



More than music? The importance of lyrics for ad music

Description



Sometimes what you don't say says it all but sometimes, it's better to spit it out after all. The debate over whether a song's music or its lyrics make it great (or less than great) has raged for as long as voice and music have combined. Seemingly, the content of a song's lyrics can to some extent [predict its chart success](#). But what does the presence or absence of lyrics in themselves mean for a sync song?

Sung lyrics differ by nature from scripted dialogue. To some extent, they provide an option for including notions or phrases that an acted script doesn't have the time or the shamelessness to include. As noted by musicologist David Huron, lines which would be unthinkable in a voice over, dialogue or onscreen text get something of a free pass when sung (even the rather twee [First Kiss](#) spot for Wren clothing probably wouldn't have dared to include the line "If you're not ready for love, how can you be ready for life?" anywhere but as part of artist and co-kisser Soko's fairly charming song),

and can convey an emotional message while voiceover or text does the factual informing. In short, lyrics can be the ideal vehicle for maximum impact in minimum time, though they often do particularly well in slightly longer-form ads.

How common is it for ads to include lyrics?

Let's take a look at a handy recent sampling of acclaimed ads: this year's Cannes Lions recipients. Of the 63 TV and Internet spots awarded a Grand Prix, Gold or Silver Lion (note that we also included all spots receiving a Campaign Award, and excluded a couple of odd fish such as the Sapeurs background documentary, Swedish House Mafia's music video for Volvo, Toshiba's mid-length feature and Old Spice's inspired but unsettling custom-penned Momsong), a minority of 17 (such as TVC Sports' [Requiem](#)) used very little or no music, 25 used music with no lyrics, and 21 used music with lyrics. A pretty even spread, with a slight favouring of purely instrumental tracks. Of the spots utilising instrumental-only tracks, four spots had no voiceover or dialogue. However, of the spots accompanied by music with lyrics, 14 had no voiceover or dialogue, indicating that the song did most of the 'talking', sometimes supported by onscreen text.

The festival darling, [Epic Split](#), combined astounding visuals with serene instrumentation, voiceover and pertinent lyrics to rev ahead and seize both Cyber and Internet Film Grand Prix prizes.

Granted, Cannes Lions is an industry event – what about ads specifically favoured by their audience? As it turns out, there may be little difference. Unruly's [most-shared ads of this year so far](#) lean slightly towards lyrics – 6 out of the ten contain lyrics (admittedly, one is Shakira and Activia's juggernaut [music video/commercial hybrid](#), which is cheating rather) compared to four without lyrics and one without music altogether.

So, how are song lyrics actually employed in ads?

The emotive and the oblique

Their use can be heavily emotive – see [Chevy's moving Super bowl spot](#), which uses Ane Brun's lyrics entirely in place of dialogue. A little less frequently, lyrics used in adverts may be more oblique than might be expected, but still highly effective. Though Ikea's celebrated Happy Inside spot introduces the lyrics of Mara Carlyle's – Pianni – relatively [late in the game](#), they add a sense of restful closure and support to the arresting but initially somewhat obscure visual narrative.

For laughs

Very often too lyrics are mined for comedy, particularly in the case of very well-known songs – take Satsuma Loans' [cheeky ad](#), viewers of which almost certainly know the chorus lyrics: punny humour is here combined with memorability. Provided the language uses phrases well-known enough to the demographic, it doesn't even have to be limited to English, as the New Zealand [Toyota Corolla Feels Good Inside](#) campaign proves – 'C'est l'amour' by Elliott Wheeler provides both melodramatic build and an explanation of the situation.

Certain campaigns mine the audience's presumed unfamiliarity with everything but the most famous

parts of a foreign song for comedy, as with Specsaver's use of [another French-language track](#) (this time by Piaf).

The human connection

The importance of a human voice's timbre and the hint of emotional connection this brings shouldn't be overlooked either – take one of the most celebrated ads out there, the first of Sony Bravia's [Colour Like No Other](#) campaign. The guitar does the rhythmic legwork. Unlike their [other major spot that year](#), the lyrics, beyond fleeting mentions of 'magic rush' and 'the colours red and blue', here have less directly to do with the visuals, and Jose Gonzales' vocal acts also as a particularly emotive instrument.

The campaign also used instrumental classical music to good effect in [Jonathan Glazer's later ad](#), but only once it had arguably established itself with the support of Jose Gonzales. The brand staged something of a [return to the format](#) in 2013, using Ry X's brooding 'Berlin'.

Tracking down a song

In practical terms, lyrics used to be an important tool for interested listeners to track down a song after watching an advert – perhaps slightly less important in the era of Shazam, but still a consideration for sync licensors and artists, given that the app is not infallible and smartphone market penetration is [overwhelming](#) but still not all-encompassing, and nor is mobile broadband. A line from, say, current Shazam favourite 'Rather Be' makes it a lot easier to discover than would googling 'upbeat electronic pop with violins'.

Clearly audible lyrics can introduce an aspect of higher risk, higher gain – get it right and your music can do the lion's share of your copy work, sometimes removing the need for dialogue or voiceover entirely. Get it wrong and the audience is jarred, consciously or unconsciously.

High gain, high risk – problems with including lyrics

Rock and hip hop can be a particular source of conflict – brands often note the powerful hook or drive of a song, but find that the dynamism comes part and parcel with a potentially unwieldy irreverence, vocabulary or subject matter. When it works, as in Channel 4's [Meet the Superhumans](#), it's scintillating. When it doesn't, it's at best amusing, at worst damaging.

Iggy Pop's use in family-friendly spots for [Royal Caribbean cruises](#) provoked many a giggle owing to 'Lust for Life's well-known references to a lifestyle like 'Well, like Iggy Pop's.

Similarly, the Pogues' ['If I Should Fall From Grace with God' for Subaru](#) raised a few eyebrows – the rollicking instrumentation and devil-may-care delivery work quite well given the boys' rough and tumble pace of life, but the references to Irish nationalism and overall musings on death sat a little uncomfortably with more keen-eared listeners.

Ways around risk

A judicious sense of timing can go a long way here – remember Garnier's longrunning use of the

Transplantsâ?? [â??Diamonds and Gunsâ??](#) in their [Fructis spots](#) In isolation the intro music delivers a frantic but fashionable edge that worked well for the demographic â?? with lyrics itâ??s rather edgier than a wide commercial audience â?? not to mention censors â?? can handle, but only existing fans are likely to spot it off the bat. Likewise the appearance of the Buzzcocksâ??s â??Everybodyâ??s Happy Nowadaysâ?? for [AARP](#) ruffled feathers, but mostly among fans who knew the songâ??s whole context of alienation and disillusionment.

Some spots opt for editing instead â?? Kanye Westâ??s scalding â??Black Skinheadâ?? was given a [full lyrical haircut](#) for Motorola, leaving only the driving, multi-sampled instrumentation without the somewhat incendiary meditations on racial tension.

Our verdict

Lyrics can be a gamble, but itâ??s a gamble that can pay off beautifully. Theyâ??re not necessary or appropriate in every spot. But listen to a song in its entirety and consider its original context before plumping for it, and you may find yourself with an extra weapon in your arsenal: memorability, emotional impact, comedy â?? the right song can put an ad leagues ahead.

This process, of course, is one that weâ??re more than happy to help with or shoulder entirely â?? here are some of the songs weâ??ve licensed for our clients which feature lyrics. See for yourself how well it can work!