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Brand Advertising As Creative Publicity

Bringing theory into line with practice

Andrew Ehrenberg, Neil Barnard, Rachel Kennedy and Helen Bloom

Report 13 for Corporate Sponsors
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Abstract

Our view of brand advertising is that it mostly serves to publicise the advertised brand. Advertising seldom seems to persuade.

Advertising in a competitive market needs to maintain the brand's broad salience – being a brand the consumer buys or considers buying. This turns on brand awareness, but together with memory associations, familiarity, and brand assurance. Publicity can also help to develop such salience.

This publicity view of advertising should affect both the briefs that are given to agencies (e.g. that cut-through is more important than having a persuasive selling proposition), and how we then evaluate the results. But since few advertisements seem actively to seek to persuade, how much do the advertisements themselves have to change, rather than just how we think and talk about them?

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The Ehrenberg-Bass Institute provides a fundamental program of University research into buyer behaviour & brand performance. Corporate membership delivers new discoveries & knowledge to marketing departments around the world.

1. THREE KEY CONCEPTS

Brand advertising seems to work mainly by creatively publicizing the brand, without trying to persuade people that the brand differs from other brands, or is better or best. Fairly few ads actually feature potentially persuasive inducements for their brand. Nor do they usually appear to change people's opinions.

Three key terms used here are now briefly outlined, namely: Publicity, Persuasion, and Salience. They are then discussed in more detail in Sections 2 and 3. Implications for sales are noted in Section 4, with a concluding discussion in Section 5.

Publicity

Publicity is usually defined as "Bringing X to public notice". Remarkably, this is much like traditional dictionary definitions of advertising: "Making publicly known by an announcement in a journal, circular, etc" (OED, 2000). Historically, advertising was often synonymous with publicity, and in our view it still largely is.

Publicity sometimes conveys new information: "The preacher this Sunday is the Reverend X". But mostly it reminds already-knowledgeable people: "The morning service is (again) at 10 am". Or "Coke Is It".

Publicity is often highly creative, to achieve impact.

Some publicity is free. Much is paid for. Publicity need not claim or imply differentiating values for the brand (although it may do so): "I saw the ad on television and liked it but can't remember what it said".

The publicizing function of good brand advertising is all-pervasive. But it is seldom discussed nowadays. Hence this report.

Persuasion

Many people seem to believe that advertising has a primarily persuasive function. For instance, the millennium edition of the *Journal of Marketing* stated (Myers-Levy and Malaviya, 1999)

> **"Persuasion is the only mode [of advertising] worthy of consideration".**

Niall FitzGerald, joint Chairman of Unilever, has said (1997)

> **"Most experts and commentators believe that branding ...is little more ... than persuading consumers ..."**

Tim Ambler (2000) has voiced a similar sentiment about the US

> **"The assumption that advertising equals persuasion is so ingrained in the USA that to challenge it elicits much the same reaction as questioning your partner's parentage".**

To persuade someone is to give them a reason or an incentive, or to induce a mood, so as to change what they think or feel, and then perhaps do.

In *strong* persuasion, the advocacy would be more explicit, like a church proclaiming "Attend Sunday Service to Save Your Soul". *Successful* persuasion would require not only the attempt but also the deed, i.e. a "winning argument" (OED, 2000).

But in brand advertising, actual attempts at "persuasion" are, we have found, in the minority. Successful persuasion is even rarer. James Best (Chairman of DDB Needham) has said, "when it comes to persuading, not a lot of advertising does". He added: "It's not meant to".

Salience

Successful publicity for brand X affects the "salience" of the brand, especially if the product or service is one that is broadly relevant to the recipient (including friends and neighbours).

Salience in our terms refers to the presence and richness of memory traces which result in the brand coming to mind in relevant choice situations (Romaniuk and Sharp, 2002b). It is not an attitudinal concept, being about a relevant brand's 'share of mind'. But it is much more than mere awareness of the brand in its product category, (however measured).

Thus with awareness has to come familiarity and, almost inevitably, that the brand is considered reputable or acceptable (like some other such brands). We believe that such broad salience is vital for a brand to become and remain in one's "consideration set" as a brand that one might or does buy.

Salience can develop through advertising as publicity, PR, word-of-mouth, retail display, sponsorship, and especially, through previous brand usage.

Consumers mostly have more than one brand in their repertoire or wider consideration set of salient brands. For a brand to become or remain salient therefore need not require any unique commitment. Nor has the brand to be thought of as altogether best, but merely as "good enough".

These three terms – Publicity, Persuasion, and Salience – tend each to be used in a variety of different ways. But that does not preclude drawing some important distinguishing lines, as we attempt to do here.

