

## PSYCHOLOGY OF ADVERTISING

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### ABSTRACT

Advertising, as currently practiced, ignores all that has been learned by cognitive psychologists in the past 30 or 40 years. Consumers process all incoming information, including advertising, in a very complex yet instant and new manner. Advertising is not a stimulus in the out model behavioural psychology stimulus-response model of human information processing. Advertising, if it is attended to at all, is nothing more than a net addition to everything the consumer has previously learned and retained about the brand. The challenge for advertising is to find ways and means to bypass or upset business as usual in the consumer's brain and to build an enduring perceptual representation of the brand as one that is acceptable and desirable.

## INTRODUCTION

### MARKETERS MAKE LITTLE OR NO ATTEMPT

To *really* understand how consumers process and use the information they receive about brands, including advertising. Instead, marketers routinely make two basic assumptions about how consumers process and use the advertising information that they provide to consumers about their brands:

*Assumption1.* Marketers assume they can *control* what consumers think about brands through marketing communications, especially advertising.

*Assumption2.* Marketers assume that brand purchases are made as a direct result of a conscious, rational consumer choice process.

These assumptions ignore the burgeoning new knowledge of how information is processed in the brain that has been and is developing in the domain of cognitive psychology. This assumption completely ignores the implications of cognitive psychology for marketing practice. Traditionally, marketers have assumed that the primary means of communicating about brands to consumers is through advertising. Other types of marketing communications may reinforce the effects of advertising but if advertising *fails* to communicate the brand message in the first place, no significant change can have taken place in consumer appreciation of the brand. To be successful, an advertisement must establish a contact with the consumer in which the consumer *consciously* attends to the advertising and is, then, influenced by it. This formulation assumes a consumer who is continuously and actively searching for information about products/services (or brands of products/services) that they buy or may buy so that they can make more informed purchase decisions the next time a conscious purchase “decision” must be made.

## **THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF HOW HUMAN BEHAVIOR COMES ABOUT**

This traditional view of how advertising works as the dominant brand information source for consumers is based on the explanation developed in the first half of the 20th century by behaviourist psychologists. To the behaviourists, all human (and animal) behaviour can be explained in terms of the external stimuli to which individuals are exposed and the responses that these stimuli evoke. To the behaviourists, everything needed to explain behaviour occurs *outside* the individual. Observable stimuli and the responses that follow from them are the whole cause and whole effect of behaviour— there is no need to understand or to try to explain internal mental processes and their relation to final behaviour since these processes are irrelevant to observable stimuli and observable responses.

For behaviourists, unobservable mental processes, especially anything as abstract as conscious awareness, was simply deemed inaccessible to scientific study. Instead, they concentrated on evaluating—objectively and precisely— the relationship between specific physical stimuli and observable responses in intact animals.

The behaviourist model of human behaviour has been embraced by the advertising industry, at least since the 1950s, for several reasons:

- First, because it was a plausible explanation of how humans react to advertisements that had, at least at one time, received authoritative support from the theoretical and applied psychologists— that is, the behaviourists.
- Second, because it was simple and easy to understand, it made it easy to tell advertisers and potential advertisers why and how their advertising would work.
- Third, because it provided a rationale for the measurement of advertising's overall effects (the awareness–interest– desire–action hierarchy-of-effects concept) and a basis for predicting the

likelihood that specific individual advertisements would be successful in the marketplace (copy testing).

- Fourth, because it reins forced the idea that all brand decisions are conscious and rational, and that advertising could influence such conscious and rational decisions.

