

Myths, misinformation and McDonald's

How fortune favours the brave

The Marketing Society Awards 2018

Building powerful brands – Long-term marketing excellence

Brand: McDonald's UK

Agencies: Leo Burnett London; Blue Rubicon; OMD UK



Executive summary

Beaks and feet in McNuggets.

Deformed cows in burgers.

Plastic eggs in the McMuffin.

These are the things that rumours about McDonald's are made of. That the nightmares of McDonald's Brand Managers are made of.

They are not the things you would imagine that McDonald's advertising is made of.

But this is a story of bravery. Of how we placed our worst fears at the heart of our advertising in glorious technicolour.

This bravery was driven by the need to tackle what we would now call "fake news".

Myths about McDonald's had found a new home on social media. A home that offered fertile ground for unwanted viral effects. Food quality perceptions plummeted. Business performance was at risk.

Our social listening uncovered the root of the problem - a knowledge vacuum.

Successive attempts to set the record straight fell short; consumers felt the brand was glazing over their concerns.

So, we set out to not simply tackle specific, damaging myths. But to prompt customers to stop and think any time they were exposed to an intriguing claim about McDonald's.

Our approach - satire. We poked fun at the new culture of fake news, and all who are drawn in by it.

We featured unpalatable myths in advertising. We poked fun at our customers.

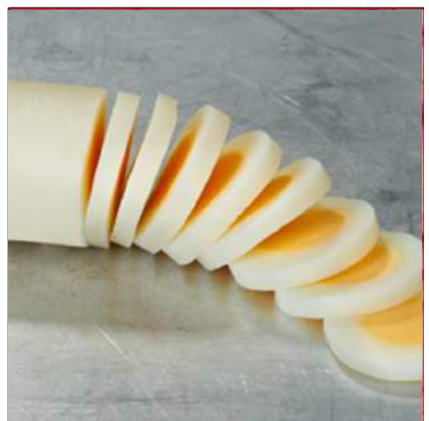
Gonzo or brave? We'd argue it's brave.

And amidst all these myths and rumours...

- Communications successfully tackled both specific myths and quality perceptions
- Food quality perceptions increased to their highest ever levels
- McDonald's 'Trust' scores reached their highest ever levels
- Econometrics demonstrated a strong contribution to the business' bottom line - £9.00
- Customer visit frequency increased
- The McDonald's UK business achieved significant sales growth

...we confirmed an old truth. Fortune favours the brave.

Confidentiality: Data included on pages 7, 15, 16, 17 and 18 are not for publication.



The rumour mill and McDonald's

Rumours. We're all drawn to them. We're social creatures and they are a source of social capital. They make us look and feel in the know and connected.

For rumours to work, they need to be based on a shared reference point. Public figures fit the bill nicely. As do big brands. And brands don't come much bigger than McDonald's.

The most powerful rumours are also a reflection of broader concerns. We care about what we eat. And McDonald's of course is a food business.

So, it's no surprise that McDonald's has long been the subject of rumours about the quality of its food.

But the brand had never felt the need to respond until the mid-noughties when it found itself cast as the villain of the food industry.



Just some of the challenges McDonald's faced in the early-mid 00's

McDonald's made substantial changes, not least to its supply chain which became the envy of its peers, winning multiple RSPCA Good Business Awards.

For the first time, advertising set out to address food quality perceptions.

Our 2009 TV ad, 'Big Nothing', was typical of our approach. We wrapped compelling food facts in an emotionally engaging execution. An idealised world of kids on a farm tracing zero shaped objects helped land a simple message:

"Nothing. Zero. That's what's added to our burgers. There's simply 100% beef from British and Irish farms. Seasoned with a touch of salt and pepper"

To make matters even more concerning, with restaurants openings now considerably slowed in the UK, Trust in the brand had become one of the most significant levers for the business's growth.



'Big Nothing' (2009)

The approach proved successful, and played its part in returning the brand and business to health. However, by the start of the next decade the rumours started to gain renewed potency.

The age of misinformation

The catalyst? That familiar disruptive force – the internet.

Rumours and myths that had previously been confined to the playground, water-cooler and pub had a new home within social media.

