

A Christmas tale, with love from Mrs. Claus

Introduction

Christmas.

An over-crowded marketing landscape.

The ‘Superbowl’ of UK advertising.

And M&S’s nemesis for the past five years.

But in 2016, reviving clothing sales was M&S’s number one priority. M&S had worked hard to ensure it had the right product, in the right place at the right time. Marketing now needed to draw women back to the *brand* so that they’d come to the store with glass half full expectations.

We could so easily have tumbled into the morass of ‘Christmas emotion’.

But, armed with a compelling, resonant and ownable insight, we transformed M&S’s marketing approach.

In fact, we reinvented an icon. A modern, stylish, confident & knowing Mrs. Claus, fit for modern, stylish, confident & knowing 21st Century women.

The campaign struck a powerful chord with middle-aged, mainstream women – an audience that has been woefully overlooked in the march to Brand Feminism.

And it helped transform M&S’s fortunes:

Sales of ‘General Merchandise’ (M&S’s non-food business, dominated by womenswear) grew for the first Christmas in *six* years.

“Marks & Spencer has stopped the rot in its clothing division with its best Christmas sales performance since 2011. The sales rise is only the second time in 23 quarters that M&S has managed to grow sales in that part of the business and stormed ahead of analyst predictions of a marginal 0.5pc uplift in sales.”

Ashley Armstrong, Retail Editor, Telegraph Business

Christmas 2016: The need for change

M&S womenswear sales had declined for five Christmases in a row.

Figure 1: General Merchandise Christmas sales

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Yr on Yr Growth in like-for-like stores	+3.8%	-1.8%	-3.8	-2.1%	-5.8%	-5.8%

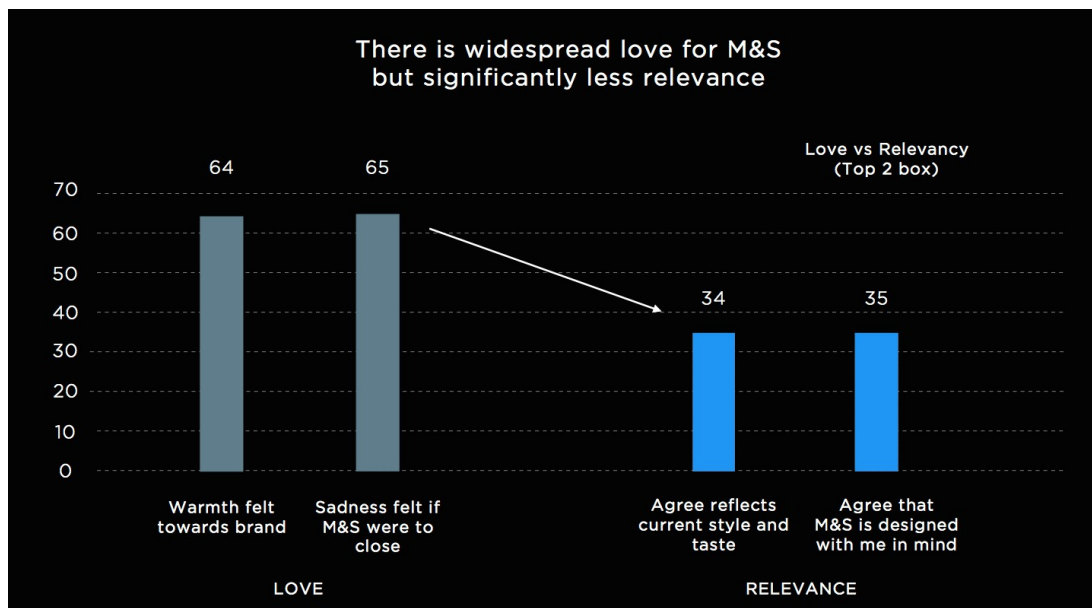
Source: M&S plc Group Q3 Interim Statements

There was a feeling that M&S just didn't 'get' its customers.

Figure 2: The relevance issue

"However many luxury mince pies and champagne it shifts, M&S's food sales cannot mask its increasingly dire clothing sales figures. The 40-something customer that M&S seeks to attract is far more fashion conscious than the brand gives them credit for – and the reality is most of them don't want to be shopping in a store that seems to be catering for ages 40 to 140."

Phil Dorrell, director of retail consultancy,
Retail Remedy, January 2015



Source: RKCR Omnibus Survey
April 2016

But in 2016, M&S had a new CEO, a new Director for Womenswear and a new Director of Womenswear Design. It was confident not only that the product was strong, but also that the availability problems that had dogged M&S over Christmas 2015 had been resolved.

Marketing now needed to draw women back to the *brand* so that they'd come to the store with glass half full expectations.

