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The Case for Strategic Levity

A Smoking Gun Report

Humour Shouldn't Be A Gimmick -
It's A Neurological Strategy



Executive Summary

In a world overwhelmed by crisis, conflict and chaos, the role of humour in marketing communications has never been more vital - or more misunderstood.

Consumers are not short on information. They are drowning in it. Bad news is constant. The cost-of-living crisis shows no sign of abating. Global strife and instability fill our newsfeeds. Against this backdrop, rational messages fall flat. Fear tactics backfire. And brands that stick to the script become part of the noise.

It's time to change the tone

This report makes a neuroscience-backed case for change. It introduces **Strategic Levity** - a bold but evidence-based approach to marketing that treats humour, play and lightness - not as creative flourishes, but as **neurologically powerful tools for engagement, connection, and memory**.

The first report from Smoking Gun's new **Intention Unit**, it combines rigorous academic expertise with the up-to-the-minute insight from some of the marketing industry's top leaders.

Drawing on insights from Dr. Eleanor Bryant, Health Behaviour Psychologist at Bradford University, it explores how humour:

- **Enhances emotional recall and learning**
- **Shifts attitudes - even toward previously negative or forgettable brands**
- **Encourages preference - ultimately helping brands win**



Dr. Eleanor Bryant, Professor of Psychology at Bradford University

Put simply: humour doesn't just entertain. **It changes the brain.**

And yet, despite its power, humour remains underused in brand communications. To understand why, we surveyed 100 senior UK marketing leaders and discovered that:

52%

More than half wish they used humour more

47%

Nearly half are prioritising brand-building

where tone and emotional impact matter most



But many hesitate, citing fears of offence, backlash, or simply being misunderstood

There is a clear appetite for humour - but a lack of clarity on how to use it confidently and effectively.

Strategic Levity is designed to bridge that gap

This isn't about making everything funny. It's about making brands feel human again. About moving on from sanitised, inoffensive and ultimately forgettable campaigns. It's about using laughter, surprise and joy as levers for effectiveness and as antidotes to cultural exhaustion.

We believe that the brands that dare to play, that connect through well-judged humour, will be the brands that win hearts, minds, share of voice and consumer spend.





Welcome to the era of **Strategic Levity.**

Because serious marketing doesn't have to be sombre. Messaging does not have to be mundane.

And because in times like these, levity isn't optional. **It's essential.**

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The Cultural Context: Crisis Fatigue and the Attention Recession



Crisis Fatigue and the Attention Recession

We are living in an era of wholesale information overload. Our newsfeeds are overwhelmed with misery and suffering. Consumers are not disengaged because they don't care - they're disengaged because they're emotionally exhausted. Marketing that contributes to this emotional burden is ignored at best and damaging at worst.

Dr. Bryant explains: "We've all essentially been working in emotional A&E for the past five years. From pandemics to economic collapse and Brexit, the public's capacity to absorb serious messages has been saturated."

Strategic Levity offers a necessary counterbalance: messages that surprise, amuse, lighten, and uplift. In doing so, they restore attention and re-energise engagement.



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The Neuroscience: Why Humour Works



The Neuroscience: Why Humour works

Humour triggers dopamine, serotonin and endorphins:

chemicals associated with learning, memory, bonding and pleasure. ^{1,2}

It reduces cortisol and adrenaline:

the body's stress hormones. ³

This makes humour neurologically optimal for engagement, recall and positive brand association. ^{1, 4}

According to Dr. Bryant: "When people laugh, their brain chemistry shifts. Dopamine and serotonin - those feel-good neurotransmitters - are released. At the same time, cortisol, which fuels stress, is reduced. It creates an internal cocktail of calm and connection."

She continues: "Humour can literally change the way a person experiences a message. It doesn't just make people smile - it makes messages stick."