2. CREATIVE PUBLICITY

Publicity – throwing a spotlight on the advertised brand – is an inescapable function of effective brand advertising. As such, we review three aspects in this section

1. How ads publicize the brand,
2. How creative publicity functions through bringing out or refreshing memory traces for the brand,
3. How advertising acts as publicity, not as persuasion.

How Ads Publicize Brands

Some advertisements announce something new, e.g. a price-cut, or a new brand. But most advertisements are about a brand or another issue (e.g. Drink-Drive) which the recipient is already aware of:

> **"Man requires more often to be reminded than informed" (Johnson, 1751).**

The most heavily advertised brands like Coke or Nike are known to billions, and have been for years, yet they still advertise.

Awareness may however be subconscious – not knowing explicitly that one is aware – especially with an item of no particular relevance to the recipient. The information may even be left unprocessed in the mind (Heath, 2001), although repeated exposures can lead to more conscious noting ("I think I've seen this before" – Krugman, 1972).

As we will discuss, publicity often does not seem to be trying to persuade consumers to change what they feel about the brand. It mostly only seeks to have consumers feel, think, and remember something about the brand at all.

Some people therefore speak pejoratively of "mere publicity" (as remarked by Moran, 1990 and Bullmore, 1998). Yet even Emerson's better mousetrap will not sell if it is not known.

Most advertisements do not seem to feature or imply strong selling propositions but "mere talking-points" (visual or verbal), i.e. creative and impactful ways of referring to the brand to help bring it before the public again. The following examples illustrate this, even for what may appear to be a "Hard Sell" approach (item 7).

1) Proclaiming the Brand

Many ads (including billboards, T-shirts, and sponsorship) just feature the brand's name or current slogan distinctively:

"NIKE" or "Coke is It"
(*Saying*: **Here I Am — Remember Me**)

It has been suggested that the banner "*Coke is It*" tells the consumer that Coke is popular, with-it, and the genuine article. But "*Bloggo is It*" would not say all this for Bloggo. "*Coke is It*" therefore does not attach "popular, with-it, and original" to Coca-Cola. Instead, it lets consumers attach or re-attach any such prior associations of their own to the brand, once the ad has reminded them of Coca-Cola again (which is what the ad *can* do).

The small print in an ad is only rarely read (or read again). But its mere presence can add tone and gravitas (or clutter) to the "Here I Am".

2) The Brand as the Product

Many advertisements in effect say the brand is an example of the product

"X Gets Clothes Clean"
(*Saying*: **X is a laundry detergent**)

Being a laundry detergent is a good thing to associate with a detergent brand and to be reminded of again, as Moran (1990) has stressed.

Experienced consumers (i.e. most) would know that X is much like other laundry detergents. But the ad reminds them of X: so when they need more detergent, they can just think X.

A more assertive tagline like

"Domestos kills 99% of all known germs DEAD"

still seems just a catchy way of saying "I'm a Disinfectant." The ad may appear to imply that Domestos is stronger. But even Domestos customers are not persuaded by this, as they mostly buy other brands as well, over any succession of purchases.

3) Providing Information

Numerous advertisements feature a particular attribute or a new price:

"Intel Inside" or "$10 off"

But information can only be new at most once. It soon becomes a mere reminder.

4) Establishing Distinctiveness

Other advertisements (including most blockbusters and "themed publicity") show the brand in some creatively memorable, yet often fairly meaningless way (as noted in Carpenter et al's award winning paper in 1999), e.g:

"Polo, the Mint with the Hole"

In Britain this is memorable for many. (It may mean more to the few who know the US version: *Lifesavers.*)

5) Appealing to Emotions

Some ads command attention through family values, gorgeous scenery, sex, humor, cute children, animals, music, being ethical, or some other warm experience:

"Nescafé — the best part of waking up"

(Feeling good about the product, and/or liking the ad. Seldom strongly persuasive, but perhaps memorable).

6) Proffering a Reason

Quite a few advertisements (a decided minority?) do present a reason (other than just announcing a price cut) for choosing that brand (e.g. has *four* airbags).

"Carlsberg — Probably the Best Lager in the World"

If such adspeak were accepted literally ("Best," "Unique", "New"), it would sell, other things being equal. But experienced users "don't seem to buy it." They know that their own brands also taste good. Almost nobody bothers to switch for adspeak reasons.

Nonetheless, saying Better or Best keeps the brand in front of the public, and provides some reassurance ("The ad says it's best").

7) Hard Sell

Some ads do overtly try to coax people to buy here and now:

"Whilst Stocks Last!" or "BUY X NOW!"

However, hard-selling lacks many widely-reported Road-to-Damascus conversions: It seldom "sells" from scratch. But it can act as a reminder, a rather intrusive way of drawing renewed attention to the brand.

Hard sell in advertising might help the already persuaded to "close the sale" themselves. But so can *soft* sell, e.g. Bullmore (1998) showing a bottle of POM™ hair-restorative and asking

"GOING BALD?",

rather than puffing

"POM gives you a full head of hair in 6 days".