Historically, M&S's Christmas marketing had been heavily product oriented – albeit wrapped in M&S's trademark 'Magic and Sparkle'. But M&S was losing out to other brands, most notably John Lewis, who were capturing consumers' imagination with a very different, highly emotional approach.

Christmas advertising was fast becoming the UK's 'Superbowl'; consumer expectations and media coverage were rising accordingly. For a brand whose reputation is hugely influenced by positive or negative media coverage, headlines proclaiming that John Lewis had won the battle for our Christmas hearts, did not help.

M&S needed to up its game.

Objectives & Challenges

Business Objective

To return General Merchandise to profitable growth.

Marketing Objective

To drive traffic at Christmas by forging a relevant and ownable emotional connection with women at Christmas.

This was not without its challenges:

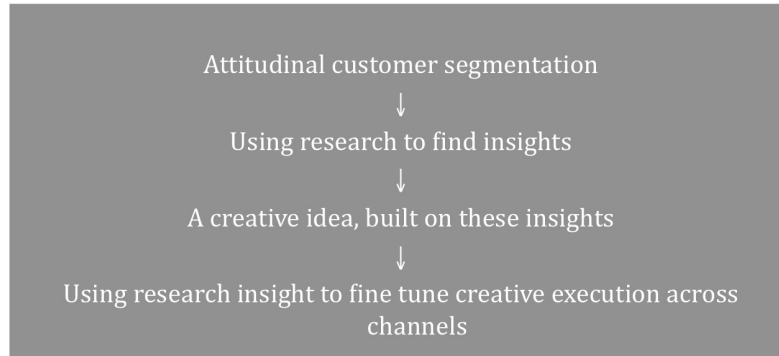
- ☐ John Lewis already 'owned' the emotions of Christmas.
- ☐ The role of women at Christmas – as mothers, shoppers, glamour queens, cooks & bottle-washers – was also a well-trodden path.
- ☐ We needed an *ownable* insight with a uniquely M&S point of view – rather than just another generic observation about the emotions of Christmas.

Clearly, carefully planned research could help.

Finding & applying insights

The process fell into four phases:

Figure 3: Insight development & application



1) Attitudinal customer segmentation

Most British women shop at M&S. But to drive relevance, we needed to identify a core audience for marketing – large enough to be worth targeting, but tight enough to be targetable.

Attitudinal segmentation identified ‘Life Maximisers’ as the key audience for M&S’s Christmas marketing. They were broadly representative of M&S’s 3m most loyal customers, but, crucially, also included a valuable proportion of more occasional customers – whose ‘swing’ vote it was essential to attract.

Figure 4: Life Maximisers

Life Maximisers want to be the best they can be for themselves and their family – making the most out of what they’ve got, rather than always striving for something new. They don’t take life too seriously, want to enjoy life and share that joy with others.

They fall into two life-stages:

‘The Encore Generation’

50+, confident, optimistic women looking for new life experiences, but not immune to the typical anxiety about competing demands on their life - how they look, grandchildren, health etc. They may be too mainstream to be truly hip but they’re stylish, witty and have real moments of cool.

‘Super Women’

Busy, time-poor Mums who are trying to be everything to everyone in their lives – with very little time for themselves. Yet they care about how they look and how their family comes across. They are financially stable and are prepared to throw money at a problem – loving smart solutions to balance their life. They feel great when they manage to pull off a moment of playful cool in a sea of chaos.

Source: Ideo

2) Using research to find insights

We needed a fresh & resonant insight.

And an ownable one.

So we looked in two places: at our audience and at our brand.

We first needed to understand our audience's aspirational self as women – and then explore how this played out at Christmas. So we immersed ourselves in their world: alongside qualitative research, we used social listening, scoured their media landscape (online and off; at Christmas and more generally), quizzed sociologists, style experts & journalists and conducted semiotic analysis of women-centric advertising.

Alongside this, we used both quantitative research and semiotic analysis to delve deep into the inherent characteristics of the M&S brand.

And we compared our findings against territories already claimed by other brands at Christmas.

The audience insight:

Women are the makers of special Christmases.

Making Christmas doesn't just mean the stress of doing the shopping, the chore of wrapping every present, the pressure of cooking the turkey... For our audience it means the love that's put in to making it special; the thoughtful touches that are remembered for years. The more care you put into Christmas, the more special it is for your loved ones.

The degree to which the specialness of Christmas is *on* women felt very untapped: Plenty of brands had sympathized with women's lot at Christmas, but none had *celebrated* women as the *makers* of Christmas.

The brand insight:

M&S does specialness like no other.

