

Breaking through the clutter

Seen. Anchored. Understood.

A pre-sign-off check for image ads in social, display and out-of-home. Predictive attention uses AI eye-tracking models to show where people are likely to look first, and benchmarks that against peer ads in the same channel, before any media is spent. Use it to pre-test and validate creative, so designers can focus on concept and design while checking that their idea and objectives come across visually.

< 2 sec

to land an ad: ~1.7 sec in a mobile feed, ~2 sec in OOH

1 in 3

OOH exposures name the wrong brand after two seconds

+59.6%

CTR for display ads designed for benchmarked attention (UvA study)

Sources: Facebook/Twitter 2016, System1 x JCDcaux 2025 (OOH only; OOH = out-of-home), Brainsight x UvA, 31 display ads. Indicative; see the sources document.

1 SEEN

A creative must stand out in its context and among its peers.
Break through the clutter.

CHECK 1

2 ANCHORED

Hero, brand (logo or distinctive assets) and key message are anchored, in the right order.

CHECKS 2 TO 6

3 UNDERSTOOD

Clear at a glance, cognitively easy to process and readable.

CHECKS 7 TO 8

WHY The two-second problem

Ad waste has two layers: spend that never reaches a person (about a third of programmatic spend does, ANA) and ads nobody looks at (70 to 75% of digital ads, Lumen and Nelson-Field). What does get seen gets under two seconds. And a seen offer with a missed brand can pay off for a competitor: you spot a great holiday deal, miss which brand made it, and book elsewhere that night. Make it count.

WHO Makers and reviewers

Designers run it while building. Studio heads use it as the gate and a shared language. Brand managers get data instead of gut feeling, a basis for deliberate design choices. Insights teams make review repeatable and run check 6.

WHEN Before it ships

Once the layout is stable and before sign-off or media booking. Again after every resize, because a crop can undo a good layout.

WHERE In the wild, not on your monitor

In its real environment at real size and among its peers: a street photo for out-of-home, a feed mock-up or publisher page for social and display. Brainsight templates place your design in a feed or street scene, also as heatmap: see it in the wild, not behind a desk.

WHICH Image ads

Static images in out-of-home, social and display. Video has its own checklist. Eight core checks plus one card of four: out-of-home, or social and display.

WHAT What it will not tell you

Emotion, likeability, memory, purchase intent and message acceptance need live research. This check covers the first seconds of attention only.

HOW Review, fix, repeat

Work through the core checks and the card that fits, weighted by campaign goal: brand-building or sales. A predictive tool such as Brainsight gives the heatmap, gazeplot, peekthrough (inverted heatmap) and a benchmark score against peers, and its Deep Analysis (AI audit) covers copy and readability; a squint test and a peer line-up come close. Check 6 needs a consumer test, check 8 a contrast checker. Fix every open box, then run it again. More: [how to pre-test and benchmark ads](#) and [the Clarity Score explained](#).

Ready to run it? [Open the checklist on the next page](#) →

Checklist

Ad or campaign: _____ Channel: _____ Reviewer: _____ Date: _____

Mark every check that passes; every open box is a fix. Run the eight core checks, then the card that fits. **The goal sets the weight:** brand-building leans on checks 2 to 6 and stays light on the CTA; sales and action ads put offer and CTA earlier and heavier, and the brand must still be seen.

