

# Advertising enters the virtual world

*Opportunities have been exploited to the full*

## Sweet but off the mark

During the 1990s, chocolate makers Ferrero Rocher came up with one of the most derided advertisements in television history. Among the many cringe-making features of the “ambassador’s party” was the all-white guest list.

The advert was later remade to reflect the ethnic diversity of people who would attend such an event. It was curious that an advertising agency (an Italian company in this case) for such a big product should have been so wide of the mark. Advertisers are usually far more “switched on”, both in terms of awareness of social issues and in seeing ways to exploit new opportunities to promote products.

Advertisers have not been slow, for example, to see that the emergence of the internet has provided them with that holy grail, an entirely new outlet for their talents, one to which they have responded with imagination and flair. Another development, the possibility of 3D advertising online, is in its infancy. The question, one posed by Debbabi, Daassi and Baile, is: will it really offer opportunities beyond that of its 2D equivalent?

A key factor in their research is telepresence, the technology that allows a person to feel that they are present at an online “event”, interacting with the product as if it were there with them. In other words, consumers have access to and contact with a product in a way that replicates their having direct physical contact. It is a phenomenon that recalls Coleridge’s reference to “willing suspension of disbelief”. Studies have shown that consumers do indeed feel “telepresent” when they interact with a product in 3D.

The researchers identified certain variables which are most likely to benefit from direct experience of a product rather than purely seeing it through advertising. They are: belief strength towards the product; belief confidence; attitude towards the product; attitude confidence (the extent to which individuals are confident that their response is the right one); and purchase intentions.

## Time for research

It was decided to test these factors by creating two experimental products for 2D and 3D web sites. One, a watch, was a “geometric” product, the other, a coat, was “material”. The former are products that need to be seen to be appreciated; the latter require touch for total appreciation and understanding of quality. Slogans were devised for both brands and included on the web sites.

To test several hypotheses, four web sites were conceived with visualisation for each project (the “Satchko” watch and the “Cymba” coat) in both 2D and 3D, with information symmetry but greater richness and interactivity for the 3D products. For example, with 3D, subjects can move and be rotated as well as having far superior digital resolution. Participants were

fully versed in use of the web sites before they saw the advertisements. Various forms of the Likert scale were used to test the opinions of the 199 undergraduates (60 per cent female) who took part.

Among findings was a confirmation that the richness of the 3D advertisements, as well as their interactivity, simulated direct product experience for both geometric and material offerings. The inherent added qualities of 3D advertising also helped to influence belief confidence and strength, as well as influencing confidence in the geometric product. This supports the proposition that advertising in 3D can trigger the same consumer responses as those which result from direct experience – a result of consumers being able to inspect a product in a way that is not possible with the “flat” equivalent; consumer confidence in their own judgment is increased.

As one of the researchers’ hypotheses predicted, 3D advertisements seem, then, to be superior to 2D in terms of telepresence for both the geometric and material products. The power of advertising is enhanced by the effects of high level telepresence which goes a long way towards simulating the direct experience of seeing the real thing, so that, as a corollary, the advertiser’s credibility is less likely to be questioned. At the same time, it should be noted that telepresence was less well developed with the material product so that positive beliefs and attitude towards them suffered. This was not surprising because if a product needs to be touched for total appreciation, no amount of “willing suspension of disbelief” can create that sensation.

### Complementary media

The researchers admit to some limitations on their work, such as the fact that the subjects were entirely students rather than a broader, more representative section of the population. That limits demographic characteristics and, in any case, no attempt was made to analyse these further, such as gender or social background. Further research might take into account the negative impact of time taken in downloading, before the product can be examined.

One form of media can often threaten a longer established form of communication. There is no doubt that print journalism has suffered, and continues to do so, as a result of the inexorable rise of the internet. Equally, different forms of media can complement one another in sometimes surprising ways. The focus of Zigmund and Stipp, mindful of the willingness of “tech-savvy” people to multi-skill, is on one such example.

With people increasingly using television and the internet everyday, a far greater number are doing both activities at the same time. This means that anything seen on television can be checked out for further information or to test its accuracy immediately. What might apply to news, sports or documentary programs applies equally to advertising, and the writers set out to check the extent to which television commercials have an impact on internet search queries. In other words, they are exploring how advertising can affect consumers’ behavior in carrying out their own investigations which might later lead to a sale.