These environments proved a powerful incubator and propagator of undesirable viral effects, thanks to a set of mutually reinforcing factors:

- **Rumours are indistinguishable from reality.** When myths sit alongside legitimate journalism in newsfeeds and wear similar clothing it is hard to sort fact from fiction.
- **Sharing is prolific.** Rumours, myths and genuine concerns can reach far more people than traditional word of mouth.
- **Click-bait as a business model.** Many online publishers rely on advertising revenue. This has driven the emergence of 'click-bait' – salacious headlines within social media designed to drive clicks and visits.
- **Permanence.** Once they find a digital home, rumours have a permanent presence that means they are more liable to resurface again.
The terms 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' had yet to be coined of course. But that's exactly what we were dealing with.

A growing threat to the business

So how was McDonald's faring in this new environment? You guessed it. Not so well. It remained a conveniently prominent lightning rod for salacious slanders and slurs. And the brand was under attack from all angles. Even fake twitter accounts for members of the band One Direction were tweeting about cancer-causing pink slime. Click-bait sites were doing their worst. Millions upon millions of people were watching YouTube videos based on these false claims. And customers were merrily sharing the misinformation onwards.

Ewww #mcdonalds has traces of human meat in their food

12 Aug 2014 by Jess Harrison



SALON VIDEO NEWS POLITICS ENTERTAINMENT LIFE IN

TUESDAY, DEC 9, 2014 09:50 PM +0000

What McDonald's still isn't telling you about its chicken nuggets

10 Disgusting Facts about McDonald's

10 Disgusting Facts About McDonald's

Alltime15x US

3,844,077 views

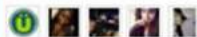
Gym Problems

McDonald's hamburger contains only 15% real beef while other 85% is meat filler and pink slime cleansed with ammonia which can cause cancer.

4:38 AM - 23 Jul 2016

McDonald's Chicken McNuggets contain dimethylpolysiloxane -- A silicone based product used in cosmetics, shampoo and silly putty.

8 Feb 2014 by UberFacts



Colleen
@thewifeofminaj

mcdonalds is fake meat...



Watch This Video And You'll Never Eat McDonald's French Fries Again

Human Meat Found In McDonald's Meat Factory

Posted on by Daily Buzz Live



McDonald's Chicken McNuggets found to contain mysterious fibers, hair-like structures; Natural News Forensic Food Lab posts research photos, video

Friday, August 16, 2013
by Mike Adams, The Health Ranger
Editor of NaturalNews.com (See all articles...)
Tags: Chicken McNuggets, Science, Food analysis, strange fibers

Yazmin Sweet'xo Why do you always say that it's British beef and eggs when McDonald's is American so it's just like copying and it's a load of fat make up from chemicals and salt

Like Reply · January 23 at 12:23am

How To Get "Real" Eggs on Any McDonald's Breakfast Sandwich

Posted by Sylvon Blanco | [Get my free 5-day course](#)

Share on FB

Tweet on Twitter

10 Awful Facts About McDonald's

Top 10 Awful Facts About McDonald's - TopFrenzNet

1,128,011 views

Tom Lally What's hidden behind closed doors though?...

Like Reply · January 22 at 12:48pm

Chicken Nuggets, Pink Elephant Poo And Fat Rats?