M&S is renowned for many things: quality, craftsmanship, excellence of service and, not least, for 'dressing the nation'. But it also has specialness at its core – from melt-in-the-middle chocolate pudding to Rosie Huntingdon-Whitely lingerie. Even its promotions are special: Dine In for £10 rather than BOGOF.... This is never more so than at Christmas, when it's famous for the thoughtfulness, craft and joy it puts into ideas - from Chocolate Present Cake to sparkly dresses for every shape and size to super-soft affordable cashmere.

Here, then was a perfect marriage of a brand truth with a fresh insight.

But something else had bubbled through our research... something that would make this marriage particularly powerful...

An important third insight

The market is out of tune with our audience's aspirations.

They are too easily lumped into a middle-aged/older women (aka past it) bracket.

Even though they fiercely defend the importance of traditional values – caring, nurturing, and providing - they see themselves as can do, stylish modern women.

To put it another way, they are both *feminist* and *feminine*.

Christmas, for them, is a prime example of this balance: It's as much a testament to their mothering, caring side as to the sassy aplomb with which they pull it off.

Brand Feminism may be on the march, but this audience has been largely bypassed by the 'girl power' of most high profile 'femvertising' such as 'This Girl Can' or Bodyform 'No blood should hold us back'.

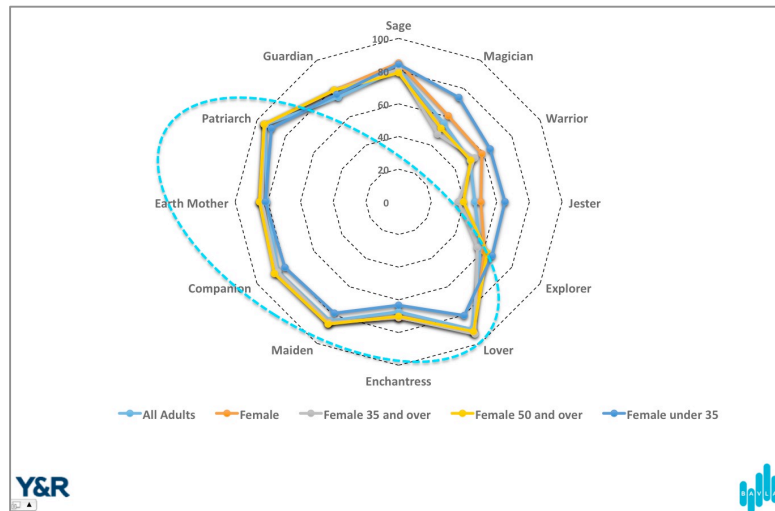
This was a real opportunity for M&S.

Because M&S is a brand that, in its prime, has always championed this kind of woman:

- It's famous for ideas that recognize the needs of modern women – for example, it never discriminates on the basis of dress size, it was the first brand to sell brilliant quality convenience food, it's ingenuous School uniform ideas (Stormwear, Stainaway, Adjust-a-Cuff, etc) are there to help time-pressed Mums.
- Its most resonant advertising (Twiggy & the girls, Leading Ladies et al) has celebrated women & femininity overtly.
- Despite its astonishingly successful food business, media focus remains squarely on whether M&S's womenswear meets the needs & aspirations of older women

Hardly surprising, then, that consumers see M&S as a deeply female brand:

Figure 5: M&S is an inherently feminine brand



Y&R Brand Asset Valuator, UK, 2016

"In our many research studies about women's views on businesses and brands, we consistently find that women view M&S, overall, as a female-centric brand. So for example, in terms of the lingerie offer, they define their connection to M&S in terms of a language of togetherness. M&S and her making the best of it, making her look and feel better. And should it happen that M&S deviates from this perspective, she will readily express her view in order to bring the brand back into that together alignment."

Professor Christopher Moore
Assistant Vice Principal, Glasgow Caledonian University

"When I think about M&S in relation to the other places where I shop regularly - I can say two things. The first is that I can see my self in M&S - as me, as a woman, in my own right and what I need. And the second is I can also see other women there too. That's important to me. Women who are quite different from me, but that is good. M&S is about a woman and women - if that does not seem like a strange thing to say."

Consumer quote, 'What She knows' Research

And this femininity is readily apparent at Christmas:

Figure 6: How M&S feels at Christmas

<p>Christmas at M&S is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Magical - Warm - Glamorous - Collective - Sparkly - Special - Sassy <p>M&S brings a cheeky, feminine, finesse to Christmas</p>	<p>Christmas at John Lewis is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nostalgic - Heart-warming - Raw, Simple - About individual relationships - Melancholic - Giving-Centric - Loving <p>John Lewis brings a deep, heart-warming, intimacy to Christmas</p>
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Source: Flamingo

So here was a huge opportunity for M&S that felt uniquely true to the brand:

Figure 7: The Brief

Opportunity:
To celebrate women as the makers of Christmas

Proposition:
A truly special Christmas is made with love

Tone of voice:
Sassy, knowing, warm

3) A creative idea, built on these insights

The idea:

To recreate an icon.

