

Imagery and advertising

Alan Branthwaite, Ignition Marketing Research Consultancy, highlights the various ways in which advertising can affect consumers' minds

IT IS NOW WIDELY recognised that advertising involves the communication of feelings just as much as reasons, if not more so; and that much of the influence of advertising on perceptions, feelings and attitudes to brands is unconscious. Ads do not require conscious attention or awareness to have an impact, and to be effective it is not essential that the content of advertising is explicitly remembered. This is supported by abundant research on memory, attention, judgment and decision-making.

Much of this is fortunate, as ads frequently do not receive focused attention in modern life, but are glimpsed casually (low-attention processing). Consequently, however, the task of researching advertising has become that much more complex. Explicit memory for ads may not be that important - it is the implicit processing that takes place while watching that shapes feelings and dispositions towards the brand.

Indeed there are indications that unconscious effects can be the most influential (although little of this research has been done directly on advertising). LeDoux (1) concluded that 'persuasion always works better when the persuadee is not aware that he or she is being influenced'. Mere exposure, even when something is 'seen' subliminally, leads to greater preference and more positive ratings than for new (previously unexposed) words, pictures of faces or many other objects. A meta-analysis of studies concluded that the mere exposure effect is much stronger when stimuli are presented subliminally than when they are freely available for conscious inspection (2). One study that aimed specifically to reproduce the effects from advertising found that mere exposure seven days previously improved the ratings of a brand, but only when consumers were unaware that they had already seen this brand in an ad (3).

What we are describing is not an anomaly confined to advertising. It is true of much of everyday life, which is mainly

comprised of non-consciously caused evaluations, emotions and choices. Conscious, self-regulated activities have been estimated to occur only 5% of the time (4). In the division of labour within the mind, the work of the unconscious is to appraise, evaluate, 'prime' and trigger actions: while the role of the conscious mind is to doubt, question, restrain and correct unconscious impulses. The ways in which the unconscious is stirred into action are often subtle. Merely thinking about or imagining an action is sufficient to increase the likelihood of doing it without any separate act of volition, unless there is an intervening countermand.

We are also strongly influenced by an innate, and largely unconscious, capacity to imitate and model our actions and emotions on those we see around us, in real life or on film (5). The formation and evaluation of impressions is instantaneous and subliminal (or implicit) from what is seen, heard or smelled around us. Student research participants in a 'language test', who were indirectly primed with words related to stereotypes of the elderly (wrinkle, lonely, grey, Florida) subsequently behaved in line with the stereotype, as they walked more slowly when leaving the laboratory. Bargh's studies (4) have demonstrated that the ability to unobtrusively prime and trigger men-

tal sets, motives and actions is quite limitless, which is probably one major way in which advertising works. We do not need to make decisions to buy most fmcg brands: we can be primed by advertising to like and want them. Seeing brands or packs on display evokes these associations, evaluative tags and impulses from the ad without our needing to be aware of how these originated.

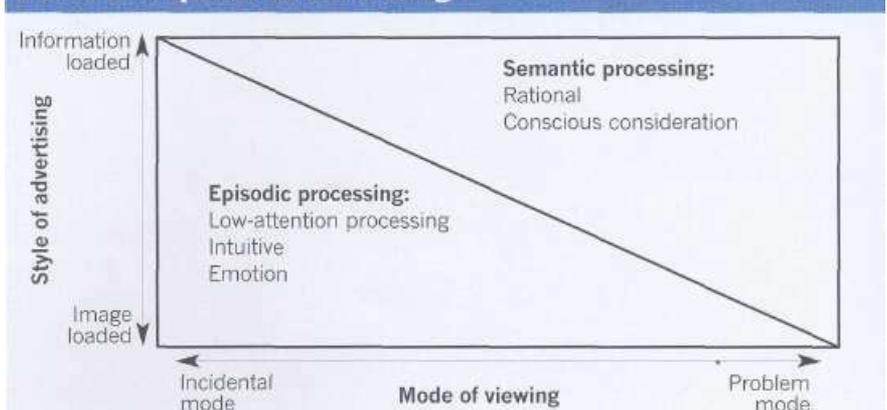
Facilitating non-conscious processing

However, not all advertisements are processed implicitly and unconsciously. Print ads that are primarily text, TV ads with talking presenters, or ads that are relevant to current needs and goals that trigger our interest and involvement (for example, 'new news' ads) are processed more thoughtfully and rationally (6).

Image-loaded advertising drives low-attention processing that stimulates feelings and intuition more than reason. Whether an ad is treated rationally or subconsciously depends on the style of advertising (information-loaded versus image-loaded) and the involvement of the viewer (problem-solving mode versus incidental low-involvement viewing). Together these two factors trigger different modes of thinking (see Figure 1): either semantic information processing

FIGURE 1

Viewers' response to advertising



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(logical, rational) or episodic processing (intuitive, implicit, experiential) (7).

Triggering episodic processing through the use of visual imagery, music, entertainment and mood favours non-conscious assimilation of impressions and feelings that are then instrumental in shaping ideas, associations and evaluative 'tags' for the brand, which are accepted without critical appraisal.