Posted In Uncategorized | No comments

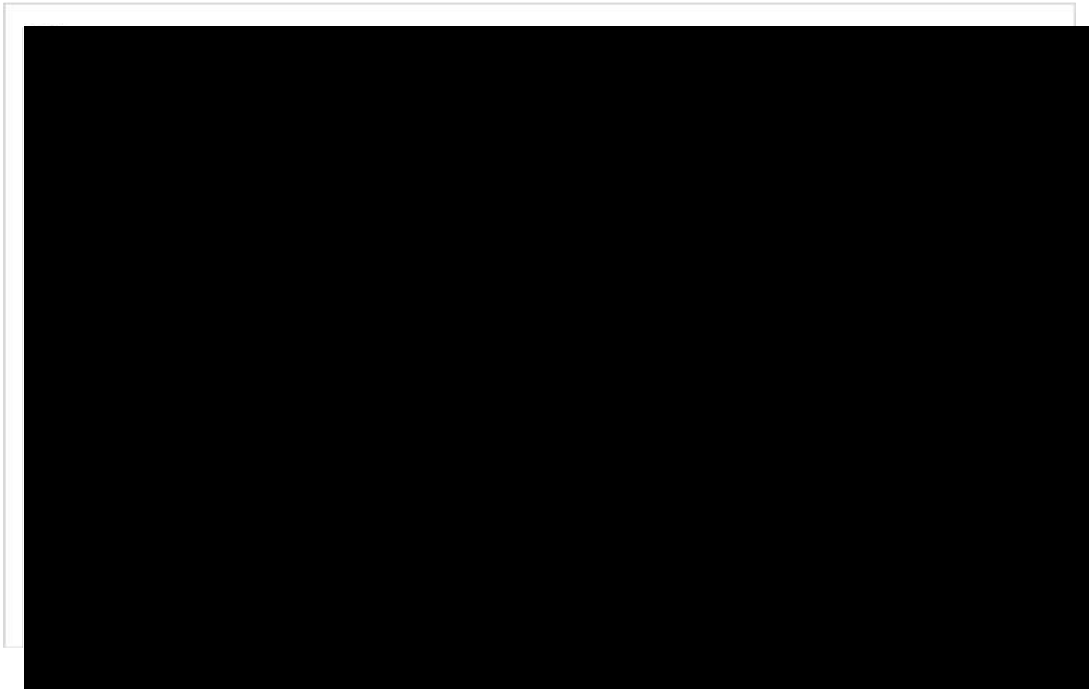
Tweet Like 42



NIAIHORAN RT @Fact McDonald's hamburgers contains only 15% real beef while the other 85% is meat filler & pink slime cleansed with ammonia which causes cancer.

6 hours ago

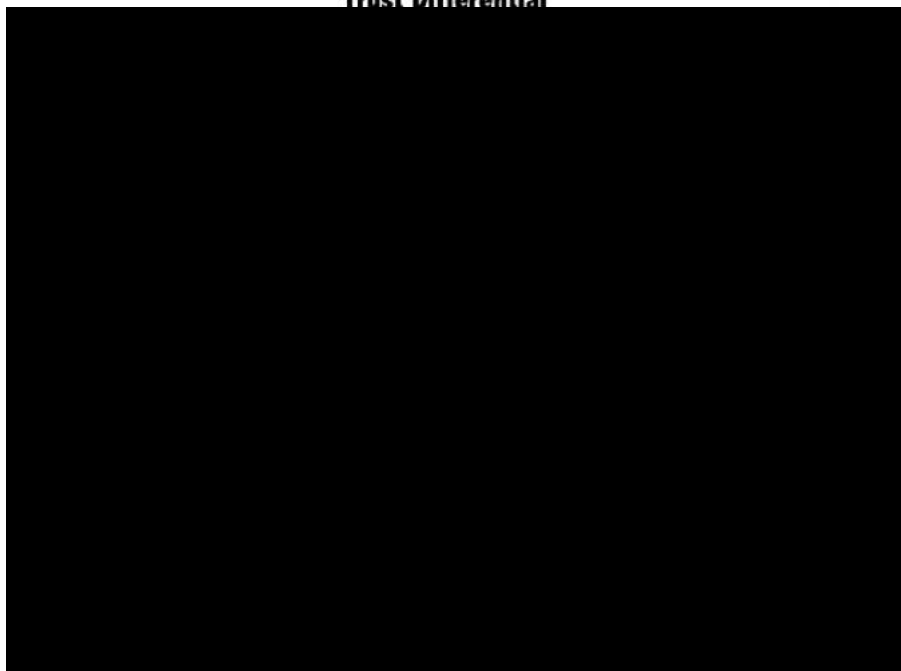
Unsurprisingly, consumer perceptions about McDonald's food quality started to decline at an alarming rate, damaging the hard-earned progress made from 2008-2011.



This was a major concern for McDonald's long-term business performance. Modelling had repeatedly shown the strong correlation between food quality perceptions and frequency of visit, therefore also footfall and revenue.

Increased food quality perceptions = Increased trust in the McDonald's brand
= Increased visitor frequency = Increased sales

Monthly visits among McDonald's frequent customers
Trust Differential



To make matters even more concerning, with restaurant openings now considerably slowed in the UK, *Trust* in the brand had become one of the most significant levers for the business's growth.

The heart of the problem

Qualitative research and social listening pointed us towards the root of the problem. A knowledge vacuum.

Advertising had done a good job of reassuring people that McDonald's food was sourced from trusted farms and suppliers. And they knew from experience that they liked what they ate at the other end of the chain. What happened in the middle was something of a mystery. Rumour loves an information vacuum. And in it rushed.

So, what could be done?

Our initial instinct was to fill the void by once more concentrating on delivering the true facts about our food in an emotionally engaging manner.