We re-imagined *Mrs. Claus* for the modern world.

Every year, Santa heads off to work, delivering presents around the world. Mrs. Claus stays at home. Not very 21st Century....

M&S Mrs. Claus is a modern, stylish, sassy power behind the throne; a metaphor for all the magical things women (and M&S) do to make Christmas special.



We used advertising to introduce her to the world – telling the story of an act of love, which results in the most special of Christmases – shot not just as an ad, but as an epic film by Tom Hooper, award winning director of *The King’s Speech*, *Les Misérables* and *The Danish Girl*.



See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5QPXhStb5I>

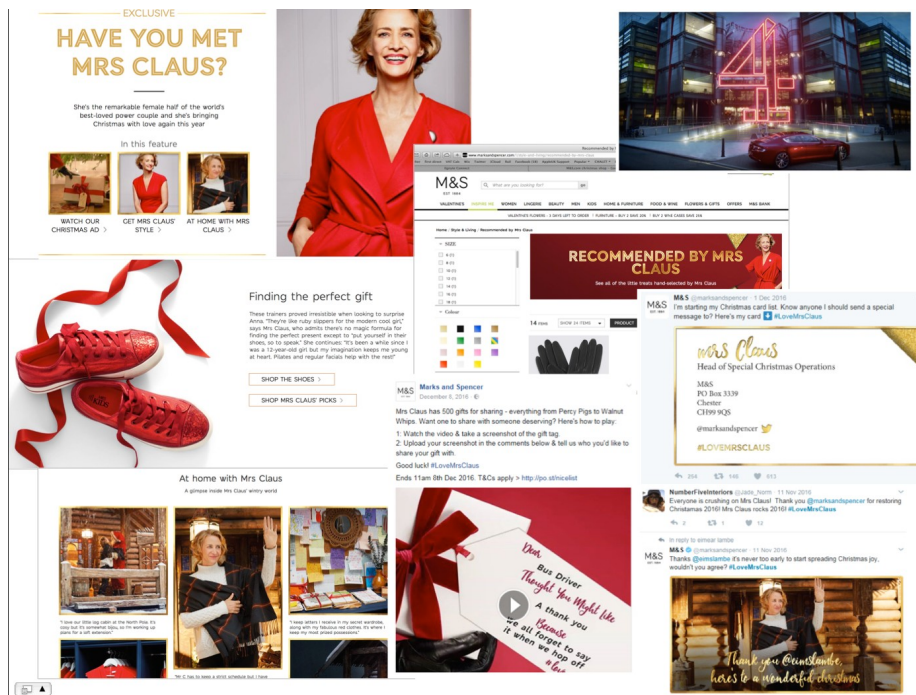
But we saw Mrs. Claus as so much more than an advertising property: she's an editorial property: an inspiration for and guide to a truly special Christmas – with help, of course, from M&S.

In this editorial role, she connected with women across channels:

Figure 8: Using Mrs. Claus across channels

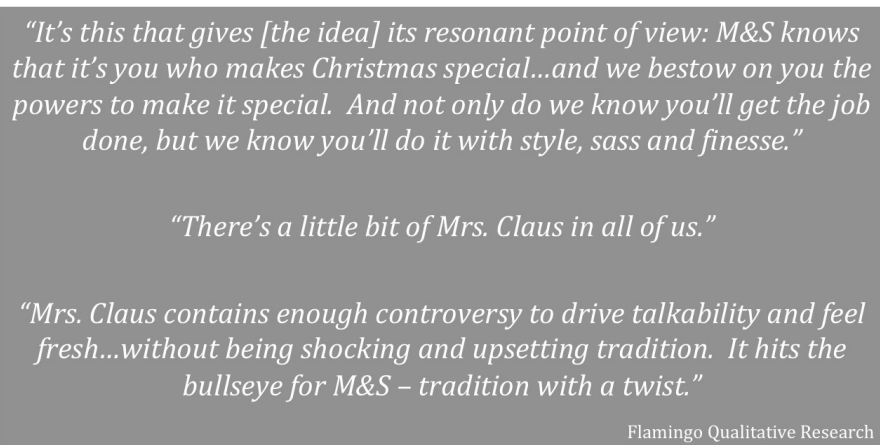
Online	Mrs. Claus's took over the M&S homepage at launch. Her character was developed online, with interviews, special touches & her Christmas ideas for you to embellish. She became the curator & guide to a truly special Christmas, through M&S's dedicated online Christmas shop.
In Store	Again, Mrs. Claus acted as a curator & guide. Her special picks were highlighted with Mrs. Claus signage, tags & displays. Staff delivered thousands of Mrs. Claus random acts of kindness in store – donating to charity for each and every one.
Social	Mrs. Claus took over M&S's profile on Facebook & Twitter (for which we developed a special #LoveMrsClaus emoji). She provided personalised responses to social comment & encouraged people to write to her – sending Christmas cards back to anyone who she thought deserved a special treat...
Mobile	All Mrs. Claus's social activity was deliberately designed to be 'mobile first' – making timely suggestions in the run up to Christmas more relevant & personal
Media Partnership	She launched via a media partnership with Channel 4, taking over the first break in Gogglebox, and subsequently launching Channel 4's Christmas season with a bespoke Mrs. Claus at Channel 4 film.