These dimensions, along which publicity can work, stem from our initially subjective ("qualitative") scrutiny of a range of ads.

Following that, formal tests of representative examples of over 100 TV, print, and outdoor ads using some 500 consumers, advertising professionals, and marketing students as subjects, confirmed that more than half the ads were NOT seen as differentiating the brand from its competitors (Ehrenberg et al, 2000 – see also Stewart and Furse, 1984 for other approaches).

How Publicity Functions Through Memory

Because of the elapsed time between exposure and behavior, advertising has to work through people's memory. The gap may be seconds for an in-store display, but two months or more for an instant coffee, or years for car or insurance campaigns. It requires *long-term* memory (LTM).

Recent developments in physiological memory research suggest that synapses need to be consolidated (nerve cells linking) for information to be processed into LTM (Franzen and Bouwman, 2001; du Plessis, 1998). More immediately actionable is the psychology of the memory process. Learning of a name, say, mostly comes through the old-fashioned process of rehearsing the input (e.g. Baddeley, 1974).

To enable this for a brand, repetitive advertising can provide more or less controlled exposures to the brand (what is said, when, where, how often, and with what creative treatments).

Indeed, just repeating a brand name – "mere exposure" (Zajonc, 1968, and Harrison, 1968) – is known to breed *Familiarity*, "the absolutely basic value created by advertising", as James Webb Young already stressed early in the last century.

And such "mere exposure" has even been shown to breed *liking*.

Consumers can also have exposures to the brand other than by paid-for advertising, though that is usually less easily controlled: The brand being mentioned by others, a glimpse of the pack in a store, an empty can lying in the gutter, and especially *using* the brand.

Even the sheer act of remembering can refresh memory traces for the brand (Hilts, 1991; Franzen and Bouwman, 2001). So can teaser ads, such as showing the familiar colors with "etton" bled into the ad's left-hand margin. (It works if it works – that is the creative challenge.) An advertisement that is liked may also be looked at more often or longer. Thus the brand may be better remembered (without "Liking the ad" having to translate into "Liking the brand", Kennedy and Sharp, 2001).

Once a message or image is placed in our long-term memory, it seems virtually never to be forgotten (e.g. Hunter, 1964; Franzen and Bouwman, 2001). Formal recognition tests and general experience have long shown this (e.g. recognizing the picture seen once 20 years ago, or the first chord of Beethoven's Seventh for those who know the Seventh).

The capacity of our memory is without question vast – each of us routinely remembers so much. But people do give different amounts of attention to different stimuli, leading at times to better memory processing and thus easier re-activation later on. Some things are harder to recall than others. So a key issue is how the memory of a specific brand can be readily accessed, i.e. recalled in a purchase situation?

Recall and Memory Associations

Mostly we can recall things instantly, as when we talk or think. But not always, as in recalling a (well-known) name.

It has long been known that memory is created, stored and accessed via associations, mostly subconsciously, e.g. "Holes ↔ Polo," "Refreshes ↔Heineken", or the color red for *The Economist*, Coca-Cola, or Virgin (Franzen and Bouwman, 2001).

A re-exposure can also dramatically revive fading recall (e.g. Zielske, 1959; McDonald, 1997). It can make recall easier in varied situations. But a message or image that is inconsistent can interfere with recall and/or initial learning (Simon, 1947; Festinger, 1957; Baddeley, 1974; Sutherland and Sylvester, 2000; Franzen and Bouwman, 2001). That is why repositioning, or changes in packaging, can be problematic.

Memory-associations for a brand are often highly individualized (e.g. "My aunt Ella used it", or "It's the one we bought at Safeways"), rather than a brand having just one global "image" for all consumers.

Publicising a brand is therefore about what consumers do with the advertising rather than what advertisements do to consumers: "What evokes the brand, not what the brand evokes" (Holden and Lutz, 1992; Lannon, 1993).

Publicity Not Persuasion

As noted earlier, contemporary accounts of advertising say that it works by persuasion, or at least they imply it (e.g. in 'persuasion testing').

But there is no evidence that advertising universally (or even generally) "converts" consumers. There are also many internal contradictions:

1. Persuasion is simply treated as a self-evident neologism:

   "Advertising is meant to be persuasive. Therefore if it's an ad, it must be persuasive. Q.E.D."

   Thus Nike printed on a T-shirt has to be "persuasive" just because it's an ad!

2. People are exposed to innumerable ads each day, and probably note many or most of them at least subconsciously (Heath, 2001), but with almost no apparent effects: "See ad and do nothing". By its own persuasion-goal therefore, far more than the proverbial

half of persuasive advertising would be wasted.

