

shenshin.co

USER ACQUISITION GUIDE



The Creative & UGC Guide

Ads that win: angles, hooks, testing, and creators

Igor Shenshin / Head of User Acquisition

What is inside

- 01 Why creative is the biggest lever you have
- 02 Angles: the real unit of creative
- 03 Hooks that stop the scroll
- 04 Ad structure: hook, value, proof, call to action
- 05 Formats: static, video, short-form vertical, and UGC
- 06 Working with UGC creators
- 07 Writing a creative brief
- 08 Building a creative testing system
- 09 Iterating winners and fighting fatigue
- 10 Common mistakes to avoid

I have spent more than twelve years running creative for paid ads, and the single biggest change in that time is where the leverage sits. It used to live in targeting and bidding. Today the platforms handle most of that for you, and the creative is the part you still fully control. That is why I tell every team the same thing: your ads are your new targeting. The image, the first three seconds, the words a real person says on camera. That is what decides who sees you and whether they stop.

This guide is the version of that lesson I wish someone had handed me early on. It covers how I think about angles, how I write hooks, how I structure an ad, how I find and brief UGC creators, and how I build a testing system that reliably surfaces winners instead of guessing. Everything here is written for the US market and the platforms you actually buy on. Read it once end to end, then keep it open while you build your next batch.

Why creative is the biggest lever you have

Ad platforms have automated almost everything except the creative. You feed the machine a budget and an objective, and it finds the people most likely to convert. What it cannot do is invent the message. When two advertisers chase the same audience, the one with better creative wins the auction on lower cost because the platform rewards ads people engage with. So the creative is not decoration on top of a media buy. It is the media buy.

This reframes the whole job. Instead of obsessing over audiences and bid caps, you spend your energy generating more and better creative ideas, and you build a system that tests them quickly. The advertisers who scale are not the ones with a secret audience. They are the ones producing more distinct creative concepts per month and killing the losers fast.

PRO TIP

If your account has plateaued, the fix is almost never a new audience or a new bid strategy. It is fresh creative that says something you have not said yet. Count how many genuinely different concepts you launched last month. If it is under ten, that is your bottleneck.

Angles: the real unit of creative

A hook grabs attention, but an angle is the underlying argument for why someone should care about your product. It is the promise, the problem, or the point of view. One product can have dozens of angles, and the same person will ignore one and buy on another. Most accounts fail because they run one angle in fifteen slightly different edits and call it testing. Real testing means running fifteen different arguments.

To brainstorm angles, start from the person, not the product. Write down the problems they feel, the outcomes they want, the objections that stop them, the identity they want to project, and the moments in their day when your product matters. Each of those is a doorway into a different angle. Here is how I organize the common ones.

Common creative angles and how to use them

Angle	What it leads with	Best when
Problem or pain	The frustration your product removes	Audience is aware they have the problem
Outcome or dream	The result and how life looks after	Aspirational products, transformation stories
Objection killer	Answering the reason people hesitate	High price, skepticism, or a crowded category
Us versus the old way	Why the common alternative is worse	You are replacing an entrenched habit or tool
Social proof	Reviews, numbers, real customers	Trust is the main barrier to buying
Curiosity or mechanism	A surprising reason it works	Novel product that needs explaining
Identity	Who this is for and who they become	Community-driven or lifestyle brands
Urgency or timing	A reason to act now	Seasonal, launches, or limited offers

PRO TIP

Mine your own reviews, support tickets, and Reddit threads for the exact words customers use. The best angles are usually hiding in a five-star review or a one-star complaint. Copy the phrasing almost verbatim into your hook.

Hooks that stop the scroll

The first three seconds decide everything. On a feed that moves fast, people are not deciding whether to buy. They are deciding whether to keep watching. If your hook does not earn the next three seconds, the rest of your ad does not exist. I spend more time on hooks than on any other part of a creative, and I test many hooks against the same body.

A hook works when it does one of a few things: names the viewer or their situation so they feel seen, opens a curiosity gap they need closed, shows a striking visual or result up front, or makes a claim bold enough to be worth challenging. Say the most interesting thing first. Do not warm up.

- Callout: "If you run paid ads and your costs keep climbing, watch this."
- Problem: "I wasted six months testing audiences before I learned this."
- Curiosity: "The reason your ads stopped working has nothing to do with your budget."
- Result first: open on the after state, the transformation, or the number.
- Contrarian: "Stop split-testing audiences. Here is what actually moves the needle."
- Direct question: "Ever wonder why one ad prints money and the next flops?"