Creative development research convinced us we had a powerful, resonant idea on our hands, because it captured our audience’s aspirational self at Christmas. But more than that: Mrs. Claus was a holy trinity - not just a metaphor for our audience; she was a metaphor for M&S and, indeed, the spirit of Christmas itself.

Figure 9: Response to the idea



But the idea was as dangerous as it was powerful: Research also highlighted how vital it would be to ensure Mrs. Claus’s casting, personality, role and relationships chimed perfectly with our audience. Too ball-breaking and we’d lose them....

4) Using research insight to fine tune execution

Again, we used not only qualitative audience research (re-recruiting respondents from earlier research) but also broader research with channel specialists together with analysis of other icons (Bond, Sherlock...) that had been reinvented so successfully.

3 key insights emerged:

i) Which elements of modern femininity (and of Mrs. Claus) we should embrace and - as importantly - which elements we should leave behind:

Figure 10: A 21st Century Mrs. Claus

From frumpy to stylish: Hers is a well-healed, confident, feminine style. There's glamour, but it's sassy & sophisticated, not sexy. And never shallow. She should never feel overdressed, nor feature too much frill or glitz. Mrs. Claus should be the friend you always ask for advice on what to wear & where to shop. Body-wise, gone is the plump Mrs. C & in her place as strong, female body.

From a supporting role to an equal one (but not a superior one): She has a lesser known but equally important role at Christmas. Santa may deliver toys to all the children, but she delivers the extra special knowing touches that make Christmas special. She delivers joy.

From submissive to empowered (but not aggressive): She isn't just a wife to Santa & a mother to the elves, but the 'first lady' of Christmas. Mrs. C still has the biggest & most generous of hearts but she shows her love in bolder ways. She has sass but not swagger, plenty of 'can do' and a touch of kick-ass to her. This means she feels much more active, more energetic.

From selfless to self-assured (but not selfish): Mrs. C, like all women, should not be viewed in just a traditional mum nurturing role at Xmas. She should be recognised & celebrated as a whole woman and all that a woman is at Christmas: For pulling it off, knowing how to get the job done, proving their mastery of Christmas – and looking great & effortless as they do.

From living in the past to living in the 21st Century: She must be totally assimilated into the modern world & have the energy & pace that goes along with it – not the slow burn time of the North Pole. She needs to have all the latest tech – from 21st Century sleighs and helicopters to Santa Nav and digital Nice&Naughty lists. She communicates with us with ease on digital platforms but equally, she'll happily respond to a letter.

Source: M&S Inter-agency briefing

ii) *Don't* cast a celebrity. However much Helen Mirren, say, might have been in the minds of respondents, a celebrity would make it harder for them to see themselves in Mrs. Claus. And how could we ensure that, in social channels, Mrs. Claus's voice, rather than the celebrity's, would be heard?

iii) How to maximize the effect of Mrs. Claus's editorial role: Working with the team at Facebook IQ, we monitored social activity over Christmas. This gave us insight into the timing and sentiment of significant moments in consumers' 'Christmas journey', so that we could be ready for Mrs. Claus to provide relevant content at the right time in social and digital channels, as well as in store. Key to credibility was using Mrs. Claus as a curator, rather than a promoter.

