

Is the Ad a Success? The Brain Waves Tell All

Stuart Elliott



An ad for Apple was used for a study of consumers' biometric responses.

NEVER mind brainstorms. These days, Madison Avenue is all about brain waves.

That may be overstated, but it is no exaggeration that agencies and advertisers are growing more interested in neuroscience in their never-ending efforts to improve effectiveness.

The ardor of the ad business to adopt the technical tools of biometrics — measuring brain waves, galvanic skin response, eye movements, pulse rates and the like — is increasing as consumer spending, the engine of the American economy, slows.

In other words, in hard times ads must work harder to move the merchandise.

"Instead of hypotheses about what people think and feel, you actually see what they think and feel," said Joel Kades, vice president for strategic planning and consumer insight at Virgin Mobile USA in Warren, N.J.

"I'm not such a huge fan of ad testing," he added, but measuring biological responses is "absolutely useful."

The curiosity about neuroscientific ways to determine how ads work — or fail to work — will be on display this week at the 54th annual convention and exposition of the Advertising Research Foundation. The agenda for the conference is filled with presentations on better methods to determine how consumers engage with ads (and vice versa).

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"In many ways, we're testing advertising the way we were testing advertising when I was at Procter & Gamble 22 years ago," said Frank Stagliano, executive vice president for the Nielsen Entertainment Television Group in New York, part of the Nielsen Company.

Neuroscience can provide "a more accurate way to understand what consumers really like," Mr. Stagliano said, which helps to produce ads and programs that "break through the clutter" rather than contribute to it.

Last month, Nielsen bought a stake in NeuroFocus, a company that specializes in brain-wave research and works for clients like Scottrade, the brokerage firm.

"We measure attention, second by second; how emotionally engaged you are with what you're watching, whether it's a commercial, a movie or a TV show; and memory retention," said A. K. Pradeep, chief executive at NeuroFocus in Berkeley, Calif.

A company that competes with NeuroFocus, the EmSense Corporation, hopes to demonstrate such usefulness in a discussion on Monday at the research foundation's convention.

Executives of EmSense, which also tries to measure consumer response to ads through biometric techniques, will present the results of a study of how award-winning ads.

For the study, EmSense surveyed 200 people, ages 18 to 54, in New York and San Francisco. The study measured their biosensory responses to 19 commercials that won awards last year at the International Advertising Festival in Cannes, France, and ads that won Effie Awards last year from the New York the American Marketing Association.

The study looked at spots like a commercial for Apple with characters playing "PC" and "Mac"; the "I Feel Pretty" spot for Nike, with Maria Sharapova, and a commercial for Tide with a talking stain on a man's shirt.

On Madison Avenue, Cannes awards, known as Lions, are usually perceived as honoring creativity and Effie winners are typically deemed to reward effectiveness. The EmSense study sought to weigh the value of those emotional and cognitive approaches.

Some findings reinforced the conventional wisdom, said Elissa Moses, chief analytics officer at EmSense in Westport, Conn., which works for clients like Virgin Mobile USA and Coca-Cola.

Winners of Effies "tend to be a little less emotional and use rational claims a bit more" than winners at Cannes, Ms. Moses said, and ads that won Lions tended to be much better liked than their Effie counterparts.

But surprisingly, "there are very important similarities" between the two types of winners, she added, which can help guide future campaigns.

Fifteen of the 19 Cannes and Effie winners engaged consumers faster than average spots, Ms. Moses said. "Typically, a spot engages with viewers in 5 to 7 seconds. The Cannes and Effie ads engaged, whether emotionally or cognitively, in 1.5 seconds."

Whichever award the commercials won, they had an equal effect on purchase consideration and on brand favorability, Ms. Moses said.

Although winners of Lions are replete with emotional appeals meant to engage viewers, they also use what Ms. Moses called a "cognitive jolt," a twist or surprise, to earn interest.

For example, viewers were startled by a car crash in a Volkswagen spot and by a dropped call in a Cingular ad.

Some consumer advocates question the role of biometrics in ad research. They worry that blending "Weird Science" with "Mad Men" will give marketers an unfair advantage over consumers.

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"The role of neuromarketing is to understand how people feel and react," Ms. Moses said. "It in no way sets out to meddle with normal, natural response mechanisms."

Her opinion was echoed by Robert E. Knight, the director of the Helen Wills Neuroscience Institute at the University of California, Berkeley, who is also the chief science adviser at NeuroFocus.

"We're not trying to predict an individual's thoughts and actions and we're not trying to input messages," Dr. Knight said.

Before Nielsen teamed up with NeuroFocus, Mr. Stagliano said, "we were concerned how people would respond," but after a test at the CBS Television City research laboratory in Las Vegas, the reaction was "overwhelmingly positive."

"Respondents didn't feel like they were being probed or anything," Mr. Stagliano said.

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