

HOW BIOMETRICS SOLVED A DECADE OLD BRAND CHALLENGE

Category: Consumer Insight
Brand: E-Class
Brand Owner: Mercedes-Benz





The *observer effect* is a phenomenon that has been widely reported in the world of marketing research (not to mention several episodes of *Star Trek*).

At the heart of this paper is a story of how Mercedes-Benz devised a research methodology that revealed the true, unbiased biological response to driving our cars.

A methodology that enabled us to unlock a deep-rooted insight that helped us transform the sales performance of one of our most pivotal models. A model that had faced relentless, 'superior' competition from two of the most respected model brands in the world.

By tapping into a sensation and creating a digital interactive experience that enabled users to experience and share its power first-hand, the Mercedes-Benz E-Class outsold its rivals for the first time in decades.

With a total marketing communications expenditure of £3.3m, we achieved unprecedented levels of interest in the model brand - brochure downloads increased by 117% and test drive requests increased by 80% - an incremental sales growth of 38% (versus a sector growth of 9%) and a gross revenue ROI in excess of 17:1.

Crucially, over 50% of the sales came from a group of car buyers who were new to our brand.



THE CHALLENGE

Mercedes-Benz E-Class is the longstanding centre of gravity of the Mercedes-Benz brand. One of our oldest model brands - it represents a bridge between a new range of small, dynamic cars at one end and large high-end luxury limousines at the other.

We launched a brand new E-Class a year earlier but, after an initial period of interest, it soon came under sales pressure once more.

Our objectives were to:

1. Make 35-54 year olds re-appraise Mercedes-Benz E-Class and increase the level of enquiries (test drives and brochure requests) from this group
2. Drive a 10% increase in Mercedes-Benz E-Class new car sales, year-on-year.

These objectives presented a big challenge. There were two reasons why:

First, the new E-Class was going up against two of the most respected models in the world. In the battleground of 'medium sized executive saloons', Mercedes' rivals had come to dominate the sector. Audi's A6 had garnered both plaudits and sales since the latest version was launched in 2011. Even more revered was BMW's 5 Series - widely regarded as the best four-door saloon ever produced. As AutoCar magazine put it:

"For 23 years, every iteration of the BMW 5-series that has gone up against the Mercedes E-class has come out on top."

In other words: to succeed we would have to break with a pattern of defeat more than two decades old.

Second, we would have to confront a brand image problem. The 5 Series and the A6 were not only seen as supreme cars. The manufacturers behind them – BMW and Audi – were both generally seen by our audience as comparatively more desirable brands. In their eyes, a Mercedes-Benz was a status car for 'the more mature driver'. As one Audi owner put it:

"I wouldn't want to buy a badge that says: 'you've made it but you're putting the brakes on'".

Source: AMV qualitative research

So, at both a product level and a brand level, we faced supposedly superior competitors.

We had slowly been making inroads into this problem over the last two years - 'Escape the Map' (Marketing Week Engage submission, 2012) and 'YouDrive' (Marketing Week Engage submission, 2013) - but for the E-Class segment, the problem was particularly acute and we needed to go further.



THE STRATEGY

In response, we began by speaking with BMW 5 Series and Audi A6 owners, inviting them to describe their cars. They responded with fondness and enthusiasm. It was akin to rolling a conversational red carpet.

Then, having heard enough fond chat about rival brands, we conducted correlation analysis of brand consideration and brand perception in the prestige auto sector.

A series of discoveries took us on a journey to our final engagement idea:





SPORTY CREDENTIALS ARE FUNDAMENTAL:

The way that rival products, and rival brands, were fondly described was remarkably similar - descriptions that were subsequently confirmed by NCBS car characteristics tracking studies.

Perception that a brand is driven by younger people, it turned out, is highly correlated with perceptions of the brand as being 'sporty' and 'dynamic'.



We had to make the E-Class seem sporty, so we turned to the sportiest E-Class model of all: the E63 AMG.

But what's the most relevant and resonant way to project a 'sporty' and 'dynamic' image in the automotive category?

PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN DESIGN:

When we spoke to BMW 5 Series and Audi A6 owners, we noted how they used descriptions of experience as evidence of still being young(ish). Adventure holidays, extreme sports (though often not so extreme), even risk-laden business deals. Things that get your pulse going.

As one respondent put, things that mean “you’re living, not just existing.”

That reminded us of a quote from our colleagues at AMG, ‘we develop the engine to prompt the release of large amounts of adrenaline’.

In other words, the experience of driving an AMG is specially engineered to elicit a physiological response in its driver.

It’s engineered for a specific purpose, but does it deliver?

We set out to measure what it really means to experience the E63 AMG.

Historically, we would have commissioned qualitative groups with drivers, but this time we wanted to understand the real, unbiased biological effects.



USING BIOMETRICS TO DISCOVER NEW INSIGHTS

We approached Hidalgo Ltd, the company that monitored Felix Baumgartner as he base jumped from the edge of space. Together we devised a methodology to gauge the true physiological impact of driving an E63 AMG.

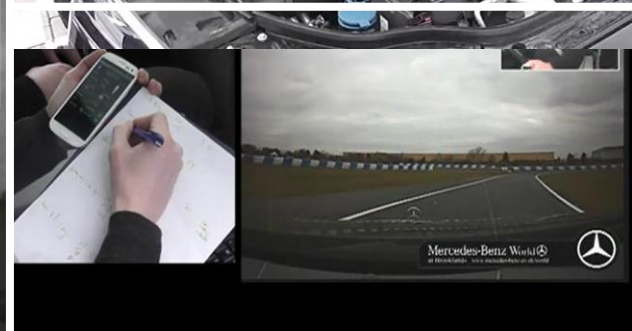
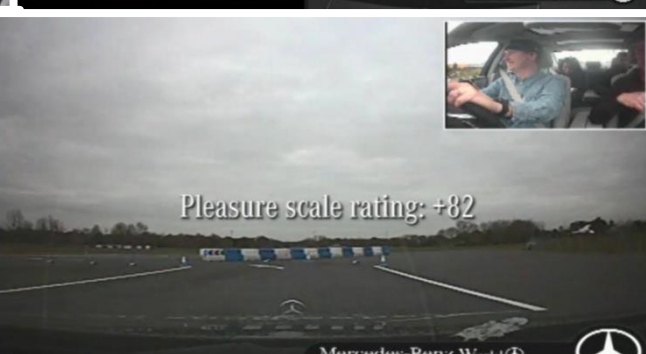
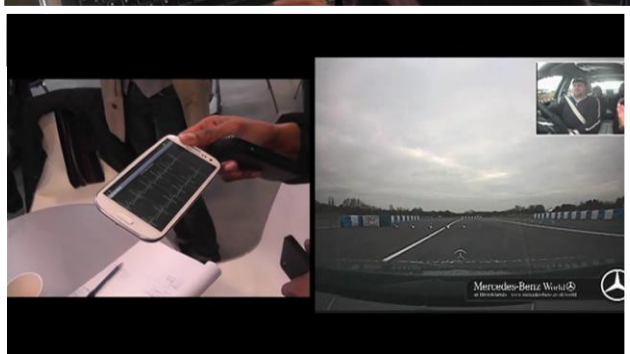
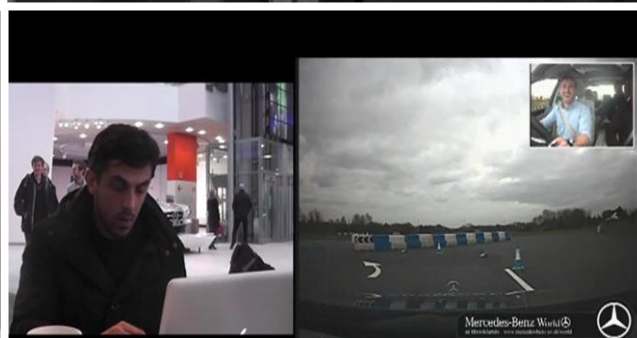
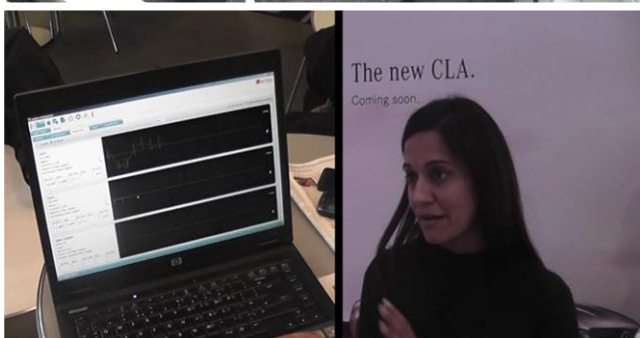
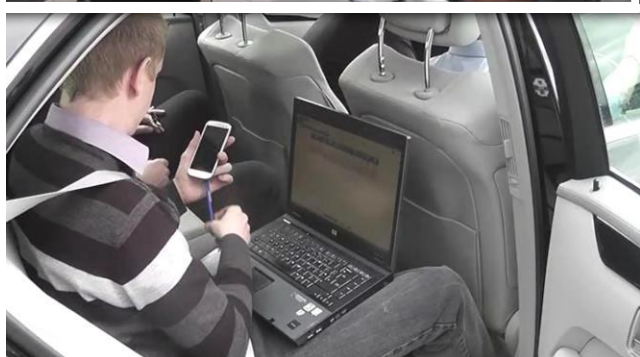
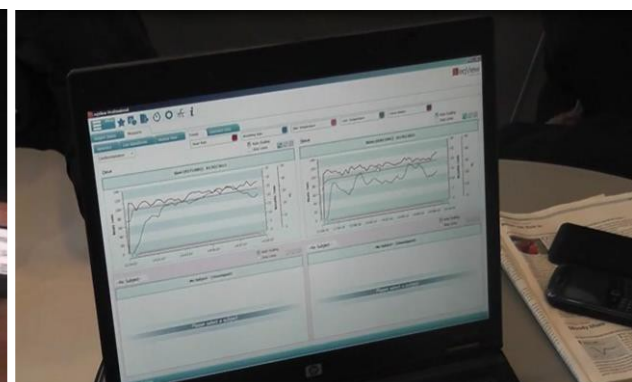
Three male subjects aged between 29 and 50 were fitted with a life monitor - a unique piece of mobile technology designed to increase understanding of how the body is performing and adapting to different pressures, strains and environments – and a Brainband EEG headset.

