

# The essence of

Careful analysis of how viewers interpret and respond to ads shows us that their search for meaning is not always a linear process

By Charles Young, Ameritest

**T**he continued use of neuroscience in advertising research is likely to exacerbate the current schism between advertising creatives and advertising researchers by highlighting the differences between two opposing views of human perception. The Gestalt viewpoint, held by most creatives, is that an ad must be understood as a unified whole that is more than the sum of its parts. The other, analytic viewpoint, is implicit in the moment-by-moment approaches used by researchers to look inside an ad for insights that might pay out for advertisers with more highly optimised advertising.

According to the Gestalt viewpoint, it is the relationships between the elements of an ad that matter most, not the strength or weakness of individual elements. An ad must be thought of as an interconnected system of images and words that interact with human perception to evoke a specific, unique emotional response.

In the view of the creative camp, looking at a graph of the peaks and valleys of the target audience's brainwaves is just another instance of researchers seeing trees instead of a forest – they worry that the essential meaning of the advertising experience, seeing each part in the context of the whole, will get lost.

After all, it is the meaning of emotions evoked by a particular string of images that is critical to the strategic brand-building process, particularly the meaning that lies below the surface communications of an ad.

If a marketer wants to convince the consumer that a new product is 'cool', for example, they can't simply say it. If you say you're cool, you're not.

But, of course, it's the attempt to understand the non-verbal and unconscious responses to advertising that makes the new methods of neuroscience so intriguing to advertisers. And in the defence of these scientific methods, it is now well established that the brain itself is a quintessential analyst. The act of seeing the Gestalt pattern of an image involves not only attention, but emotion and memory as well.

Here's a simple model for thinking about what goes on in the mind of the consumer while watching a TV commercial; it's based on what is probably a common experience for the reader – watching a PowerPoint presentation.

At the incredibly low cutting speed of PowerPoint – on the order of one minute per screen versus the three seconds per shot for the average commercial – it's possible to be quite introspective thinking about what you watch as presentation unfolds. This gives us an opportunity to examine a 'slow motion' version of what is going through our mind at high speed, usually below the level of

consciousness, when we watch a TV ad.

Imagine you are sitting in a conference room (partway through a long research presentation) looking at a screen filled with data. As you decide which numbers on the slide to focus on, you ask yourself, 'What's the most important thing here? What can I ignore?' And as you try to attend to the conversation going on in the room, you think back to an interesting point made seven slides back. You ask yourself, 'How does this point fit together with that other point?' Also, perhaps after some unexpected finding is revealed, you ask, 'Where is this going?' And repeatedly, slide after slide, you ask yourself, 'How do I feel about this? What does this mean? How is it relevant to me?'

Finally, also imagine that, by the end of the presentation, you're excited by the findings and decide you need to show this research to your senior executive. But they're busy and won't have time for a 30-slide presentation. So you feel that the important information can be summarised in a few slides and you ask for a copy of the deck and sort through it for the key slides.

This simple model of screen-based communication highlights several important aspects of the television viewing experience.



