

WHITE PAPER

Beyond Go/No Go

Arming Brave Marketers for the Creative Leap

How evidence from real brand experiences can help marketers develop original ideas, understand uncertainty and make stronger investment decisions.

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November 2026

IN BRIEF

- Measurement doesn't kill brave creative work. The way people use it does.
- Used as a final gate, a single Go/No Go score can limit creative development and obscure the context behind the result.
- CLEO and The Creative Lab are designed to help brave marketers distinguish what is supported by relevant evidence from what remains untested, so they can develop the creative leap and sell it in.

The brave marketer's dilemma

At the Smithfield Big Breakfast in October[1], one question kept coming back: does measurement stifle creativity? Our answer is no. Measurement doesn't kill creative work. The way people use it does.

Give the same research to two teams and it can lead to different discussions. One treats the score as the decision. The other asks what the evidence supports, what needs developing and what would justify stopping. The difference lies in how the research is used.

As the Smithfield team say so well: **data informs, algorithms optimise, people decide**. The right data doesn't stop you being brave. It gives you the ammunition. But when research is reduced to a single number and a Go/No Go verdict, it gives marketers little help in developing the idea or defending the creative leap. The discussion needs to go beyond whether the work passed.

As an advertising planner, I (Fiona) wanted MESH Experience to look beyond testing that happens in a lab, not in real life. However, with CLEO and my co-author Illitch Real of Rubiklab, we have found a way to bring the real world, real results into the creative development process.

Peter Field and Adam Morgan showed the industry the Cost of Dull advertising in 2023[2]. We want to help marketers to be Brave not Beige.

When testing becomes an approval gate

Creative testing can provide useful diagnostics, but a single approval score cannot capture every strength, weakness or source of uncertainty in an idea. For an unfamiliar concept, marketers need to understand what the score measures, how the comparison was made and what remains untested. That creates a more useful discussion about whether to develop, investigate or reject the idea.

- **It can arrive too late to reshape the core idea.** If testing is left until after production, weeks of time, agency fees, talent and production costs may be committed before a score is used to decide Go or No Go. By then, changing the core idea can be expensive. A weakness present from day one can become a costly discovery.
- **A single score can flatten the idea.** A concept can be brilliantly fresh, slightly inconsistent with the brand and weak on the call to action all at once. One number

can average that into "middling" and obscure which part is promising and which part needs fixing.

- **Context needs to be considered.** Across 903 payment-brand experiences connected to the 2026 World Cup in MESH's Payment Methods UK study, people told us whether the experience felt like a natural part of the moment. When it definitely did (29% of experiences), 66% made people Very or Fairly likely to choose the brand next time. When it felt forced or irrelevant (6%), only 12% did. More than half (53%) landed in the middle: noticed, but not adding much. These figures describe an association within this sample, not cause and effect.[3]
- **The lab is not life.** A test setting may not reproduce how an ad is encountered in everyday life. One retailer asked us why Christmas sales were so strong when research had told them their TV ad didn't work because people didn't understand the offer. In real life, people loved how the ad made them feel about the brand, a possible factor in their decision to visit the store. They weren't looking at the small print on the last frame, which was what the pre-testing had focused on.

AI can accelerate creative evaluation, but the usefulness of its advice depends on the evidence and context behind it.