Each driver independently performed circuits of a private race track. We were able to view the driver's biometric data live under acceleration and braking conditions.

For each driver we were able to track a complete set of biometric measures including; activity in the pleasure center of the brain, heart rate variability, breathing waveforms, breathing rate, tri axis accelerometry, temperature and galvanic skin response.

The data was compared to Hidalgo's database.





TYPICAL BIOMETRIC RESPONSE

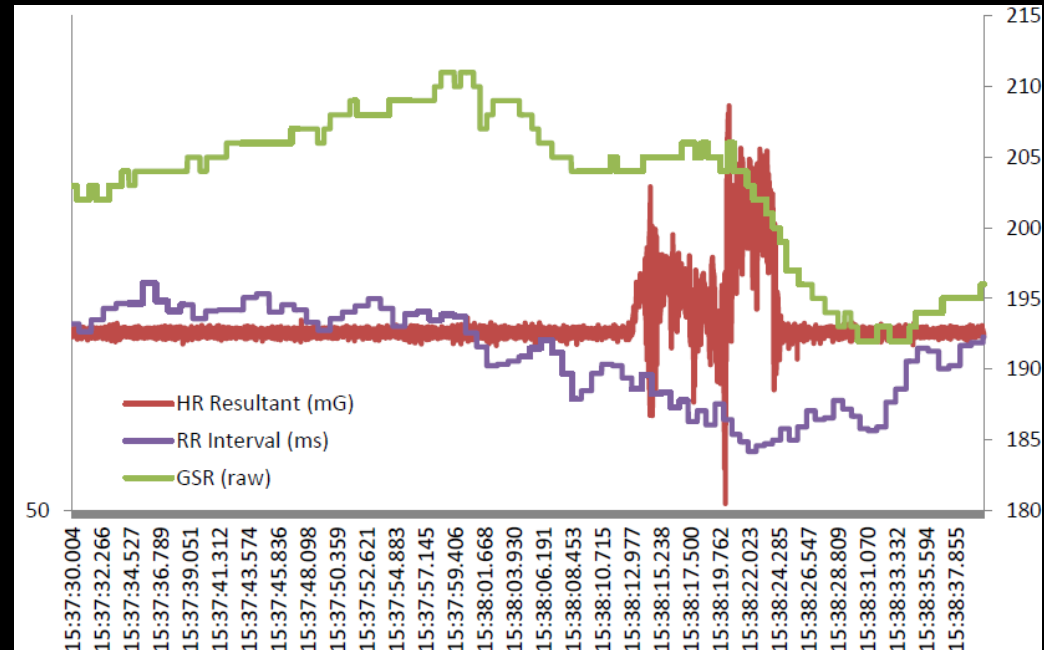
Nick's data shows a positive emotional response. The instantaneous heart rate and heart rate variability show a marked anticipatory response as does Galvanic skin response. The positive (excitement/exhilaration) response starts approximately 6 seconds before beginning acceleration.

We observed that there was a reproducible physiological response amongst all three drivers that suggest extreme excitement. Of particular interest was an anticipatory heart rate and galvanic response in all three subjects when standing still which began 6 seconds prior to motion.

As Hidalgo stated in their analysis:

The finding of an anticipatory instantaneous heart rate response is both exciting and valuable to understand further. This is similar to the type of response seen in highly trained special operations soldiers prior to taking a shot at a target.

Dr. Ekta Sood, Hidalgo Limited, March 2013



Nick, age 40, resting heart rate 75

HR = Instantaneous heart rate
RR = Heart rate variability
GSR = Galvanic skin response



SOUND IS PROFOUND

This was particularly interesting because the key stimuli that caused the anticipatory response was primarily attributed to the sound the car emitted from its exhaust.

So it became apparent that sound could be used to elicit a physiological response.

We'd discovered a non-tactile sensory stimulus that has deep emotional resonance with drivers – a sensory agent that we may be able to use to make people not only feel physically through interactive experiences, but remotely too through advertising.

We wanted to understand this phenomenon with current performance car owners. What it is about performance cars that made them so appealing? And to gauge whether sound was as significant as the biometrics suggested.

So we conducted 11 ethnographic depths amongst performance car owners (Mercedes-Benz, BMW and Audi), at home and out and about in their cars. Within each session, their world was photographed and filmed throughout to provide a richer deeper understanding of their lifestyle and priorities.

What became immediately apparent was the universal appeal and significance of sound. Above all else, the sound of the exhaust note generated a highly animated response from the respondents.

It's the sound that creates the emotional bond between driver and car. Not only that, the sound of the exhaust is a sensation they primarily use to signify a car as being an authentic performance car.

The sound of the car could provide the all-important sporty credentials.

THE EXECUTION

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a man's face, likely a driver, wearing a racing helmet. He has a focused, intense expression. A small, blue, circular sensor device is attached to his forehead. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows, creating a sense of speed and intensity.

The Mercedes-Benz E 63 AMG has an incredible sound - as we discovered through biometric testing - the kind of sound that instantly provokes a strong emotional and physical response.

The brief to our communications agency, AMV, was to demonstrate how powerful sounds can trigger emotions.

But we didn't want to simulate the experience. We wanted people to experience the emotive power of sound first hand and to engage on the devices they are already using most regularly.

The interactive, multi-media campaign explored how sound has the power to incite a range of emotions, such as excitement, happiness and nostalgia.

An interactive digital experience allowed users to build, layer upon layer, their own personal audio and video 'mash-up' using a range of sounds - all featuring the exhaust notes of the E63 AMG and other sonic elements. The sound bites were specifically chosen for their ability to stimulate an emotional response in the end user.