The central role of images

External and internally generated imagery is the primary mechanism in creating emotions, ideas and the evaluations of the world around us that automatically influence attitudes and choice. Damasio (8) makes a strong case, based on neuropsychology, that it is impossible to know, reason and evaluate without using images that are ultimately based in sensory experiences (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, and so on) - even for physicists thinking about abstract mathematical problems: 'The point then is that images are probably the main content of our thoughts, regardless of the sensory modality in which they are generated, and regardless of whether they are about a thing or a process involving things; or about words or other symbols ... which correspond to a thing or process.'

These impressions about the external world are often based on 'thin slices' of experience (9), just as in advertising, and give rise to profound evaluations and expectations. In effect, the imagery in advertising primes our impressions and feelings towards the brand, and also the potential to act in particular ways.

This is not just a matter of simple associations between products in an ad and the mood and imagery. There is also a spin-off from the internal 'stream of associations and ideas' (episodic thinking) generated while watching - fast-moving and idea-rich when the body state is in the positive and pleasant band of the spectrum, slow-moving and repetitive when the body-state veers towards the unhappy and discontented zone. Ads work best

when they create a positive mood to stimulate imagination. This actively (though not necessarily consciously) facilitates the process of creating and laying down mental images connected to the brand. We are also more persuaded when we are engaged by an idea and develop the implications for ourselves, based on the impressions that we have gleaned. Implanting images in the mind through advertising ultimately provides the tools individuals will use to think and feel about a brand.

The brand connection

While ads can be effective, even though viewers (or readers) do not remember seeing them, or which brand the ad was for, it is still necessary, even in low-attention processing, for the imagery (together with the ideas and feelings it produces) to be connected to the brand while watching or soon after, in order to generate the dispositional neural patterns that can be reactivated in perceiving packaging or thinking about the brand or product area. In all but the simplest ads, this requires a degree of sustained attention to link up the brand and imagery. We cannot assume that brand linkage is automatic simply because both are present during the ad. The very strength of the imagery, and the stream of ideas or associations produced, can in themselves distract attention and overshadow the brand identity. Only when the imagery and brand identity are connected will the imagery stimulate emotions and prime the desire and interest in purchasing that particular brand.

In summary, the key to the effectiveness of low-attention processing in advertising lies in the type of imagery that it conveys and the way it is processed. Memory for the ad may not be important when it comes to researching the non-conscious effects of advertising, but particular attention needs to be given to the imagery and the ways that it is assimilated by the viewer in relation to the brand.

Effects of imagery

The potency of imagery from the point of view of communication and persuasion is that it has the capacity to transcend the boundary between the outside world and the world within us. Neurons in an individual's brain spontaneously represent the movements and expressions seen in another person or a photograph, and produce signals in the sensory-motor structures that are the same as when personally initiating real movements. External objects and events impinge on us, through the imagery they create, as if they are happening within us - the sound of a dentist's drill in another room sets our teeth on edge; another's sneeze, cough or a yawn seems to irritate our lungs or stimulate our facial muscles; a gory image strikes at our own viscera.

There are many examples of the powerful effects of imagery on human thinking and feeling. It stimulates creativity in problem solving, as in Einstein's mental experiment to understand the physical properties of light by imagining himself travelling alongside a beam of light at 300,000 kilometres a second: 'The physical entities that seem to serve as elements in thought are certain signs and more or less clear images which can be voluntarily reproduced and combined ... [These] are, in my case, of a visual and ... muscular type' (10).

Here Einstein draws attention not only to visual images, but also kinaesthetic imagery that has long seemed to me to be an important and influential ingredient in linking ideas and feelings.

Imagery enhances memory for information as in the art of the mnemonist. Visual imagery also provides the means for the hypnotist to share control of the patient's mind, by creating an empathy bridge while inducing a trance. Facial expressions induce emotions in others and pictures stimulate sexual arousal when the reader engages with the images by entering into a fantasy scenario. Imagination can be as effective as physical exercise in building up strength and^

muscle. Visual images of various kinds have wide-ranging physiological effects including changing heart rate and blood sugar levels, forming blisters and stimulating the immune system. (See Branthwaite (II) for more detailed examples.)

In analysing the impact and effects of images, we can distinguish four facets that are taken in almost simultaneously, although they are processed differently and have effects in different modalities.

1. The character of an image comes from the execution, which conveys mood and tone.
2. The content, in terms of objects, symbols and situation, has meaning and potential relevance for the viewer. These two facets are largely responsible for engaging the viewer and creating rapport.
3. The connotations of an image are the perceptions, associations, ideas and feelings that spring from the content and embellish its significance for the viewer.
4. The context gives an image its dynamic qualities by indicating the scenario and action that make the image part of an ongoing event that we feel part of and directly affected by (as if we were there).

