

RESEARCH PAPER

Nr. 5, 2003

**Understanding The Role of
Emotion in Advertising**

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Understanding The Role of Emotion in Advertising

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Understanding the role of emotion in communication is critical to an understanding of advertising effectiveness, because emotion is an important mediator of how we process information. Unfortunately, the role of emotion is often misunderstood. To begin with, we must be careful not to confuse 'emotion' with positive affect or 'liking.' Emotion, even negative emotion, energizes how we process information. As Rossiter and Percy (1997) have repeatedly pointed out, it is *not* necessary to 'like' all advertising for it to be effective. Only when we are dealing with positive motives is it necessary to 'like' advertising, and then it is critical. We shall be addressing emotion and motivation later. Emotion should and does operate in the processing of all advertising, even information-oriented advertising or so-called 'rational' advertising. Because something is emotionally arousing does not mean it must be an affectively-oriented or so-called 'emotional' or 'feeling' advert, at least not in terms of the affect-cognitive distinction generally made (psychobabble for the fact that advertising dealing with unpleasant or even disturbing subjects, such as cancer or motor accidents, can be emotionally arousing).

So what exactly do we mean when we are talking about 'emotion'? Emotion, strictly speaking, is a response by the autonomic nervous system to a stimulus. There may or may not be a simultaneous cognitive response associated with it. Emotional responses are

elicited, which means they occur automatically upon exposure to a particular stimulus, advertising in our case.

In this paper we will be looking at how both conscious and (even more importantly) *unconscious* emotional memory operates when we are exposed to advertising. We will then examine the critical link between emotion and motivation, and look at how this argues strongly for a dynamic understanding of the way emotion works as we process advertising. Rossiter and Percy (1987) have long ago suggested that it is foolish to expect a single emotion to be operating throughout the processing of advertising. Yet even academic research continues to reflect a single emotion theory. What is needed for effectively building brand attitude in advertising, as we shall see, is a *sequence* of emotional responses.

Finally, after laying what may sometimes seem a very theoretical foundation (but one really necessary if we are to begin to understand emotion's role in advertising) we will discuss a case history that describes how you can *successfully apply* this knowledge in a straight-forward and relatively inexpensive way to ensure more effective advertising and other marketing communication.

Emotion and Memory

Whenever we form memories, in addition to the words and visual images associated with whatever we are storing in memory, we also store the emotions or feelings that are present at the time. When we recall that memory, the emotions associated with it are also recalled,

whether or not we are immediately conscious of those feelings or not. These associations reflect both conscious and unconscious memories, what neuroscientists talk about as 'explicit' or declarative memory and 'implicit' or nondeclarative memory. This is all handled by the amygdala and the hippocampus.

Conscious, 'explicit' or declarative memory is generally associated with the hippocampus; and unconscious, 'implicit' or nondeclarative emotional memory is generally thought to be acquired and stored in the amygdala. But, we do not need to concern ourselves with the neurobiology involved. The important point is that because both of these systems are activated by the same stimulus (an advert in our case) and are functioning at the same time, these two kinds of memory seem to be part of one unified memory system (LeDoux, 1996).

What we do need to concern ourselves with, however, is the *consequences* of what happens as a result of the influence of emotion on our memories. Emotions are attached to both types of memory (conscious and unconscious), and these emotional memories will be activated by the things to which we attend, and will help us process what we see or hear. What we are most concerned with understanding are unconscious, nondeclarative emotional memories, because they function *independently* of whatever conscious, declarative memories we might have, even though they are part of the same system, and mediate our conscious processing.

That is a real mouthful. But what it means is that our memories, that is what we 'know'

about a brand, will be framed or understood within the emotional context of how we formed our initial impressions of them, and how we subsequently re-experience them (e.g. when exposed to advertising). The same goes for all of the perceptual cues in an advert. Our understanding of them will be processed within the emotional context of these memories we have associated with them. In other words, the emotions associated with a brand and how it is presented *are already present*. They are not generated when we think about the brand, they *come with* our thoughts about the brand, out of memory.