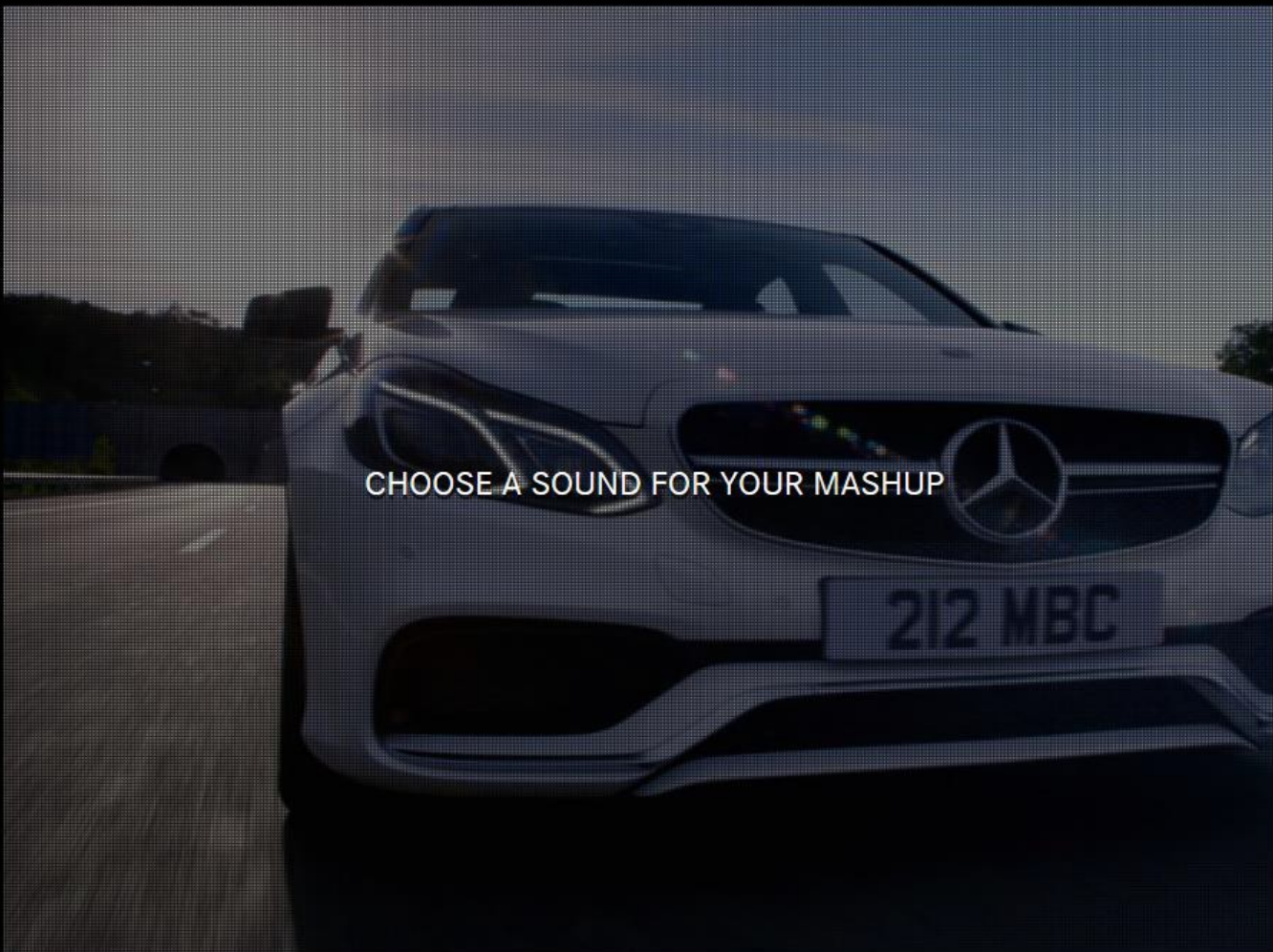
Once users had created their own 'mash-up' they were invited to share their creation on social networks, using #soundwithpower, for a chance to have their version air on TV during the second burst of the campaign.