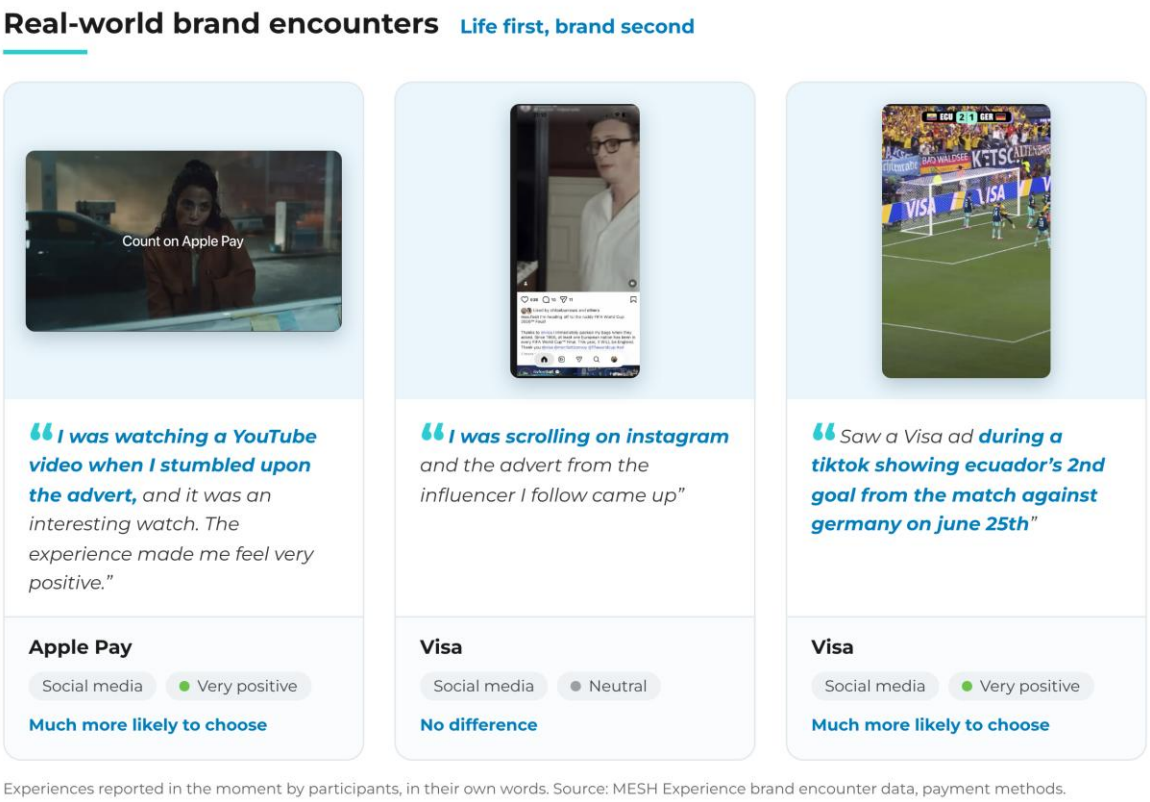
- **AI testing tools** should be assessed on their evidence base, the outcomes they predict and the settings in which their performance has been demonstrated. Where a tool relies on forced exposure data, marketers should consider what that evidence can and cannot tell them about everyday brand encounters.
- **General purpose AI** such as ChatGPT and Claude can use supplied brand and market context. Their responses still need to be checked against relevant evidence: a persuasive answer is not evidence that an idea will work.

The Creative Lab is designed to bring MESH Experience data into a structured review of the idea. Its value should be judged by the quality and usefulness of that review.

What is the MESH Experience data?

For twenty years, MESH has been capturing people's experiences with brands. This includes everything from seeing an ad on TV or social to noticing it pop up in ChatGPT or seeing it on a shelf in Tesco. People take photos and report their experiences close to the moment, reducing reliance on later recall. They tell us how positive the experience made them feel, how relevant it was and how likely it made them to choose the brand next time. They also describe the experience. What is interesting in these descriptions is how people start with what they are doing first, "I was watching a YouTube video when….", we see how the brand lands in their everyday lives. Life first, brand second.

Now with AI we have a treasure trove of millions of brand encounters to analyse for patterns in what people find persuasive and distinctive, and what attracts their attention in real life. This dataset provides the foundation for CLEO.



Real world brand encounters can help us understand how people have responded in everyday life and develop hypotheses about why.

How can this help brave marketers?

A better question: how big is the leap?

Brave marketers need more than a verdict. They need to size the creative leap: what is supported by relevant evidence, what is genuinely unknown and whether the risk is worth the opportunity.

	Testing used as an approval gate	Evidence used throughout development
Output	A score and a verdict	A report on what to develop and why
Approach to unfamiliar work	An idea to approve or reject	A bet to be sized
Use of evidence	A test score considered in isolation	Relevant evidence considered in context
When it helps	At a decision point	From the first line, as a sparring partner
In the boardroom	"It passed" or "it failed"	"This is supported, this remains uncertain, and this is what we propose to test next"

That needs the right evidence. Share of Experience (SOE) measures a brand's proportion of recorded encounters across paid, owned and earned touchpoints within a defined category, market and period. MESH has gathered millions of these moments over 20 years. In UK beer, Molson Coors found that Share of Voice (media spend) explained little of the difference in market share between 16 beer brands (R^2 = 0.13), while Share of Experience explained most of it (R^2 = 0.85; Figure 1).[4]

