The Effects of Advertising

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In 1989 total advertising expenditures in the United States exceeded 125 billion dollars—a figure expected to increase in 1990. As a result, the average American citizen is constantly being flooded in a sea of "spots." There is television, radio, outdoor (posters, billboards, and park benches), newspapers, buses, trucks, taxicabs, matchbooks, direct mail, and now even movies. Moreover, as Jack Trout and Al Ries note in their book Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind, "even the human body has become a walking billboard for Adidas, Gucci, Benetton, and Gloria Vanderbilt(9-10)." Simply put, advertisements are unavoidable. Therefore, this raises an interesting question: to what extent do these messages affect consumer attitudes and behavior?

Much of the research examining advertising or communication effects concentrates on controlled verbal processes and their resultant effects on the beliefs, attitudes, and consumption of the advertised brand. For instance, the cognitive response approach to examin-
ing advertising effects focuses on the amount and type of evaluative verbal processing. In other words, this approach is primarily concerned with the generation of counterarguments and support arguments. The cognitive structure approach, on the other hand, emphasizes the beliefs about the brand that are formed or changed after exposure to the advertisement. But experiments have shown that neither of these approaches can completely account for the noted variance in attitudes. Therefore, a third explanation is that there may be another, complementary approach to describing the attitude formation and change process. The approach that has been suggested is a measure of affective feelings about the advertisement (Mitchell & Olsen 18). Although there is not a complete understanding of this approach, it may represent the transfer of affect through a nonverbal channel. For instance, attitudes may be transferred from the commercial to the advertised brand by the principles of classical conditioning (Staats & Staats 37-40). A picture or words that evoke positive feelings may, over time, be transferred to the brand. Support for this position comes from a study by Mitchell and Olsen in 1981. In this experiment, subjects saw a number of different advertisements for hypothetical facial tissue brands. The results indicated that feelings toward an advertisement also explain the variance
in attitude and belief formation (Mitchell & Olsen 18).

Of course, each of these approaches can only be explained within the context of numerous other factors, which to some degree, affect the type and amount of cognitive responses, cognitive structure, and feelings generated toward the advertised brand. For example, attention levels and environmental factors (distracting stimuli) both affect the amount of mental processing. A study that manipulated attention levels found that reduced attention levels affect the amount of attitude change by blocking evaluative analysis (Baron, Baron, & Miller 310-323). If the persuasive communication causes subjects to generate mostly support arguments, then partial attention will result in a less positive attitude. However, if the communication causes counter-arguments to be generated during conditions of full attention, then partial attention will result in less negative attitudes (Petty, Wells, & Brock 874-884). These results, though, require comprehension of the message. Otherwise, attitude formation is based upon less judicious, emotional factors.

Messages that have a more complex meaning generally require more attention (Britton, Westbrook, & Holdredge 582-591). Consequently, for a relatively simple message, a particular low level of attention may allow for comprehension of the advertisement. While the same level
of low attention can inhibit the comprehension of a more complex message (Regen & Cheng 138-47).

Without a doubt, the amount and type of distracting stimuli has an affect on the amount of attention devoted to an advertisement. Obviously, as the distraction takes up greater amounts of time, the quantity of information from the message stored in memory will be reduced. In addition, under these latter conditions, "the resulting memory structure may be fragmented. In other words, associated concepts may be only weakly linked to the brand (Harris (Mitchell) 31)." Moreover, "people are less able to differentiate strong from weak arguments (Petty & Cacioppo 71-79)." Not only the amount of distraction, but also the type of stimuli have an affect on a person's processing. For instance, a distraction that requires verbal processing such as listening to the conversation of another person will interfere with the verbal processing of information from the advertisement. However, interference with the verbal channel does not block visual information from being achieved (Harris (Mitchell) 31). Therefore, a distraction, in itself, does not guarantee that the information presented is completely lost.