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What humour does in Marketing Communications



What humour does in Marketing Communications

Dr. Bryant notes: “There is solid evidence that humour improves engagement and recall. If someone laughs or feels amused, the likelihood that they will remember that brand activity - or associate positive feelings with the brand - increases significantly.”⁵

Research further shows that the effects of humour in advertising on consumer attitudes are stronger than that of most other persuasion tools.^{5,6}

Additional benefits include:

- **Enhances brand recall:** “Humour heightens memorability because it creates a positive neurological tag in the brain.”^{7,8}
- **Shifts brand perception:** “Research shows humour can change attitudes towards previously negative or ignored brands. It acts as a social lubricant.”^{9,10,11}
- **Increases purchase likelihood:** “Emotional positivity nudges decision-making. When people feel good, they’re more likely to buy.”¹²
- **Boosts content engagement:** “We see the effects daily-humorous posts get more shares, more dwell time, and better responses.”¹³

But it is not without its pitfalls. Dr. Bryant cautions: “The key is knowing your audience and your medium. Sarcasm might fly on X but crash in a TV ad. Mockery, especially if it punches down, can be damaging. But absurdity, wordplay and parody - when done well - can create joy and build brand trust.”



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Fear Doesn't Work Anymore: The Decline of Doom-Led Messaging



The Decline of Doom-Led Messaging

Fear-based and hyper-rational marketing fails in high-stress environments. It can trigger avoidance or emotional shutdown. Consumers increasingly block it out.

“Fear stimulates cortisol and adrenaline,” says Dr. Bryant. “That’s great for running from lions, but not for buying cereal. When stress hormones surge, the brain prioritises survival - not learning. That’s why people don’t engage with doom-led advertising.”^{14, 15, 16, 17}

Conversely: “When humour is used, people stay with the content longer. They engage more deeply. It disarms their resistance and opens them up to the message.”

*There are however some exceptions to this rule. In some health contexts fear can be an effective strategy to influence behaviour change.*¹⁸

*In addition - generating FOMO has been shown to be quite effective.*¹⁹



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Industry Insight: What Marketing Leaders Really Think About Humour



To understand the industry's attitudes towards using humour, we surveyed 100 senior marketers at leading UK brands. The results reinforce both the opportunity and the hesitation surrounding its use in brand communications.

46%

Almost half of marketers are **nervous about using humour in public-facing content**, with concerns centred on misjudging tone or causing offence.

Among those who feel nervous:

- 27% **fear sparking unwitting offence**
- 26% **are concerned about what is appropriate humour to different audiences**
- 16% **are concerned about what is appropriate humour to different channels**
- 23% **worry audiences "just won't get it"**
- 19% **fear a media backlash**
- 12% **fear a consumer backlash**

These insights reveal a paradox: brands **recognise humour's potential**, but struggle with implementation due to perceived risk.

Humour's Strategic Appeal:

When asked what emotional responses drive the best results:

- **Surprise (37%) and Excitement (31%)** topped the list
- **Laughter** - central to the Strategic Levity proposition - was the third most valued at **16%**, ahead of empathy (11%), fear (4%), and anger (1%)

This aligns with Dr. Bryant's neuroscience perspective:

"Surprise and laughter are closely linked neurologically - they both release dopamine and boost engagement."

A Desire for More Levity:

52%

of marketers wish they used more humour in their comms.

Only 9% said they wanted to use it less.

In short: the desire is there. The industry just needs better tools and frameworks to act with confidence.

Levity and the Future of Brand Investment:

47%

Nearly half of senior marketers ranked **brand-building communications** - where tone and emotional resonance matter most - as their **top investment priority** for the next 12 months.

This creates a clear runway for levity-led campaigns to take centre stage.

Strategic Implication

Marketers are telling us:

- They know humour works
- They want to use it more
- But they need support navigating cultural, tonal and audience sensitivities

This reinforces the purpose of Strategic Levity: to provide the evidence, guidance and frameworks to unlock humour's potential - safely, meaningfully and strategically.



