Creativity in TV ads does not increase attention

Emotive creativity can reduce the attention paid to TV ads - but this could make the ad more effective, says **Dr Robert Heath,** Bath University School of Management

IT'S A POPULAR IDEA that consumers don't want to watch TV ads, and that it is only the emotive appeal of creativity that encourages them to pay attention and allows the message to be communicated. In a section entitled 'Heath's Error' in his book, *The Advertised Mind*, my friend Eric Du Plessis states that: "Good emotionally-driven ads attract attention," and: "All the evidence about emotional appeals shows that their main role is to attract attention..."

Evidence shows that emotion in TV advertising is a jolly good thing. Les Binet and Peter Field's analysis of 1,000 IPA Effectiveness Awards campaigns concluded that TV advertising is becoming more effective, and that campaigns that rely on emotional appeal tend to be the most successful at building brands. This is supported by research I published in 2006 in the *Journal of Advertising Research (JAR)*, which showed that it is the emotional 'creative' content in advertising that builds strong brand relationships, not the message.

Well, what's the problem then? Quite simply it is that Eric's assertion is wrong. Emotive creativity in TV advertising doesn't increase attention - it decreases it.

FIGURE 1

TV ads and results

Brand	Category	Emotive content	Attention
British Airways	Airline	5.10	1.04
Velvet	Toilet tissue	4.90	1.14
Lexus	Car	5.02	1.08
Renault	Car	4.85	0.87
Amex Suit	Financial services	4.84	1.13
BMW X3	Car	4.70	0.88
B&Q	Plant retail	3.66	1.38
Roundup	Weedkiller	2.74	1.19
Garnier	Skin cream	3.30	1.23
L'Oréal	Hair colour	3.35	1.22
Colgate	Toothpaste	3.14	1.09
MG Rover	Car	2.79	1.39

Source: Dr Robert Heath

Learning from psychology

Unlike print or poster advertising, the challenge with TV advertising isn't so much getting you to look at the screen as getting you to pay at least some active attention when you do so. Eric and I agree that advertising cannot work unless some attention has been paid, otherwise you would never know what brand was being advertised.

In my July 2009 *Admap* article, I explained how level of attention runs from active, goal-driven, 'top-down' processing down to passive, stimulus-driven 'bottom-up' processing, and presented experimental evidence which confirmed that most TV advertising is watched at the lower, stimulus driven level.

Now I don't dispute that psychology experiments have shown that emotion can increase arousal and switch your attention from low to high. But these fall into two categories: the first are experiments that have tested extreme emotional stimuli - such as nudity, or angry or fearful faces. Emotions like these, which 'force' you to pay attention, are rarely used in brand advertising these days, partly because they can cause offence and get you into trouble with the regulatory authorities, and partly because it has been found that people process 'forcing' ads selectively and often cannot remember who they are for.

The second category are experiments that have tested moderate emotional stimuli - such as happy faces - in contexts such as news footage, which are likely to get much higher levels of attention than TV advertising. So, in practice, these psychology experiments have little, if any, direct relevance to what happens when we are watching TV ads.

But psychology does present evidence that is relevant to the processing of emotive TV advertising. For example, it is now universally accepted that emotional stimuli are processed automatically, pre-cognitively and without the need for attention. It follows that if emotive stimuli are included in TV advertising, and if TV advertising is processed on a stimulus driven basis, very little cognitive resource will need to be deployed.

The implications of this are important. Resource matching theory has shown that our brains tend only to deploy the amount of cognitive resource needed in any situation.

Clearly, if we are scared, or excited, or turned on, or shocked by something, we will deploy more cognitive resource and pay more attention (as in the UK rear seat-belt ad in which the son flies forward and kills his mother). But marketers don't tend to use shock tactics like these in brand-building TV ads. What they generally use are things like mildly humorous, poignant or dramatic situations, elegant or attractive visuals, and footage that is beautifully shot against nice, uplifting background music.

Since TV advertising is mostly processed as a stimulus, ads that are dominated by this sort of emotive content will be judged by the brain to require little in the way of cognitive resource to process them, and thus relatively low levels of attention will be deployed. The converse is that ads that lack any emotive content will probably be perceived by the brain to be trying to communicate some sort of rational message, and relatively more attention will be deployed. This, of course, is the exact opposite of Eric's assertion.