Aside from attention levels, the way in which a person processes information also plays a role in determining how they interpret commercials. One strategy,
which is called the brand strategy, is actively processing the information from the advertisement with the goal of forming an overall evaluation and to acquire information about the advertised brand. Alternatively, individuals may have some other goal during exposure to the advertisement, such as enjoyment of the advertisement's entertainment aspects. These are called nonbrand strategies. According to one study, "these two processing strategies will generally cause differences in the resulting content and organization of information from the advertisement in memory. Both strategies cause a trace of the advertisement to be retained in memory, however, the brand strategy also results in a well-integrated network of concepts organized about the brand. In contrast, a non-brand strategy appears to result in a weakly linked set of knowledge about the mind...these two types of strategies resulted in differences in the amount of time required to verify information about the brands and the resulting attitudes toward the brands. The group executing the nonbrand strategy took longer to verify information about the brands and formed more positive attitudes(Harris(Mitchell, Gardner, & Russo) 1982).

So what determines which strategy is used? That depends. The individual actually interested in buying a new car will employ a brand strategy while watching automobile commercials. But the person, who neither needs nor wants a new car, will employ a nonbrand strategy. It only makes sense that what an individual looks for
determines, in part, the information discovered within the advertisement. We see what we want or need to see.

Individual factors—knowledge and social status—also affect the cognitive processing that occurs during exposure to an advertisement. With little prior information about a brand, an individual will experience difficulty in comprehending a complex and highly technical advertisement. Furthermore, with little product knowledge, an individual generates significantly fewer counterarguments (Harris & Mitchell 35). On the other hand, as a message is repeated a moderate number of times, there is a greater opportunity to think about the arguments presented and to show a greater differentiation between reasonable and deceptive arguments (Cacioppo & Petty 78). As for social status, two studies reveal that advertising has a greater effect on the purchase decisions of lower-class individuals than on those of higher socio-economic classes. What's more, fear appeals are more effective with blue-collar workers than with white-collar workers (Peretti & Lucas 693-94; Burnett & Wilkes 21-24).

An advertisement's characteristics such as modality (the amount of time that an individual has to process the information), context, and structure (print, audio, or video) also affect cognitive processing. In some circumstances, modality may be a function of structure. With print advertisements, for example, an individual
can spend as much time as he/she prefers when considering the message. But of course, other factors (e.g., a phone call, children, or with broadcast media, the length of the advertisement) will also control processing time. One study indicates that fewer counterarguments are generated when processing time is limited (Wright 192-205).

As for the content of an advertisement, several theories have been developed. First, there is the learning theory. This hypothesis, presented by Fishbein, argues that attitude change is greatest when a commercial presents strong arguments to support broad claim(s) as with a product demonstration. He argues that these advertisements produce more favorable brand attitudes and behaviors (233-240). One study by Burke Marketing Research, Inc. supports this assumption. According to the study, the strongest impact on recall scores appeared to stem from the use of product demonstrations in television commercials (Albion & Farris 17). Another researcher contends that an effective message will "prove" that a product has a particular attribute. From here, attitudes are changed by facilitating learning and eventual acceptance of the information (McGuire 1972).

The second theory suggests that an advertisement does not need to provide specific, proven information
to be successful. Rather, unsubstantiated claims about a brand's desirable attributes—"the strongest decongestant you can buy"—are very powerful in convincing the consumer. These researchers believe that persuasion is mediated by the thoughts generated by the receiver as the communication is received and processed. That is, people are not passively persuaded by raw information. Actually, they actively evaluate information and in doing so, literally persuade themselves. This model was originally developed by Olson, Toy, and Dover. And together, they predict, and have demonstrated empirically, that exposure to a commercial may also spontaneously evoke unexpected thoughts about benefits that the advertised brand is not able to deliver. In other words, according to their model, a message can persuade by stimulating people to remember or infer brand relevant information that is not contained in the actual advertisement (245-262).