However, available evidence, particularly the work of Andrew Ehrenberg and his colleagues (Barnard and Ehrenberg, 1997; Ehrenberg, Barnard, Kennedy, and Bloom, 2002), strongly suggests that consumers do not make an overt, conscious decision before they buy a particular brand. Rather, in most product categories, consumer brand choice is made almost exclusive lyfroma “repertoire” of three or four acceptable brands among which the consumer has continuously divided his or her purchases in the past. If the understanding of how advertising works and the psychology upon which it is based are flawed, marketers may have to rethink the role that advertising and other forms of marketing communication play in the consumer choice of brands:

- The objective of advertising, specifically, and marketing communications, generally, is *not* to cause a consumer to buy a particular brand on his next purchase occasion.
- Rather, the role of advertising and marketing communications is to make a brand seem at least as *accept table* as the brands that the consumer already routinely purchases in the product category.

#### A CONTEMPORARY VIEW OF HOW HUMAN BEHAVIOR COMES ABOUT

Cognitive psychology has, in the past 30 or 40 years, revolutionized how psychologists conceptualize the ways in which Human beings acquire and process information and the relation between such information processing and subsequent behaviour. Marketers’ view of how advertising and marketing communications work has not kept up with this revolution in understanding how humans process information, think, and behave.

By the early 1980s, behaviourism was no longer widely viewed in the scientific community as an

acceptable explanation of how human behaviour comes about. Attention shifted to the brain and the complex assortment of mental processes that constantly and contemporaneously go on in the brain as the real determinants of human behaviour. Behaviourism lost favour as there was increasing recognition that it was neither a complete nor accurate description of how human behavior comes about. Behaviorism may well describe at least some learning and behavioural processes in lower animals whose brains have not evolved into complex organisms like the human brain but it does *not* describe how and why humans behave the way they do.

What has replaced behaviourism as a model of human behaviourism a conceptualization of behaviour as a result of complex, ongoing mental processes? The emphasis has shifted from the observation of discrete stimuli and discrete responses to a study of the brain processes that determine what stimuli consumers attend to and remember and how the brain then processes these perceptions and memories to develop specific behavioral patterns. The shift has been from simplicity (stimulus/response) to complexity (relating the totality of mental processes to subsequent behaviour).

While it is safe to say that a general understanding of how the brain works has emerged, it is also safe to say that more is known about some mental processes than others and that a good deal of what is thought to be known is based on inference rather than upon undisputed fact.

It is generally acknowledged that the brain *simultaneously* processes a wide variety of incoming information. One way to think about this is to visualize a man driving a car down a superhighway in heavy traffic, conversing with his wife, drinking coffee, listening to the radio, monitoring the possibility of incoming phone calls on his cell phone, and worrying about the pain in his left shoulder rotator cuff. Another way to suggest the complexity Of the human brain's continuous processing of information is to think about the various components of human consciousness. First, of course, are all the language based communications that impinge upon an individual. But human

consciousness also monitors the simultaneous processing of visual information, tactile information, visceral information, motivational information, muscular information, emotional information, and soon.

Specific behavior comes about in the context of all this in coming information, perceived simultaneously not only consciously, but semiconsciously and unconsciously.

All of this information swirls to gather through tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands or thousands of thousands (no one knows for sure) individual neural pathways that continuously produce, at least in healthy brains, an integrated awareness of and an integrated response to the totality of this input, as it unfolds.

There is no question about all the kinds of information that the brain processes, even though it may be impossible to identify precisely which kinds of information are arriving at any given time and which kinds of information produce specific ongoing awareness and response, moment by moment. There is less certainty about the exact organisms and mechanisms within the brain that selectively create the consciousness that we experience and our detailed awareness of and response to it. Kandel, Kupfermann, and Iversen (2000, p. 1236) describe the complex ongoing activity of the brain:

Studies have made clear that our experience of knowledge as a seamless, orderly and cross-referenced data base is the product of integration of multiple representations in the brain at many distinct anatomical sites, each concerned with only one aspect of the concept that came to mind.

At any given moment, an individual perceives a limited amount of information that has been selected out, by the brain, from all the incoming information from the environment in which he happens to find himself at that particular moment. Exactly what the individual perceives also depends on his remembered past experiences as they are meticulously and instantaneously assessed as relevant or irrelevant in particular stimuli situations.

