



A guide to writing an Effie

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Foreword

The Effie Awards demand unequivocal proof that advertising drove results. Coincidence is irrelevant, correlation isn't enough - only clear causation counts.

How you build and argue that case can make or break an entry, which is why Stuff is proud to sponsor the Effie Writing Guide.

Writing a great Effie is a lot like great investigative journalism: deep groundwork, separating fact from fiction, legitimising your strongest sources. Then shaping it into a compelling, persuasive narrative.

Writing a winning Effie case can feel hard. And the judging? Can feel harder again. As it should be. Effie Awards are the unapologetic global gold standard for effectiveness. But the good news is when causation is clearly proven, judging becomes simpler. This guide is here to help.

Stuff delivers hard facts every day, so we applaud those devoting time to prove, not just claim, advertising's power to build brands and drive growth across Aotearoa.

The logo for Stuff, featuring the word "Stuff" in a stylized, bold, black font. The letters are thick and have a slightly irregular, hand-drawn appearance. The 'S' is the largest and most prominent, followed by 't', 'u', 'f', and 'f'.

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Introduction

Writing an Effie® can often feel like a long and lonely road. This guide is designed to give some short-cuts and signposts to speed you on your way.

We've divided it into two sections:

1. Broad principles: the big things that will help steer you in the direction of success.
2. Specific practices: precise things you'll want to do at key moments/sections of the paper.

Broad principles

Before you get lost in the weeds of Effie specifics, here are the big things to keep in mind when you're writing one.

In a nutshell:

1. Shorter is sweeter
2. Think like an academic, write like a journalist
3. Beware the curse of knowledge: assume nothing
4. Read other papers - particularly from the same category
5. Make sure your paper has wonderful symmetry: challenge, objectives, solution, results build on each other
6. Build a logic flow before the long version
7. Edit, edit, edit
8. Construct a causal chain from comms to business results
9. Avoid the impression you're data doctoring
10. Get started early
11. It takes a village to raise a paper, but someone always needs to hold the pen.

01

Shorter is sweeter.

There's a word count. Stick to it.

Better still, come in underneath it.

Keep in the essentials, remove the blather.

The same goes for style. Keep the sentences short and punchy.

02

Think like an academic, write like a journalist.

Your paper will be scrutinised by judges who will be looking for holes or inconsistencies.

Approach your paper like an academic. Think of the hardest questions you could possibly be asked, by the most sceptical of audiences.

Pressure-test the data and the story to make sure it's as bullet-proof as possible.

Then write as rollicking a tale as you possibly can. Don't let it descend into dryness. Give it drama and dynamism.

To misquote Malcolm Gladwell, you need to be right AND interesting.

Again, think of the judges. And think to yourself, would I enjoy reading this?

03

Beware the curse of knowledge. Assume nothing.

You are knee-deep in your category. You know all the players, the game and the ridiculous acronyms that are bandied about.

Many Effie entries fall down because of the curse of knowledge; assuming that the reader knows as much as the author.

Many of your judges won't. And we specifically ask them to leave any assumptions that they have about the category outside the judging the room.

So take the time to explain who's who, what's what and why you're using a three letter acronym throughout that no one's ever heard of.

04

Read other winning papers – particularly from the same category.

Reading past papers will give you a massive leg up. Your agency probably has a filing cabinet full of them.

It will give you a sense of the shape and scaffolding that you may want to put around your paper.

In particular, it'll give you a short-cut to the variables that you might want to discount or eliminate to prove campaign contribution.

05

Make sure you've got wonderful symmetry: challenge, objectives, solution, results build on each other.

We've all seen (or written) briefs that look like a cowpat, rather than a runway.

Effie papers can often read the same way; with objectives not reflecting the challenge and the solution seemingly coming out of nowhere, results that don't match the objectives that were set.

The best papers feel inexorable and inevitable - with each section building on and flowing into the next.

06

Build a logic flow before the long version.

Penning a 2,500-word piece on record returns in the insurance category can feel very intimidating.

Start with a bullet point skeleton so you know the thrust of the argument. It will help you stay on track.

Then turn it into flowing prose knowing you've got the logic down pat.

07

Edit, edit, edit.

Ernest Hemingway said the ‘first draft of anything is shit.’

Get a draft going as early as possible and then edit ruthlessly and continuously.

Better still, give it to someone you know and trust to read.

Get them to apply the red pen.

08

Construct a causal chain from comms to business results.

No proof is perfect says Les Binet.

However, some proof is better than others. Namely, a rock-solid chain of events that leads from comms to business results.