However, this 'idealised world' approach was no longer capable of reassuring people. The damage was done and the research told us that people were suspicious of this advertising veneer.

We needed to get real and embrace the uncomfortable reality.

Time to be brave

At this point we broached the prospect of acknowledging myths in advertising.

There was understandable nervousness in all quarters. We would be amplifying these rumours, spending a significant amount of money exposing them to many who might not have heard them before.

A kamikaze move surely?

The challenge

To pull this off, we needed to not only tackle the specific myths that were proving damaging. We also needed to address myths in general. And our advertising had to be more interesting than these myths that had been designed for maximum intrigue.

In desperation, we scoured other genres of creativity that had tackled difficult issues. And we hit upon a timeless tool.

Satire.

Fighting fire with satire

Satire promised a combination of effects that made it particularly appealing. It holds up a mirror to society. It pokes fun to provoke reflection.

And the mimicry and exaggeration that characterise much satire have a powerful dual effect. They shine a light on the behaviours the satirist wishes to address, whilst creating humour that makes otherwise uncomfortable scrutiny bearable – and even enjoyable.

Satire might offer us a way to challenge both the myths, and those that believed and shared those myths onwards.

We wanted to find a way to poke fun at the new culture of rumour and fake news, and all who are drawn in by it.

So, we set out to fight the fires of rumour that blazed around the brand with satire, alighting on a creative approach that balanced humour with bite.

The Creative Work

We used social listening to identify the most persistent and damaging myths. These centred around our core menu items of beef, chicken, eggs, and fries.

We then took some of the most sensational myths such as deformed cows, nasty bits of chicken, plastic eggs and fries made of anything other than potato. And we lavished upon them the love, care and craft that we normally reserve in advertising for our most cherished brand benefits.

And we gently and affectionately poked fun at the customers who were believing and sharing these rumours.

These entertaining evocations, that we could all relate to, raised a smile and showed these rumours and rumour-mongers for what they were – really rather silly.

Each and every touchpoint was used to reinforce these messages along the customer journey, from our tray liners to our website.

'Cow' (2015)



This is a cow (moo). As drawn by Laura Evans, age 9 and a quarter. Apparently it's the kind of cow McDonald's use.



Laura thinks they're full of additives and other bits, because they wouldn't use good beef just to make burgers.



Her mum says so. Hi Beth. And it must be true because Carol told her.



This is Ted. Ted is a butcher. He wants to show them what he thinks makes a great burger.



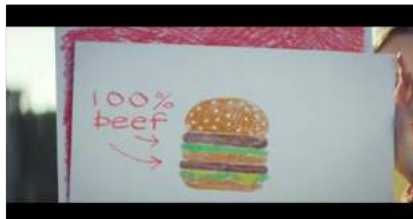
The right feed, fresh air...



...and whole cuts of forequarter and flank.



And that's it, 100% beef. And a pinch of salt and pepper.



And that's exactly what goes into a McDonald's burger.



'Chicken Whispers' (2016)



"There's all sorts of bits in McNuggets".
Oh, here we go again.



"She said there's all sorts of
beaks in McNuggets"



"She said there's bits, beaks
and feet in McNuggets"



"Yeah there's all sorts of bits..."
"... beaks, feet..."



"...innards, feathers..."



Hold on, meet Hayden, he's a food
quality inspector. He's responsible for
the chicken that does and doesn't go
into McNuggets.



And he's written an easy to follow list.



So, if it's not 100% chicken breast,
it's not going in.



Well there you have it.
"Can I have one?"
Whoops, too late.



'Eggs' (2016)



To make light of the fact that some people thought our eggs weren't real we created a fictional factory where tubes of plastic egg were manually sliced.

'Chicken' (2015)



We demonstrated the absurdity of people's beliefs about our Chicken McNuggets through the depiction of a mad scientist and his 'Franken-chicken'.

'Fries' (2015)



Again, we created a fictional factory to poke fun of the people who thought our fries aren't made of real potato.

Independent voices

As well as creating content from the brand, we also created content from independent voices. We looked to infiltrate the online world that rumours and myths inhabit, selecting our influencers based on their ability to get to our 'hard to reach' audiences. We allowed these larger than life YouTube personalities access to our farms, factories, and restaurant kitchens to find out for themselves how we make and prepare our food. Posting on their channels and letting them stamp their own styles over the content proved to give the messages even greater credibility.



brummymummyof2 – 'What's REALLY In A McDonald's Happy Meal?'