PRO TIP

Kill any intro that starts with your logo, a slow pan, or "Hey guys." Text on screen in the first second helps the majority who scroll with sound off. Match the visual energy of native, organic content, not a polished TV spot.

Ad structure: hook, value, proof, call to action

Once the hook earns attention, you need a structure that carries the viewer to action. I use a simple four-part frame for almost every direct-response ad. It works for a fifteen-second Reel and a sixty-second UGC video alike. The lengths change, the order does not.

- 1 Hook (0 to 3 seconds): stop the scroll and make one clear promise about what they will get by staying.
- 2 Value (the middle): deliver on the promise. Show the product solving the problem, explain the mechanism, or walk through the benefit. This is where the angle lives.
- 3 Proof: back the claim with something believable. A result, a demo, a review, a before and after, a number, or a real person vouching for it. Proof is what turns interest into belief.
- 4 Call to action: tell them exactly what to do next and why now. One action, stated plainly. "Tap shop now to try it," not a vague "learn more."

The four-part structure at a glance

Part	Job	Watch out for
Hook	Win the next three seconds	Slow starts, logos, throat-clearing
Value	Make the case, deliver the angle	Listing features instead of benefits
Proof	Make it believable	Claims with nothing to back them
Call to action	Drive one clear next step	Multiple asks or a weak, vague CTA

You do not always run these in strict order. A strong ad often front-loads proof into the hook, a real result in the first second, then explains. But every winning ad has all four elements somewhere. When an ad underperforms, walk it back through this list and you will usually find the missing piece.

Formats: static, video, short-form vertical, and UGC

Different formats do different jobs, and the smart move is to run a mix rather than betting everything on one. Each has strengths, and the same angle can be expressed in several of them, which multiplies your testing volume without inventing new ideas.

- **Static images:** fast and cheap to produce, great for punchy claims, offers, and testing angles and copy quickly. A bold headline on a clean image still converts.
- **Longer video:** room to explain a mechanism, tell a story, or build a case for a considered purchase. Works well for higher-priced or complex products.
- **Short-form vertical (Reels and similar):** full-screen, sound-on, fast-paced, native-feeling. This is where most reach and cheap attention live right now. Design for vertical first.
- **UGC:** creator-made content that looks like a real person talking to their phone. It reads as authentic rather than as an ad, which lowers the guard and lifts engagement. Often my best-performing format for direct response.

PRO TIP

Shoot and design vertical first, then crop or adapt for other placements. Do not take a horizontal video and jam it into a vertical slot with black bars. That single mistake quietly tanks a lot of otherwise good creative.

Working with UGC creators

UGC is a workflow, not a lucky find. You source creators, brief them well, license the footage, and in many cases run the ads through the creator's own handle. Done right, it gives you a steady stream of authentic creative that outperforms polished studio work for a fraction of the cost.

To find creators, look at people already making content in your niche, use UGC marketplaces and creator platforms, and reach out to happy customers who post about you. You are not hiring for follower count. You are hiring for how naturally they talk to a camera and how well they fit your audience.

- 1 Source: build a shortlist from marketplaces, niche creators, and customers who already love the product.
- 2 Brief: send a clear brief with the angle, the hook, the key points, and examples. Give direction but leave room for their natural voice.
- 3 License: agree in writing on usage rights, how long you can run the content, and where, including paid ads. Do not assume you own footage just because you paid for it.
- 4 Whitelist: for the strongest results, run ads through the creator's own handle with their permission (often called whitelisting or partnership ads) so the ad appears as the creator's post.
- 5 Disclose: require clear disclosure that the content is a paid partnership. This is the correct framing for the US market.

FTC DISCLOSURE

In the US, creators must clearly disclose a paid or material relationship with your brand. Make disclosure a non-negotiable line in every brief and contract: a plain, visible label like "paid partnership" or "#ad" that a viewer cannot miss. It protects the creator, your brand, and your ad account.

Writing a creative brief

A creative brief is the difference between footage you can use and footage you have to reshoot. Whether you are briefing a UGC creator, an editor, or a designer, the brief carries your thinking to the person who makes the asset. Keep it one page. Nobody reads a ten-page brief.