Processing imagery

These facets are processed mentally in quite a different way from verbal material. An image is absorbed holistically by repeatedly scanning its features, and interconnecting them, rather than in a linear sequence, as with text. Of course, the assimilated image is not an exact reproduction, but an interpretation biased by affect, selective perception and related associations. Much of this is pre-conscious, at lower levels of the brain, and the response is primarily intuitive and affective. As a result, our responses to images are automatic, less analytical.

The affective qualities of an image (mood, feelings) are indeed processed much more quickly than the cognitive meanings we derive, through a fast non-conscious emotion circuit in the brain. This links sensory information about the emotional properties of an image (analysed in the thalamus) directly to the amygdala - 'the brain's emotional computer' (I). The slow, cortical emotional circuit sends information from the thalamus to the amygdala via the cortex, where more detailed analysis of the meaning of the emotion is conducted. Images even in the form of complex scenes or social situations and symbols evoke emotion through this pre-conscious mechanism (5).

The feelings and ideas provoked by images arise through empathy and identification with the subject matter as if we are directly experiencing the situation.

An image produces episodic knowing in an autobiographical and intuitive way (see Table I). This is more powerful than semantic, verbal information, because it is experienced directly and feels as if it comes from inside us, as if we have discovered or experienced it ourselves. This gives great confidence, as this knowing and understanding is generated from inside, rather than handed on from outsiders as semantic or factual information (which depends on their authority and credibility).

There is strong evidence that pre-conscious processing is powerful because it evades critical scrutiny through conscious, rational appraisal, as illustrated in the following experiment. Happy or angry faces were flashed on a screen for four milliseconds (subliminally) or one second (when they would be consciously seen) while people were looking at Chinese ideographs, which they were rating for liking (a form of projective technique). The liking ratings were influenced by the facial images only with the shorter exposure, when they were 'seen' unconsciously, without any opportunity for conscious, rational examination or control over feelings. The emotional mind seems to be particularly responsive to stimuli that its conscious counterpart does not have access to: 'Persuasion always works better when the persuadee is not aware that he or she is being influenced' (I and 12).

Note that we are dealing with events as short as one-tenth of a second or less. In terms of exposure to TV or print ads, this means it is in the detail of fleeting images that an ad's impact and effectiveness is produced. Ads work by stimulating imagination, which is the active process of creating and laying down mental images and associations, although this requires only low-involvement processing.

Researching imagery in ads

For ads to be effective, the transmission of images is central to influencing impressions, thoughts, feelings and decisions, especially at a pre-conscious level. The role of advertising research must be to assist in identifying the right images and fine-tuning the execution to maximise their impact and link with the brand.

Qualitatively, research tools are needed to tap into episodic processing at lower levels of consciousness, and avoid raising rational scrutiny: 'Introspections are often going to be a poor window into how processing that gives rise to conscious content works, and no window at all into processing that does not give rise to immediate conscious content' (I).

TABLE 1

Comparative processing	
Image	Verbal
Holistically	Linear-sequentially
Pre-conscious and conscious	Conscious, attentive processing
Intuitive, associative	Rational, evaluative
Involving, automatic (empathy)	Controlled, analytical
Episodic knowing	Semantic knowing

Imagery itself (rather than discussion) is more likely to provide an effective tool in research, as it is more closely related to the expression of the unconscious than words. These responses are less likely to be filtered through the conscious/rational apparatus, whereas verbal explanation has to be consciously composed before it can be expressed. Also 'stream of consciousness' techniques and games involving wordplay can evade semantic censorship. Spontaneous, rapid and unconnected word-associations are less consciously controlled than introspective reflective discourse, to provide more direct access to implicit impressions from an ad

The usefulness of projective and elicitation approaches for surfacing subliminal and unconscious images can be found in research on the recovery of memory through dreaming, fantasy or free association. For example, respondents were shown a picture for half a minute (so that some parts would have been consciously remembered, but not all the detail). They were asked to draw as much as they could recall, and then given a break in which half of them played a game of darts while the other half engaged individually in a period of free association and fantasy. They then made a second drawing of the picture which often included previously unremembered aspects, but only for the group allowed to fantasise (13).

The right conditions for investigating the effects of advertising imagery can be achieved by the way tasks are presented when applying projective and elicitation techniques, such as:

- > bubble drawings representing the consumer in front of a shelf display or using a particular product
- > laddering to probe the symbolism and associations of advertising imagery for the individual
- > metaphysical thinking ('If the product in the ad had some magical spell, what would it be?') to force non-rational expression of inner personal and intuitive reactions to the images, or
- > synaesthesia to 'sense' the connotations that the ad lends to the brand.

Conclusion

The knowledge that ads can affect the appeal of a brand without remembering having seen them, or knowing which brand they were for, does not logically mean that all advertising is equally effective. The question for advertisers is still the same: 'Does my ad work for my brand as well as it could?'

Unless we are prepared to go to the expense of production and test markets before assessing commercials, there is still a need to investigate the imagery, structure and communication effects before filming and airing the ad. By recognising the difficulties in evaluating advertising, carefully honed qualitative tools can still provide useful and effective means for improving ads, by surfacing the unconscious and resolving potential weaknesses in the way imagery is used. •

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