3. Advertisements seldom seem constructed to appear persuasive, let alone *strongly* so ("Heavy Sell"). They offer or imply no strong incentives, emotions, or rhetoric.
   This is quite unlike either courtroom "advocacy" or "religious conversion", where advocates work hard to make explicit that the choice options are between "Guilty" (off with his head) and "Not Guilty". And the incentives are Life Everlasting versus Eternal Damnation (e.g. Ehrenberg, 2001).

4. Much advertising theory seems to presume that in the absence of functional brand differentiation, the ads have to give every consumer some reason, benefit, or added value so as to be able to select one brand rather than another. But in practice, consumers need the product and seem to know that brands are near look-a-likes:

**"I know these brands are all the same.
I just have to choose [one as] the best".
(Bullmore, 1998)**

5. Persuasive advertising (e.g. strong sell) should be heavily affected by wear-out (e.g. McDonald, 1992, 1997; Pechmann and Stewart, 1989): people find being repeatedly exhorted boring or even irritating. In contrast, sheer publicity (e.g. sponsorship, Nike on a T-shirt, or "Coca-Cola" over shop-fronts) can usually be repeated almost interminably: people seem to know that advertisers are just reminding them. There can apparently be no over-exposure (Hunter, 1964).

6. The short-term effects of advertising that occur can hardly be due to strong "persuasion" if they are only short-term. But they can be caused by momentarily refreshed brand awareness.

Basically our view is that advertisements can be effective [or "act"] simply through publicising the brand memorably, without having to "persuade" consumers that the brand is better than they thought before. Such publicising works through the brand's "Salience".

3. SALIENCE

Why does an experienced consumer first buy a particular brand and then continue to buy it (often as part of a repertoire of two or more habitual brands)? The process may be described as the brand having gained and then maintained what we call Salience, in a rather broad sense of the term. We now consider in turn:
(a) What such Salience is;
(b) How Salience seems to develop;
(c) How Salience works;
(d) How it requires the brand to be "distinctive" but not "differentiated" (e.g. functionally).

What is Salience?

Salience in our sense is about the brand coming to mind in personally relevant choice situations (Romaniuk and Sharp, 2002b). The brand has become part of one's broad consideration set, a brand that one might buy or use – either now, or in years ahead.

This goes well beyond traditional awareness, or even the "strength" of such awareness (e.g. first recall).

Salience concerns the 'size' of the brand in one's mind (Romaniuk and Sharp, 2002b), i.e. all the memory structures which can allow the brand to come forward for the wide range of recall cues that can occur in purchase occasions. With this 'share of mind' come feelings of being familiar, and feelings of assurance ("Yes, I've heard of it. It should be all right."). That is our broad designation of "Salience" – awareness and memory traces, *plus* familiarity, *plus* assurance.

Moran (1990) in his seminal paper already stressed the role of a brand's "Presence". Similarly, Bullmore's "Fame" (1999, 2002) is a colourful way of reflecting salience. But it overstates the role of big brands – successful *small* brands can still be salient for those who use or consider them, but hardly "famous".

Salience is not exclusive. An individual usually has a consideration set of several competitive brands which he or she may choose to buy over a series of purchases (and others not). Opting for one or another salient substitute on any specific purchase occasion need then be for no special reason. But the choice can also vary with the context – availability, a desire for variety, a mood, an ad or retail display, an offer, or a whim of the moment (e.g. the mother-in-law coming).

For a brand to be in a consumer's consideration set or to be actually chosen, the brand does not have to be seen as "best", but only as "good enough". This is the late Herbert Simon's (1947) highly regarded "Satisficing" criterion. In Darwinian terms, it means "Survival of the fit enough", not of the fittest.

Crucially, in our view, this conforms with consumers' primary need being not for a brand, but for the *product*. They will want some coffee or a hotel room of the right type (by price/quality, location, amenities, etc). In a competitive market they then have to choose one of the available options of that product or service, which would typically nowadays be named or even "branded."

Consumers therefore find themselves having to choose between brands in their consideration set that are mostly "near look-a-likes" to them, i.e. items that are distinctively labelled but intrinsically similar or even virtually identical (except – strictly – in how they look).

In principle, to decide, people could simply toss a mental penny ("Oh I don't know – I think I'll have that one"). In practice however, consumers mostly seem to find choosing a familiar and even habitual brand convenient and reassuring.

How Salience Develops

There is as yet no clearly-known path for a brand to follow so as to become salient and enter a consumer's consideration set (see Shocker et al, 1991; Roberts and La tin, 1997 for reviews).

(Similarly, there is no clear evidence for how initially uncommitted embryonic stem cells settle down to become the dedicated nerve cells which can actually counteract Parkinson's disease.)

