

BEACON



A GUIDE TO WRITING WINNING ENTRIES

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AWARDS

Writing a great award entry isn't so different to writing a great news story. Both demand clarity, credibility and ultimately must convince readers why they should care.

This Beacon Awards entry writing guide, from the Comms Council, offers tips to sharpen your submission and we encourage you to read it.

After all, whilst creating award-worthy work is no easy feat, turning it into a persuasive award story is an art in itself.

That's why this year Stuff, home to the best story writers in New Zealand, are proudly sponsoring the award-writing process.

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INTRODUCTION

The Beacon Awards celebrate the power of great media thinking. This guide helps you craft entries that showcase the strategic rigour, channel innovation, and smart decision-making that unlocked results for your clients.

WHAT'S NEW IN 2026

We've made a number of changes in 2026, so please check to ensure you understand these changes to maximise your chances of success.

1. Scoring allocations

The scoring methodology for each section of the entry papers has been rebalanced.

Background & Challenge now contributes 25% of total scores (for most categories) to enable you to provide richer context to judges to evaluate your work.

For a full breakdown of scoring by section across categories, see page 10.

2. Word Count alignment

We've simplified the word counts to be more uniform across categories.

For most categories the word count guide is now 1200-1500 words maximum. You don't need to use 1500 words where less will do, but you can't use more.

Sustained Success entries have a word limit of 1800 words.

3. New Categories

Look out for three new categories.

One additional category – Positive Change – has been added to List B.

In addition, two new special categories have been added to List C: Emerging Talent – Media Agency and Emerging Talent – Media Business.

PART A: GOLDEN RULES

1. This is a media award.

Beacon celebrates the power of media thinking. Judges are looking for evidence that smart media strategy, channel innovation, audience insight, or activation ingenuity unlocked the result.

It's not Axis (creative awards).

It's not purely Effie (effectiveness awards).

Results matter—they validate your thinking—but the hero of your story is the media approach.

Ask yourself: Could this campaign have succeeded with a different media strategy? If the answer is yes, you haven't made the case for why your media thinking was critical.

2. Judges are time-poor and detail-oriented.

Your judges are senior media strategists, clients, and media owners. They are:

Reading dozens of entries in a compressed timeframe.

Looking for clarity, not cleverness.

Detail-oriented and literal-minded—they want evidence, not assertion.

What this means for your entry:

Make it scannable. Use subheadings, bullet points, and short paragraphs.

Front-load key information. Don't bury your insight or strategy in paragraph three.

Show, don't tell. Use charts, tables, and data to illustrate your points.

3. Context is everything.

Judges may be experts in media, but they don't live and breathe your category. They might judge automotive one hour and FMCG the next.

Your job is to educate them:

What does "good" look like in your category?

What makes your challenge genuinely difficult?

Why should a 2% shift in market share be celebrated in your world, when in another category 15% growth is routine?

The entries that win are the ones that bring judges into your world and make them feel the degree of difficulty.

4. Write to the category.

Different categories have different criteria and emphasis.

Critically, they also vary in scoring attribution.

Entering a paper written for the industry vertical in List A, without amendment, into List B categories may disadvantage you.

For example, entering a generic paper into the Most Effective category, which allocates a higher % of the total score to the Results section is your cue to provide more depth, and further evidence to substantiate your results than you might have done in your initial entry in a List A category.

See the chart below for easy reference to scoring differences across categories.

Scoring Allocations



Category		Entry Section	Scoring Attribution
A01 Social Marketing A02 Retail A03 FMCG A04 Consumer Durables A05 Financial Services A06 Utility & Telco Services A07 Other Consumer Services A08 Charity	B09 Small Budget B10 Content B13 Creative Media Idea B18 DEI Community Engagement B19 Positive Change C20 Sustained Success	Background & Challenge Insight & Strategy Execution Results	25% 25% 25% 25%
	B11 Technology	Background & Challenge Insight & Technology Solution Execution Results	20% 40% 20% 20%
	B14 Insight B15 Communication Strategy	Background & Challenge Insight & Strategy Execution Results	20% 40% 20% 20%
	B16 Most Effective	Background & Challenge Insight & Strategy Execution Results	20% 20% 20% 40%
	B17 Best Collaboration	Background & Challenge Insight & Strategy Collaboration Results	20% 20% 40% 20%
	B12 Data	Background & Challenge Insight, Strategy & Data Solution Collaboration Results	20% 40% 20% 20%

Common Pitfalls.

