The Creative Multiplier

Why fresh copy is good business — and how a planned creative refresh multiplies the value of the media you've already bought

By Rod Rackley · Chairman, Circle Graphics · Chairman, OAAA Suppliers Council

Author's note: I've been involved in billboard copy for a long time, since 1997, having cut my teeth at Lamar Graphics, Lamar's internal print division, moved into a partner role at Circle Graphics shortly after it was founded in 2003, and got my digital education the hard way — founding Anthem Displays — before rejoining Circle Graphics six years ago. Along the way I've had a hand in producing as many billboard faces, static and digital, as just about anyone alive. That's the seat this paper is written from — not the creative department and not the media desk, but the production floor, where you learn exactly how long a face stays up and what it costs to change one. The argument is mine. The research is cited so you can check it.

Where This Paper Came From

At our convention in Dallas, John Morgan stood on the main stage and told a room full of out of home professionals something most of us needed to hear. Morgan — founder of Morgan & Morgan, a former billboard owner himself — was introduced that day as the largest buyer of out of home advertising in the country, having spent roughly $350 million on advertising last year with plans to spend half a billion this year. When the biggest customer in the room explains how he uses your product, you take notes. I did.

John Morgan and Rod Rackley at OAAA BOD Meeting prior to National Convention in Dallas, TX on May 10, 2026

What stuck with me wasn't the size of the spend. It was the discipline underneath it. "Most creative is not creative," he told us — most of the billboards he looks at are wasting the advertiser's money. But pay attention to what his firm actually does about that, because the answer isn't just better design. It's constant renewal. Atlanta gets "Hurtlanta." Pennsylvania gets "Painsylvania." Philadelphia gets a board built on local slang. Boston gets "Wicked Smart." Christmas gets its own copy. Ballparks, subways, transit wraps, race cars — each one a new execution of the same unmistakable brand. And when he wanted the whole country talking, he "defaced" his own boards nationwide with mock graffiti his own graphics people produced, then rode weeks of earned media and social chatter on the stunt.

He never lets the message sit still. The brand never changes; the copy never stops changing. Watching that from my seat — a career spent producing the faces that go up on these structures — I realized we've been treating what Morgan does as personality, when it's actually method. This paper is my attempt to lay out the method, and to show that the science backs it.

The Argument in Three Sentences

Excellent creative is the price of admission; nothing fixes a weak message. But even excellent creative loses effectiveness when it's left up too long unchanged, because the human brain is built to stop responding to what it has already seen. The advertisers who get the most out of this medium keep the location, keep the brand, and change the copy — and by doing so they multiply the value of media they have already bought.

A great location is the most honest thing in advertising. Same road, same commuters, same physical presence, day after day. That consistency is our medium's superpower: it builds recognition and familiarity the way nothing else in the media mix can. But it carries a quiet cost. When the visual message never changes, the brain files it under "expected" and moves on. The board remains visible. The message becomes expected.

And a word of clarity for the veterans in the room, because I'm one of them. This is not the old practice of rotating the same vinyl to new locations — same creative, new board — which the industry is doing less of for good operational reasons. Here, nothing moves. The structure stays put, the location keeps working, and it's the message that changes. Old rotation moved the copy; a creative refresh renews it.

Notice what I am not saying. I am not saying billboards "wear out" on a fixed timetable, or that a strong campaign stops working the day it becomes familiar. The evidence is more nuanced than that — and more useful. Repetition and freshness are not enemies. They are two jobs, and the mistake is asking one execution to do both forever.

49%	38%	Attention first
of surveyed consumers said they'd still notice the same OOH ad after one month – meaning half expect they won't (9)	higher long-term memory impact by day five for evolving vs. unchanged creative in a QMS / Neuro-Insight study (10)	A peer-reviewed billboard field study found creative improves memory only after the board crosses an attention threshold (11)

What the Brain Does With a Board It Has Seen Forty Times

None of what follows is exotic. It's standard, well-replicated science, and it maps onto our medium almost perfectly.