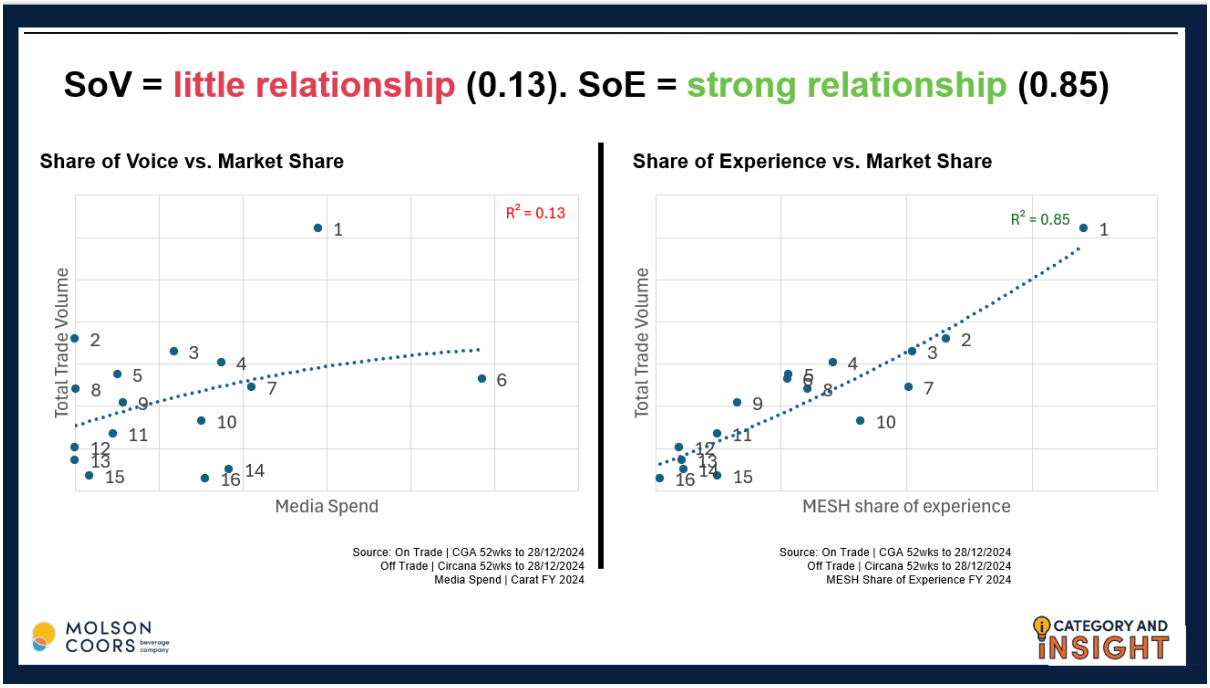


Figure 1. Share of Voice and Share of Experience against market share, UK beer, 2024. Source: Molson Coors Category and Insight; CGA, Circana, Carat and MESH Experience data.

Crucially, the evidence doesn't need to have seen your idea before. The analysis considers qualities such as how novel an encounter felt and what triggered attention, not just what the ad showed. So a new concept can be read against how those same qualities have landed elsewhere. What no data can do is remove the real uncertainty in a creative leap. That stays a judgement call. But it can show where the reasoning behind an idea is supported by relevant evidence, and where assumptions remain untested.

CLEO: Closed Loop Experience Outcomes

CLEO is MESH's answer: a closed loop, powered by Share of Experience data, designed to support learning from the first idea to results in market.

- **Create** is where the work is developed, from a line to a finished asset, in The Creative Lab. Brand platform and creative guidelines, built from real brand encounters, sit alongside it.
- **Predict** is designed to estimate how a finished campaign may perform, using the creative assets alongside information such as media spend, placement, pricing and distribution.
- **Evaluate** tracks Share of Experience and changes in brand equity once the campaign is in market, using recorded encounters across touchpoints for a brand and its competitors.

- **Calibrate** compares predictions with observed results, investigates possible reasons for any gap and feeds the findings back into future predictions.