If you have the funky maths of econometrics, splendid. But take the time to explain the model somewhat and the contribution of other variables.

Whether you do or you don't, show strong, directional, 'by eye' correlations with your activity and results.

In particular, that launching comms coincided with discernible shifts in important metrics.

Many of the best papers contain simple, killer charts that show comms going live and an uptick across a chain of results from comms to brand to behaviour to business.

09

Avoid any impression of data doctoring.

Present your data in the most candid and transparent way possible.

Judges are on the lookout for time series that feel selective, comparisons that feel arbitrary or data that's been chopped off for no good reason.

Whilst it may not always be possible, there is nothing more impressive than continuous time series data showing what happened before and what happened subsequent to the campaign.

Conversely, there is nothing more suspicious than arbitrary time windows, or individual data points that appear to be cherry-picked.

And, whilst you're trying to show your numbers in the best light, the use of 'axis wizard' to make marginal gains look like momentous magic is oft-spotted - and punished.

At all times, justify why you're doing what you're doing, so the judges can see the method behind your mathematics. Don't give them the opportunity to turn scepticism into cynicism and mark you down because they think you're trying to pull the wool over their eyes.

10

Get going early.

Time is often the maker or breaker of a good paper, so get going as early as possible.

In particular, assemble and interrogate the data as fast as you can. Papers are ultimately dependent on a number of killer charts that will wow the judges.

Data tends to be held by different sources: client, media agency, tracking company and econometrics partner (if you're doing really fancy maths), so you'll likely need to lean on all of them for assistance. That takes time.

11

It takes a village to raise a paper, but someone needs to hold the pen.

You can try and go it alone, but the best papers generally lean on the co-operation and contribution of others.

Your client is an essential ally: they will likely know the big picture story as well as what the business will and won't tolerate from a narrative and numbers perspective.

Flesh out a skeleton early on and ensure that it won't breach any confidentiality issues. You can always index numbers or redact sensitive data if there are concerns.

That said, someone needs to front up and be the author. Heavy sits the Effie crown.

If it's you, congrats/commiserations. Now let's get down to specifics.

Specific practices



The Sections

Admin up front

The first page contains the nuts and bolts of the paper and should be relatively self-explanatory.

On-air dates are important, so judges can understand when the campaign ran: handy hint, keep referring back to these/visualising them in your charts so judges can see the close relationship between campaign and cracking results.

Coming up with a good title isn't essential, but can give some oomph to proceedings. Many papers lean towards a 'how x (insight/idea) delivered y (results) for z (client)' method.

Section 01: Exec summary

There is an exec summary of 100 words at the beginning which isn't included in the word count but is a great way to signpost what the judges are about to see.

Plenty of times people write this last as it's the most compressed version of events. It's hard to keep it to 100 words so you may need a few goes at it.

Sections

The paper is divided up into 4 main sections with sub-divisions in each to help you structure your argument. Overall marks allocated to each section.

For most categories, the scoring split is as follows:

Section 02: Challenge, Context and Objectives	20%
Section 03: Insights and Strategy	25%
Section 04: Bringing the Strategy and Idea to life.	20%
Section 05: Results	35%

(Split 20% results, 15% proof of campaign contribution)

Read the prompts

There are prompts for each section: use them to keep you on the straight and narrow. They're very helpful and point to what the judges will be looking for.

Word allocation

Bar section 3B (strategic build or idea summary) there are no word limits in individual sections, so allocate your total word count as you please. Although the marks allocated will give you some sense of how you might want to go about it.

Section 02

Challenge, Comms, Objectives

Section 2A: Challenge and Context

This section is the foundation stone of the paper. Start with a bang, not a whimper.

Context is king

This is your chance to show the judges where the business stood prior to comms and, importantly, the reasons why.

Use historical data to paint a picture

Many of the best papers clearly show business/brand performance across time and set the stage for a shot-in-the arm from comms.

Be as specific as possible

Don't just talk to broad societal issues like a cost of living crisis. If you do, show how these specifically impacted the business.

4C's is a good framework to interrogate: consumer, category, company and culture.

The 4 C's can often be a good way to paint a picture of what you were facing. Whether from increased competitor activity or category decline; consumer behaviour or perception changes; a burning platform or opportunity at a company level or larger societal forces bearing down on you. Or a combination of all of them.

Summarise in a snappy challenge

Create a one sentence summary of the challenge that you were trying to take on, so the judges have a crystal-clear picture of what you're trying to take on.

Demonstrate degree of difficulty

Paint a picture of how hard the challenge was to achieve. Help the judges understand that this was no easy task.