Describing the Plan, not the story	—————>	Write with the consumer’s perspective in mind
Burying the insight	—————>	State it explicitly as a standalone sentence
Vague objectives	—————>	Use indexed figures or directional language, but be specific
No context for results	—————>	Always provide baselines or benchmarks

Before you write:

Brain-dump everything: Identify 3–5 most compelling points and cut everything else.

Write a one-page treatment first:

Entry Summary: [One sentence]

Background & Challenge: [Key points]

Insight: [One sentence]

Strategy: [One sentence]

Execution: [Key points]

Results: [Key numbers]

Crowdsource your approach: Get a strategist to check the logic, client to check results, and an outsider to check for clarity.

Learn from winners: Read past winning papers.

PART B: SECTION GUIDANCE

A caveat before you continue:

Throughout the following pages, we have provided examples.

It's important to flag that these are fictional – written to further support the guidance, not to be taken as gospel. There may (almost certainly) be 'facts' you might contest!

Special apologies go to anyone who works in the shampoo category, but for everyone else, we hope the examples add flesh to the bones of the advice provided!

ENTRY SUMMARY

(150 words, not counted in main word count)

This is your elevator pitch. It's the first thing the judges read and it sets the frame for everything that follows.

Example Structure:

The challenge (1 sentence)

The media insight/approach (1–2 sentences)

The result (1 sentence)

Example:

[Brand X] faced declining market share in a category dominated by competitors with 5x our budget. Rather than trying to outspend them, we identified that mental availability peaks in the 48 hours before purchase—and concentrated 70% of our budget into targeted digital and OOH blitzes timed to the two days before payday. This delivered an 11-point penetration increase in 6 months – 5 years of ‘normal’ category growth compressed into one campaign.

A common mistake

Entrants often write an entry summary that could apply to any award show. For Beacon, the summary should make the media contribution explicit.

BACKGROUND & CHALLENGE

This section has been upweighted to 25% in 2026 as judges have told us they need rich context to properly evaluate entries, particularly when it comes to assessing results.

Judges will read your entry alongside many others from completely different categories. They might not know what 'normal' performance looks like in your category, how competitive the market is, what the prevailing media approach is in your category, why a 1% shift in penetration might be more impressive than a 20% lift in another category, etc.

Like any compelling writing, your opening sentence matters. Don't lead with marketing jargon or a generic statement. Make it human and immediate.

Your job is to bring the judge into your world. Given them the context they need to understand:

The market dynamics - growing, declining, hyper-competitive?

Your brand's position - challenger? Incumbent? New entrant?

The media landscape - what's considered 'normal' or 'best practice' in your category? Are there prevailing media approaches within the category?

The specific challenge - what problem did media need to solve?

The scale of ambition your objectives imply - a 10% lift in sales for a brand that has oscillated up and down by 15% routinely in the past is less impressive than in a category where sales have been consistently flat for 36 months.

STRUCTURE

Consider how best to structure your response to guide the reader through the context of your solution. Here's an example of how you might do that:

Paragraph 1: Market context.

Set the scene. What's happening in the category. Make it immediate and human, not generic.

Example:

The New Zealand shampoo category is dying – down 8% in value terms as consumers shift towards multi-use products. The top 3 brands control 65% of market share, supported by TV-heavy campaigns with budgets exceeding \$2m annually. Innovation is rare, and price competition is intense.

Paragraph 2: Brand position.

Where does your brand sit? What's the historical performance?

Example:

Brand X is the #4 player with 9% market share. Over the past two years our share has remained static despite consistent investment, suggesting our media approach was no longer cutting through. Our share of voice (6%) lagged behind our market share, and we lack the budget to compete in traditional mass media.

Paragraph 3: Media landscape.

What's the prevailing media approach in your category? What do competitors do?

Example:

Category convention is mass-reach TV campaigns supported by retail promotions. The top 3 brands collectively invest 75% of their budgets in broadcast media, maintaining continuous SOV to build mental availability. Digital channels are used primarily for re-targeting and performance marketing, not brand building. In our market, no challenger brand has successfully driven penetration growth on a digital-first budget – the conventional wisdom was that you needed TV scale to move the dial.

Paragraph 4: The challenge.

What did you need to solve? Be specific.

Example:

Our challenge was to drive trial among women 25–34—a segment where we had low penetration (12% vs category average of 28%)—without increasing our media budget. This segment is critical: they represent 40% of category value and have the highest lifetime value. We needed to find a media approach that worked within our budget constraints.