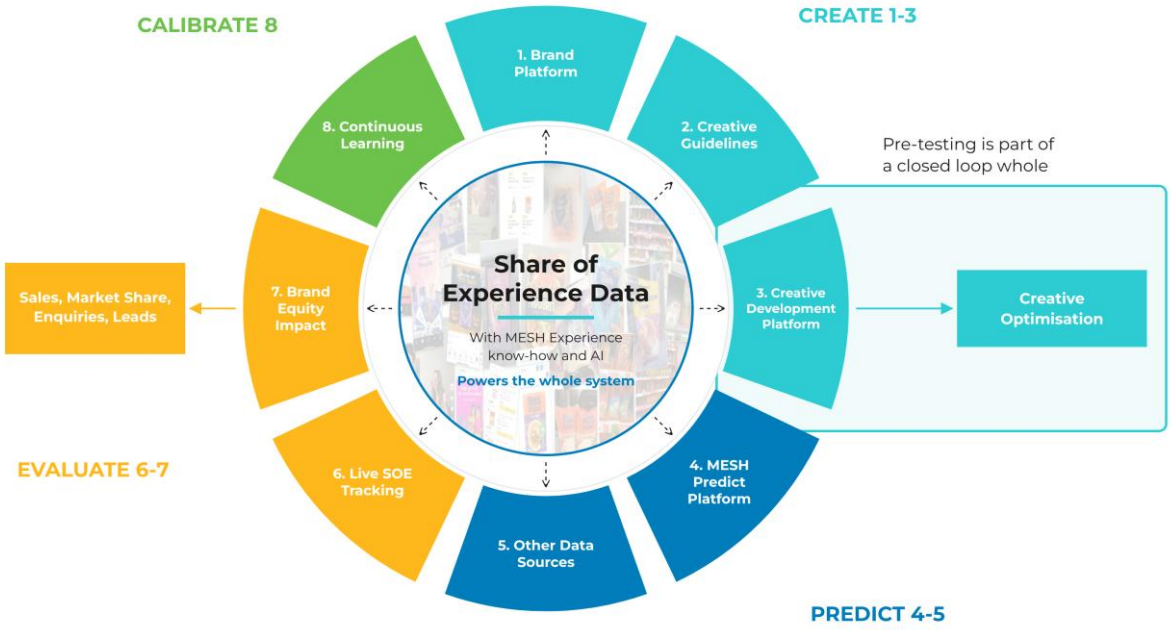


Figure 2. CLEO: Closed Loop Experience Outcomes

Predictive accuracy should be judged against clearly defined outcomes, in specified markets and periods. Forecasts need to be compared with observed results, with the scope and limitations of the comparison made clear. A closed loop provides a framework for that assessment; it does not, on its own, establish predictive accuracy.

MESH has a long record of pioneering new metrics. In 2014, Keith Weed, then CMO of Unilever, co-authored a Harvard Business Review article, "The Ultimate Marketing Machine",[5] arguing that the most important marketing metric would soon change from share of voice to share of experience. CLEO is the next step.

The Creative Lab: the right feedback at the right time

The Creative Lab is the Create stage of CLEO, designed to provide AI generated assessments from defined analytical perspectives throughout development.

You bring your idea as usual. The Creative Lab works out which stage it is at and the feedback changes to match:

1. **Initial idea** (a line or two). The panel helps the idea grow: where it could live, who it could reach and two or three directions to take it. It doesn't pick apart details that don't exist yet.
2. **Concept** (the idea described in more detail). The full panel reviews it.
3. **Artefact** (a script, a storyboard, a visual). The panel looks at the work itself and suggests changes.
4. **Finished asset** (the work as it will run). The advice turns to where, when and to whom to run it, and how to adapt it.

No tearing apart a one-line idea, and no rewriting a finished film. Weak spots show up early, when they cost a conversation rather than a reshoot. And each idea can be followed in one place from first thought to finished work.

Just as people in organisations have different perspectives, The Creative Lab has a panel of six agents with different roles. Their data sources are set out below.