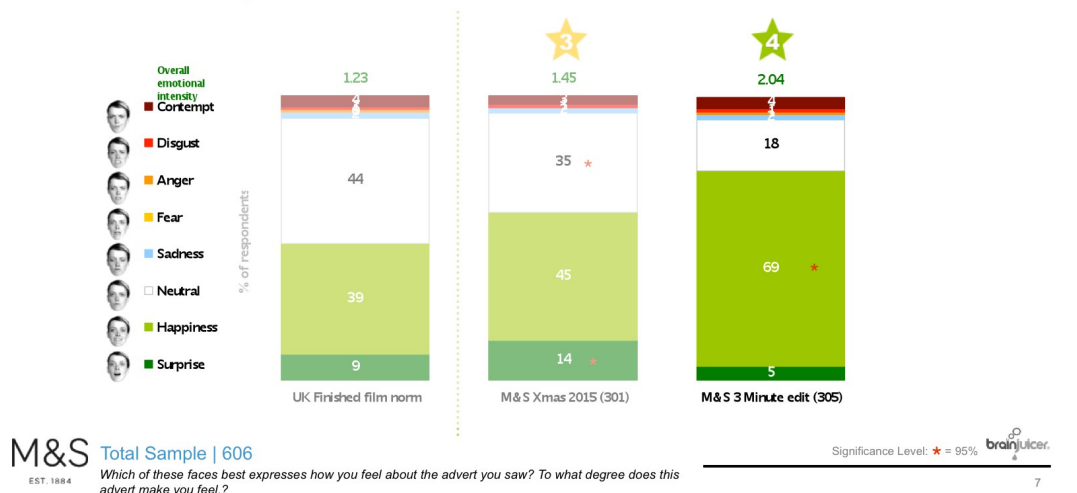
4) Results

Women loved the campaign.

Figure 11: Emotional response to the campaign

Mrs Claus is generating much higher levels of **happiness** than norms, and very low levels of neutrality

FaceTrace® Emotional Response

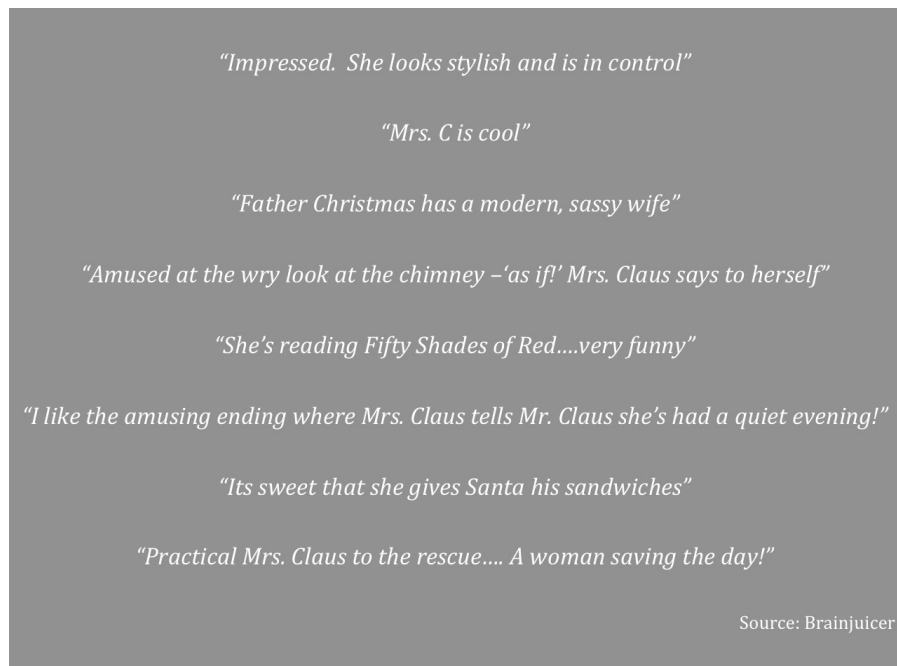


They loved it because it resonated on so many levels.

"It's about love and togetherness and family. For many, this is what Christmas is all about. The character of Mrs. Claus is the hero. She adds a modern twist to the traditional tale, bringing a smart, sassy, stylish woman into the heart of the story. Mrs. C hits the right note between being aspirational whilst still being relatable."