Paragraph 5: Objectives.

What were your measurable objectives?

Example:

Increase penetration among women 25–34 from 12% to 20% within six months. Achieve this at media efficiency equal to or better than our previous campaign. These targets represented a 67% increase in penetration within a segment that had historically been resistant to our messaging, in a category where penetration typically shifts by 1–2 percentage points per year even with significant investment.

WHY MEDIA CONTEXT MATTERS

Including media context achieves 2 things:

It sets up your strategic thinking. If you're about to describe a bold, channel-breaking approach, judges need to know that you're breaking with convention.

Conversely, if you're doubling down on a traditional channel in a new way, they need to understand that context too.

Example

Without media context

'We decided to use influencer marketing and Tik Tok'.

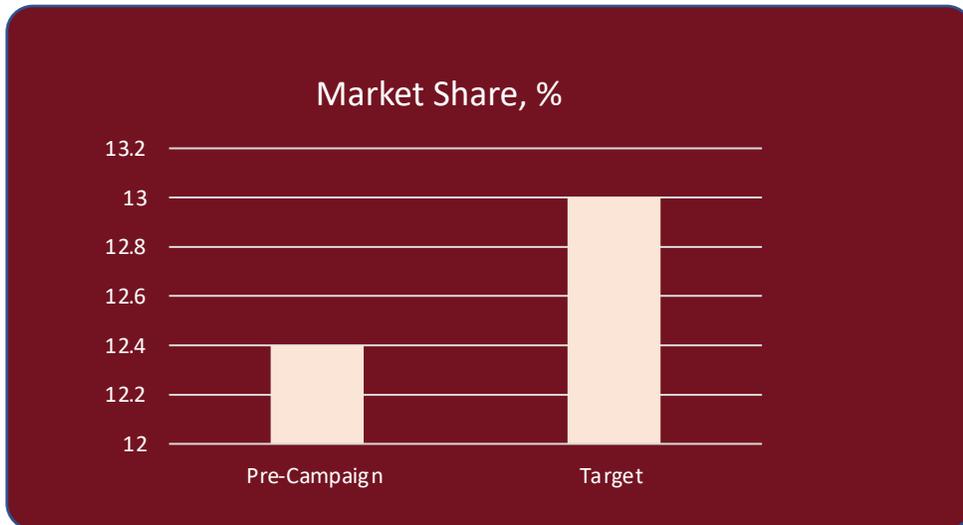
With media context

'In a category where TV dominates (75% of spend) and digital is used purely for performance marketing, we took the contrarian view that our audience could be reached more efficiently through influencer-led content. This was unproven: no shampoo brand had successfully driven penetration through social-first strategy. But data showed our audience spent 90 min/day on Tik Tok vs 45 minutes watching TV.'

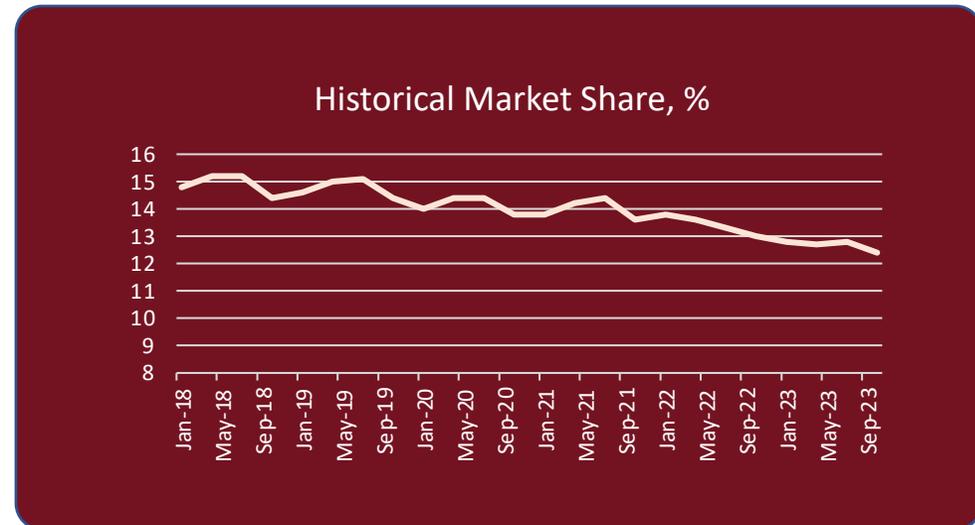
USE CHARTS TO SHOW CONTEXT

Good use of charts to short-cut judges' understanding are invaluable. Providing long-term data for periods prior to your activity enable a judge to fully understand the history of the brand and provide reassurance that you are not selectively cherry-picking your data points.