**Rules of Engagement:
How to Use Humour Well**



Rules of Engagement: How to Use Humour Well

Dr. Bryant outlines the evidence-backed principles: ^{20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25}

- “Avoid humour that mocks, marginalises or objectifies. It triggers defensiveness and alienation.”
- “Tailor humour to the platform and demographic. A meme might win on Instagram but fail in print.”
- “Use humour as a hook - but follow it with fact. That combo - laugh then learn - is powerful.”
- “Think of humour as empathy in action. It builds bridges. It helps people process serious messages in a more palatable way.”



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Strategic Levity in practice: Case Studies

These campaigns by Smoking Gun exemplify how Strategic Levity can drive meaningful brand engagement and measurable commercial success, while remaining rooted in strategic objectives.



Case Study 1:

Giving Philips Coffee Machines a Kick-Start



Challenge:

Establish Philips in the coffee machine marketplace where its awareness was extremely low.

Strategic Levity in action:

We positioned Philips' coffee machines as the perfect Valentine's gift by connecting the brand with influencer trio, Sam Thompson, Zara McDermott and Pete Wicks.

Results:

The influencer content:



Reached 2.3m people



Generated 1.4m video views, 66k engagements and 16k clicks

It was part of a campaign that **doubled market share**, with Philips overtaking Siemens to the no.2 spot, and scored high for memorability in qual' research.

Watch the campaign video [here](#).

Case Study 2:

A True Original



Challenge:

Turbocharge brand awareness for Original Source shower gel.

Strategic Levity in action:

We recruited Made In Chelsea star turned BBC Radio 1 presenter Jamie Laing to front an energising brand campaign.

Jamie appeared in a cheeky video, pranking wife Sophie Habboo with the ultimate wake-up call.

Results:

Bringing to life all of the energy, zest and colour that the brand's shower gels epitomise - the memorable content achieved:

🕒 4.5m views

🕒 1.4m engagements

The content series - part of the 'Nature Hits Different' campaign - **saw sales of a key SKU rise 67% YoY in retailer Tesco, and market penetration grew 27%**, outperforming key competitors Radox and Dove.

Watch the campaign video [here](#).

Case Study 3:

Fry and Mighty



Challenge:

Spread the word about Philips' latest airfryer.

Strategic Levity in action:

By teaming up with comedy and podcast queens LuAnna to launch Philips' Steam & Fry Airfryer - we served up laughs, flavour and serious results.

They hosted a buzzy media and influencer event, hit the streets for a taste test with Itsu and dropped content that made our theme of family mealtimes feel fun, real and totally scroll-stopping.

Results:

Their content as part of a wider campaign helped drive a **900% jump in market share for airfryers YOY** - and also -

- Reached 2m people
- Generated 1.6m video views and 700k engagements
- Brand preference rose from 10% to 23% - leading the competitor set
- Brand consideration rose from 36% to 50% - trumping the competition

Read the full case study [here](#).

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Strategic Levity is an Untapped Advantage



Strategic Levity is an Untapped Advantage

Despite decades of psychological research, most marketing teams have not operationalised humour as a strategic tool.

Experts like Weinberger, Eisen and Greiner have pioneered the study into how humour operates in marketing.

“There’s a gap between what the science knows and what the industry does,” explains Dr. Bryant. “We’ve known for years that humour improves memory and mood. But few brands have treated it with the same strategic rigour they give performance media or segmentation.”



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What Marketing Leaders Should Do Next



What Marketing Leaders Should Do Next



1

Audit your tone:

Are your campaigns making people feel *anything*?

2

Map humour potential:

Where can levity live in your content journey?

3

Experiment:

Test humour types and formats by audience and platform.

4

Invest in storytellers:

Comedians, writers and behavioural scientists.

Dr. Bryant adds:

“Start small, test and learn. Humour doesn’t have to be laugh-out-loud. Sometimes a smile is enough to shift perception.”