Emotion and Motivation

Because advertising, to be effective, must relate to the underlying motivation that drives behaviour in the category, emotional response to advertising must relate to the correct motivation, and hence to brand attitude. (This section explains the theoretical foundation of a relationship between emotion and motivation. Some readers may wish to go directly to the next section on how it is applied; 'Motivation and Emotional Sequences.') Rossiter and Percy (1991) see this happening along the lines proposed by Hammond in his reconceptualization of Mowrer's theory of emotion. The antecedents of motivations, why we want to do something, are reflected in a sense of deprivation and are usually mediated by internal stimulus change. In other words, we sense a need, and something inside tells us to do something about it. For Mowrer (1960 a, b), emotion is a key to learning and represents drives that are associated with specific eliciting conditions. He sees fear, hope, relief, and disappointment as the fundamental emotions. When something happens that might elicit emotions such as hope or relief we are likely to engage in what he calls 'approach behaviour.' That is, we are likely to behave in a way that will encourage that

hope or relief. If something occurs that elicits emotions of fear or disappointment, not surprisingly we will engage in 'avoidance behaviour.' Implied in Mowrer's notion is that when someone senses the possibility of danger, fear will occur; and when the potential danger passes, relief will be experienced. In response to a stimulus where you expect to be safe, hope will be elicited. But if that expectation passes, there will be disappointment. We can see from this idea that as we experience things, there seems to be a *sequence* of emotions associated with the behaviour that results from a particular motivation.

Hammond's (1970) work is informed by Mowrer's idea that rewarding events lead to drive reduction and punishing events lead to drive induction. But he reworked Mowrer's original formulations, suggesting that if something likely to increase the occurrence of a negative state or decrease the occurrence of a rewarding state, it will be what he called *excitatory*, eliciting either fear or hope; and things that are likely to decrease the likelihood of either a negative or rewarding state will be *inhibitory*, eliciting relief or disappointment.

Strongman (1987) suggests that this formulation provides the best synthesis of behavioural work on emotion, bringing together as it does both Hullian and Skinnerian ideas of behaviourism. He sees emotion as a central state elicited by both learned and unlearned stimuli; and the stimuli in both cases may be the presence or absence of either reward or punishment. To Strongman, this represents emotion within a motivational framework. This fits nicely with the homeostatic concept of motivation advanced by Rossiter and Percy in which there are two fundamental motivating mechanisms, one positive and one negative.

This homeostatic view follows directly from a need for advertising and other marketing communication to facilitate the formation or reinforcement of a positive brand attitude which is consistent with the appropriate motivation driving behaviour in the category. Most psychologists see all behaviour as the result of specific motivation. With few exceptions these motivations will be classified as positively originated or negatively originated. In their formulation, Rossiter and Percy call negatively originated motives 'informational' and positively originated motives 'transformational,' and as we shall see, very specific emotional responses are associated with these different motives.

Motivation and Emotional Sequences

The onset of something negative should motivate a person to reduce or remove whatever is causing the problem in order to return to equilibrium. You have a headache and seek something to remove the pain (problem removal). You worry about what will happen to your young family if you have a fatal accident, so you buy insurance (problem avoidance). With the onset of a positive experience, a person will maximize the utility or source of that experience until satiated, at which point they return to equilibrium. You smell fresh-baked cookies in the kitchen, seek them out and eat several until you are full (sensory gratification).

An understanding of this response relationship informs the distinction between informational and transformational brand attitude strategies for advertising. If the underlying motivation driving behaviour is negative, one set of creative tactics related to

the emotional portrayal of the motivation will be required; if the underlying motivation is positive, a very different set of creative tactics will be required. We are looking for an emotional response that follows either indirectly from an evaluation of the benefit claim in our advertising (the usual path for negatively motivated behaviour) or directly from executional elements within the advert (the usual path for positively motivated behaviour).

While emotional responses to stimuli are very specific, one can nonetheless look for certain emotions to be associated with particular motivations, very much in the spirit of Hammond's reconceptualizations of Mowrer's theory. Rossiter and Percy (1987) remind us that emotional stimuli in advertising should be used to elicit responses that are associated with the appropriate underlying motivation that is driving behaviour in the category. At the same time they point out that there are really no general schema that represent the exact functioning of emotions. However, if we look at something like Russell and Pratt's (1980) circumplex notion of emotion we can see that one can organize emotions into generalized *categories*.