## **ADVERTISING'S ROLE IN HOW HUMAN BEHAVIOR COMES ABOUT**

When an advertisement shows up in a consumer's immediate environment, it may or may not be perceived consciously. If it is attended to at all, it will be in the context of whatever the consumer already has retained about the advertised brand *and* the product category in which it competes. What he already knows about the brand will depend on what he has processed and remembered from previous advertising for it as well as other sponsored marketing communications for it, past experience with the brand (either personal or second hand as reported by family members, friends, acquaintances, strangers, or impersonal outside evaluators like *Consumer Reports*), and whatever past information has come to him about the brand from other non advertising marketing communications as well as information from other media sources not controlled by the marketer. In addition to whatever the consumer remembers about the brand from such past exposures, his perception of an advertisement will also depend on several personal habits and attitudes that are part of his general reaction to advertisements, as such:

- Continuous screening of incoming messages to sort out those messages that are of no immediate interest
- An indifference toward and high intolerance for all kinds of intrusive communication
- Short attentions span once a message is perceived as advertising
- A continuing preoccupation only with self
- An essential interest in, if not an aversion to, advertising.

An advertisement, any advertisement has a very difficult task if it is to capture the perception of a consumer and an even harder time, once perceived, to make a net addition to what the consumer already knows about the brand.

Morton Hunt (Hunt, 1982, p. 157) describes this continuing process of transforming incoming information into a meaningful moment-to-moment reality:

...every human being fashions a world out of the formless tumult and sets each thing in its proper place. Not, of course, in actuality, but in the model of actuality within the mind, where the inane



welter of incoming sense impressions is sorted out, shaped, and assembled in to a coherent representation of the outer world.

Given this contemporary view of how the brain works, it is surely time for a complete overhaul of traditional views of how advertising works.

Advertisements tend to get lost in the shuffle in the totality of brain activity. They are rarely regarded uniquely, nor attended to as *unique* informational statements about a brand and then only in the context of whatever has already been stored in memory about that brand. Additionally, whatever, if anything, the consumer does take away from an advertisement, consciously or unconsciously, is immediately amalgamated into everything else the consumer knows about the brand.

The same analysis applies to all the other kinds of sponsored marketing communications and other non marketer sponsored communications that have, overtime, formed an individual consumer's perception of the brand.

Morton Hunt (Hunt,1982,p. 96) has described this process of the absorption of new information in to the existing conceptions in the brain:

...in real life, we perceive and remember early everything in terms of what we already know—we modify the input and remember not what our senses perceived but what our minds made of it.. ..

What this suggests is that the extent to which we remember a new experience has more to do with how it relates to existing memories than with how many times or how recently we have experienced it , or how much interfering scribble there is.

What is decisive in the consumer mind is the current collection of information it now holds about a brand—sponsored or unsponsored, positive or negative—not the last advertisement to which the consumer was exposed.



To consumer perception, the sources of a sponsored message about a brand— advertising, promotion, direct response, event sponsorship, etc. — is unimportant. Consumers, when exposed to an advertisement for the brand, do not say to themselves, “Oh, here is a new advertisement for *Buffo*.

This is important. Must attention. The source of the message may be irrelevant to the consumer. It is whether the message is perceived by the consumer as important or not to him, right now, consciously or unconsciously, that determines whether it finds its way, in whole or in part, into the consumer’s basic conception of the brand, along with whatever other prior messages, message fragments, or conceptions about the brand are already the rein whatever distorted or amalgamated form.

### **THE REALITY OF MODERN MARKETING**

From the marketer’s point of view, the goal of communicating effectively with consumers is even more difficult to achieve because of the trivial differences that exist among the brands in most product categories. The rear every few products or services available to consumers that are truly differentiated from and superior to the products or services with which they compete (Weilbacher,1993).

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GNITED MINDS  
Journals