**Are we there yet? The Temporal Dynamics of Motoring Branded Content**

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*You cannot bore people into buying your product, you can only interest them in buying it.*

*David Ogilvy*

The petrol price hike in July 2022 saw motorists paying more than ever at the pumps. Brought about by a series of factors including the war in Ukraine and a fall in the value of the pound against the dollar fuel reached a record high with diesel creeping over £2 per litre. Why this did not prompt a falling out of love with motoring, or at least a significant cutting back in driving activity is interesting and the subject of investigation here. Indeed from the earliest days of the car, it has always been about more than engineering, performance and speed. Pioneered by the introduction of the *Michelin Guide* (1900) branded content remains a successful tool for car promotion as it effectively and affectively brings to life the joy of motoring, a leisure activity centred around a journey that fuses both a temporal and physical dimension.

Promotional strategies have always been about space and time: where to position the ad and how long it will run. Where branded content differs is that it does not use these as the framework around which content is built but rather time and space becomes vessels for the possible in terms of creativity. More specifically, how branded content treats time differently to traditional advertising centres on the concept of duration: time as a qualitative value to be filled with experiences allowing people to spend time with the brand.

When we travel it is highly experiential. We are mobile, in transit, and that which connects departure to arrival is the time it takes to get there. The journey can therefore be harnessed as a liminal space for brand relationship building.

At the beginning of the twentieth century perceptions of the car were changing within both the motoring world and indeed in the public consciousness. Whilst recognised as a significant luxury item, print car advertising at this time principally centred on two dimensions: its aspirational qualities and its technical merits, all communicated in a static 2D format on the page. *The Michelin Guide* (1900) challenged the advertising establishment via a model whereby, whilst still utilising print, brands would be the generators of their own content to build a more effective and authentic relationship with their target audience. In this respect, what the *Michelin Guide* sought to achieve was ahead of its time by over a century. In today’s social media era brands struggle to function as custodians of their own identity. However, the Michelin brothers, André and Édouard, devised the guide to generate interest in motoring and inherently the tyres they were manufacturing but more than this their legacy lies in the way that they utilised promotional content to control their brand identity through ownership of the concept of motoring. Indeed, their own strategy for growth centred on increasing annual car mileage and hence the need for new tyres as part of regular maintenance – Michelin tyres of course. Focusing on ‘the journey’ rather than a specific car in order to engineer broader appeal, the early editions included maps to reach identified beauty spots, locations of petrol pumps, and technical instructions around car maintenance. It was only later, following World War One, that the guide evolved into what we know now whereby a quintessential part of its increasing popularity came from its inclusion of a star rating of restaurants mapped along a route and awarded by hired professional food critics. Initially distributed for free, as the guide became valued by motorists so did it then come with a price attached. By 2022 the Guide is now sold in 93 countries.

In essence, what we have is a travel, hotel and restaurant guide for French motorists produced by a tyre company and as such is an early example of the power of branded content to feed off the capacity of popular culture but re-packaged to offer both relevancy and entertainment value and delivered by a more discrete brand custodian. As a pioneer in the field, the value of the *Michelin Guide* is in how it saw the journey as opposed to car ownership and tyre consumption as worthy of promotion. Rather than working with the duality of the car and its driver the publication offers up a more dialogic relationship: man and machine crafting motoring adventures together. As a result, at the heart of the *Michelin Guide* was a cultivation of the pleasure of driving and the emotions attached to it.

Today journeys may be regulated by work, namely commuting, or as antidote, an escape from the quotidien. What links such activities and offers up a unique promotional space as a result is that within the car we are imbibed with a sense of temporal freedom: seemingly de-synchronized from those around us and yet operating in a context of always being on hyper sensory alert.

Temporality can be distinguished from clock time through the injection of the lived experience, turning the linear progression of quantitative minutes and seconds into a deeper qualitative immersive vessel. Branded content is ripe here to fill such temporal moments in relation to motoring promotion through a recognition that the temporal space a journey carves out allows us to spend time with a brand in a non-distracting manner. When so much of the diurnal centres on clock-watching, the car as cocoon crafts its own temporal register specific only to that one journey. In the car, our attention is focused, separated from the usual array of distraction of the multi-screen landscape. In the development of promotional culture, branded content comes out of consumers turning their backs on the push model of advertising. They recognise that time is precious and the amount of content available is gargantuan and they want to choose what they see and hear and when. The content itself to be effective needs to be reflective of brand personality but laced with currency; carefully curated to achieve its goals.

The legacy of the *Michelin Guide* in the annals of the history of branded content is both significant and enduring. Over a century later Land Rover was an early adopter of the now ubiquitous podcast medium. Storytelling is an inherent part of the human condition. Stories shape who we are and can make us feel the whole gamut of emotions. They shape our daily lives at the macro and micro level and at the same time have the ability to take us out of this world in terms of both space and time. Land Rover podcasts speak to the recognition that whilst the car is in motion, there is actually little movement from the driver, but in contrast all senses are heightened. Working with Mindshare in 2017 and utilising the in-car immersive experience of 3D sound, the Discovery Adventures were aimed at existing Land Rover owners and aspirant consumers. This seven part mystery series starts in London’s Natural History Museum where a child named Sam, his uncle and his Dog, Rover, of course, seek to solve the mystery of national GPS disruptions. As they travel through the country the listener takes the part of Sam and picks up clues provided by various celebrities that populate the story. Narrated by renowned outdoor experts, families work together as a captive audience in this adventure. And yet ultimately it is the car that is the star as it propels us forward into the narrative. It is interesting that time was a key driver in the forging of the overall idea. As Scott Dicken, the Marketing Director of Jaguar Land Rover UK stated on launch: “the car is a unique environment, a place of reduced distractions that allows for important quality time, and we’re hoping to encourage families and adventurers of all ages to make the most of this time together to go on a car adventure.” On the back of its success Land Rover Stories (2020) is a series of video-driven, Instagram-promoted travelogues in which photographers document their adventures driving their Land Rovers across a global landscape. This is then developed in a second phase where famous partners such as John Mayer share their journeys too. In this beautiful fusion of image and narrative the journey once again is both centred and captured but in such a way as to spark interest for the self-creation of future plans.

Authenticity is key for successful branded content. Branded content is all about storytelling: how the brand tells stories about itself in different ways. Both the Michelin brothers and Land Rover successfully executed their mission by playing with the dual and yet interwoven nature of the concept of journey. The car allows the journey to exist: but when journeys become adventures, the promotional possibilities are endless.

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