Section 2B: Objectives

Distinguish between business, marketing, brand & comms objectives.

Provide a clear ‘waterfall’ of metrics that start with business or organisational outcomes and flows down to marketing and communications objectives.

Here are some tangible examples* of metrics – by no means exhaustive or applicable to all cases:

Comms metrics

- Spontaneous or prompted campaign awareness, recall,
- Communications diagnostics: message take out, attitudes to the comms
- Popularity/fame/social discourse
- Branding scores

Brand metrics

- Spontaneous or prompted brand awareness
- Brand perception metrics
- Funnel metrics: Aware, Consider, Purchase, Recommend

*This guide has been written with commercial entries in mind. Some specific categories such as DEI & Social Marketing may have very different objectives or outcomes, and associated metrics. The DEI category, in particular, offers specific guidance notes on the entry form to help the writer navigate the sorts of things the judges will be looking for in that category.

Marketing/Behavioural metrics

- Penetration/Purchase
- Frequency
- Weight of purchase/Basket size
- Retention/Life time value
- Conversion
- Advocacy/recommendation
- Behaviour change (Actual much better than claimed)

Business/End-result metrics

- Value and volume sales
- Value and volume share
- Revenue
- Profitability
- Outcome metrics (e.g death on roads)

Section 2B: Objectives

Provide context or benchmarks

Showing these results in context is hugely helpful: for example vs previous campaigns, business performance or competitor results.

Don't exceed the number allocated, but equally don't feel like you need to pad the section out by searching for 3 objectives where one is sufficient.

Less is more when it comes to objectives. Keep them punchy and pertinent.

Map them to the challenge: keep that symmetry

Explain why you've selected the metrics and map them to the challenge you've set out. Random metrics stand out like sore thumb.

Quantify them as much as possible

Show specific KPI's that were set. It makes it much easier for judges to assess success later.

It is often helpful to show the absolute increase desired as well as the percentage increase this represents.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Comms objective: Achieve a prompted campaign recognition of 78%
(in the top 20% of campaigns ever tested)

Brand objective: Increase consideration from 12 to 18% (a 50% increase)

Marketing objective: Increase penetration by 9 to 12% (a 33% increase)

Business objective: Increase value sales from \$10.5m to \$13m (a 24% increase)

Section 03

Insights and Strategy

Section 3A: Insights

Show how they help address the challenge and unlock the solution.

Be ruthless. Highlight only those insights that are pertinent to the task at hand.

Sometimes they'll be earth-shattering, sometimes they'll just be the right thing to do.

Of course, we all want to unlock that never-seen-before insight. That's a rarity.

In the absence of that, just show how your insights were rock solid and led to the right solution.

Define your audience

Who they are, why they're important and how they think & act.

Look to the 4C's again

Your insights are likely to come from these areas or a combination of them. Perhaps a category zag, a rich consumer insight or a hidden product truth.

Backed by data

This can be your own proprietary research or broader stuff. Whatever the case, make sure it's robust and quote/footnote.

Section 3B: Strategic build or idea (50 words)

A simple, snappy summary of what fuelled the solution.

This is the set up for the next part of the paper: distilling your insight(s) into the key build or idea that leads directly to the comms solution.

Section 04

Bringing the strategy and idea to life

Section 4A: The creative solution

Show a direct connection between insights and creative approach.

Don't just unfurl the creative work and assume the judges will make the connection on your behalf.

Demonstrate how the creative solution helped stand out from the crowd.

Judges will have subjective opinions about your creative solution. Make sure that you highlight all the reasons why it was brilliant. You might even want to talk about options that were discarded or competitor campaigns that it trumped.

Section 4B: The comms strategy

Show why the channel strategy is right and a good use of resources.

Again, show the link between insight and comms approach. Given the variety of choices available, show how your solution gave the brand maximum bang for its buck.

Demonstrate the 'path' it was meant to take your audience on, showing how it would drive the changes and meet the objectives that you've set out.

Demonstrate learning and optimisation along the way, showing how you adapted and improved as time went by.

Detail your media and creative spend – actual, not ratecard.

And don't worry if it's sizeable or slim – you can use the results to show how, irrespective, it was a worthwhile investment.

Section 05

Results and other factors

Section 5A: Results

Mirror your objectives.

Keep the symmetry and show how the results meet the objectives.

Be as clear and compelling as possible.

Visuals and verbals work well together. Restate your objective and show your result verbally, then ram it home with a killer chart, often showing pre-campaign benchmark, target and actual result.