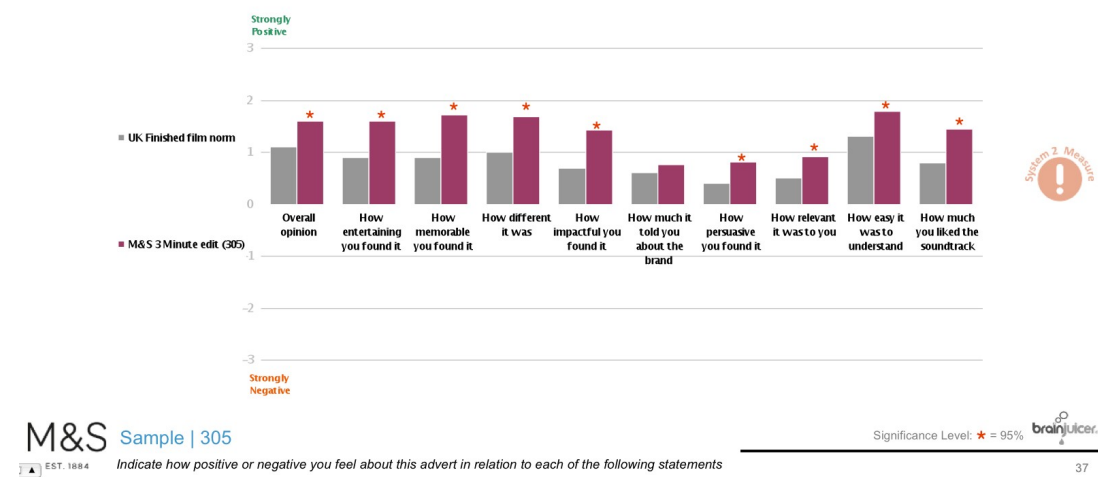
Brainjuicer

As we'd hoped, women were seeing themselves (or who they aspire to be) in Mrs. Claus's story: the perfect combination of stylish, modern witty and caring.



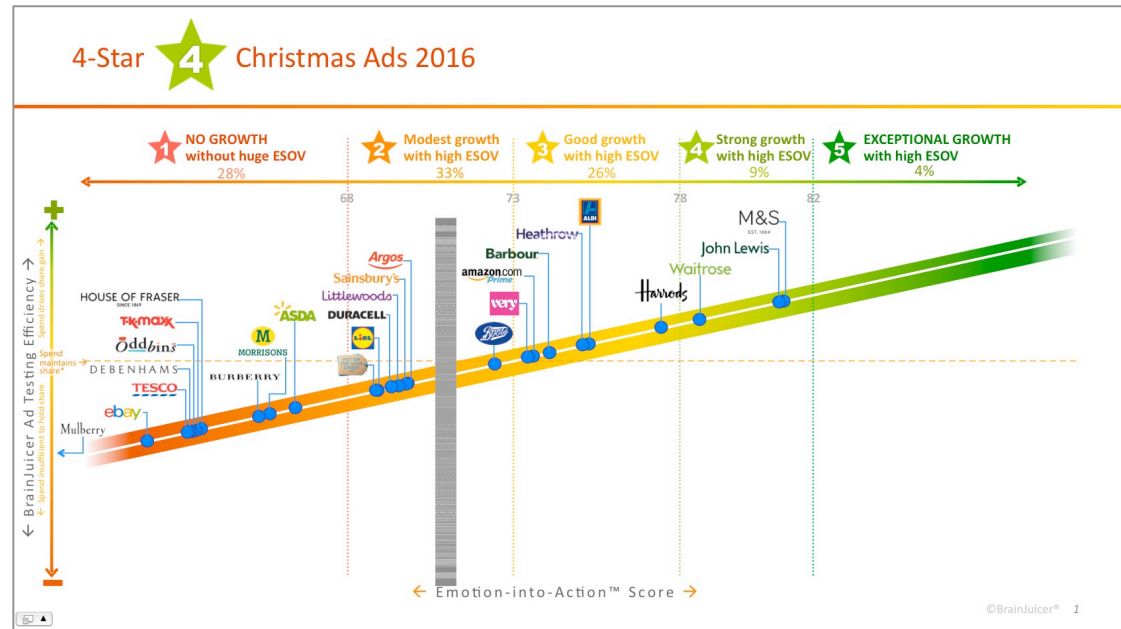
So it was no surprise that the campaign was twice as relevant, memorable and persuasive as the average UK campaign:

Figure 12: An unusually resonant campaign



In fact, Brainjuicer testing put Mrs. Claus ahead of all other Christmas campaigns, John Lewis included:

Figure 12: Mrs. Claus ‘wins’ the Christmas advertising battle



"The use of a great insight (together with an Oscar winning director) really does pay off"

Brainjuicer UK Christmas Advertising Webinar

Because of this, the campaign became a hot topic on social media.

With over 14m views on Facebook & Youtube , 1.2bn estimated impressions on Twitter (vs 42m the year before...) and over 47,000 tweets, share of voice increased by 250% year on year. #LoveMrsClaus trended on Twitter for the whole of November; even #FiftyShadesOfRed trended briefly!

Most importantly, 93% of sentiment was positive.

And, of course, online chat was driven by women:

Figure 13: Female talkability

	Proportion of online chat about Christmas campaigns by women
M&S	72%
Waitrose	69%

Aldi
John Lewis

67%
62%

Source: M&S

Figure 14: Examples of online chat



Online buzz fuelled, and was fuelled by the media who delighted in our reinvention of Mrs. Claus for the modern world.

There were over 69 pieces of coverage creating an estimated 81m opportunities to see.