- The angle: the one argument this creative is making, in a sentence.
- The hook: the exact first line or opening visual you want tested.
- Audience: who this is for and the problem they feel.
- Key points: the two or three things to communicate, in priority order.
- Proof to include: the result, review, demo, or number to show.
- Call to action: the single next step and the offer.
- Format and specs: vertical, length, sound-on, on-screen text expectations.
- Do and do not: brand rules, claims to avoid, tone. And no dashes in on-screen copy or scripts.
- References: one or two example ads that show the vibe.

PRO TIP

Give one brief per angle, not one giant brief covering five ideas. It keeps the creator focused and makes your test results clean, because each asset maps to a single argument you can judge on its own.

Building a creative testing system

Testing is where good ideas turn into revenue, and where most teams get sloppy. You need a repeatable system: how many concepts you launch, how much you spend, what you measure, and a clear rule for when a test is finished. Without that, you are just refreshing dashboards and trusting your gut.

- 1 **Volume:** launch a batch of distinct concepts, not one ad. I aim for several genuinely different angles each round rather than minor tweaks.
- 2 **Budget:** give each concept enough spend to reach a meaningful number of conversions before you judge it. Aim for enough conversions to trust the signal, not just a handful of clicks.
- 3 **Measure:** track cost per result and the click-through rate as your top signals, plus hook rate (how many keep watching past three seconds) and the ratio of clicks to purchases. Watch spend and time in flight so a test does not run forever.
- 4 **Decide:** a test is done when a concept has spent its allotted budget or hit enough conversions to be confident. Then cut the clear losers, keep the clear winners, and set aside the middle for iteration.
- 5 **Document:** log every concept, its angle, its hook, and its result. Your test history is the map that tells you which angles to double down on next.

What to measure and why

Metric	What it tells you	Fix if weak
Hook rate (3-second holds)	Whether the opening stops the scroll	Rewrite the hook, front-load the payoff
Click-through rate	Whether the ad creates enough interest to act	Sharpen the angle and the call to action
Cost per result	The bottom line: is this efficient	Kill losers, scale winners
Clicks to purchase ratio	Whether the landing experience matches the ad	Align the page with the ad promise

PRO TIP

Do not judge a creative in the first few hours. Early numbers swing wildly. Set your budget and time thresholds up front, and hold yourself to them. Turning ads off too early is the most common way teams kill winners before they warm up.

Iterating winners and fighting fatigue

When you find a winner, the work is not over. It is the start of a new branch. The fastest way to grow is to take a proven concept and produce variations of it: new hooks on the same body, new creators delivering the same script, a static version of a winning video. You are not searching blindly anymore. You are mining a vein that you know contains gold.

At the same time, every winner fatigues. The audience sees it too many times, engagement drops, and cost creeps up. When you notice frequency climbing and results slipping on a once-strong ad, that is your signal to refresh. Refreshing does not mean starting over. It means a new hook, a new opening visual, a new creator, or a new edit of the same winning idea.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Iterate winners into families of variations rather than hunting for brand-new ideas every time.
- Watch frequency and rising cost per result as early warnings of fatigue.
- Always have fresh concepts in the pipeline so you are never scrambling when a winner dies.
- A refreshed hook on a proven body often beats a brand-new concept and is far cheaper to make.

Common mistakes to avoid

Most of the failures I see are not exotic. They are the same handful of mistakes repeated across accounts. Fix these and you are ahead of the majority of advertisers.

- Testing edits instead of angles: fifteen versions of one idea is one test, not fifteen.
- Slow openings: burning the first three seconds on a logo or a warm-up.
- Making ads that look like ads: polished, corporate, and easy to scroll past. Native beats slick.
- Judging too early: killing a creative before it has enough data to be trusted.
- No proof: bold claims with nothing believable behind them.
- Weak or missing call to action: assuming people know what to do next.
- Ignoring fatigue: running a winner into the ground instead of refreshing it.
- Skipping disclosure: running creator content without clear paid-partnership labeling.
- Not documenting results: forgetting which angles worked, so you relearn the same lessons every quarter.

PRO TIP

The best creative teams are not the most talented. They are the most systematic. More angles, faster tests, honest measurement, and a habit of iterating winners. Talent helps, but the system is what compounds.

Where to go next

If this gave you a clearer way to think about creative, there is a lot more where it came from. I write regularly on the shenshin.co blog about angles, testing, and the day-to-day of running paid ads, and my free course walks through the full user acquisition workflow step by step. Start with one batch of angles this week, test them honestly, and let the winners tell you what to make next.

shenshin.co