Doug Armstrong – 'ARE MCDONALD'S BURGERS REALLY 100% BEEF?'



Raphael Gomes – 'How it's made McDonald's Chicken McNuggets?'

Optimisation over time

Having found an approach that allowed us to not only tackle specific myths, but make people stop and consider their response to myths in general, we spent the three years from 2015-2017 using every tool in our arsenal to maximise its impact.

- We continued to conduct social listening to inform each new execution for the campaign. E.g. having established the provenance of our beef (100% British & Irish) we then needed to react to cynicism about what else was present – therefore we created an ad about beef being the SOLE ingredient in our burgers
- We optimised our media approach to be ‘always on’ for increased efficiency
- In order to encourage a positive, symbiotic relationship between our *Trust* campaign and our product advertising, we selected our *Trust* execution based on the related product advertising on our plan so they were on air concurrently e.g. whilst advertising a new beef burger it was a beef execution that was live from our *Trust* campaign
- We rotated the different executions to prevent wear out, build recognition, and deliver multiple key messages to our target audiences

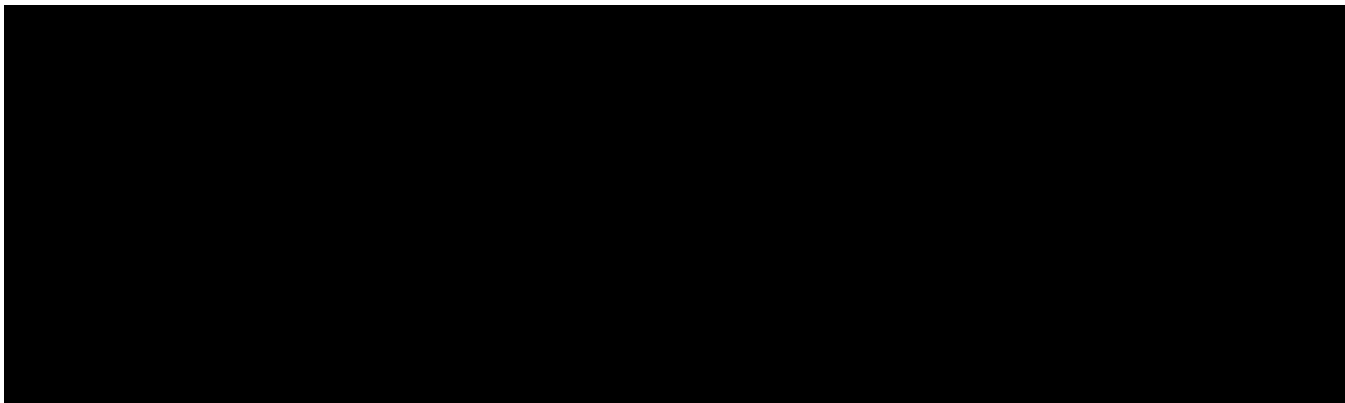
A risk that paid off

Our bold approach paid dividends.

1. Communications tackled both specific myths and quality perceptions in general
2. Food quality perceptions increased to their highest ever levels
3. McDonald’s *Trust* scores reached their highest ever levels
4. Econometrics demonstrated a strong contribution to the business’ bottom line - £9.00
5. Customer visit frequency increased
6. The McDonald’s UK business achieved significant sales growth

1. Communications tackled both specific myths and quality perceptions in general

There is a wealth of information to suggest that our broadcast communications worked as intended. Not only did they deliver their specific ingredient messages but they had a positive effect on brand measures such as ‘McDonald’s has good quality food’, and ‘McDonald’s is a brand I trust’ (amongst infrequent visitors – Ipsos).



This was supported by post-campaign qualitative research that found the approach in broadcast alleviated customers’ concerns for the first time. They also commended us for leading the market by revealing more about our food processes (Davies McKerr, 2016).