Views of how consumers can be made to choose or adopt a brand have at times been oversimplified. Economists from Galbraith (1958) downwards – and indeed many marketing people – seem to have long believed that marketing or advertising can simply manipulate or persuade the consumer. Hierarchical-effects models like AIDA have been replaced by pyramidal equity models. Econometricians have sought to determine "drivers" of consumer choice by marketing-mix decision-models (e.g. Leeflang et al, 2000; Ehrenberg et al, 2001). But no clear empirical results in all this have yet emerged.

To us, the process itself looks intrinsically haphazard, as has been graphically recounted by Alan Hedges (1998), initially 25 years ago.

Hedges spelled out how a consumer, faced with a new brand P (or one "new" to that consumer), can dither on a slow path toward a decision (which ultimately was not even to *try* P!):

- First the consumer usually has to become aware of the new brand P, by name or looks, at least subconsciously (e.g. not really being aware of being aware of the brand, as in Heath, 2001). For example, the consumer sees a neighbour using P (although most often this has no effect). The consumer then perhaps becomes aware of an advertisement for P (hardly noticed explicitly before), suddenly notes that the brand is actually in the stores, probably notices another advertisement or two for the new P, tries to relate P to his or her present brand(s), and hears some word-of-mouth perhaps. And so on – thus memory structures develop.

- P's advertising and retail display may also engender some assurance for P. This may not come from what the ads specifically say or claim. But the existence of a good deal of advertising for the brand can engender a feeling, subconscious perhaps, that "with all that spending on advertising (and/or on shelf-space), P must be all right" (e.g. Kay, 1993; Sutherland and Friedman, 2000).

- Growing salience can then at times lead to some *interest* ("I wonder what that P's like?"). But mostly not. Experienced consumers will hardly expect the new brand P to be very different. If it were, there would be more talk about that (including in the advertising). Nonetheless, the consumer may consider trying P when next buying the category: "I've heard of P. I might try it". Then, or later.

- If brand P upon actual purchase or usage seems satisfactory (which often is the case with established brands), the brand *may* be bought again. Or not. If yes, it can become one of the brands in that consumer's regular brand repertoire, with an ongoing habit of buying or using P, often formed almost instantly (Ehrenberg and Goodhardt, 2001). For this to occur, the new P would only need to seem about as good as the other brands in the consumer's wider brand repertoire or consideration set. This is "satisficing" again, not "better" or "best". No unique or deep commitment or conversion to P is needed or likely (McWilliams, 1997), with no strong persuasion needed. On-going usage or buying can however breed subsequent liking through various processes ("Mere Exposure" as already mentioned, "Cognitive Dissonance Reduction" as in Festinger, 1957; or "I-Use-It therefore-I-Like-It" self-identification as in Bem, 1967).

Hedges' hit-or-miss adoption process of a brand coming into one's salient consideration set (or not) has been likened to cosmic radiation leading to a genetic mutation "by chance", followed by natural selection, with very few of the new mutants surviving as "fit enough".

A Brand's Place in a Repertoire

For any individual buyer some brands are more salient than others, and in a repertoire, some are bought more often. This will be a consequence of the many 'reinforcers', often small, which can act upon a buyer over time (Foxall, 1996), e.g. aspects of distribution, product features, advertising, etc. Even for highly competitive brands that match each other's advantages, individual features do differ in various "minor" ways. For example, the bottle-tops; the place on a retailer's shelf; the specific ingredients in particular mueslis and/or their degrees of sweetness; or the car-door handles.

Such minor differences are seldom individually advertised. They are often not even consciously noticed by the consumer, or evaluated, at least not until after the brand has already been fairly extensively tried. The consumer "acts first and thinks later" (Swindells, 2000). Therefore, minor differences rarely influence a consumer's initial choice of brand.

Such minor brand differences can however lead to lasting longer-term brand preferences and subsequently foster extended use ("I like *that* muesli"). They can influence why one brand slowly becomes much bigger than its otherwise very similar competitors. Advertising can help in this even by merely publicising the brand name. This can remind consumers of their own personal reasons for considering that brand.

How Salience Works: No Deep Commitment

When a brand accumulates salience for the consumer, it almost never is the consumer's only salient one. Over a series of purchases, consumers are mostly polygamous. Each usually has several serious partners in his or her active purchasing repertoire or consideration set, plus occasional flings.

In repertoire markets, a salient brand seems seldom to play a unique role for its customers – no deep commitment. Loyalty (or strictly, split-loyalty) is much the same from brand to brand (e.g. Report #1 and earlier references there) – it's just the number of loyal buyers that varies greatly. Each brand is bought quite infrequently by most of its customers (the Pareto-like predominance of light buyers, e.g. Ehrenberg, 1959). For frequently bought branded goods or services, a brand's customers mostly buy the other brands in their repertoires in total more often:

> **"Your customers are mostly other brands' customers who occasionally buy you".**

What each brand's customers *feel* about the brands they know and use generally does not vary idiosyncratically from brand to brand. It may seem surprising, but competitive brands differ little in how many of their customers say it "Tastes Nice", is "Good Value for Money", or "A Brand I Trust". Table 1 illustrates this.