At the Bath School of Management, we decided to test these two hypotheses. If Eric is right then we would expect higher levels of emotive content in TV advertising to be correlated with higher levels of attention. If our psychology-derived theo

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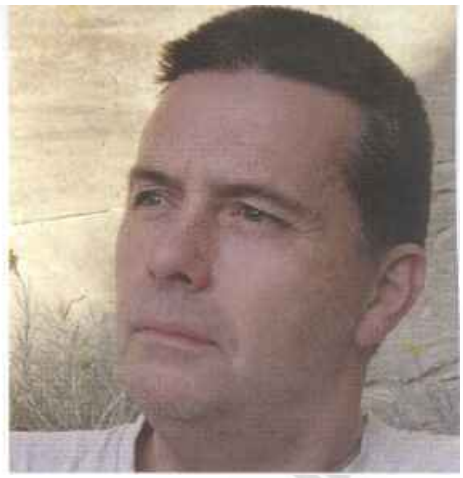

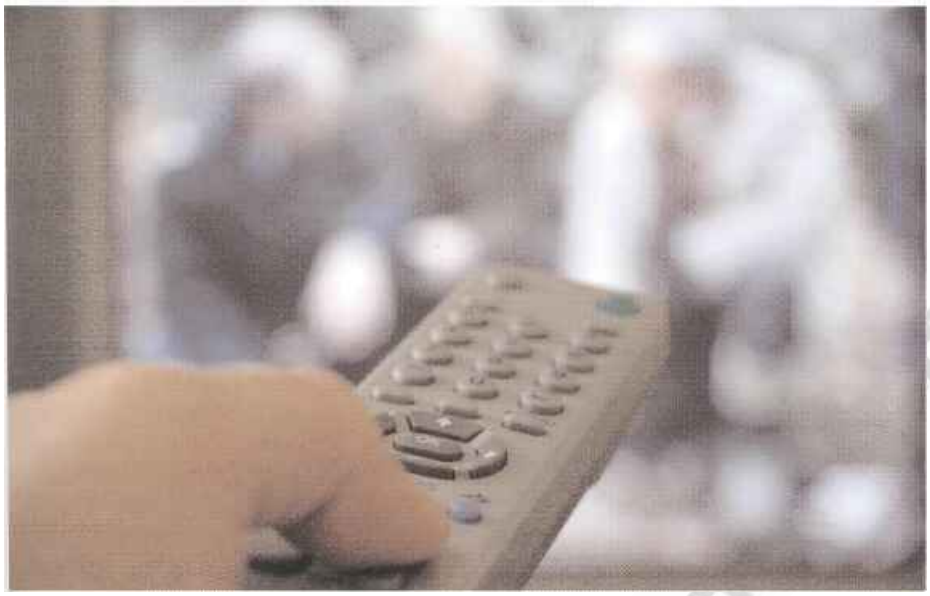

ry is right, we would expect higher levels of emotive content in TV advertising to be correlated with lower levels of attention.

To maximise the validity of our test, it was decided to use unadulterated TV brand ads as stimulus material and to manipulate the selection of these so that half had higher levels of emotive content and half had lower levels of emotive content. The level of emotive content in the ads was measured using scales derived from a major content analysis done by Holbrook & Batra in 1987.

This study examined 64 ads against a total of 72 scales, and among the six ad content factors they identified was one called 'Emotional'. We used the scales which correlated with the 'Emotional' factor in a pre-study to rate a total of 26 ads on TV at the time of our research, and then selected the six with the highest and the six with the lowest levels of emotive content for our main experiment.

Measuring **attention**

Establishing levels of attention in real time is a challenging task, as people have no accurate way of estimating how much attention they are paying at any one time. Perhaps because it is difficult to measure, marketers are often over-liberal in the way they use the term. For instance, John Rossiter and Larry Percy quote research showing "...an attention loss of 17%", when the study actually measured ad recall, and Spike Cramphorn, in his 2006 *International Journal of Market Research* article, asserts that 'Attention ...contributes directly to increased purchase intention", when his measure of attention is no more than a set of consumer attitudes towards the ads.

But the eye fixation-per-second measurement system I have alluded to in previous articles can measure real-time attention levels very accurately, as witnessed by the fact that we were able to establish that attention levels used to process TV ads were between 38% and 46% of the attention levels used to process print ads.

To conduct a fair test, it was necessary to ensure that no-one knew we were interested in advertising. If participants knew that examining advertisements was the motive behind the research they would be more inclined to 'top-down' process them.

For this reason, recruitment was done through the Bath University Department of Pharmacology, and subjects were simply asked to participate in a study to test the effect of TV watching on the eyes. The 12 test ads were professionally edited using two different random rotations into a 3o-minute episode of *Frasier*, with four ads before the programme, four in the middle and four afterwards. To ensure that the attention at the start of the study or towards the programme itself didn't interfere with the results, a dummy ad was placed at the start of each of the three breaks.