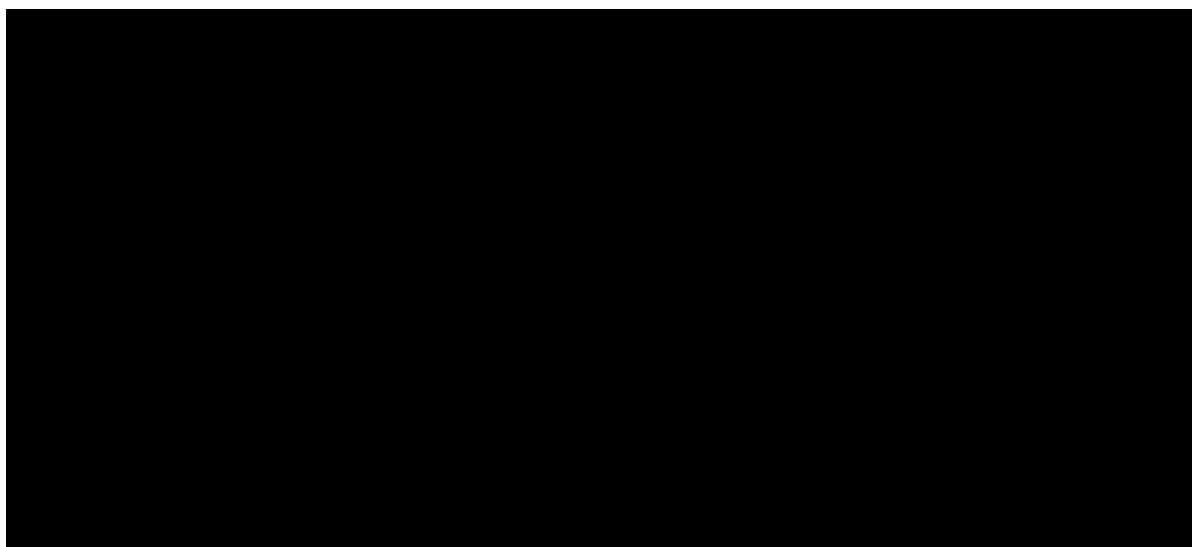
The same research showed that the openness and transparency of the vlogger content was effective in positively shifting trust perceptions.

It spoke volumes about the confidence and integrity of the brand to give the vloggers the freedom to scrutinize the facts and divulge unknown information.

As expected, this approach was particularly effective for convincing our more cynical consumers (Davies McKerr, 2016).

2. Food quality perceptions of McDonald’s increased to their highest ever levels.

The campaign also had a hugely positive impact on consumers’ food quality perceptions.

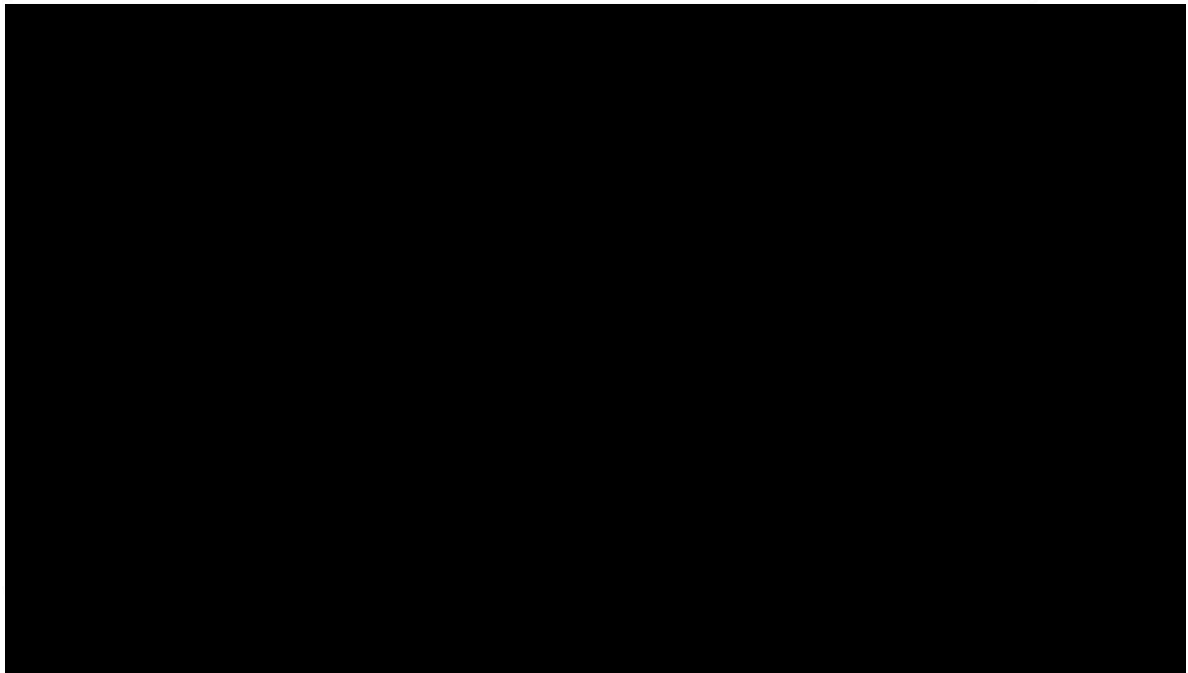


In particular, perceptions of *Good quality food* recently hit their highest ever level of [REDACTED] - an increase of over a third since our 'Good to know' campaign launched (Q4'2014- Q4'2017).