TINIE TEMPAH - BASS

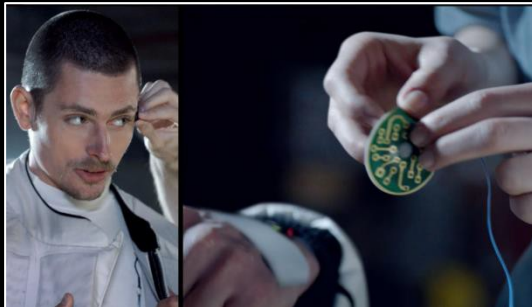
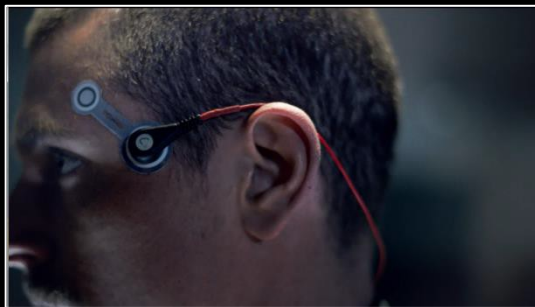


STINGRAY - RHYTHM



CHOOSE A SOUND FOR YOUR MASHUP





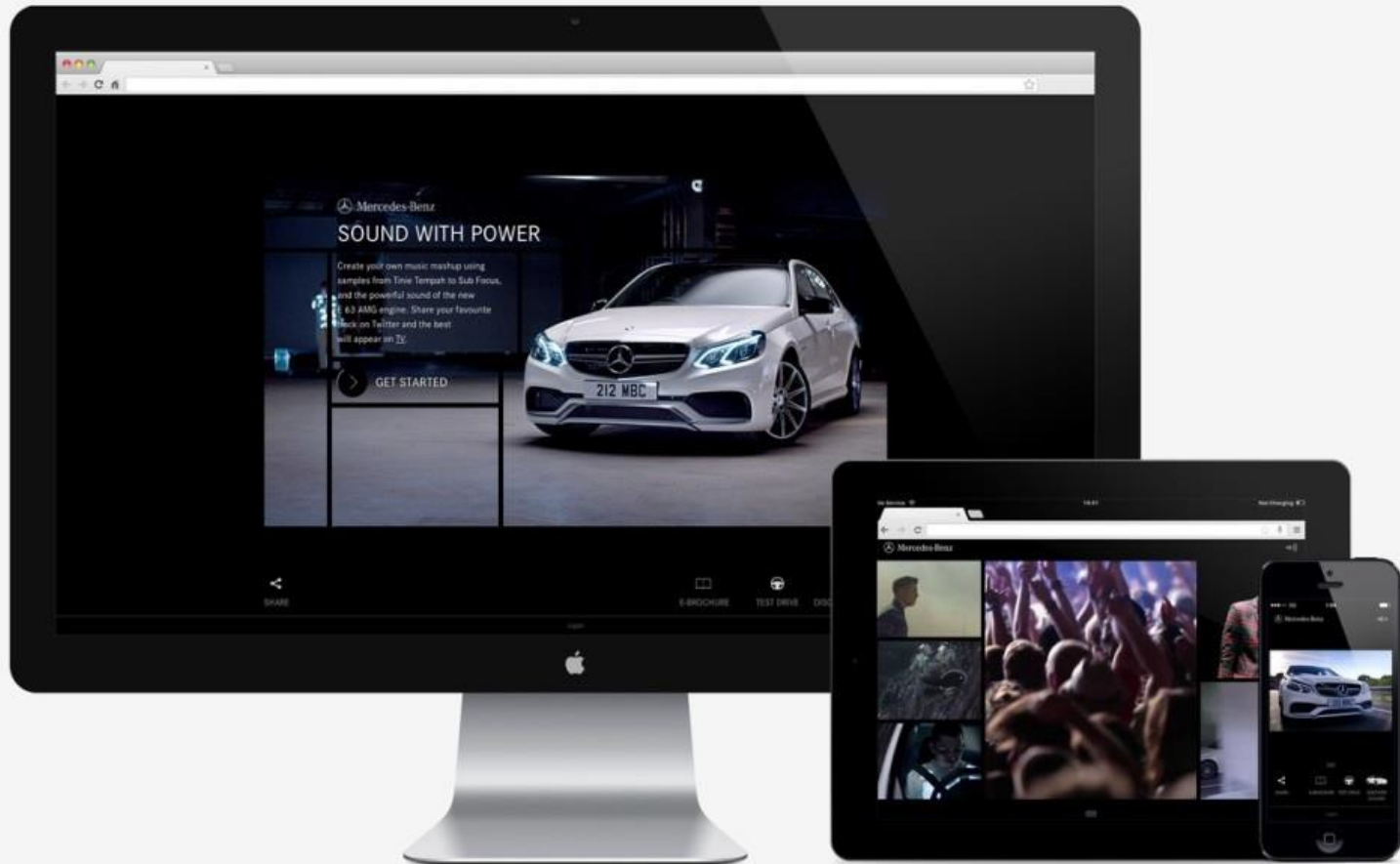
A TV campaign drove the audience to the digital experience by demonstrating the human response to sound. Uniquely, we see the real (not simulated) responses of one man to a variety of emotionally resonant sounds.