A metric was therefore introduced which measured changes in Google search queries to show how television commercials or sponsorship can be the trigger for consumers to carry out searches on the internet. Care was taken over the choice of advertising which would be used to measure these responses. “Reminder” advertisements for familiar products did not

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feature, and neither did exhortations to “visit our web site”. Rather, this was an exploration of the hypothesis that an advertisement for a new and interesting product might lead to internet searches, even though no one is being urged to take such an action.

### Keeping count

The metric allowed for “very finely grained analysis” which can count up queries over very short time spans, so changes in the number of searches can be pinpointed with considerable precision.

Two case studies looked at advertisements for new cars which were shown during coverage of major sporting events. In the case of Chevrolet’s new Volt electric car, advertised during the Beijing Olympics, the US query volume went up 20 times. Another case study discovered that even when advertising was done late at night (for a new beer), consumers were willing to turn to their laptops and computers for more information. A further case study revealed greater variations by time zone: there was more interest in a new theme park ride in Florida from consumers on the cold east coast than there was among less chilly Californians.

No one believes that the metric can replace other measures for judging the effect of advertisements. But what it can do is provide a measure of a certain form of consumer response to the initial impact of advertisements: the reaction that makes people sit up and take some action. With more information they might, then, be a little closer to the key decision to make a purchase. And the fact that they respond so instantly tells advertisers that the messages are getting to them. All this is backed up by surveys such as that conducted by NBC as part of the “Vancouver Olympics Research Lab” in February 2010: more than 60 per cent of viewers with internet access said that a television advertisement had led them to search online for more information.

### Advertisement analysis

In the same way that advertising has become ever more complex and sophisticated over the years, so has the response of consumers. People have grown up with an instinctive understanding of what advertisers are doing, even if they do not necessarily understand the “grammar”. In the UK, advertising is a favorite topic in schools and colleges, often as a way of making points about the use of images and language. The focus of Pieters *et al.* is on measuring the effects of visual complexity in advertising. They acknowledge that there are counter arguments within the industry about whether complexity hurts or benefits advertising, but argue that this really misses the point. Instead they identify feature and design complexity in advertising as the issues which are, respectively, negative and positive factors.

Feature complexity relates to the amount of detail and variation in an advertisement’s visual features, design complexity more to the use of elaborate designs, such as use of shapes, objects and patterns. The authors examine examples of feature complexity in advertisements, from low and medium to high, consider principles of design complexity (relating to such issues as the number, regularity/irregularity and detail of objects pictured in advertisements) and principles relating to the difficulty of brand identification in advertising.

The reactions of more than 3,500 participants to 249 adverts were tested, and included the use of eye-tracking devices which gauged reactions in terms of average gaze duration. The findings supported hypotheses relating to the negative effect of feature complexity and the positive effect of design complexity. The former hurts brand attention and attitude to the ad, while the latter helps people to focus on the images and aids overall understanding. This is important for the industry because design complexity is entirely within the control of practitioners.

It is the first time that the harmful effects of feature complexity in advertisements has been documented by research. A previous assumption was that “visual clutter”, by slowing down the reader, increased his or her attention to the material; rather, the writers now believe that too much visual detail can be harmful and prevents people from paying attention to the brand, and is more likely to create a negative attitude. Such findings clearly have implications for advertisers, but it is worth observing that trade-offs will sometimes occur in favoring one approach at the expense of another. It is interesting to note that one particular advert is used by the writers to illustrate the positive impact of low-feature complexity, while the same advert is low on design complexity, something that is not considered so positive. This is a contradiction which advertisers, smart operators pace occasional lapses such as the Ferrero Rocher debacle, will surely pick up on.

### Comment

This review is based on “Effect of online 3D advertising on consumer response: the mediating role of telepresence,” by Debbabi, Daassi and Baile (2010); “Assessing a new advertising effect: measurement of the impact of television commercials on internet search queries,” by Zigmund and Stipp (2010), and “The stopping power of advertising: measures and effects of visual complexity,” by Pieters, Wedel and Batra (2010).

One of the most unusual aspects of Debbabi *et al.*'s research is the extent to which consumers buy into the concept of 3D advertising, and see it as offering something that the 2D equivalent fails to deliver. It is possible that an older group of participants in the trial might be more skeptical.

Zigmund and Stipp's piece of research provided some fascinating insights into just how embedded the PC and internet is in many people's lives, with technological multi-skilling considered the norm.

In dealing with an established and more traditional form of advertising, Pieters *et al.* show that there are still lessons to be learned about the way consumers respond to the various visual stimuli that are put before them.

### References

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