This was also supported by increased quality perceptions of our two main ingredients, beef and chicken, both achieving a [REDACTED] point increase YOY for each of the three years (Fast Track, 2014- 2017). This was after four full years of only [REDACTED] point fluctuations.

3. McDonald's Trust scores are now at their highest ever recorded – 45%

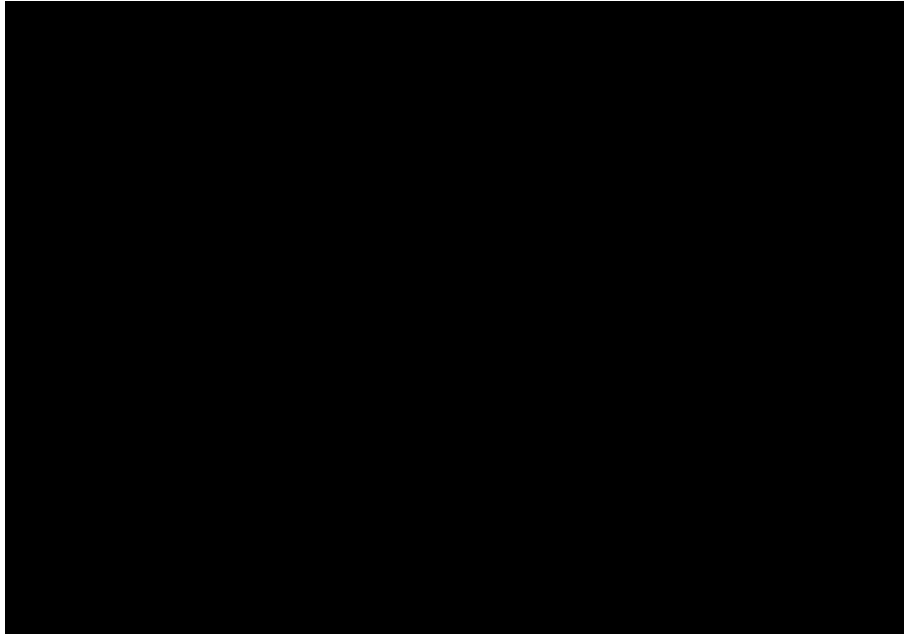
The British public's trust in McDonald's is higher than ever at [REDACTED]. Not only is this the highest *Trust* score achieved by McDonald's but *Distrust* in the brand also significantly decreased. The campaign more than doubled the gap between *Trust* and *Distrust*.



4. Econometrics demonstrated a strong and growing contribution to the

Not only were the communications effective but they were extremely efficient.