	Check	What to look at	Watch out for
1 SEEN Get noticed. Pre-test on benchmarked attention. Is the creative standing out in its contextual environment and against its peers?			
☐	1 Stands out in context	Predictively benchmark among peer ads in a feed, street or publisher context. Does it stand out? A creative can stand out in one channel and be completely missed in another environment. Context is your biggest competitor. Attention Score: percentile on a normal distribution; 50 median, 65+ top third.	Low attention score (under 50).
2 ANCHORED Anchoring. Are intended design elements instantly seen and anchored, also in the right order?			
☐	2 Entry point	Where does the first fixation land? On the hero, brand or key message? Use a heatmap or gazeplot (scan path) to check hotspots and viewing order.	Eye lands on texture, decoration or a face, not the hero. Or offer seen, brand missed.
☐	3 Gaze Cueing <i>(optional)</i>	Optional, but it can help. Do gaze or gesture lead to the product, brand or message? It works as a second step, after the face has anchored attention: Brad Pitt case .	Nothing as such, except a face that pulls attention from brand or message (vampire effect).
☐	4 Brand and message	Attention share on brand element and key message, plus position, size and contrast. The goal decides how much brand or CTA needs. Anchor what makes people look beyond two seconds; if not, the brand must still be seen, for those who look away.	Brand or message in a low corner with near-zero attention, or low contrast. Elements far apart or in an illogical order.
☐	5 Reading order	Does the gaze run in the order your goal needs? Branding: emotional hook (face, character, ambassador), then brand, then product, message or offer, reinforcing each other (brand integration). Sales: offer and CTA earlier, heavier.	Branding: brand after the offer, or missed. Sales: CTA outside the path, or the eye leaves before it.
☐	6 Logo or assets	Is the brand carried by its logo, its distinctive assets, or both? One is enough if it is famous: cover the logo, do colour, shape, character or tagline still say who this is? A new brand needs its logo. Needs a consumer test.	Neither carries the brand: small logo and generic category colours, or a new look per placement.
3 UNDERSTOOD Visual and cognitive ease. Is the creative clear, easy to process, and readable?			
☐	7 Clear at a glance	Check the Clarity Score (about 50 average, 51+ good; bands): focus (how many hotspots) and spread (how far apart). Rank the focal points, count the sections. Easy to process = the message lands directly. How: Attention 1st , Clarity 2nd .	Clarity Score under 50, two equal winners, over about three sections, or too much competing for the eye.
☐	8 Readable at size	At real size and distance: word count, type size, contrast (WCAG 4.5:1, large text 3:1), colour-blind simulation. Judge it yourself or run Deep Analysis (AI audit).	The headline takes more than a glance, or sits over busy imagery.
CARD A OUT-OF-HOME Add to the core checks. Word, section and size limits come from out-of-home tests: do not apply them to feed.			
☐	O1 Drive-by test	No live test needed: view the peekthrough (inverted heatmap) and the benchmark. What do you pick up in a split second, driving past at 120 km/h? Do brand and idea survive?	Brand or idea vanishes in the peekthrough, or a low benchmark.
☐	O2 Copy and section budget	Count the words and sections. Deep Analysis (AI audit) also weighs word difficulty, length, wordplay and reading time: does it fit the pre-attentive window?	More than about 10 words or 3 sections.
☐	O3 Hero size, logo position	Share of the canvas taken by the hero or product, and where the logo sits. Check it in the street template: in the wild, not at your desk.	Hero under half the canvas, logo low.
☐	O4 Worst-case viewer	Design for the passer-by, not the person waiting. Check glare and light; read key info placement from the heatmap, not a fixed rule.	Brand readable only when waiting, or lost to glare or a busy background.
CARD B SOCIAL AND DISPLAY Add to the core checks			
☐	F1 Phone-size test	View at real device size in a feed mock-up. The Brainsight benchmark covers light and dark mode, mobile and desktop; elsewhere, check both.	Brand or message vanishes at thumbnail size.
☐	F2 Survives every crop	Open every version you run (1:1, 4:5, 9:16, banners). Buttons and captions cover parts of the image. Brand, message and CTA still in view?	Logo or CTA cut off, or hidden under a platform button or caption.
☐	F3 In view from the start	Brand and message visible in the first frame, not only at the end of an animated banner, on later carousel cards or after a tap.	Brand or message only in an end state, on a later card or after a tap.
☐	F4 One campaign look	Line up the display, social and out-of-home variants side by side.	Each placement looks like a different advertiser.