The ad opens on a man being fitted with a suit and ear piece. He is then played various sounds, such as a baby's cry, crashing waves, a scene from a film, a favourite piece of music and the roar of the E 63 AMG.

As he hears each sound, we see the suit light up in a different ways. The suit measures, through state of the art monitoring technology, his physical and neurological response to sound and feeds this into built-in LED light panels.

The television commercial directed the audience to the online 'mash-up' tool, hosted on the Mercedes-Benz website. Users were able to create their own audio-visual mashups straight in the browser whether on desktop, tablet or mobile.

They were never more than a click away from a test drive or brochure request.



Maxus took control of planning and programming for the marque's TV and cinema activity, brokering a deal where the #SoundWithPower campaign will appear in cinemas alongside three of the biggest major blockbusters of the year.

Maxus also devised and implemented innovative digital platforms to showcase and support the 're-mixing deck', including an exclusive three month partnership with Spotify.

Showroom materials and heavyweight online support, consisting of online advertising, interactive ads for mobile, iPad and Spotify were created by Weapon7.

An engaging social media strand with bespoke content was driven by Holler, playing off event advertising and leveraging real social discussion. Holler also brought the context of sound with power to life through exclusive interviews with Lewis Hamilton.

RESULTS

SOUND WITH POWER HAS ENGAGED ITS AUDIENCE

Visits to our website in just three months ¹	354,219
Visitors completed the experience ¹	75%
Average dwell time on site ¹	2mins, 16 seconds

RECORD ENGAGEMENT WITH THE BRAND

Mercedes 'online engagement' ^{1,3}	453,845
Increase in online engagement ^{1,2,3}	+ 71%
Engagement on Twitter ^{1,2}	+ 564%

INTEREST IN THE E-CLASS GREW SIGNIFICANTLY

Visits to E-Class section of Mercedes website increased ^{1,2}	92%
E-Class Brochure downloads increased ^{1,2}	117%
E-Class Test Drive Requests increased ^{1,2}	80%

WE ATTRACTED A NEW, CONQUEST CUSTOMER:

Perceived age of driver post exposure (pre = 43) ⁵	37
Competitive drivers who see a positive impact on driver image ⁵	74%
Customers new to Mercedes-Benz ^{2,4}	52%

