Less Can Be More

Voiceovers should be used sparingly. Of the ads in our database that use voiceovers, 63 percent use them only during certain parts of the ad, or at the end only. Pauses and silences can help add emphasis, and allow time for the message to be absorbed. When we focus on ads that use continuous voiceovers, we see that they tend to be less involving (indexing at 99) than ads that have no voiceover or a voiceover at the end only (indexing at 103). It seems that continuous voiceovers can wash over viewers and lull them into inattention.

We tend to see issues with continuous voiceovers more often with translated ads; when an ad is translated into another language, sometimes it takes more words to explain certain concepts (especially when the concept is one that has special resonance in the ad's original market). A UK deodorant ad that had performed well in research was subsequently translated into Polish and tested again. In the Polish version, viewers did not play back the differentiating message; instead, they took out a generic deodorant message about efficacy. As a result, the ad did not convey its news, and failed to create a sense of differentiation. A comparison of the audio soundtracks of the two ads showed that the Polish version was sonically "busier." It provided less aural down time to allow viewers to process the ad's message.

A louder pattern for the Polish ad with no real breathing space



Sound wavelength from audio soundtrack

Another ad for a new deodorant scored poorly on all key metrics. Analysis showed the ad had a comprehension problem, with over a third of respondents finding it at least somewhat difficult to follow. Since the ad was already in a finished film state, the main changes made to the ad related only to the voiceover. The English voiceover in the original ad had a French accent. The revised version featured an English accent. But the voiceover was leaner only 69 words, versus 80 in the original. In addition there was a title card, setting up the story from the opening shot. Comprehension improved dramatically with only 9 percent having comprehension problems, and the ad's persuasive strength moved from low to high. The subsequent launch was a success.

### The Voice in the Voiceover

The voice in the voiceover can make a big difference. One ad, with local translations and voices, was tested in the UK, France and Italy. In the UK the ad received a high level of dislikes, which further investigation showed to be largely due to the voiceover. The voice was regarded as "silly," and detracted from the key message. However, in France and Italy, there were almost no mentions of "silly voices." In the UK, persuasion was greater among those who did not mention the silly voices compared to those who did mention them.

Regional accents can often add to enjoyment, especially when they are used in a playful manner. However, if an accent is too strong, it can be hard to understand, and this can lead to lower comprehension and enjoyment for the ad. Also, since people tend to be proud of their accents, if the accent is over-exaggerated and clearly not genuine, it can annoy people from that region.

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