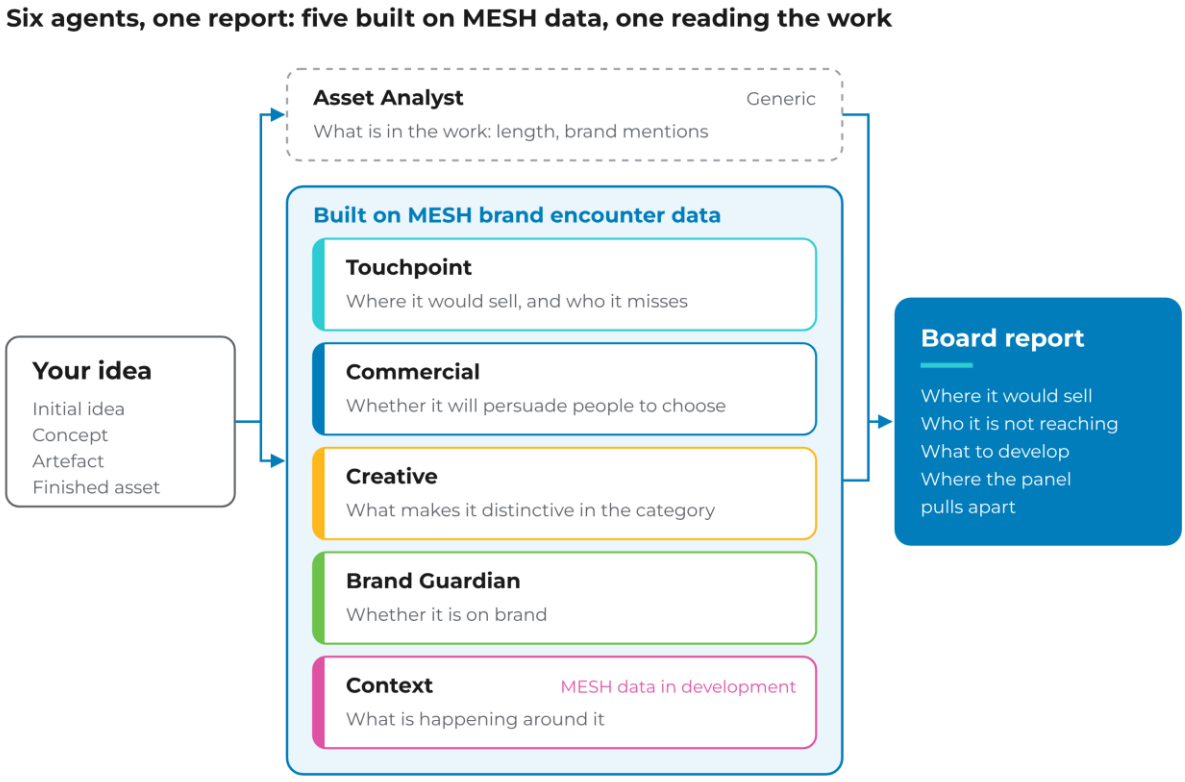


Figure 3. The Creative Lab: six agents, one board report

Agent	What it asks	Data
Asset Analyst	What is in the work: length, where and when the brand appears	Generic
Touchpoint	Where might it work, and who might it miss?	MESH brand encounters
Commercial	What might help it persuade people to choose the brand?	MESH brand encounters
Creative	What makes it distinctive and fresh in the category?	MESH brand encounters
Brand Guardian	Is it on brand: platform, pillars, tone of voice, distinctive assets?	MESH Brand Platform Guidelines, built from our data, or the client's own
Context	What is happening around it that could change how it lands?	MESH and external data (in development)

Their views come together in one board report: where the idea might work, who it may not speak to, what to develop and, crucially, where the panel pulls apart. The purpose is to challenge the idea and make the reasoning visible, helping the team examine strengths, weaknesses and unresolved questions.

A common language for client and agency

When testing becomes a single Go/No Go gate, it can put ideas and relationships under strain. The agency defends the work, the client defends the budget, and the research becomes a referee neither side fully trusts. Development can turn adversarial.

The Creative Lab is designed to give client and agency a shared basis for discussion at the same stage of the idea. They can examine the same evidence, challenge its interpretation and make their assumptions explicit. The aim is to move the conversation from "whose opinion wins" to "how do we make this stronger".

In practice: a payments example

Take payment methods as an example. Using MESH's own Payment Methods data, we put a deliberately brave idea into The Creative Lab prototype, with a leading payment method, Brand A, simply as the example brand. The idea, the data and the analysis are all MESH's own.

The idea: The Invisible Hero. The payment brand celebrates the fact that you never think about it: the thousands of moments where paying just works. The brand advertises being unnoticed. The challenge is to make an unobtrusive payment experience distinctive enough for Brand A to earn recognition.

The board's verdict. Not Go, not No Go, but develop: "Develop the quiet reliability idea around what a successful payment lets people do next, with Brand A visible enough to earn the credit."