Utilizing an emotional categorization theory (like Russell and Pratt), it is possible to see how one can match certain emotional categories with particular motivations. The Russell and Pratt emotional categorization theory arrays categories of emotions around the circumference of a circle in such a way that each category has a logical 'opposite.' Unpleasant-Pleasant, Dull-Exciting, Sleepy-Arousing, Relaxing-Distressing. Negative motivations such as problem-solution or problem avoidance are likely to follow a

'distressing' to 'relaxing' sequence of emotional response. A problem occurs, stimulating a 'distressing' emotional response, followed by a 'relaxing' emotional state when the problem is solved or avoided. Positive motivations such as sensory gratification are likely to follow a 'dull' to 'exciting' emotional sequence. Someone is feeling bored or 'dull' when confronted with an opportunity to enjoy themselves which elicits a positive 'exciting' emotional state.

Perhaps the most important insight here for advertising is that in building or sustaining a positive brand attitude, if we are to adequately address the motivation involved, advertising should elicit a dynamic *sequence* of emotional responses. As we mentioned earlier, it would be inappropriate to think in terms of only a single emotion, or more precisely a single emotional state. What is likely to be involved is a transfer from one emotional state to another, and this must be implied or represented in the advertising. 'Oh, no, look at those stains on my new shirt' (mild anxiety). 'Look, the advertised brand got the stain out' (relief). This should be a very familiar scenario from every detergent or cleanser advert ever run. And it should underscore the fact that a *sequence* of emotion is involved (a point all too often ignored by both academic and practitioner advertising research).

Emotion and Advertising

Let us now turn our attention specifically to emotional responses in advertising.

Emotional stimuli should be included in adverts in order to serve an underlying purchase or usage motivation, where motivation is defined as a behavioural energizing mechanism.

It is this emotional energy that affects brand attitude communication effects. At the low involvement level, when dealing with negatively motivated behaviour, emotion will operate directly upon brand attitude. But when dealing with positively motivated behaviour, emotion will operate on brand attitude *indirectly* through attitude toward the advertising. This is why it is essential that advertising dealing with positive motives must be seen as 'emotionally authentic.'

These two dimensions of involvement and motivation are what define the brand attitude quadrants of the original 'grid' theory of Rossiter and Percy (1984). In their view, involvement is defined in terms of *risk*, either fiscal or psychological. The fundamental difference between low and high involvement advertising is that in terms of processing, low involvement advertising only requires attention and learning, but with high involvement advertising one must also accept the message as true. As a result, it is easier to process low involvement advertising because the target audience does not need to be convinced by the benefit claim, they only need to have their curiosity aroused.

The relative contribution of the emotional component of the benefit claim will differ significantly according to the motivational aspect of the brand attitude. Specifically, when dealing with negative originating motives, informational brand attitude strategies, the emotional portrayal of the motivation itself is not as important as adequate benefit claim support. Information must be provided that satisfies the need, 'solves' the problem being addressed. Emotion in this case will be largely confined to energizing the processing of the message, and the correct emotional sequence will facilitate this. With transformational

brand attitude strategies, where we have positive originating motives, the correct emotional portrayal of the motivation is critical to the delivery of the message. Emotional responses stimulated by *creative elements* within the advertising will facilitate learning.

Rossiter and Percy (1987) proposed a set of specific emotional sequences that might be associated with particular positive and negative motivation in advertising. In their original formulation they are careful to remind us that these hypothesized emotional sequence are just that: typical emotions that *might* be used in advertising to elicit an emotional response that will help stimulate the motivation. There is no doubt that advertising, like any stimulus, will elicit emotional responses from memory, and that these will be related to motivations. But as noted earlier, emotional responses are *specific*, not general. Nevertheless, certain categories of emotional response sequences do seem to make sense. To reflect a negative motivation, for example, they suggest an emotional sequence such as 'annoyed - relieved' (problem removal) or 'fearful - relaxed' (problem avoidance); and to stimulate positive motivations emotional sequences such as 'dull or neutral - joyful' (sensory gratification) or 'apprehension or neutral - flattered' (social approval). The debt to Russell and Pratt in this formulation should be clear.

Applying the Theory

So where do we stand? We have discussed a lot of things, but how do we apply it? We have just seen how necessary it is to ensure an appropriate emotional portrayal of the motivation that is driving behaviour in our category. That seems pretty straight-forward. But how can we be sure the emotional portrayal is correct? How can we anticipate the

effect emotional memory will have on our advertising when people are not conscious of these emotional memories? The key is to identify visual images that we can use in our creative executions that are associated with our brand's primary benefit at the deepest possible level in memory, and that also will elicit appropriate nondeclarative emotional memories.