Far more people say "A brand I trust" about the leading brand than for the sixth brand (27% versus 6%). These differences are what most marketing people seem to note, but they are misleading. The reactions of the users of each brand are much more similar. The second line of Table 1 typically shows that about 45% of users for any brand say that their brand is one they trust.

The highly varying *population* responses in the top line were misleading because they merely reflect that big brands have more users, with brand users being more likely to say positive things about their brand (Barwise and Ehrenberg, 1970; Franzen, 1999; Ehrenberg-Bass Institute Report 27 for Corporate Members).

Evaluative attitudes ("Tastes nice" or "A brand I trust") are therefore generally found to be much the same among users of competitive brands, with just a well established small Double Jeopardy trend with market share – here from 48% for the top brand I down to 37% for IV (e.g. Ehrenberg-Bass Institute Report 26 for Corporate Members).

Brand-users' beliefs about their brands are therefore similar. This can be explained by the measures reflecting what consumers believe about the product-category as a whole (i.e. any brand). If they use a specific brand, they tend to see their product-beliefs as applying to that brand.

The exceptions are certain functionally "descriptive" characteristics of a particular brand which tend also to be noted by its non-users (like Rice Krispies "Staying crisp in milk"), or replay of some emphatic advertising slogan.

Distinctiveness, Not Brand Differentiation

The perceived sameness of competitive brands has often been noted over the years, e.g. by James Webb Young early in the last century:

- **"The trends in our technology lead to competing products being more and more the same" (Young, 1923).**
- **"A good deal of contemporary consumer advertising reflects brand differences that are so slight that one may wonder whether consumers will consider them to add distinctive value to the brand" (Weilbacher, 1993).**
- **"There is a danger that in searching for something different to say you end up basing advertising on small or meaningless claims" (Keeble, 1998).**

Nonetheless, this commodity-like similarity of competitive brands tends still to be seen as regrettable news:

> **"Each marketing generation continues to believe that there was, until only very recently, some golden period when all products [i.e. brands] were not only demonstrably different from each other but also, wondrously, better than each other" (Bullmore, 1998).**

Indeed, most practitioner and academic opinion is that consumers need a "reason" to choose a specific brand.

Table 1: A Typical Attitudinal Response to Large and Small Brands

Top 6 Brands	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
% of pop. saying "A brand I trust"	27	16	10	8	6	6
% of *users* of brand X saying this	48	44	43	47	39	37

Marketers therefore widely regard brand differentiation as vital. If no functional differences exist, distinct "Added Values" need to be specially created for the brand – different values for each different brand:

- **"This use of advertising – to add a subjective value to the product – becomes increasingly important" (Young, 1923).**

- **"It is obvious that consumer perceptions of differences between brands caused by advertising are** [widely thought to be] **the essence of the advertising opportunity" (Weilbacher, 1993).**

The orthodox view therefore seems to be that advertisements should carry or imply "selling-points" (i.e. they should proffer added values) which will enable consumers to choose between brand A and brand B. Yet when we deconstructed and tested advertising messages as noted earlier, they were often seen as only providing "talking-points" – ways of saying something about the brand and creatively publicizing it – and *not* "selling points", seen as differentiating the brands.

As stressed by Moran (1990), creative advertising people themselves often do not subscribe to the notion that consumers need a persuasive message or differentiating "brand values". Many of the advertisements which they produce – and which their managements and clients accept and run – do not explicitly articulate strong brand differentiation. Instead, they mostly say, "Coke is It", "X Gets Clothes Clean", or show a car driven along a mountain road.

As briefly illustrated in Table 1, there is little evidence that brands as such are seen by their users as possessing differentiating added values. Even the protagonists of the brand values theories do not seem to give operational definitions or substantiated examples (e.g. Aaker et al., 1992; Ambler, 2000 – see also McDonald, 1992; Feldwick, 1998).

Choosing between competitive brands is therefore usually quick and easy (e.g. Miller and Berry, 1998; Heath, 2001) compared with the quite difficult choices between functionally different product variants (a coupe or a SUV, a faster versus a less costly processor, a lemon or mango flavor, etc). We believe that is why advertising as a weak force (i.e. mere publicity) can actually influence brand choice at all – it is a choice between close substitutes.

4. SALES EFFECTS

Brand Maintenance as the Main Outcome

The main aim of advertising is usually taken to be "Growth." The looked-for advertising effectiveness is therefore almost always identified with extra sales, higher margins, added values, or more favourable attitudes.

This may seem businesslike. After all, how can a marketing plan ask for millions and not promise added sales or profits to pay for it? But enduring growth beyond that of the market seldom, if ever, materializes. Not every brand can grow its share.

