There is always considerable discussion about the best way to present the test ad or concept in an advertising pre-test. Primarily, people ask, how should the ad be exposed to the respondent? There are two main approaches to expose an ad for pre-testing: (1) presenting the test ad as part of a clutter reel; or (2) on its own. In the following sections, we discuss these approaches and identify that the most appropriate way to expose a test ad for the purpose of pre-testing is on its own.

**1) Using a Clutter Reel**

This approach puts the respondent and the test material in the ‘normal’ exposure environment. Print ads are placed in print media, and TV and radio ads into clutter reels of other commercials. As most TV ads in real life appear amongst others during a program break, it might seem natural to test ads in a clutter. Hoping to obscure their intent, some researchers also insert the ‘pod’ of the clutter into a segment of normal programming material.

The primary use of a clutter reel is to measure recall as a test of awareness, which is believed to predict the ‘cut through’ or ‘noticeability’ of the ad. This method is derived from the now largely redundant AIDA (or equivalent model) of buyer behaviour. Very few advertising or research practitioners still believe that the main purpose of advertising is to create memorable ads. However, it is important to know that the creative is cutting through. We measure cut-through using our Attention measure. Based on multiple statements, this provides much more sensitive information than just a recall score.

There are many significant drawbacks with clutter reels and it is for the reasons described below that **add+impact®** does not use this technique.

- **Levels of Attention**

A test situation cannot evoke ‘natural’ responses about the test ad. Respondent’s attention to clutter reels is far greater than the attention they pay to advertising in real life. Ads placed in a clutter reel will elicit a range of positive and negative responses, different from those they would otherwise elicit in a real exposure situation.

- **Top-of-Mind Responses are Lost**

Qualitative researchers know that the best information comes from a respondent’s ‘top-of-mind’ response that reflects his/her focus and interest. However, it is impossible to gain a top-of-mind response to the test ad with a clutter reel, because the first round of questions are concerned with ad recall, and is not until seeing the ad again, that the viewer will responding to the test ad. Viewing the ad again is no longer a fresh experience and this affects viewer perception and response. In a series of tests with one of our clients, we found that the incorporation of a clutter reel consistently reduced the richness of qualitative response.

Using the clutter process to imperfectly measure this awareness via recall at the beginning of the interview means valuable information about the individual’s initial reactions is lost forever.
- **Difficulties with Context**

We know that the context in which a stimulus is viewed affects the response. Unfortunately, it is not possible to fully assess a clutter’s influence on a test ad. Different ads in the clutter reel evoke different responses from different people. The response to the test ad depends on whether the sandwich ads in the clutter are good or bad.

When a viewer watches sandwich ads (those ads placed either side of the target ad), they ‘see’ the test ad differently from the way they would have seen it on its own. Although some researchers suggest establishing norms for sandwich ads, it is not possible to establish these for every individual in the target audience or for every ad in the sandwich. The ads in this year’s clutter are different to next year’s. The effect on the test ad is not known.

Measures of recall derived from clutter reels are unreliable, because the test ad is likely to be the least familiar ad in the clutter and therefore more likely to be noticed. Recall is a proven unreliable measure. We confirmed this when, testing the same ads with and without clutters, we found that the sandwich ads themselves often obtained inconsistent scores. So how can the test ad results be reliable? Recall never taps the full memory and is unreliable for this reason too. Clutter reels generate ‘unnatural’ contextual viewer responses because clutters never represent the real world.

Also, different ads for the same brand tested a year apart will have different clutters (updated with current ads) that provide a different context, which can affect comparability.

- **Problems of Clutter Reels with Development Material or Campaigns**

Using clutter reels with audiomatics, concept boards or animatics is unnatural. Using other unfinished material to make up the clutter is even more unnatural, and selecting a neutral clutter becomes very costly. It is also not possible to effectively pre-test a campaign using a clutter reel.

**Single ad exposure**

The most reliable way to understand consumer’s responses is when the ad is exposed on its own. Focussing solely on the test ad makes it possible to get the most value from individual responses. When ads are exposed this way, response patterns can be evaluated using a common context.

The single ad exposure approach is very flexible and is appropriate for ads at any stage in their development, or in a campaign format. ‘Top of mind’ verbal responses to open questions allow the viewer to identify what is important about the ad and discuss it. This is the only way to elicit unbiased, unaffected viewer response to the ad.

Progressively testing the ad on its own allows changes in viewer response to become more apparent. Audiomatic responses can be readily compared directly with animatic or finished ad responses. As there are no outside ‘cues’ to detract or enhance the ad response, the effect of changes to the advertising material can be seen.

No pre-test is natural. However, when we show the ad without the clutter we are achieving the same outcome without any of the disadvantages. **add+impact®** uses the simplest possible way to expose and test ads — i.e. by themselves and to a single individual in the target audience.