

PRACTICAL INSIGHTS

How an Unboxing Video Gave Volvo's Brand Story New Meaning

The six-minute ad produced by AKQA offers powerful lessons for marketers



A playful reimagining of size allowed for the narrative transportation aspect of the ad. Volvo Cars, AKQA



By Paul Barbagallo

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The video opens in a stark white room. A man wearing a blue blazer, black jeans and black sneakers—a variation on the modern Silicon Valley tech executive uniform—walks into frame. He is pushing a large gray industrial dolly bearing only a miniature white box.

“Small,” he begins. “It’s a big word with a bad reputation.”

anticipated product is about to be removed from its packaging. It will be examined, admired and discussed with the vigor of a sneakerhead ripping open the latest Nike drop.

Volvo EX30 | The Unboxing

Volvo Cars, AKQA

“It would have been a disservice not to tell as much as possible about the product and our brand—and also make it as engaging as possible,” Johan Larsson, head of product and technology communications for Volvo Cars, told Adweek. “So, we went looking for something that you would want to watch and something that is interesting.”

To date, more than 1.7 million people have viewed the six-minute “unboxing” video from Volvo and its agency **AKQA**. It has become a gamechanger for the company’s positioning in the market as the sustainable carmaker of choice, and not because of its tongue-in-cheek novelty. The unexpected piece of creative offers a textbook case in how to go outside industry norms to take a brand story to another level.

Why Advertise on YouTube

f

in

X

When creating YouTube video ads, what is your most important campaign goal?

☐

Sales

☐

Leads

☐

Website traffic

☐

Product and brand consideration

☐

Brand awareness and reach

☐

No goal

☐

Other

Breaking from convention

how the company is measuring overall performance of the campaign, he said that in some cases, Volvo reached its targets “in the first week.”

That might not feel that surprising or even noteworthy—after all, automotive advertising is known for treading the same staid ground: dazzling cinematography and breathless mentions of better **gas mileage**, new design concepts and other incremental improvements to the same **gas-powered products**. In the auto industry, anything that challenges the unwritten rules of the category can easily spur torrents of affection.

Yet the fact that Volvo and AKQA produced something so deliberately uncommon should not be downplayed through a veil of cynicism. Rather, it should be used as inspiration to persistently search for new platforms, formats and methods to make a brand story more meaningful. In examining the ad in depth, Volvo-AKQA achieved this in five specific ways.



BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE TECHNICOLOR FIAT AD THAT BROKE EVERY RULE IN THE BOOK

Hyperfocus

Behind all the cheeky cleverness is an example of creativity that is laser-focused on one big theme that will drive an important business and organizational outcome for Volvo in the years to come: Small is big. If consumers embrace smaller electric SUVs like the EX30, Volvo will have a smaller environmental impact while selling more cars (i.e., big sales).

To be sure, the slogan “Think Small” was first made famous by Volkswagen in 1959 through a series of iconic ads produced by DDB to promote the **Beetle**. But through an intense amount of focus and discipline, Volvo has taken the concept to a different stratum.

Working with AKQA from the beginning of the campaign, Volvo developed a simple set of messages and then tightly managed every expression of them in the market, from YouTube videos to paid media placements. According to Malm, whose whiteboard bears the phrase “thinking small might be the biggest thought of all,” the team has remained small, agile and closely connected to ensure everything is “executed with excellence.”

Perhaps most importantly, the consistency of message rings through the ad itself through the repeated use of the word “small.”

Repetition

By design, the first word of Rowan’s monologue is “small.” Over the next five minutes and 53 seconds, Rowan repeats the word 22 times, often in bumper sticker-worthy proclamations: “Small is a grand philosophy;” “everything starts small;” “big things have small beginnings;” “small is big on little details;” “small knows exactly how big it is;” “small can be bigger than it seems;” “small has stamina!” And the kicker, meant to evoke Volvo’s sustainability focus: “Small is kind. Kind to people. Less environmental impact.”