Yet growth as the target has mostly remained unquestioned. And so advertising has famously remained unaccountable:

> **"Advertising is bewildering because currently** [sic!]**, no one knows what advertising really does in the market place" (Lilien, Kotler and Moorthy, 1992).**

But Kotler and his colleagues continued, rather exceptionally:

> **"What advertising is** *supposed* **to do is fairly clear, ... to increase company sales and/or profits over what they would otherwise be".**

This means to us that competitive brands should mostly not *lose* sales if they are advertised. But few commentators openly acknowledge such an apparently negative (i.e. non-positive) goal.

Advertising *may* at times be followed by a sales increase (e.g. Abraham and Lodish, 1987; Franzen, 1999; McDonald, 1997). But these tend to be short-lived ups-and-downs, since few advertised brands' market shares increase for long. Such "short-term" advertising does not pay for itself

(Ephron, 2001), otherwise advertisers would advertise more.

Our conjecture – which could be tested – is that the extra short-term sales are due to briefly-refreshed brand awareness. This would mostly occur if the brand was already in that consumer's brand repertoire (advertising being noticed and liked far more by brand users than non users).

Occasionally a campaign will cut through and seem to greatly boost sales – the stuff of creative advertising awards. It often contains no selling propositions. As Jones (1997) notes, with apparent surprise:

> **"The advertisements shown to have greatest effect were certainly not hard-selling in the conventional sense. They were likeable..., visual rather than verbal".**

But if advertising of established brands seldom increases *long-term* sales, why then do brands have big-budget advertising and marketing support? The simple answer is "Competition." The expectation is that competitors will gain if you do not market your own brand effectively.

If your brand has 10% of the market (which is quite a lot), it nonetheless has 90% of the market against it. That means roughly 90% of all the distribution efforts, display, advertising, promotion, word-of-mouth, after-sales service, added values, quality-control, sales training, CRM, etc, in the category. All of these are putting competitive pressure on your own sales.

Indeed, faced with widely-displayed and heavily promoted competitive look-a-likes, even customer loyalty seems to erode slightly (i.e. a "somewhat leaky bucket"– East and Hammond, 1996). But it mostly does so slowly, because of consumers' and also retailers' well-established habitual buying propensities – re-ordering rather than making new decisions.

Hence we think that advertising is needed to try and maintain both salience (penetration), and customer retention, and also to give the brand a chance of catching its fair share of 'the leaks'.

Keeping each brand in competitive near equilibrium or even stalemate has to be the *main* realistic marketing aim for established brands. It is what mostly happens, whatever marketers tend to say about growth. The occasional larger gain is a bonus for a fortunate few – perhaps those who "get everything right", not just their advertising.

Brand maintenance may not appear very macho as a goal: "Running hard to stand still". But top management continues year after year to allocate — perhaps reluctantly — big advertising budgets in markets that remain stubbornly steady. This seems to recognise advertising's primarily defensive role.

Evaluating Advertising

It is because of the lack of obvious longer term sales gains that marketers put in place detailed tracking systems to try to evaluate their advertising effectiveness: 'U&A' and brand image tracking, or, in modern parlance, equity monitors.

The concept of salience has implications for such research:

- Traditional awareness measures are inadequate, as no matter how these are implemented ("top of mind" etc) they only tap the link between the brand name and the product category cue (Romaniuk & Sharp, 2002a).
- Instruments that seek to document how well the brand's image conforms to some ideal make unwarranted causal assumptions about the effects of what buyers feel about the brand, and what they do.
- Multi-attribute attitudinal models largely assume salience rather than diagnose it.
- "Persuasion shifts" may largely or wholly reflect refreshed awareness.
- More attention needs to be paid to how many relevant consumers think of the brand, and how often or how likely they are to do so, rather than to

what they feel about it (which will not differ much from brand to brand, for brand users).

Much work is needed on advertising evaluation: to remove the sole focus on growth for every advertiser, to shake off the vestiges of 1960s attitude psychology (Foxall, 1996), and to develop adequate measures of salience.

For such measures to be useful in advertising evaluation there needs to be some evidence of links to both advertising (i.e. sensitivity to changes in advertising) and to subsequent buyer behavior. This may be technically hard. But the biggest hurdle is for "no-change" brand maintenance to become accepted as the basic criterion of advertising success:

"Having to run hard to stand still".

5. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The publicity perspective of advertising which we have sought to outline in this paper does not of course explain everything. But it can unify many of advertising's diverse aspects.

Within this framework, advertising theory and practice hang together better, and both make more sense. Thus the traditional advertising goal of effective persuasion – prevailing upon people to change their attitudes or feelings – has long been found very difficult to achieve (e.g. Moran, 1990). It therefore hardly makes sense to try to do so by a 30-second commercial or two.

