

Oh! We of Little Faith

By Jerry W. Thomas

The Federal Trade Commission believes advertising works. Ralph Nader and other self-anointed “consumer” advocates believe advertising works. Many economists and academics believe advertising works.

These disparate groups tend to believe advertising is so awesomely invincible and massively effective that it can make poor, helpless consumers buy things they do not need and do not want, that advertising can drive competitors out of business and create monopolistic dominance in a marketplace, and that advertising is an insidious and pervasive force that has the power to modify human behavior. But not everybody believes in advertising.

We who create advertising, use advertising, and try to evaluate advertising are the disbelievers. Oh, we say we believe, but in our innermost heart of hearts, the doubts won't go away. Too many times have we watched our brilliantly conceived advertising have no apparent effect upon sales or market share. Too many times have our bright hopes been dashed on the rocks of reality, or submerged in a tide of ambiguity. If we cannot

consistently observe the positive effects of advertising, it is only natural that we suffer the pangs of advertising agnosticism.

Oh! We of little faith! Why is it so hard for us? Perhaps a recitation of the mechanisms by which advertising works will help restore our lost souls:

Advertising can create awareness. Brand awareness alone works in three important ways:

1. Awareness creates the possibility of purchase. People cannot buy a product they are unaware of.
2. Awareness helps people see a brand in the store. Awareness affects perception. As a brand's awareness increases, the consumer's ability to see the brand in the store increases. An example will illustrate. Did you ever learn a completely new word and, in the days that followed, were surprised to see and hear the word repeatedly? Nothing had changed, except your awareness. The new word was not suddenly being used more frequently by society. You were merely perceiving it for the first time. In the same way, awareness helps us “see” a product on the shelf.

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3. Awareness biases people in favor of the “aware” brand. All other factors being equal, the higher a brand’s awareness, the more favorably that brand is perceived. High awareness tends to create a “halo effect”—a positive bias toward all aspects of a brand.

Advertising can create a model that people wish to identify with and imitate. The modeling instinct is one of the most powerful impulses in the psyche. Children model after their parents. Employees model after their bosses. Hero worship and hero emulation are common human experiences. We all imitate people we admire. We are all copycats, though most of us are not aware of just how much. Advertising can create personalities and images that trigger the modeling instinct. If the personality or image portrayed is one people admire, they will tend to identify with those personalities/images and subtly modify their behavior in that direction. The “Marlboro Man” is a classic example of a psychological archetype people have chosen to identify with in cigarette brand choice.

Advertising can communicate new information. Man is a semirational creature who will, in weaker moments, respond to facts and reason and modify his behavior accordingly.

Advertising can suggest, and man is a suggestible creature. The “placebo effect” is as common in everyday life as it is in medical environments. That many people can be hypnotized indicates how susceptible Homo sapiens are to suggestion. The day-in, day-out repetition of an advertising message, if acceptable to the conscious mind, can reach and influence the unconscious mind and, later, feed back into consciousness as feelings altering perceptions and behavior. Responsiveness to suggestion is a subtle process and one peripherally related to the modeling impulse.

These are the principal psychological processes by which advertising influences consumer behavior. These processes are not readily visible in everyday experience because they are subtle and intertwined. But do not despair: Believe! Have faith! Advertising really does work. Sally forth with renewed conviction and use these psychological principles to make your advertising more effective.

About the Author

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Decision Analyst is a global marketing research and analytical consulting firm. The company specializes in advertising testing, strategy research, new products research, and advanced modeling for marketing-decision optimization.



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