We can do this by conducting some relatively inexpensive research where we take a sample of our target audience and probe for deeply held images associated with the primary benefit and the emotions they trigger. This is something psychologists call a search for schemata. We are looking for visual images that come to mind when people think about the benefit. This 'schemata' will reflect all of the key associations with the benefit in memory. Based upon an analysis of the images that are described, we ask the brand's creative team to come up with pictures or illustrations they feel reflect the images people are describing. These images are then tested to see how well they elicit the primary benefit and corresponding nondeclarative memory.

What we are looking for in this exercise is the 'gist' or general characteristics of the images people have in mind so that creative executions based upon these images will be recognized as reflecting the benefit. This *general* understanding of the image and its associations is what permits variation in executions, and thus campaign extendibility. It also helps us identify key visuals that will be *unique* to the brand. This is critical. Too often brand positionings are based upon 'ideal attributes' and as a result run the risk of leading to executions that are too similar to other brands and are executed in culturally

stereotypical ways, to say nothing of eliciting the wrong emotional memories.

Let's illustrate what we are talking about with an interesting case history. A small amusement park aimed primarily at children under 12 years of age had been experiencing declining attendance for three years. The task was to develop new advertising to help reverse the trend, and importantly to accomplish it with *limited resources*. The primary benefit for the park's positioning was 'fun,' so the research task was to identify visual images associated with 'fun,' and the emotions they trigger. The challenge was to find images that are associated with 'fun' in nondeclarative emotional memory so that these unconscious memories will positively influence parents' (the ultimate decision-makers) conscious associations with the fun *they* will have, as well as their children, when visiting the park.

In the images described by the target market, cues for 'family amusement park fun' are often quite different from 'fun' cues in general, but they are nonetheless multitudinous. They included specific amusement park features and attractions, as well as the social interaction of family members in various situations occasioned by a visit. Strongly associated with family amusement park fun is an almost electrified atmosphere, which begins with the expectation of the park visit and heightens as the day draws near.

Emotions are stimulated with the anticipation of exciting rides, heterogeneous crowds of excited people, a landscape of lights, distinctive amusement park sounds, and a flood of food smells. Traditional attractions seem to be prevalent—the roller coasters, merry-go-rounds, fun houses, and cotton candy.

However, there is also a second orientation to family amusement park images. In addition to the excitement, an amusement park seems to evoke a calm sense of family well-being. Strongly tied to this sense are images of a picnic area and other areas specially designated for children under twelve. A park can provide fun for parents by giving them the opportunity to see their children having fun, and to heighten the social interaction among family members.

Overall, we found that stereotypes of an amusement park experience seem to offer the best cues that people, adults and children, are having fun. Facial expressions and body posturing can include smiling and laughing faces, proud parents' faces, fearful and crying children's faces, and expressions of other emotional peaks (both high and low). Specific park features that frequently were described included merry-go-rounds, roller coasters and other rides, food smells (cotton candy, hot dogs, barbecues), heterogeneous crowds of preoccupied and merry people, a cacophony of music, voices, equipment noises, family members interacting in close fashion, etc.

From these descriptions of the visual images of 'fun' associated in peoples' memory with amusement parks, the park's advertising agency prepared a series of illustrations meant to reflect these descriptions. Because we are dealing here with a high involving transformational strategic problem (i.e. behaviour is driven by positive motivations), we know that advertising must establish a strong link in the target's mind between the park and children having fun, show an emotional authenticity, and enable the target to

personally identify the park as depicted in the executions. The images developed by the agency for testing all were seen by the target as reflecting 'fun,' but not all of them were seen as *real*. In the end, a set of images was identified that was strongly linked in memory to 'fun,' and that were seen as 'real,' arousing appropriate nondeclarative emotional memories.

Advertising based upon the images identified led not only to an increase in park traffic, but attendance increased over 14% compared with the park's *all-time* record attendance year, translating into incremental revenue of over one million U.S. dollars. (The interested reader will find a detailed discussion of this case on Percy, 1997.) Both the research conducted to identify the appropriate schemata and the resulting advertising were managed with a *very modest* budget. The key was to identify positive links to memory, associated with emotions that are consistent with the underlying motivation driving behaviour in the category. This does not need to be an expensive undertaking.

Summary

Persistence of memory is strongly linked to our emotional lives. Memories of past impressions and feelings are filtered through and made consistent with our current impressions and feelings. If we can anticipate the effect emotional memories will have on our advertising, and other marketing communication, even when out-of-consciousness, and ensure an appropriate emotional portrayal of the motivation, we will significantly increase its effectiveness.

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