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**Comic Relief:
A Comedian's Advice for Brands
on Getting Humour Right**



Described as “**a sensational stand-up**”, Jack Kelly is a Manchester-based comedian, writer, and host. As heard on BBC Radio 2, Jack is celebrated for his sharp wit, relatable charm, and what the British Comedy Guide calls “wistful and hilarious anecdotes”.

He is also the co-founder of the award-winning Laughiēnda Comedy Club and is the driving force behind a series of successful comedy nights across Greater Manchester.

Here he offers brand marketers a grounded, real-world view on how humour works in practice - and how brands can use it more confidently and authentically.

Humour Has Rules - But They're Not the Ones You Think

Jack is clear: “There’s no strategy in comedy - only structure.” According to him, humour operates on instinct, relatability and rhythm, not corporate frameworks. But that doesn’t mean it’s random.

“**All good jokes follow a pattern: set-up, twist and punchline,**” he explains. “The Andre Previn and Eric Morecambe sketch is a perfect example. It begins with the serious set-up of a classical performance, twists with Morecambe’s apparent incompetence and lands a brilliant punchline with his famous line, ‘I’m playing all the right notes - but not necessarily in the right order.’

“**It’s all there - context, tension, release. The same format can make airfryers funny.**”

His advice for brand teams: “Don’t overthink. If something makes you laugh personally, that’s already a better creative starting point than guessing what your audience might laugh at.”



Punch Up, Not Down

“Every joke has a victim,” Jack says. “But that doesn’t mean every joke is cruel. It’s about *where* you aim. A dustbin can be the joke. Your audience shouldn’t be.”

He reinforces a key principle echoed throughout the Strategic Levity report: **humour must connect, not alienate**. “If you wouldn’t make the joke in front of the person you’re referencing, don’t use it.”

Don’t Clean the Comedy Out of It

Jack warns that many funny ideas get sanitised into banality.

“**You can tell when something started off funny, but then they played it safe.** The edge gets sanded off, the risky parts taken out and it ends up over-explained or too polished. It’s like seeing how the magician does the trick, the audience loses trust.”

“So you’re left with something that *kind of* makes the point, but none of the fun.”

“**If you’re unsure, test it.** The best comedians always fine tune their material. Marketing should be no different.”

Imitation Kills Levity

Jack draws a clear line between influence and imitation: “There’s a difference between parody and pastiche. If you’re just redoing someone else’s joke, you’re not adding anything. The audience knows.”

He urges brands to avoid chasing trends for trend’s sake. “If a TikTok creator’s sketch is working, don’t try to copy it. Collaborate with them - or create something original that reflects your brand’s own personality.”



Leave It to the Experts and Trust Them

Jack's clearest recommendation? "Hire comedians, comic writers, or creators - but don't box them in. The best comedians never walk on stage with a joke they haven't tested. Marketing needs the same rigour."

He notes that the comedy industry is full of professionals eager to partner with brands - if only they're trusted to do what they do best.

"Comedy is the cheapest form of engagement you've got. Two people talking in a kitchen can beat fireworks and CGI - if they're funny."

Jack's Five Golden Rules for Brands Using Humour

- 1 **Start with what makes YOU laugh** - not what you *think* the audience wants.
- 2 **Don't punch down** - make the product or situation the joke, not the person.
- 3 **Stop over-polishing** - if you trust the humour, keep it raw.
- 4 **Collaborate, don't imitate** - work with creators who do it well.
- 5 **Be brave - and test like a comic** - your audience will tell you what works.

Jack's philosophy echoes the core of Strategic Levity: humour is human. Used well, it invites audiences into your brand story - not as buyers, but as participants.

As he puts it: **"Make me laugh and I'll give you my respect. And maybe even my money."**



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Conclusion: Levity Isn't Optional
- It's a Competitive Advantage



Levity Isn't Optional - It's a Competitive Advantage



This report began with a simple but urgent observation: in a world drowning in crisis, brands must shift tone to stay relevant. The neuroscience is clear. The marketing insight is current. The creative case studies are proven. And the time to act is now.