Few will however question that even five seconds' publicity for a brand can successfully remind people of it. And that 30 seconds can probably do so better, with more impact on refreshing memory traces for the brand, or even perhaps enhancing them or linking up a new one.

Ongoing and substantial change and sustained growth in market share – the supposed outcome of persuasive advertising – is rarely reported for established brands. It is in any case impossible for every brand. Consumers themselves have long felt free to say that they have "never been influenced by advertising", since only rarely do they change what they feel or do about established brands.

Nonetheless, both academic text-books and practitioners' pronouncements continue to say or imply that changing what people feel is what advertising is supposed to do. Hence persuasive brand advertising has mostly failed when it is judged by its own goal, i.e. growth through persuasion. The advertising industry, as well as management generally, ought to face up to that and change the goalposts. With profitable brand maintenance as goal, everyone can win, with occasionally the bonus of some lasting extra sales perhaps.

Brand advertising seen as creative publicity can succeed – and often does. And this success has to be measured and evaluated, even if only as "No change".

Even for an established brand, publicity can successfully remind the experienced consumer of the brand and help to counter its many competitors' overwhelming availability, at much the same quality and prices. In this threatening competitive context, publicity can help to maintain the number of people to whom the brand is broadly "Salient", the term we are using for the brand coming to mind, being familiar, safe and satisficing (i.e. being "good enough").

Advertising's Differing Tasks

Advertising is generally expected to fulfil several very different tasks, sometimes more or less simultaneously:

1. To promote a new brand;
2. To entice additional recruits to an established brand;
3. To encourage that brand's existing clientele to stay;
4. To tempt these existing customers to buy it more;
5. To encourage buyers to pay more.

There are also the different tasks of the brand motivating its own (sales) staff through its advertising, as well as enthusing its suppliers and its retailers. Yet differing advertising tasks can be involved when pursuing investors, sponsors, business-to-business customers, e-commerce, politicians, or general PR.

With the persuasive view of advertising these different tasks would seem to require different strategies, tactics, copy, and execution perhaps (e.g. Anschuetz, 2002). In contrast, the publicity perspective can, we believe, address all such differing tasks with its single overarching game plan. It can tell and remind people of the brand, letting them bring their own associations and needs to the issue. "Always Coca-Cola" could be said in the same breath to existing customers, prospective ones, and the trade.

And it could be said over and over and over again with little if any wear-out, unlike hard sell (e.g. "Whilst stocks last"). The *tactics* of such publicity would however vary prodigiously – with specific concepts and the highly varied creative executions that we all know.

Some people fear that this "mere publicity" stance is unhelpful to creatives. But we suggest that the exact opposite is the case. Advertising a better mousetrap is fairly easy if it is in fact a bit better. One can for instance just say so. But having to centre your advertising on adding year after year some indiscernible "Whiter and Brighter" product-boon can restrict the kind of creativity that aims at memorable impacts for the brand.

In contrast, publicizing a brand gives ample scope for imaginative insights ("The Big Idea") and for disciplined marketing-communication skills ("Always Coca-Cola"). This can stimulate creativity, i.e. making distinctive and memorable publicity for the brand out of next to nothing. This seems the hallmark of good advertising as we know it. We think still that advertising a competitive brand means just "Telling a brand story well" (Ehrenberg, 1974), without there being just one solution. There is huge scope – the campaign need not be hemmed in by the brand's 'selling proposition'.

It is not that consumers' feelings or rational thoughts about the brand do not matter. But that they cannot be easily influenced, as they tend to be much the same among users of each competitive brand. ("Users of brand A think or feel about A much what users of brand B think or feel about B"). What seems to differ between different brands is not what their users feel about them, but how many people feel it.

This differs from Dr Johnson's much quoted but mistaken view that

> **"Promise, large Promise, is the soul of an advertisement"**

(even if he just meant puffery). It differs also from James Webb Young's more recent decree in 1923 that for

> **"advertising to add a subjective value to the product becomes increasingly important".**

Finally, it differs from Gardner and Levy's opening of their 1955 classic:

> **"Basic to many of the problems of advertising and selling is the question of the consumer's ... conception of the brand".**

Our contrary thesis is that advertising and selling do not depend on consumers seeing the brand as different, but upon the brand being seen at all, i.e. as broadly salient and therefore being in the consumers' individual consideration sets. That has long been treated as a necessary condition for choosing a brand (from say Howard and Sheth, 1969 onwards). Our overall conclusion is that from the publicity perspective, advertising practice need generally not change. The notion "Creative Publicity" already seems to reflect what most advertising in fact does. What would need to change is the way advertising is generally thought of, talked about, and evaluated. That would be theory coming into line with practice.

Instead of trying to persuade experienced consumers that every advertised brand is better or best, we should accept that advertising mostly needs to refresh, and may occasionally enhance acceptance of the brand as one to buy and/or to consider.

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