

50 years using the wrong model of TV advertising

Robert Heath, University of Bath, and Paul Feldwick, argue that information-processing models have misled marketers and researchers

THIS ARTICLE SUMMARISES a paper to be presented at the 50th Market Research Society Conference. It investigates the dominance of the information-processing model, which has been assumed to be correct since the first UK TV ad ran in 1955. We present evidence that the model is over-simplistic and contrary to learning from psychology, and examine why it has never been successfully challenged. Finally we present an outline for a new model, and summarise some implications.

Surreal gibberish

In 1999 a launch TV commercial for a snack food product aimed at teenagers

Research 2007, the Next 50 years

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The programme will provide participants from across the globe with the opportunity to take part in interactive debates, expert briefings and seminars, alongside the main sessions. Showcasing the latest methodologies, cutting-edge thinking and case studies, the programme involves leading international research experts and major players from the business world.

The key themes for Research 2007 are:

- ▶ Celebrating our achievements
- ▶ Research and the real world (Jonathan Porritt will be keynote speaker on the conference theme of sustainability. This is the MRS's first CarbonNeutral event).
- ▶ People, organisations and culture
- ▶ Brands and business
- ▶ Research techniques and methods
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was pre-tested. It consisted of a song with meaningless gibberish lyrics, accompanying a series of surreal scenes. It was pre-tested amongst teenagers using familiar 'impact and communication' questions, and average scores were produced for constructs including 'ease of understanding', 'believability', 'relevance', 'branding' and 'persuasion'. Not surprisingly, scores were below norms.

The report recommended the ad should not be used, saying, amongst other things:

- ▶ 'This route ... hampers understanding and comprehension of intended message'
- ▶ 'There is a strong element of dislike [of the song] which overrides message take-out, and impressions about the product'
- ▶ 'the taste, or other details about the product are hardly mentioned spontaneously'
- ▶ 'relevance, believability and persuasion [are]... low. This is also supported by the low ease of understanding score'
- ▶ 'a more simplistic route ... which emphasises the brand name and benefits clearly would work the best'.

For reasons of timing, the advertiser went ahead and ran the ad in spite of the research. Results were exceptional. An independent survey showed it to be the most recalled and liked ad for three months in a row; the campaign was mentioned widely in the press and on TV, and the brand took a substantial market share.

It is not difficult to see why the research got it so wrong. The report repeatedly concerns itself with issues like 'message takeout', 'taste and other details of the product', 'believability and persuasion', all constructs that have no relevance to an ad that deliberately contains no information, is nonsensical and surreal, and is meant to work by being entertaining and catchy. Furthermore, the fact that the song was disliked in the research, yet proved hugely popular, suggests a serious distortion in the research process compared to real life.

In hindsight it seems hard to believe that intelligent and responsible people could have invested time and money in such a misconceived piece of research. Yet this type of research is far from atypical in

an environment where information processing is believed to be the basis of advertising success.

The information-processing model

The dominance of the information-processing model is illustrated by Hall and Maclay's research among UK advertisers and agencies (i). The most common advertising model they found in use was the Persuasion hierarchy of effects model', the requirements of which were that 'it has impact, it has the capacity to be noticed, to make people know what brand is being offered and that it is communicating the desired message'. They also identified a saliency model, which prioritised creating awareness; and an involvement model, which stressed the role of advertising in creating relationships through affective means. But all their models endorsed the need for a 'unique selling proposition to be clearly established'.

The USP was coined by Rosser Reeves in 1961, but the idea that advertising is primarily about message transmission can be tracked back through David Ogilvy, Claude Hopkins, Daniel Starch and John E. Kennedy, to St Elmo Lewis, who devised the first 'hierarchy of effects' model (AIDA), back in 1898. The legacy of this thinking is that nearly all agency or client creative briefing forms require a statement of 'proposition' or 'message', and these ideas are perpetuated in corporate manuals and marketing textbooks worldwide.

Of course, the IP model would never have thrived were it not supported by academia. Jones (2), for example, describes advertising as an activity that 'increases people's knowledge and changes people's attitudes', and Myers-Levy and Malaviya's highly praised *Journal of Marketing* paper (3) considered 'only theories that adopt an information-processing perspective'. The way thinking is loaded is evident by the popularisation of the terms 'strong' and 'weak' to describe the information-processing and emotional-reinforcement models (2, 4). And the most influential academic model of all, Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model,

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although developing two routes for persuasion, leaves no doubt that the attentive cognitive 'Central' route is superior to the less attentive, more emotive 'Peripheral' route. As they say, 'Attitude changes via the Central Route appear to be more persistent, resistant, and predictive of behaviour than changes induced via the peripheral route' (5).