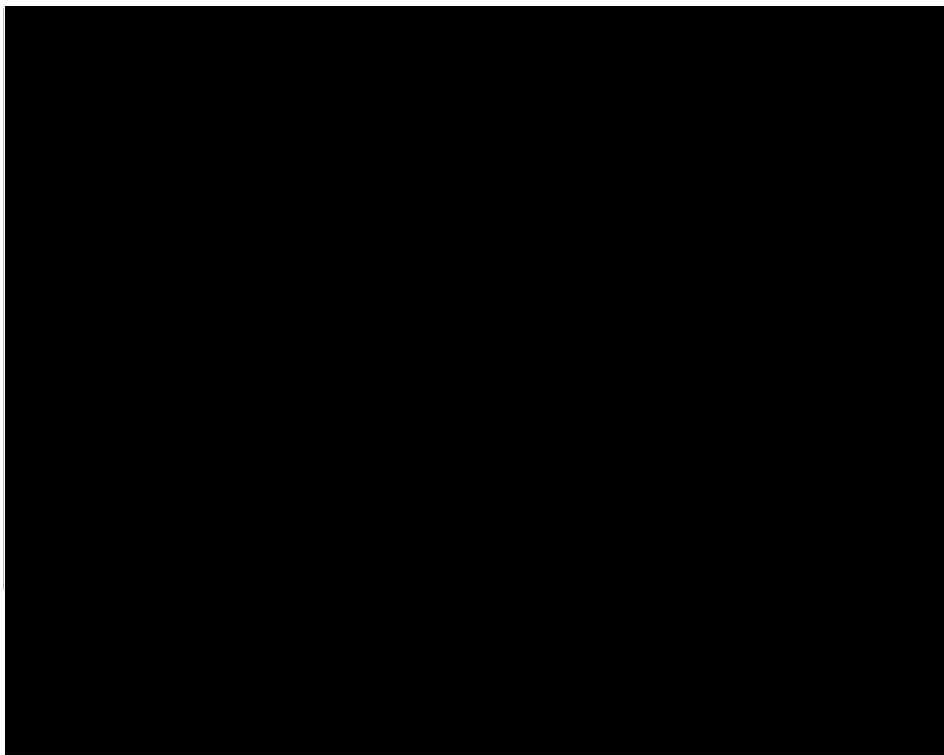
For every [REDACTED] invested the campaign now returns [REDACTED] (calculated after isolating the effect of communications). This return has grown as the campaign has bedded in, demonstrating further just how much of an impact it has made to the business' bottom line.



This represents a significant increase from previous trust driving campaigns – a ROMI which has more than doubled in real terms, an increase of [REDACTED] from the campaign that preceded 'Good to know'.

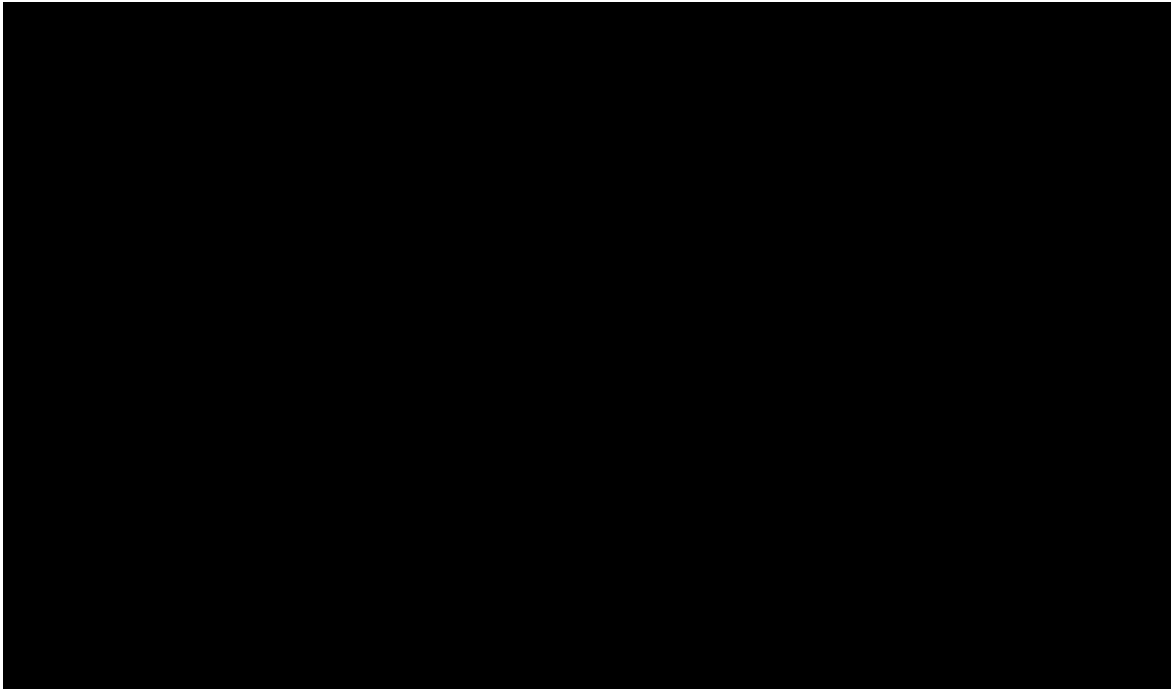
This is particularly impressive considering a backdrop of media inflation.

5. Customer visit frequency increased



6. The McDonald's UK business achieved significant sales growth

And we saw these reflected in the sales growth of McDonald's UK.



The risks we had taken had paid off. Fortune does indeed favour the brave.

Word count: 1990