A bad chart: Below is a chart that relies upon single data points. It provides no historical context to enable judging evaluation of the scale of ambition.



A good chart: Provides historical data over a long period, enabling the judge to evaluate trends, seasonality, and context for subsequent objectives attached to your campaign.



COMMON MISTAKES

- Treating the Background & Challenge section in a cursory way to get to the Strategy section quicker.
- Assuming the judge will know your category dynamics.
- Forgetting to describe the prevailing media landscape.
- Burying the challenge in market context.

DO	DON'T
Describe the media orthodoxy of the category	Assume judges know what's 'normal'
Provide long-term context	Provide a single data point for your sector
Explain why the objectives are ambitious relative to category/brand norms	State objectives without justification or benchmarks
Acknowledge competitive activity and SOV	Pretend your brand exists in a vacuum
Use charts to show trends over time	Bury key data in dense paragraphs
Educate the judge about what 'good' looks like in your world	Assume they understand the category dynamics

INSIGHT & STRATEGY

This is where you demonstrate how you thought, not just what you did. Judges are looking for a clear chain of logic:



This section separates good entries from great ones. A mediocre entry will describe a media plan. A great entry will show you why that plan was the only logical response to the insight and challenge.

What judges are looking for:

- A genuine insight (not a restatement of the brief or an observation)
- Clear evidence of how the insight was uncovered (research, data, observation)
- A strategic leap from insight to media approach
- Distinctiveness in media strategy

Observation vs Insight

Defining an insight is a whole sub-genre of advertising discourse. For the purposes of a great Beacon entry, we recommend simply bearing in mind the difference between an observation and an insight – the latter being something that genuinely provides deeper understanding and helps you move forward:

Observation: 'Our audience spends a lot of time on Instagram and Tik Tok.'

Insight: 'Our audience is paralysed by choice in our category – there are 23 brands claiming to be 'the best'. They're outsourcing decision-making to Instagram and Tik Tok because it gives them a shortcut. They're not looking for the objectively best product; they're looking for social proof that reduces their decision anxiety.

In short,

Our audience doesn't need the best product – they need validation that people like them choose it'.

(and remember to footnote your sources).

STRUCTURE

Once again, structure is key to guiding the reader through your thinking. Here's an example:

Paragraph 1: The Insight.

State it clearly up front.

Example:

Our buyers make shampoo decisions in 4 seconds based on mental availability, not rational choice. The category leaders win by maintaining constant share of voice –they're always present, always remembered. But our research revealed a crack in this armour: mental availability has a short half-life. A brand encountered 48 hours before shopping has the same recall as one with continuous presence. This meant our budget constraint was actually an opportunity: we didn't need to be everywhere all the time –we needed to be impossible to ignore right before purchase..'

In short, Recency can beat Familiarity.

Paragraph 2: How the insight was uncovered.

Put flesh on the bones to ensure they don't think you've invented it.

Example:

Our insight was drawn from 3 distinct sources:

- Ethnographic research observing shopping behaviour which revealed the speed and spontaneity of brand choice
- Analysis of our own sales data which showed spikes correlated strongly with media activity in the preceding 48 hours
- Social listening showing our audience discussed grocery shopping Wed-Thu, triggered by payday.

Paragraph 3: Strategic Implication.

What did this insight mean for your media approach?

Example:

This insight fundamentally shaped our budget allocation. With a media budget 1/5th the size of our top three competitors, we couldn't maintain continuous SOV. But we didn't need to: if mental availability peaked in the 48 hours before purchase, we could concentrate 70% of our budget into fortnightly windows timed to the two days before payday – when our audience was most likely to shop.

Paragraph 4: The media strategy.

One clear sentence. Judges will read dozens of entries. Make it simple.

Example:

Our strategy: Be the last brand they see, not the brand they see most.

TESTING YOUR STRATEGY

One of the most common weaknesses in entries is a disconnect between the challenge and the strategy.

Can you draw a straight line from:

- The challenge you defined in section 1
- To the insight you uncovered
- To the strategy you developed
- Through to the execution that follows in Section 3?