SWEDISH TRANSPORT OPERATOR STACKS CARS TO SHOW ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

This repetition heightens the overall poetic effect of the word and reinforces that one big theme—small yet mighty—in the minds of consumers. But the technique also works on a deeper, almost rhetorical level—as epimone. The word isn’t just reiterated over and over to hammer home the features and benefits of the new EX30; it’s used to change the audience’s perspective on the very meaning of small—and big.

Brevity

The 623-word script delivered by Jim Rowan amounts to 69 individual sentences. Only seven of them contain subordinate clauses or phrases. Seventeen are sentence fragments. The rest employ the parataxis literary device of juxtaposing short, simple, independent clauses without coordinating conjunctions, such as “and,” “but” and “or,” or linking words like “while” and “that.”

for only a few seconds, you will still learn something practical—for example, that Volvo uses recycled material for the interior.

Scale

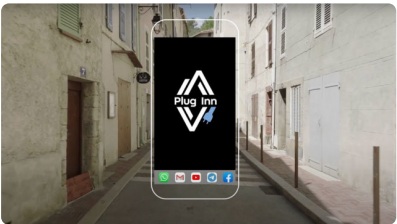
With the central story of “small yet mighty,” the Volvo-AKQA team decided to play with scale. In one frame, we see Rowan gripping a toy model of the EX30. We watch as he takes it apart and explains where the batteries and motors go. In the next frame, we see Rowan's giant-sized hand lowering the model into a fishbowl filled with plant life. In the next, we follow a miniature Rowan as he steps into the same car and starts driving.

This isn't visual gimmickry. Playing with scale actually serves multiple functions. The most practical: Rowan can literally unbox a car. A car is not a limited-edition Disney toy or an Apple iPhone that can be opened in someone's home; the team had to take creative license.

Critically, this playful reimagining of the size of things allowed Volvo and AKQA to embrace the narrative transportation aspect of unboxing videos. One of the reasons people love unboxing videos is the sense of being alongside the reviewer as they open and review a new purchase. We experience the sensation of being with them on the journey. Being lost in a story enhances and audience's enjoyment and lessens their resistance to persuasion, making them much more willing to suspend disbelief and overlook absurdities of scale.

Reason

Despite its unconventional form, the ad makes a logical appeal to reason much like traditional automotive advertising. In one notable moment, Rowan explains that the EX30 is offered with either one motor or two. “Want to go longer? Get the car with one motor. Want to go faster? Well—with two motors, the EX30 is the quickest Volvo car ever, 0-100 kilometers per hour in 3.6 seconds.”



RENAULT WINS CREATIVE STRATEGY GRAND PRIX AT CANNES FOR RURAL EV CHARGING APP

“We put up so many barriers for ourselves when we develop campaigns,” Peter Lund, global chief creative officer for AKQA, told Adweek. “We feel pressure to speak to people on a popular platform where they already exist, and it has to fit in six seconds, and it has to feature the logo in the first second, and it has to show the car.”

But here, Lund explained, the team decided to ignore those rules. “The output is something very unexpected, but people surrender to it because of that.”



PAUL BARBAGALLO

Paul Barbagallo is Adweek’s **svp, executive editor of thought leadership and practical journalism.**