# an ad

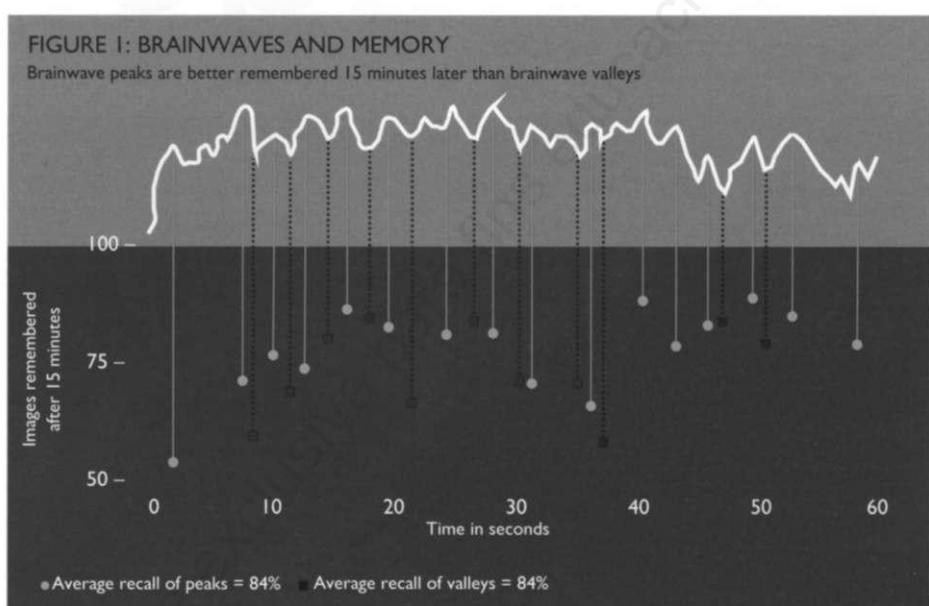
First, the audience is never a passive receiver of information but is actively engaged in the search for meaning. Second, the search process is not limited to determining meaning one screen at a time, but rather looks backwards and forwards to connect what is on any given screen with what comes before and after. Third, not all of the screens of information that pass in front of our eyes are equally important in determining the net takeaway.

The model also raises an interesting question. Which presentation represents the Gestalt of the virtual research meeting: The full 30-page research deck or the four-page summary?

An ad begins its existence as a storyboard of a few key frames. This is a small subset of the imagery that might be in the finished ad. But when these images are viewed in relation to each other, as in a cartoon, most creative directors feel they can convey the brand story's essential meaning – at least for the purpose of selling the commercial to the client. Looking at it from this perspective, I suggest it is possible to define the essence of a TV commercial as the analogue of the four-page deck – a subset of the creative elements that captures the meaning of the whole commercial.

The commercial for Volkswagen Passat, 'The Force,' was created by the Deutsch ad agency and first aired during the 2011 Super Bowl. In the subsequent media coverage, it was ranked by most commentators as the number one ad shown during the game.

The 60-second ad opens with *Star Wars* music and a child dressed as Darth Vader marching resolutely through the house. In a progression of scenes, Little Darth is shown raising his hands forward to engage the power of the Force – with an exercise machine, a dog, a washing machine, and a doll – all with no effect. Cut to a scene of Little Darth in the kitchen, helmet in hand, after his mother tries unsuccessfully to console him with a sandwich. Suddenly his father returns home in a new car. Little Darth rushes excitedly outside past his father, determined to try using the Force one more time on



the new machine. Little Darth is face to face with the front of the Volkswagen as the engine starts and he jumps back, surprised and triumphant at having finally found the Force. Cut to the kitchen, where the father is looking out the window and has pressed the start button on the radio key. Cut to the all-new Passat, starting at \$20,000. Close on Volkswagen logo.

Consistent with the consensus of the creative community, we found that this ad is very strong in its ability to attract attention, falling in the 99th percentile of all the thousands of ads we've tested in the past five years. In terms of brand perceptions, the message communicated by this ad is that the new Passat is a 'fun' car to drive.

One of the things predictive of a strong commercial is the number of peak moments in the audience's brainwaves as they watch an ad. The brainwave attention curve for 'The Force' has many peaks (Figure I).

Peaks follow the rhythms of commercial storytelling. They are also linked to memory. The visuals that generate brainwave peaks are remembered by 84% of the audience 15 minutes after seeing the ad, while the visuals

falling in the valleys are only remembered by 72% of the audience.

As a rule, the brain doesn't record the data of experience; it remembers the meaning of what just happened. It is the search for meaning that arouses the interest of the brain and generates the electrical activity that an EEG measures.

An Ameritest picture sort, the Flow of Meaning®, helps us see the meaning of each image in this ad. With this picture sort, respondents self-report the thoughts and feelings they experienced as they watched the commercial into one or more of ten meaning categories based on the creative brief. Given that the chief purpose of an ad is to build a brand and that brands only exist in the long-term memory of consumers, then images that stand out as the most attention-getting, the most emotionally charged, and the most meaningful images and words in the ad – represent the essence of the ad.



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