COMMON MISTAKES

- Confusing observation with insight
- Describing creative strategy instead of media strategy
- Listing channels without explaining why
- No clearly identifiable strategy statement

A note on List B categories

In categories that are seeking specific forms of excellence, found in List B, there are some where the Insights & Strategy section is the most important section of all. Here, you should ensure that you go deeper; show multiple layers of thinking, consider sharing strategic options you didn't take and why, or provide more depth to the uncovering of insights, or the nuances of the strategy and its implications.

Simply cutting and pasting the same content from a List A entry in a specialist category without considering what else might be required to stand out often results in lesser outcomes.

EXECUTION

This is where you demonstrate how you turned strategy into action.

Judges want to understand how the implementation enhanced the strategy; the role of individual channels in building the idea; the degree of difficulty in executing; what made the execution move from 'good' to 'great'.

What judges are looking for:

- The consumer experience – what did people actually see, hear or encounter?
- Channel roles – how did each channel play a specific part?
- Sequencing and timing – how did the campaign unfold?
- Innovation or ingenuity – what made your campaign distinctive or difficult to pull off?
- The relationship between strategy and implementation – can the strategy be seen clearly in execution?

Tell the story, don't describe the plan. The most common mistake in this section is listing channels and tactics without bringing the execution to life.

Tell the story, don't describe the plan

Weak version:

We used a mix of digital OOH, social media (Instagram and Tik Tok), and Spotify. We ran the campaign for 6 weeks with two creative bursts. Budget was allocated 40% digital OOH, 35% Social, 25% Spotify.

Strong version:

For two days before payday, our audience couldn't escape us. As they drove to work, our digital billboards dominated the route into the city—bold, unmissable, and located within 500m of every major supermarket. During their commute, our Spotify ads interrupted their playlists with a simple message: "Payday tomorrow. Time to treat yourself." That evening, as they scrolled Instagram, our Stories appeared with a "shop now" link and a limited-time offer. We went silent for the next 12 days, then repeated the pattern. This pulsing approach meant we owned the moment of maximum intent while staying within our budget constraints.

STRUCTURE

Consider a structure such as this to ensure you do justice to this section.

Paragraph 1: The big idea or organising principle.

How did you bring the strategy to life?

Example:

Our execution was built around a simple principle: be impossible to ignore when it matters, then disappear. With a budget 1/5th the size of our top three competitors, we couldn't maintain the continuous SOV they enjoyed. Instead, we concentrated all our activity into 48-hour blitz windows every fortnight, timed to the two days when mental availability mattered most.

Paragraph 2/3: The consumer journey.

Walk judges through what the consumer experienced.

Example:

Thursday morning (Day 1 of the blitz): Our audience woke to find our brand dominating their commute. We secured 100% share of voice on digital OOH within 500m of major supermarkets across Auckland and Wellington—15 high-impact sites that our target audience passed daily. The creative was bold and singular: a striking visual mnemonic (our distinctive purple bottle) with a one-word message: "Tonight?"
Etc....

Paragraph 3: Channel roles and why they were chosen.

Explain the specific role each channel played and why it was the right choice.

Example:

Each channel had a distinct role:
Digital OOH (35% of budget): Delivered unavoidable reach at the moment of consideration. Positioned near grocery stores, it served as a final reminder before shopping.
Tik Tok influencer content (25% of budget): Built social proof and product credibility through authentic reviews from micro—influencers, seeded 36 hours before the main blitz.
Instagram Stories (25% of budget): Provided the conversion mechanism. The "shop now" link and retailer locator removed friction from the purchase journey.
Spotify (15% of budget): Reinforced the message during high-attention moments (commute) when our audience was receptive but not yet ready to act.

Paragraph 4: Degree of difficulty.

What made this execution challenging or distinctive?

Example:

Dynamic OOH buying: We negotiated exclusive 48-hour takeovers of premium digital sites.

Synchronized activation: All three channels had to launch simultaneously and stay in perfect sync. This required custom trafficking and real-time monitoring.

Retailer integration: We worked with major grocery chains to ensure stock availability during blitz windows—if consumers couldn't find the product, the campaign would fail.

Questions to ask yourself

A quick self-check before you finalise this section. Have you:

- Told the story from the consumer's perspective?
- Explained the role of each channel?
- Shown how the campaign unfolded over time?
- Highlighted what made this execution difficult or distinctive?
- Connected the execution back to the strategy?
- Included specific details (numbers, timing, formats)?
- Explained what you didn't do and why?
- Could a judge visualise the campaign from your response?

RESULTS

The proof of the pudding.