Where it might work. The panel suggested the strongest fit might be at the payment moment itself, as long as the idea makes routine success worth noticing rather than simply confirming what people expect. It was promising in conversation, but only if the story gives people a specific benefit to retell. As a broad TV brand celebration without a concrete human payoff, it was a weak fit.

The panel also raised a question about relevance. A participant in the underlying category data said: "I expected them to accept my credit card, which they did." That comment suggests a hypothesis for development: routine payment success may need a personally meaningful benefit to become an engaging story. Whether that applies to this concept, or to particular age groups, still needs testing.

What to develop

1. **Creative:** build "The half-second that holds everything", a concept around the payment succeeding and the meaningful moment that continues because of it.
2. **Brand Guardian:** define how Brand A earns recognition at the payment moment, rather than letting the bank, shop or wallet take the credit.

3. **Commercial:** a point-of-sale companion that links the human payoff to a clear, truthful reason to choose Brand A.
4. **Touchpoint:** explore an everyday independence direction with a specific practical benefit, to be tested with people aged 55 and over.

Where the panel pulls apart. "Creative wants to celebrate how little people notice payment; commercial needs a reason to choose Brand A. Keep the payment unobtrusive, not Brand A's contribution: human payoff first, clear attribution alongside it."

This is what brave work needs. The brave core survives and the tension becomes clearer. The category evidence helps the team identify promising directions and unresolved questions for development. It does not establish that this concept will succeed. A marketer can take that distinction into the boardroom: what the evidence suggests, what remains a hypothesis and what to test next.

The evidence for bravery

The following examples show how MESH Experience data has supported investment decisions in established client work in the past. They illustrate the value of timely evidence and the rationale behind CLEO. Whereas these examples demonstrate how real-time reporting can sustain momentum for internal C-Suite support, CLEO is designed to bring evidence earlier into the creative process. Its performance needs to be evaluated in its own right.

Boots: evidence in time to fight for the next campaign. When Pete Markey joined Boots as CMO, his first summer campaign was a test of nerve. Market mix modelling would take months to report but the Christmas budget had to be secured from the C-Suite long before that. MESH tracked how people were experiencing the brand in real life as the campaign ran, giving him an early, evidence-based read on what was working. He took that into the boardroom, made the case and won the investment.

> *"In my first summer at Boots, I couldn't wait months for the econometrics to tell me whether our campaign had worked. I had a Christmas budget to secure. MESH gave me real-world evidence of how people were experiencing the brand, early enough to take into the boardroom and make the case. Brave marketing isn't about ignoring data. It's about having the right data at the right time to back your judgement, and the confidence to fight for the work."*
>
> **Pete Markey, former CMO, Boots**

Fidelity International: breaking category norms, with evidence. When a new Marketing Director joined Fidelity International, investment brands advertised in press, around tax-year end, with rate-led messages and a serious tone. She set out to break all of that: TV, emotional life moments featuring a family and a dog, and a witty tone of voice. The category's instincts pushed back. "Do we really need TV when press has always worked?" "Is it appropriate to use wit for investments?"

She partnered with MESH for four years, using Real-time Experience Tracking to understand recorded brand encounters through customers' eyes. The data helped the team assess the strategy and make the case for continued investment. In year 2, new TV work initially scored low on noticeability and recognition, the kind of result that can end a campaign. But repeated exposure was associated with a more positive brand image and better message comprehension in the recorded encounters, so Fidelity increased its investment in brand TV. In year 4, when Fidelity's relative performance weakened as new competitor creative appeared, the early warning led to the year 5 creative budget being brought forward.

The case study reports sales up 350% and a considerable increase in return on marketing investment.[6] Just as important, the Marketing Director built such trust with her C-Suite that she could take bold decisions, such as increasing marketing spend and moving creative budget forward, with ease. It takes a brave client to embrace research where there is nowhere to hide.

Neither marketer used data to play safe. Both used it to back bold decisions and win the case for them. That is the partnership we believe in: evidence that helps clarify the decision and marketers brave enough to act on it.

Five rules for brave marketers

1. **Ask for ammunition, not just a score.** Distinguish what is supported by relevant evidence from what remains untested, so you can make the case at board level.
2. **Size the leap, don't avoid it.** Untested is not the same as bad. Often it is exactly where the advantage lies.
3. **Bring evidence in at the first line, not the final cut.** Evidence introduced early gives teams more opportunity to improve the idea before major production decisions are fixed.
4. **Share the evidence with your agency.** A common language turns development from a negotiation into a collaboration.
5. **Close the loop.** Create, predict, evaluate, calibrate. Every campaign should make the next brave decision easier to defend.