The third theory attempts to explain the nonmessage cues which lead to brand allegiance. A typical cue is the expertise, attractiveness, and trustworthiness of a spokesperson. These cues are referred to by Pechmann and Stewart as heuristic cues. And they state that,

"whereas claims that are processed systematically must be substantiated, claims that are processed heuristically need not be. The effectiveness of the heuristic cue, not the
information itself, is what deter­mines whether the message will be accepted. Thus ads that employ heuristic cues may use puffery or make unsubstantiated assertions... [and] promote brand sales without changing beliefs about the brand's specific attributes (Cafferata & Tybout (Pechmann & Stewart) 41).

Although this method of processing is not the most reliable and accurate means of judging the validity of a claim, nevertheless, consumers may employ such heuristic cues when economy of effort is important.

The fourth theory is the low involvement model, described by Lavidge and Steiner. While it is very similar to the heuristic model, this theory is more specific. The assertion is that people rely on the simplest of cues—name, logo, or packaging (Lavidge & Steiner 53-62). And according to Ray and Batra, advertisements often use emotion-laden stimuli such as color and imagery to increase the attractiveness of the brand name, logo, or packaging (543-548). Therefore, processing of a commercial may involve emotional reactions to less predictable signals. As Pechmann and Stewart state, "people buy these brands on the basis of the simplest of choice heuristics: 'I'll buy it because it looks familiar to me' (Cafferata & Tybout 41)."

The last theory is classical conditioning. According to this theory, favorable attitudes are formed indirectly. The advertisement associates a product
with pleasant ideas, scenes, or items. After seeing such a commercial numerous times, the viewer assumes that the product also has these pleasant, desirable attributes. Clouds and toilet paper, teddy bears and fabric softner, and Ronald Reagan's "Morning in America" spots are prime examples of this classical conditioning model at work. Pechmann and Stewart believe that,

"an ad that is entertaining or heartwarming presumably can enhance more favorable brand attitudes... even if there is no indication that use of the brand itself will be entertaining or heartwarming. Many ads that use emotion apparently do so simply to create a good feeling about the brand, regardless of whether one of the brand's most salient benefits is emotional (Cafferata & Tybout(Pechmann & Stewart) 43)."

Clearly, information that is presented in a unique way will cause the individual to devote more attention to the advertisement; therefore, more knowledge about the brand is retained.

As for the structure of an advertisement, audio, video, and print advertisements each evoke different cognitive responses. While the two broadcast media generate more annoyance responses and are considered less informative, Wright found that more counterarguments were generated when information was presented through print media. But most studies focus, not on the comparisons of broadcast and print media, but
on the different effects of words and pictures. For instance, evidence suggests that pictures are remembered better than words—a phenomena termed "hypermnesia" (Erdelyi & Becker 158-171). In a more specific study, subjects were shown 612 illustrations from magazine advertisements and were able to remember a median of 98.5% of the pictures that they had been shown (Shepard 156-163). Of course, certain pictures are more effective than others. Logos that included a pictorial depiction of a brand name facilitated recall, but logos that only showed the product, did not help the viewer remember a company’s name (Lutz & Lutz 493-98).

In a study, though, that did focus on the differences between video and print, Grass and Wallace found that television commercials produced significantly greater recall of message points than specially matched print advertisements which used a "main frame" from the commercial as the copy. Overall, recall was superior for television by 81% to 56%, and recall of the main message point was superior by 75% to 39% (Grass & Wallace 19-23). Grass and Wallace hypothesized that the superior performance of television commercials was due to the greater amount of attention paid to the broadcast presentations. Obviously, the ability to recall a message does not necessarily result in purchasing the advertised brand, but it is not surprising
that people, for the most part, buy products they are familiar with and trust.

This brings us back to the original question—to what extent do advertisements affect consumer behavior and attitudes? Do individuals spend more and become materialistic as a result of hundreds of advertisements? If so, is there a specific dollar amount increase in purchases? Unfortunately, the simple, unsatisfying answer is that researchers do not completely understand the effects of advertising. They do know, though, that attention levels, environmental factors, processing strategy, individual factors, and message characteristics each help to explain some of the results, but only some. As a matter of fact, advertising may never be completely understood. But ultimately, the one thing that really matters is that it works... and that is something advertisers can literally bank on!
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