Judges will be looking for:

- Achievement against objectives – did you hit your targets?
- Proof that media was critical – can you demonstrate that the media approach was instrumental to the result?
- Context and significance – why should judges be impressed by these numbers?

Results validate your media thinking. They're not the hero of the story (that is EFFIE's role), but they're critical proof that your strategic and executional brilliance actually delivered.

Questions to ask yourself

Would the campaign have succeeded with a different media approach?

Did the media strategy unlock something that wouldn't have been possible otherwise?

Have I shown that the media choices amplified, enabled, or fundamentally shaped the success?

Do my results directly align with the objectives outlined in Section 1?

STRUCTURE

A strong Results section typically follows a pattern similar to this:

Paragraph 1: Overall achievement against objectives.

Start by directly answering: did you achieve what you set out to do?

Example:

We exceeded all our objectives:

- Penetration among women 25-34 increased from 12% to 23% (target 20%): a 92% increase vs our 67% target.
- Overall market share grew from 9% to 11.2% - the largest single-period gain by any challenger brand in the category in 5 years.
- Media efficiency improved by 78%: we achieved \$4.20 in incremental sales per media dollar (vs \$2.35 in our previous campaign)
- Source: Nielsen Scan Data

Paragraph 2: Demonstrating that media was instrumental.

Consider media-specific outcomes such as geographic precision, timing correlation, audience specificity, comparison to previous approaches.

Example:

The pulsing strategy drove the sales pattern: Sales spiked during 48-hour blitz windows and returned to baseline during silent periods. Across six cycles, we saw average 34% uplift during blitz, declining to +8% in following 48 hours, then baseline by day 5. This pattern repeated consistently. Geographic precision proved media's role: We ran only in Auckland and Wellington. Penetration increased 11 points in these markets vs 1.2 points in rest of NZ (where creative was visible through PR/social but no paid media ran). Creative had national awareness, but only media markets delivered penetration gains. Our media choices unlocked unprecedented results: Previous campaign (TV-led, always-on, same creative platform) delivered 3.2 points penetration gain over 12 months. Our new media approach delivered 11 points in six months—3.4x improvement in efficiency. Channel precision drove efficiency: Digital OOH near grocery stores meant 73% of target audience lived/worked within 500m of our sites, and 68% of sales came from stores in this radius. Other variables remained constant.

Paragraph 3: Additional evidence and ROI.

If you have additional compelling evidence or a strong ROI story, tell it here.

Example:

Brand tracking showed a 28-point increase in "brand for people like me" among women 25–34, directly addressing our perception challenge. Social listening revealed 3,200 brand mentions during blitz windows (vs baseline of 200/week), with 87% positive sentiment—demonstrating that our media concentration strategy created "unavoidable" brand moments. Retailer feedback confirmed that our product moved from back-of-shelf to eye-level placement in major chains due to velocity increases specifically during our media windows.

Acknowledging other factors

Great results sections play devil's advocate, identifying potential external factors that might have been responsible for the results and providing evidence to account for or discount these factors.

Demonstrate you are realistic that advertising is never the sole driver of results. Consider what else might have been in play and show that you've accounted for it.

Example:

We acknowledge that a 10% price promotion ran during weeks 3–4 of the campaign. However, the sales pattern shows that uplift occurred consistently across all six campaign cycles, including the four cycles without promotional support. When we isolate the two promotional weeks, the sales uplift was 42% (vs 34% average), suggesting the promotion added 8 points of uplift while the media approach contributed 34 points. The media strategy was clearly the primary driver—the promotion simply amplified an effect that was already working.

Common mistakes

- No indication that media was instrumental
- No context for numbers
- Results don't connect to objectives
- Ignoring obvious other factors in the market

A note on specialist List B categories

For entries in the Most Effective category, which allocates 40% of the score to Results, be exceptionally robust. Include business results, brand impact, efficiency, and long-term impact.

YOU'RE ALMOST READY

Hygiene factors (scrutineering checklist)

Before you submit:

- Correct entry form used
- Word count within limit
- Agency-blind (no agency names or logos anywhere within the entry paper or supporting materials)
- Media schedule uploaded (showing all media with % value)
- Campaign material loaded (max 10 files, no agency branding)
- Results and facts and figures all sourced (every claim must have a source either accompanying the fact/figure or clearly footnoted)

Make every word count. Cut ruthlessly.

This is your chance to showcase brilliant media thinking. Make it impossible for judges to ignore.

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