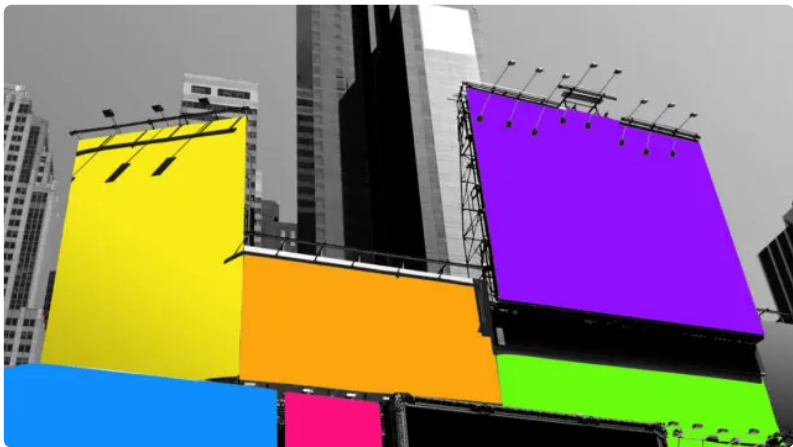
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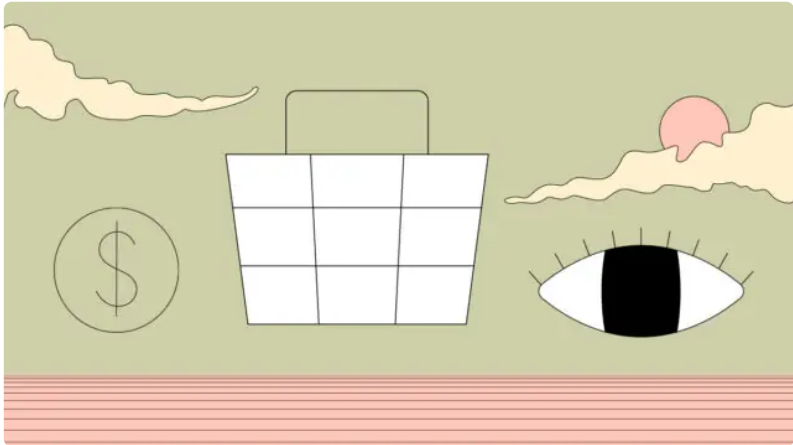
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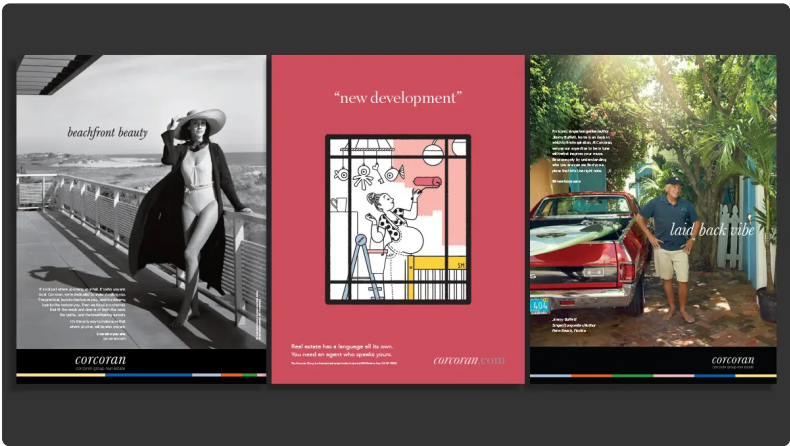
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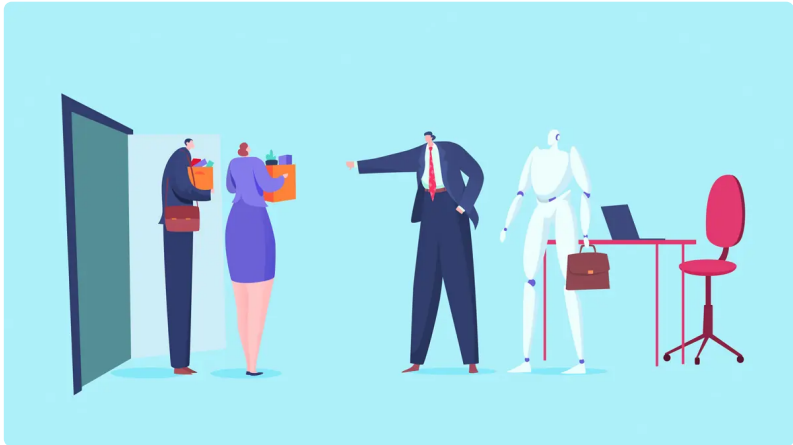
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