Habituation

Neuroscientists call the core phenomenon habituation: a learned reduction in response to repeated stimulation (1). It is not blindness, it is not fatigue, and it is not proof that the board stopped working. It is the nervous system economizing — allocating less response to something that has become predictable. A commuter can pass a board two hundred times and remain fully, physically exposed to it while giving it a fraction of the orienting attention she gave it the first week it went up.

Novelty and prediction error

The flip side is novelty detection. The brain runs on predictions and pays attention when reality doesn't match them (2, 3). A changed headline, a new image, a different offer generates what the researchers call "prediction error" — and prediction error is what recruits the systems involved in attending to and remembering new information. A copy change turns a familiar corner into a new perceptual event.

Selective attention

This matters doubly in out of home because our exposure is incidental. Nobody drives to look at billboards. Our audience is navigating traffic, weather, and conversation, and the visual field is a competition for limited processing capacity that is won by whatever is salient, relevant, or inconsistent with expectation (4).

The change has to be visible — and the brand has to survive it

Two cautions keep this honest. First, distinctive items really are remembered better — the well-known Von Restorff or isolation effect (6). Second, change blindness: people can miss even substantial changes when attention is elsewhere or the change lacks a clear visual signal (5). Updating a legal disclaimer is not a refresh. A subtle color shift is not a refresh. The change has to read at sixty miles an hour, while keeping enough brand continuity that it's recognized as the same campaign.

And let me be fair to repetition

Repetition is not the enemy. Mere exposure — the tendency to like what we've seen before — is one of the oldest findings in social psychology (8), and familiarity is an asset every advertiser should want. The problem arises only when repetition is asked to do two different jobs indefinitely: build memory and continually recapture attention (7). Those are different jobs. Continuity does the first. Change does the second.

One note on rigor, because this paper will be read by people who check. Popular marketing writing loves to invoke the reticular activating system as the brain's "filter." The RAS is real, but it governs arousal and wakefulness; the honest scientific footing for the creative refresh is habituation, novelty detection, selective attention, and memory encoding (13). We don't need to borrow glamour. The boring citations are on our side.

What the Marketing Scientists Say

The neuroscience explains the mechanism. The marketing science tells us how to use it without breaking the brand — and it comes with a warning label our industry should respect.

The most influential body of work in modern marketing science comes out of the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute. Byron Sharp's How Brands Grow (14) argues that advertising works primarily by building and refreshing the memory structures that make a brand come to mind in buying situations — what Sharp calls mental availability. Read that verb again: refreshing. Advertising's job, in the most evidence-driven account we have, is to renew memory, continuously, across as many category buyers as possible. A premium OOH location that has gone perceptually stale is a refresh machine running at partial capacity.

Jenni Romaniuk's work on distinctive brand assets (15) tells us exactly what must never change: the logo, the colors, the characters, the cues people use to recognize the brand without thinking. Morgan & Morgan understands this instinctively — every one of those wildly different executions is unmistakably the same brand. The assets are sacred. The execution is disposable. Getting those two backwards is how advertisers destroy campaigns: they redesign the logo and leave the same tired headline up for a year.

Les Binet and Peter Field's analysis of the IPA effectiveness databank (17) points the same direction from a different angle. The strongest campaigns in their data commit to consistent creative platforms over years — and that long commitment is precisely what makes a frequent refresh affordable. When the platform is fixed, each new execution is a chapter, not a reinvention. You're not paying to rebuild the brand every time; you're paying to turn the page.

Rory Sutherland (18) would add the psychological kicker: a big, public, physical board is a costly and confident signal in a way a skippable pre-roll ad can never be — and a visibly fresh board signals a brand that is active, current, and paying attention. A visibly stale one signals the opposite. In public space, neglect is legible.

One more piece of honesty, because it strengthens the case rather than weakening it. Ehrenberg-Bass researchers have also argued that creative "wear-out" is often overstated, and that brands abandon strong campaigns too early more often than too late. I agree — and that is exactly why this paper's advice is to change the execution, not the campaign, and to time changes to business moments rather than to a calendar superstition. Keep the platform for years. Change the copy in chapters.

What the OOH Evidence Says — and What It Can Honestly Support

Three studies bear directly on our medium. Each is useful; none is a silver bullet, and this series will be stronger if we say so out loud.