Strategic Levity offers a practical, evidence-based approach to integrating humour and humanity into brand storytelling.

It's a model rooted in psychology. It's guided by cultural intelligence. It's delivered with creativity. And it's designed for marketers who want to engage - not overwhelm - consumers.

Because serious marketing doesn't have to be sombre.

Because humour isn't a gimmick. It's a neurological strategy.



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Toolkit Addendum: Applying Strategic Levity in Practice

To help marketers take action, this practical toolkit offers expanded exercises, real-world examples, and ready-to-use frameworks to implement Strategic Levity across brand communications.



Tone Audit: The Feel Test



The first step in applying levity is to assess the emotional tone of your current campaigns. This tool helps you gauge whether your communications genuinely engage the senses and elevate the mood.

Ask of each asset:

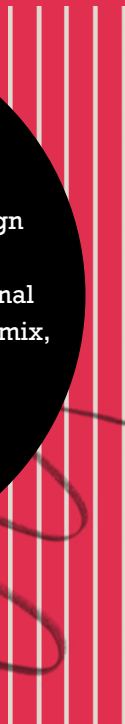
- ☐ What emotional response does this evoke?
- ☐ Would someone smile, laugh, or feel lighter after seeing this?
- ☐ Does the tone match or counterbalance the emotional state of your target audience right now?

Action: Review your last five brand campaigns and score them (1–5 scale) for:

- ☐ **Memorability**
- ☐ **Emotional resonance**
- ☐ **Positivity of tone**

Pro Tip:

Consider mapping your campaign content across a mood grid (e.g. energising vs. calming; rational vs. emotional). Aim for a balanced mix, but identify where levity can elevate bland or overly rational touchpoints.



Humour Dos & Don'ts Cheat Sheet



Use this guide to shape tone and avoid common pitfalls in comedic creative

Do

Use humour as a **bridge**, not a barrier. It should foster connection, not division.

Follow the laugh with a message. A joke should lead to a product truth or value.

Match tone to **channel and audience**. Dry humour may work in long-copy print; absurdity thrives on TikTok.

Ensure humour is **on-brand**. Levity should reflect your values, not clash with them.

Don't

Punch down, stereotype, or mock marginalised groups. Ever.

Confuse inside jokes or obscure references with cleverness. If it needs explaining, it's not working.

Sacrifice clarity for laughs. If the message is lost, the humour hasn't helped.



Strategic Levity Campaign Checklist



Use this final checklist as a pre-launch test for any campaign that leverages humour or levity.

Is the humour **appropriate to the audience and platform**?

Does it create a **positive emotional reaction** (smile, surprise, amusement)?

Is it **linked to a clear benefit or message**?

Have potential risks (e.g. misinterpretation or backlash) been considered?

Was it **tested with a sample audience** for clarity and tone?

Is the humour **repeatable** across formats (e.g. paid, organic, influencer)?

These tools are designed to help brands move from theory to practice-bringing levity into campaigns in meaningful, measurable and strategic ways.



Strategic Levity is not a style. It's a strategy. Use it with purpose.

Introducing Smoking Gun's Intention Unit

The Intention Unit is an award-winning powerhouse of diverse storytelling expertise, blending a combined 50+ years of industry-leading PR, social and newsroom experience.

It seamlessly combines **strategy, creativity and channel mastery** with an editorial mindset, to deliver best in class storytelling that captivates audiences and drives real business impact.

Rooted in everyday culture and research-led insight, it cuts through the noise with its effective, results-driven approach.

It is made up of:

Strategy Director: Hayley Peters

Chief Storyteller: Carl Stroud

Social Media and Influencer Director: Carly Chell



How can I adopt Strategic Levity in my brand communications?

We are the team to help - always with ruthless focus on impacting your business goals.



**To discuss how to use levity to your unfair competitive advantage in
your PR and comms, contact Smoking Gun CEO Rick Guttridge**

Call Rick on 07887 942926 or email createingenious@smokinggun.agency

www.smokinggun.agency

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