Measurement should inform judgement and help people act on it. With CLEO and The Creative Lab, we want to give brave marketers evidence that helps them make the creative leap and the case to sell it in. The same discipline should give marketers the confidence to stop an idea when its weaknesses cannot be resolved.

Better data doesn't take the decision away from people. It gives brave decisions something true to stand on.

Sources and notes

1. Smithfield (2026). LinkedIn post by Smithfield on the Smithfield Big Breakfast, October 2026. https://lnkd.in/p/ecTeF-Tf

2. Field, P. and Morgan, A. (2023). The Extraordinary Cost of Dull. System1 Group and eatbigfish. Interview: https://youtu.be/2m7Du5ZnblE?si=Efc9R3cXwDAcVV9l

3. MESH Experience, Payment Methods UK 2026 study. Base: 903 payment-brand experiences connected to the FIFA World Cup 2026, pooled across 10 brands. For each experience, participants answered "Did it feel like a natural part of the moment?": Yes, definitely – a natural part of the experience (29% of experiences); Somewhat – noticed but didn't add much (53%); Not really – felt out of place (11%); Not at all – felt forced or irrelevant (6%). Persuasion = the share of experiences after which the participant was Very or Fairly likely to choose the brand next time: 66%, 37%, 26% and 12% respectively. Positivity: 72%, 45%, 26% and 19%. Relevance: 63%, 30%, 22% and 17%. Fieldwork 6th June to 3rd August 2026, 1429 participants

4. Molson Coors Category and Insight, with MESH Experience. Share of Voice and Share of Experience against market share for 16 UK beer brands. Market share = total trade volume (on-trade: CGA, 52 weeks to 28/12/2024; off-trade: Circana, 52 weeks to 28/12/2024). Share of Voice = share of media spend (Carat, FY 2024). Share of Experience = MESH Experience, FY 2024. Figures are R^2 for the fitted trend line in each chart: Share of Voice 0.13, Share of Experience 0.85. The work was a finalist in the MRS Awards 2025: "Molson Coors: From share of voice to share of experience – how measuring real brand encounters transforms media research", published by WARC, 16 July 2026. A separate MESH analysis of UK beer and cider (4,343 participants; 15,659 brand experiences over 20 months) found a correlation with market share of r = 0.84 for Share of Experience and r = 0.21 for Share of Voice: Blades, F. (2026). "From share of voice to share of experience: How to fix traditional media." MRS professional webinar. https://www.mrs.org.uk/event/professional-webinars/from-share-of-voice-to-share-of-experience-how-to-fix-traditional-media-jul26; and LinkedIn: https://lnkd.in/p/eDVPdmAy. These are historical associations, not evidence of CLEO's predictive performance.

5. de Swaan Arons, M., van den Driest, F. and Weed, K. (2014). "The Ultimate Marketing Machine." Harvard Business Review, July–August 2014. https://hbr.org/2014/07/the-ultimate-marketing-machine

6. MESH Experience. Financial services case study. https://blog.meshexperience.com/financial-services-case-study. The work won awards in 2021 including the International Business Excellence Awards and finalist for the Marketing Society Awards.

About MESH Experience

MESH Experience is a data, analytics and insight consultancy that measures experiences, helping forward-thinking organisations make better marketing, customer experience and path-to-purchase decisions. Its Real-time Experience Tracking sees the world through customers' eyes, capturing what people experience about a brand across paid, owned and earned touchpoints, so brands and campaigns are set in their proper context.

Share of Experience has been examined in relation to business outcomes in MESH's client work. CLEO (Closed Loop Experience Outcomes) and The Creative Lab are designed to build on 20 years and millions of real brand encounters to help brave marketers develop, predict, evaluate and learn.

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About Rubiklab

Rubiklab is a research and technology company that combines AI with expertise in data analysis to help organisations turn complex information into useful insight. Its work spans social listening, media analytics, qualitative research and text analysis, bringing structured and unstructured data together. Rubiklab develops tools for exploring research evidence, identifying themes and making knowledge easier to use. Its LabIQ platform supports transcription, thematic analysis and multilingual research. Through its collaboration with MESH Experience, Rubiklab brings this research and technology perspective to the development of CLEO and The Creative Lab.

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