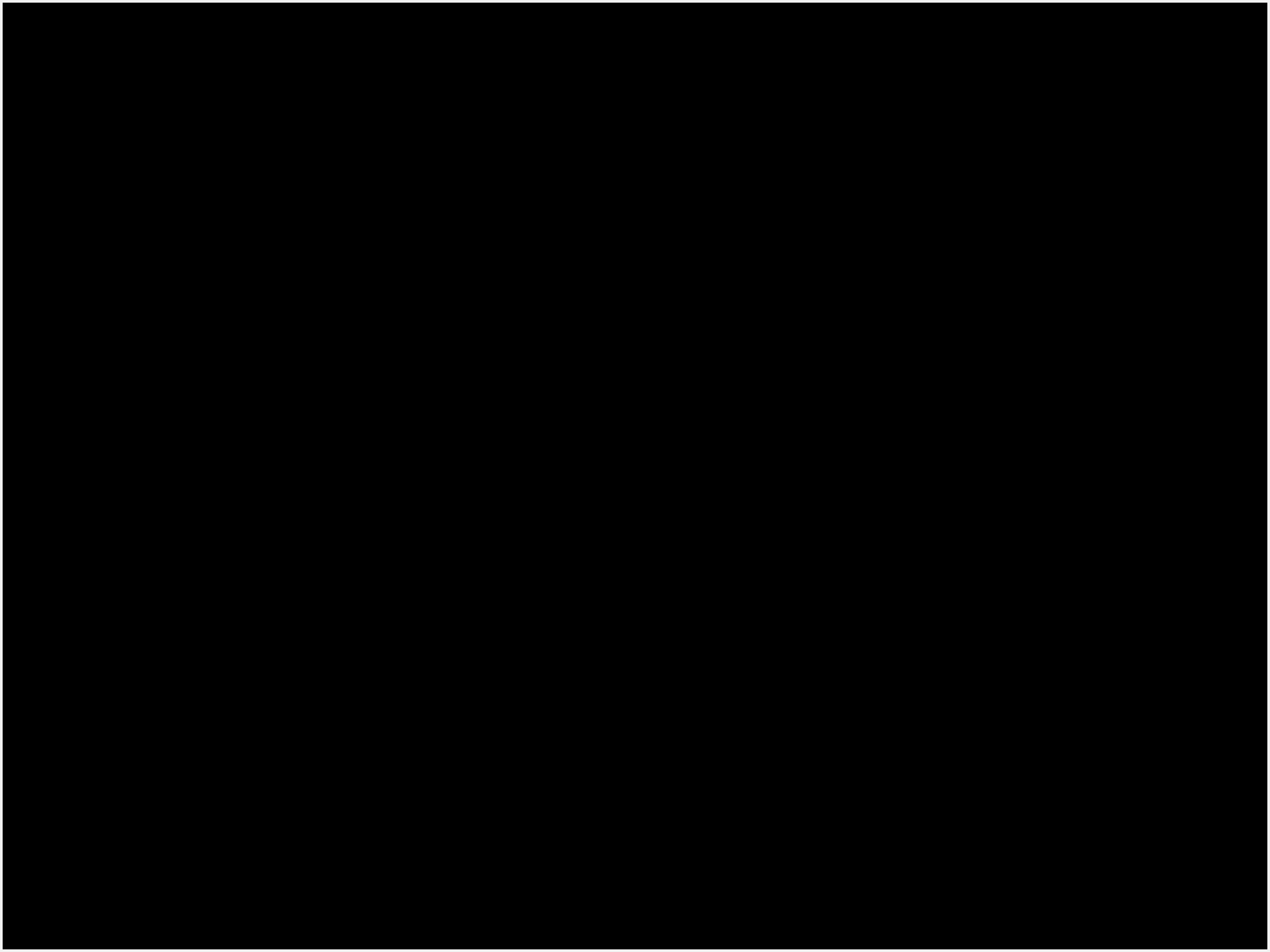
1. Omniture for Mercedes-Benz

2. Versus equivalent period a year earlier

3. Includes all likes, shares, comments, re-tweets, posts etc. In any platform

4. Mercedes-Benz, UK

5. TNS Ad-Tracking Q4 2013, January 2014



The power of an insight with a difference:

It's commonplace for marketers to talk about 'differentiation'.

How should our brand, our packaging or our ad be different to competitors?

This case demonstrates what happens when marketing consciously choose to do something different to generate insight.

Biometrics has existed in scientific research for many years, but by placing unbiased consumer insight at the heart of the marketing challenge we disrupted the E-Class segment.