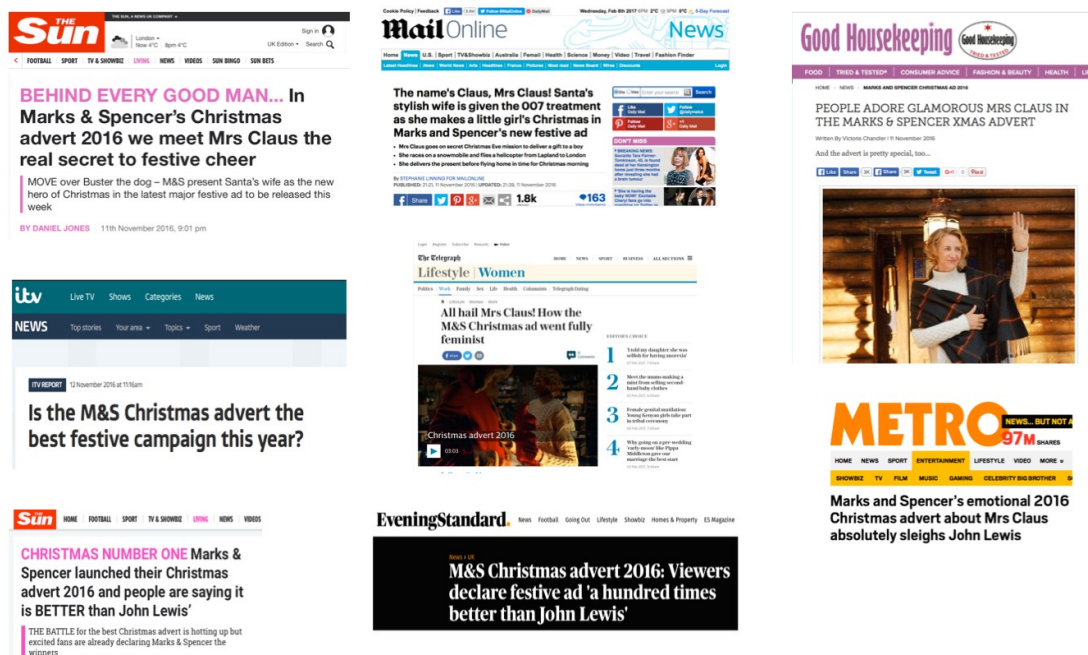
Figure 15: Examples of media coverage

At a time of year when all around seem to be telling women how to drop a dress size before party season; which shop the best mums go to; or how to plan ahead to ensure everyone else's needs are satisfied on the big day, it's refreshing to see a middle-aged woman tearing through the skies in a helicopter as if it's the most natural thing in the world. After all, in 2016 every little girl should know that she's just as capable as any boy. As heartwarming Christmas messages go, I can't think of a better one.

Daily Telegraph, 14th December '16

The #LoveMrsClaus ad has been praised as feminist for its depiction of Mother Christmas as a strong, independent, tenacious woman. Traditionally Mrs. Claus has faded into the background as her husband took centre stage... But M&S has rebranded Mother Christmas to make her something women in 2016 can all aspire to.

The Huffington Post, 15th November '16



All of this positivity, changed attitudes towards M&S for the better. In particular, M&S became more *relevant* to women.

Figure 16: Top 5 Attitude shifts

	%pt uplift vs Christmas 2015
Suits my lifestyle	+13
Does the right thing	+12
Rewards me	+9
Leading	+7
Thoughtful	+5

Source: Brainjuicer; 3 second spontaneous brand associations

And the change in attitude produced tangible results for M&S:

Footfall increased █████ year on year – that’s some █████ more visits than the year before¹.

Despite this not being a product-centric campaign, sales of clothing featured in the campaign rocketed:

¹ Please note that M&S footfall figures are for judges eyes only

Figure 17: Sales of advertised items vs plan

	% uplift vs plan
Mrs Claus's red dress	+34%
Mrs Claus's cable knit jumper	+38%
Red glittery trainers	+34%

Source: M&S

M&S flourished online:

Figure 18: Online uplifts

	Uplift vs Christmas 2015
Visits to campaign editorial page	+714%
Traffic from social media	+300%
Direct traffic	+24%
Dwell time	+7%
Average order value	+50%
Online sales	+9.4%

Source: M&S

And, most importantly, Mrs. Claus drove the first growth in M&S General Merchandise Christmas sales for 6 years – a full 8.1%pts up on the previous year.

Fig 19: General Merchandise Christmas Sales

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Yr on Yr Growth in like- for-like stores	-1.8%	-3.8	-2.1%	-5.8%	-5.8%	+2.3%

Source: M&S plc Group Q3 Interim Statements

Conclusion

Brand Feminism is on the march. But middle aged, middle class women have not, until now, been put centre stage. A powerful and, crucially, ownable insight allowed M&S to change all that. In doing so, M&S held its head up high in the

overcrowded Christmas market – topping the tree of the Christmas advertising ‘Superbowl’, rekindling the love of its customers and driving a transformation of the business.

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