- **OAAA / SocialVibe (9).** — In a 5,003-consumer study on OOH wear-out, 49% said they would continue to notice the same ad after one month, and 26% after three months; 53% said they begin remembering OOH after one to three exposures. Useful directional evidence that wear-in and attention decay coexist. Its limitation: self-reported expectations, not observed gaze or campaign response.
- **QMS / Neuro-Insight (10).** — Across 30 creatives in 15 categories, creative that changed day to day produced 38% higher long-term memory impact than unchanged creative by day five, and a context-driven execution keyed to day and temperature scored 18% above the DOOH average. The most direct support for evolving creative. Its limitation: proprietary, industry-funded neuroscience research rather than a peer-reviewed publication.
- **Wilson, Baack & Till (11).** — In a peer-reviewed field study along an urban expressway, creative improved brand memory only after the billboard crossed an attention-capture threshold; size, visual saliency, and brand familiarity also drove recognition. The reminder that "fresh" is not enough — the execution must first be conspicuous enough to earn attention in the real environment.

The Advertising Research Foundation's recent review of the wear-out literature (12) lands where this paper does: repetition can create wear-in and familiarity, while wear-out is most likely under heavy short-term frequency or weak creative. No single study proves that every unchanged billboard becomes wallpaper on a fixed schedule — and we shouldn't claim it.

What the evidence does justify: planning multiple executions for long campaigns; refreshing high-salience elements; and testing when attention and response begin to flatten. **What it does not justify:** one universal replacement schedule, the claim that repeated OOH stops working, or treating every cosmetic edit as meaningful change.

"The board remains visible. The message becomes expected."

The Morgan Playbook, Read as a Lesson in Freshness

Go back to that Dallas keynote and strip away the showmanship, and what remains is a freshness discipline any advertiser could adopt. I count five moves in it:

- **Localize** — the same brand promise rewritten for each market's language and pride. A market-specific headline is a copy change with a built-in reason to exist.
- **Seasonalize** — holiday and seasonal executions that give the calendar itself the job of refreshing the message.

- **Ride the moment** — sports sponsorships, venue takeovers, and cultural tie-ins that let outside events make the same brand newly relevant.
- **Sequence** — galleries of ever-changing executions in transit environments, designed so people seek out the next one. The refresh itself becomes the attraction.
- **Occasionally, shock** — the self-defacing stunt: a brand confident enough to vandalize its own boards, converting paid media into weeks of earned media. The refresh was the story.

Every one of those is a copy change. None of them is a brand change. The distinctive assets — name, look, promise — never move an inch. That is Romaniuk's rulebook and Sharp's mechanism executed at nine figures a year, by the buyer who has more of his own money riding on the answer than anyone else in the medium. And notice one thing he is not doing: he is not letting a single execution sit on a board until the market stops seeing it.

Putting It to Work

The practical opportunity is not to choose between repetition and novelty. It is to combine them deliberately. Keep the location, the brand assets, and the campaign platform working; then refresh enough of the execution to give the audience a reason to look again.

KEEP CONSTANT	CHANGE WITH PURPOSE
Distinctive brand assets — logo, color system, characters	Headline or offer
Core campaign platform and voice	Hero image or product view
Primary promise	Sequence, daypart, or context
The location itself	Seasonal or local relevance

For static inventory

Plan the copy change up front: a long-term posting should not automatically mean one execution for the entire term. Print a campaign family — two or three executions sharing brand structure but introducing a materially different headline, image, or offer. Time each change to a business moment: a launch, a season, an event, a new proof point, so the change has meaning. And treat production as media optimization, not as a cost center. The incremental price of a new face should be weighed against the value of renewing attention on media already purchased — which is usually the cheapest attention an advertiser will buy all year. I spent my career on the production side, and I will say plainly what that experience taught me: the cost of printing and installing a new face is small; the cost of a market that has stopped seeing your board is not.

For digital inventory

The ad loop should do more than alternate unrelated artwork — build a sequence that adds information or advances the story. Exploit context: day, time, weather, location, and live events can make the same message newly relevant on the same screen. Keep the recognition cues intact; dynamic does not mean visually chaotic. And where feasible, measure by exposure cohort — compare attention, recall, search, visitation, or sales response before and after the creative change.