Participants were allowed to sit as close to, or far away from, the TV as they wanted, and the only intrusive element in the study was that they were asked to wear an extremely lightweight plastic headband with a reflector that was visible only in the bottom periphery of their left eye. After the ads had been viewed in the programme context, the Emotional Content questions were asked, along with questions about a number of other factors that are believed to influence the level of attention paid to advertising. These were Prior Exposure (which is expected to decrease attention levels on subsequent exposure), Usage of the Product Category or Brand being advertised (which are expected to increase levels of attention), and Liking of an advertisement (which is also expected to increase attention levels).

Results

Full details of the coding procedure and the extensive analyses and manipulation checks carried out can be found in an article in the December 2009 edition of *JAR* that I wrote with Agnes Nairn and Paul Bottomley. Analysing the fixations-per-second (FPS) during each ad against the average during the watching of the TV programme showed that high levels of emotive content were associated with an average reduction of about 20% in attention levels, significant at 99.9%. The ads, with their scores for Emotive Content and Attention (FPS), are shown in Figure 1.

The only other variable to show any influence on attention levels was prior exposure to advertising, and this had the effect of reducing attention levels, but only for the ads that had lower emotive content. This was anticipated, since the attention levels towards the higher emotive content ads were already depressed.

To be confident of these findings, we needed to be sure that there was not a simple explanation arising from the nature of the ads chosen which might

'physically' have caused the eyes to fixate more rapidly. Eye movements are known to be influenced differently by reading of copy versus scanning of scenes, so the ads were examined to ensure none had excessive levels of captioned words present. It was found that there was marginally more captioning in low emotive content than high emotive content ads, but the time on-screen the captions occupied was minimal and therefore highly unlikely to have affected the FPS over the entire ad.

Eye fixations are also known to be longer when processing faces compared to scenery, and it was found that the low emotive content ads showed marginally more faces and high emotive content ads more scenery. However, increasing the duration of fixations would have reduced attention, so it is likely the result would have been greater if the two sets of ads had been matched on this criterion.

Examining the ads for other evident differences revealed only one factor that differed substantially - the presence of a narrator. However, the presence of audio narration could not have exerted a physical influence on visual FPS, other than via feedback from the brain suggesting that there is information to be sought.

Explaining the results

Subjectively, the effect of the narrator meant that there did appear to be more 'things' talked about in the low emotive content ads than the high emotive content ads. This raises the question of whether or not the ads were high/low emotive content or low/high informational content.

Judging by the random sample of ads collected, these two types of ad appear in the UK to be mutually exclusive, ie high emotive content ads are seen to have low information and vice versa. This also seemed to have been the case in Holbrook & Batra's original 1987 study in the US. However, whether the ads had high or low information, the effect of the emotive content was still not sufficient to increase attention towards them.

The results cast an interesting light on the state of mind of normal TV advertising viewing. It appears that under normal viewing conditions, the motivation to respond to their needs seems to have deserted our research participants. They paid no more attention to ads that featured brands or products they used than ads that feature brands or products they didn't use, and paid much the same level of attention to ads that they didn't like as to ads they did. And when viewing advertisements they had seen before, the amount by which their attention dropped was small.

All this is consistent with the idea that normal viewing of TV advertising is not a systematic 'top-down', goal-driven activity, but is predominantly an automatic, 'bottom-up', stimulus-driven activity.

Implications for creativity

Although the scope of this study is relatively modest, our results concur with other studies, which have found that creativity correlates with a small fall in the level of attention viewers thought they were paying.

These findings inevitably raise questions about the value of emotive creative content, and ask what, if anything, is contributed by the expensive resource that ad agencies apply to the creation of modern TV advertisements. Marketers might justifiably conclude that modern creativity is all smoke and mirrors, and that they would be better served by simple informational TV ads that present their message without any creative embellishment. But the findings of Binet & Field 2007, mentioned earlier, suggest they would be wrong to think this.

So, if it doesn't increase attention, how does emotive creativity make brand-building TV ads more effective? We have shown in previous research that by creating an emotional association, creativity can directly influence the relationship between the consumer and the brand. But I believe emotive creativity might also work in a more contentious way, which is by reducing message counter-argument. TV advertisements are invariably prone to be seen more than once, and research shows that if high levels of cognitive resource are available, then repetition can encourage negativity through counter-argument. But if the effect of higher levels of emotive creativity is to lower attention towards TV ads, then less cognitive resource will be deployed, and the chance of counter-argument will be reduced.

So, the conclusion I draw is that emotive creativity might facilitate communication, not - as Eric believes - by increasing attention, but by lowering attention, promoting open-mindedness and effectively encouraging the consumer to let their guard down.

If this is the case, then it raises questions about the ethics of using emotive content among vulnerable audiences, such as children, whose ability to counter-argue is already likely to be low. This is an important issue that will need to be addressed in a separate article in the future.

Fonte: Admap, Washington, v. 45, n. 1, p. 26-28, Jan. 2010.