Of course, constructs like emotion have been incorporated into academic models, but always as an adjunct to information processing. Thus Lavidge and Steiner (6) see emotion as a consequence of cognition, limited to the decision-making area of liking and preference, and even Holbrook and Hirschmann (7) believe that 'Abandoning the information processing approach is undesirable'. For others emotion is synonymous with 'ad liking' (8) in which 'Positive affect is ... transferred to the brand... advertised.' But the most influential belief is that emotion facilitates information processing by increasing attention. This dates back to Kroeber-Riel's Activation Theory (9), and has recently been publicised by Erik Du Plessis (10).

Evidence that the IP Model is flawed

Academics like Krugman (n) and Ehrenberg (4) have openly challenged the IP model, but the problem has always been finding hard evidence in support. Partly this is because advertising evaluation has historically been dominated by metrics that measure cognitive thinking rather than feeling. But hard evidence is emerging in academic work amongst psychologists. For example, Kathryn Braun (12) has confirmed Ehrenberg's claim that advertising can operate post-purchase. She found that advertising exposed after trial confounded subjects' ability to judge accurately the quality of orange juice, leading to substandard product being highly rated

D'Sousa and Rao (13) have empirically challenged the need for attention to be paid for advertising to work, achieving increases in brand awareness, predicted brand share and brand choice by exposing subjects to radio advertising in a divided-attention situation. Shapiro, MacInnis and

Heckler (14), using a computer-controlled magazine, have shown advertising can work when processed without any attention. They concluded that Advertising has the potential to affect future buying decisions even when subjects... do not process the ad attentively and ... do not recollect ever having seen the ad.'

More recently, Krugmaris assertion that TV advertising is low involvement compared with press has been verified by Corke and Heath (15) using measurement of eye movement as an indication of visual attention. Their research was carefully designed to give no indication that advertising was the main focus, and details will be covered in a separate article in *Admap* in April. In summary, it showed that respondents use two to three times the cognitive resource (specifically, attention) in the processing of print advertising as in processing TV advertising. In addition, the results suggested that TV and newspaper processing are different in nature. Newspaper processing appears to conform to the systematic goal-driven 'top-down' processing of the IP model, but the lazy eye movements in TV processing suggest automatic, stimulus-driven 'bottom-up' processing.

Using the same technique, Heath (16) has directly tested this hypothesis. He examined four beliefs relating to the goal-driven information-processing model:

1. high levels of emotion in advertising encourage increased levels of attention
2. we pay more attention to things that we like (10,17)
3. usage of products or brands results in higher levels of motivation and higher levels of attention
4. prior exposure of advertising means that less attention will be paid.

Heath incorporated a group of six ads with high emotional content and six with low emotional content into a TV programme at random positions, and then exposed the programme to subjects whose attention was measured by eye-camera. After the programme had been watched he ascertained liking, prior exposure, and product and brand usage for each ad.

The results totally contradict all four of the assumptions in the IP model. No significant drop in attention resulted from

prior exposure. No significant increase in attention resulted from product or brand usage. Most important, emotional content in advertising was significantly correlated with lower, not higher, levels of attention. And liking was significantly correlated with lower levels of attention, mainly because ads with high emotional content were generally liked more.

That high levels of emotion in advertising encourage low-attention processing will surprise Du Plessis, who, in a direct attack on Heath's Low Attention Processing model (18) asserts that 'All the evidence about emotional appeals in advertising shows that their main role is to attract attention, therefore it is unlikely that, the more emotional an advertisement is, the more it will become low involvement processed' (10). Du Plessis's 'error' is to assume that TV is systematically processed by ordinary people in just the same way as it is by marketers, ad agency employees, market research executives and market research respondents. The fact is that ordinary people, sitting at home in the evening after a hard day at work, have no desire to apply systematic thoughtful goals to watching TV ads. As Tellis observes, people 'do not yearn for ads' (19). >

'Clients and agencies must take on board ... that advertising can be effective without "message", "proposition", or "benefits", and recognise that attempts to impose these may reduce not increase effectiveness'