A clean test any advertiser can run

For a 12-week campaign in a high-frequency commuter corridor, compare one execution held constant against a matched campaign that posts a fresh execution every four weeks — three in total. Preserve the brand platform; change one or two high-salience elements. Measure aided recognition, message recall, and one business outcome. This is not a universal four-week rule — it is a clean way to learn the refresh curve for a specific advertiser, audience, and location.

And a better question for long-term contracts

This reframes one of the oldest objections in our medium. The question on a six- or twelve-month posting is not “is that too long?” It is “how many chapters has the advertiser designed for that presence?” Long duration and fresh messaging are not in tension. They are complements — and together they are the strongest version of the product we sell.

Closing

The creative multiplier is not more noise. It is a disciplined way to make media you've already bought feel new again — grounded in how attention and memory actually work, consistent with the best marketing science of the last twenty years, and demonstrated at scale, in public, by the medium’s largest customer.

In Dallas, John Morgan closed with a line he borrowed from Ted Turner — a billboard man long before he was a media mogul: “Early to bed, early to rise, work like hell, and advertise.” That’s good advice for seventy years running. I’d add four words for the out of home industry: **and change the copy.**

Sources

1. Rankin, C. H., et al. (2009). “Habituation revisited: An updated and revised description of the behavioral characteristics of habituation.”
Neurobiology of Learning and Memory, 92(2), 135–138.

2. Ranganath, C., & Rainer, G. (2003). “Neural mechanisms for detecting and remembering novel events.” Nature Reviews Neuroscience,
4, 193–202.

3. Clark, A. (2013). “Whatever next? Predictive brains, situated agents, and the future of cognitive science.” Behavioral and Brain Sciences,
36(3), 181–204.

4. Desimone, R., & Duncan, J. (1995). “Neural mechanisms of selective visual attention.” Annual Review of Neuroscience, 18, 193–222.

5. Simons, D. J., & Levin, D. T. (1997). “Change blindness.” Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 1(7), 261–267.

6. Chee, Q. W., & Goh, W. D. (2018). “What explains the von Restorff effect?” Journal of Memory and Language, 99, 49–61.

7. Chun, M. M., & Turk-Browne, N. B. (2007). “Interactions between attention and memory.” Current Opinion in Neurobiology, 17(2),
177–184.

8. Zajonc, R. B. (1968). “Attitudinal effects of mere exposure.” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 9(2, Pt. 2), 1–27.

9. OAAA / SocialVibe. “Consumer Response to OOH Advertising Wearout.” Online survey of 5,003 consumers; self-reported responses.

10. QMS Media & Neuro-Insight (2021). “Evolving Creative Is More Memorable.” 235 participants; 30 creatives across 15 categories;
proprietary industry study.

11. Wilson, R. T., Baack, D. W., & Till, B. D. (2015). “Creativity, attention and the memory for brands: An outdoor advertising field study.”
International Journal of Advertising, 34(2), 232–261.

12. Advertising Research Foundation (2025). “Do Ads Really Wear Out? Evidence and Implications for Media.”

13. Taran, S., et al. (2023). “The reticular activating system: a narrative review.” Canadian Journal of Anesthesia, 70, 788–795. Cited here
to distinguish arousal systems from simplified marketing claims about attention filtering.

14. Sharp, B. (2010). How Brands Grow: What Marketers Don’t Know. Oxford University Press.

15. Romaniuk, J. (2018). Building Distinctive Brand Assets. Oxford University Press.

16. Romaniuk, J., & Sharp, B. (2016; 2nd ed. 2022). How Brands Grow: Part 2. Oxford University Press.

17. Binet, L., & Field, P. (2013). The Long and the Short of It: Balancing Short and Long-Term Marketing Strategies. IPA.

18. Sutherland, R. (2019). Alchemy: The Dark Art and Curious Science of Creating Magic in Brands, Business, and Life. William Morrow.

19. Morgan, J. Keynote remarks, OAAA OOH Media Conference, Dallas, Texas (2026). Transcript on file with the author. Quoted with
speaker attribution; spend figures as introduced from the conference stage.