Make it as legible and clearly signposted as possible.

FOR EXAMPLE:

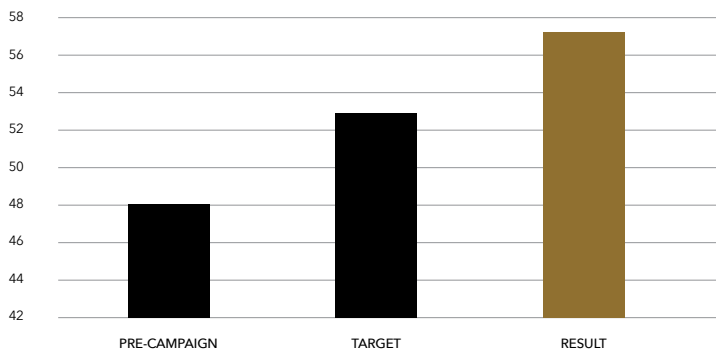
Brand objective:

Increase prompted brand awareness from 48-53% (a 10.4% increase)

Result:

Increased prompted awareness from 48-57% (18.8% increase)

Prompted Brand Awareness*



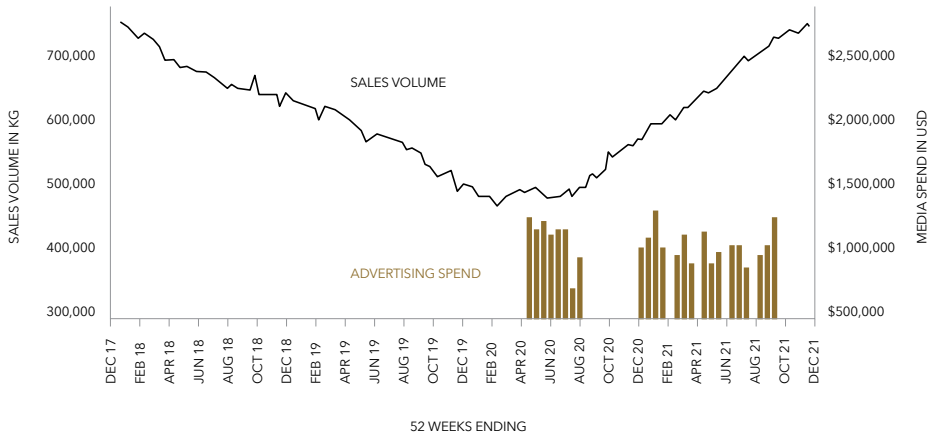
*Source: Always cite your source for any data included.

Section 5A: Results

Overlaying the campaign start date or the media spend across time is also incredibly useful (but don't 'forget' to map the media spend that preceded this campaign).

FOR EXAMPLE:

Spend vs Sales



Remind judges of the context

Apparently small changes may not just be difficult but very valuable. Conversely, if it is relatively easy to achieve significant growth in your category, explain why yours is remarkable.

Share can often be more compelling than sales

In commercial cases, share immediately takes category dynamics out of the equation and shows performance relatively to your competitive set.

New learnings or bonus features win plaudits

Judges are looking for interesting ways of calibrating success. Equally, if there are some bonus results that weren't part of your core objectives, then show them off.

Section 5B: Proof that results were a direct result of the campaign

Don't underestimate the importance of this section!

Many papers have been torpedoed for not sufficiently discounting the contribution of other variables.

Judges value thoughtful answers here.

Show that you've carefully considered what else could be in play: from seasonality to price/distribution to competitor activity. The more you eliminate, the stronger your case becomes.

Be thorough and candid.

Eagle-eyed judges will be looking for obvious omissions and punishing you for them.

Finally

Follow the rules. Eligibility guidance is there for a reason. Don't give anyone cause for questioning the validity of your entry. Stick to the rules and you'll be rock solid.

Give yourself as much time as possible. In particular, the process of actually entering the paper online, providing all the relevant details, getting client sign off - these things all take time. The Comms Council Database Questionnaire also takes time - don't leave it to the last minute.

If you want to maximise your chances of success in multiple categories, write distinct entries that address the questions posed that are category-specific. Judges have differing levels of tolerance for 'cut-and-paste' entries.

Thank you, in advance, for entering. It's a huge commitment. We take pains to ensure that the judging process is respectful of the efforts required to enter Effie. Make it easy for them by ensuring your entry is as good as you know your campaign was.

Good luck.

Ngā mihi nui
The Comms Council



For any further information regarding your Effie entry, please contact the Comms Council.

awards@commscouncil.nz