

# 'Sad-vertising'

David Bonney, McCann Erickson, London, considers the true emotional resonance of downbeat communications

**A** MIDDLE-AGED MAN plays a tape cassette: 'Son, I know it's many years since we talked. But, as you may know, I am dying and I won't get a chance to see you.'

'I wanted to tell you I'm sorry ... and I love you.'

The tape ends. The man cries.

You can rely on Maxell tapes.

A dying man chooses Maxell tapes for their reliability, because he will not get a second chance to say goodbye to his son. Brilliant. Moving. Possibly the most emotional part of your day so far. Possibly causing you to reflect on your own relationships with your parents or children. And it is only a script... the finished ad might have floored you. And what is more, all that meaningful experience brought to you by Maxell tapes.

Unfortunately, this is the script for an ad that was never made. One can imagine why. The client was nervous - who wants to associate their brand with sadness? The agency was not sure - why risk losing the client's favour defending a script that seemed a gamble? And in creative testing the punters had never seen anything like this - how could they say they 'liked' such an ad? How could this be an ad at all - where was the uplifting music, the protagonist's pay-off, the hilarious and unlikely events that demonstrate the product's quality?

## Never forgotten

Yet, of all the scripts written by Naresh Ramchandani that never got produced, this is the one no one forgets. I have never encountered so many people eager to tell me about an ad that was never made - every time I'm told about it the script is slightly different and after 16 years of Chinese whispers, no doubt the script above is but a distant descendant of the original. But while the words may have changed, the sentiment has remained constant, and Naresh provides a simple reason why that sentiment was so important:

'I learned my trade at HHCL, where we set out to be different... and in a world where most ads were young, bubbly, irreverent ... it was clear something poignant would cut through.'

It so happens Naresh went on to win a Cannes Gold for Maxell tapes with 'Israelites'. But, interestingly, the script I opened with was HHCL's first choice when they went to the client ... which surely makes it the greatest 'sad-vertisement' never made.

'Sad-vertising' is my term for those rare and beautiful brand communications that reach a little deeper. Communications with the confidence to make consumers feel something more sophisticated, meaningful and lasting than momentarily cheerful or excited. Sad-vertising is not just advertising that makes you feel sad - it is advertising that spurns the orthodox and one-dimensional strategy of stimulating positive but trivial emotions. Sad-vertising flies in the face of superficiality, acknowledging that people, emotions and real life are a confusing mess of ups and downs blended into one, and nonetheless enjoyable, meaningful and powerful for it.

I would like to see more sad-vertising (certainly beyond the charity and public information categories where one might expect to find it). It says much that I had to choose a script that never got made as my archetypal sad-vertisement. Nearly all advertising deals in happiness, offering shortcuts to gratification through the portrayal of humour, moments of elation, dreams come true.

## Rich emotion, real life

But life is far richer than that - life contains sadness, empathy, boredom, anger, jealousy and fear. And advertising too rarely captures these emotions from which real life is born - the themes of hope, regret, gratification, resilience, ambition, love, hate and competition resonate deeply and are founded upon a confusion of positive and negative emotions. Surely advertising's reluctance to embrace this full spectrum of emotional life distances us from consumers, reducing the effectiveness of communications? I would like to think my job as a creative planner is to ensure our communications touch people - how can I truly do this if prohibited from plumbing the depths of my target's true emotions?

Many great brands have successfully flirted with sad-vertising, producing memorable and effective ads in the process: 'J.R. Hartley' for *Yellow Pages*, 'Dad' for Mastercard, and others for Orange, Hamlet, Volkswagen, Tennants, Nescafe, Bisto and Smirnoff. Be it an old man whose life has clearly not made much impact on the world, a girl freshly dumped by her boyfriend, or a child appealing to spend just one night a week eating with her parents and doing 'what families do'... these things really get to us, and it is not purely positive emotions they make us feel.

But, for some reason, most brand communications continue to be superficial, inately cheerful and unrealistic - these are missed opportunities; and nothing frustrates me more than having to watch surfing cars, chocolate-induced giggles or blokey slapstick. Despite great brands having had the confidence to produce touching, tonally authentic ads, the consensus is still against sad-vertising.

## Seek the positive, shun the negative - arguments against

The cognitive neuroscientific revolution of the 1990S has led to a renaissance in our understanding of the brain, and as a former research psychologist it pleases me to see advertising benefit by keeping



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abreast of recent psychological advancements.

Most significantly, advertising has learnt that man is at the mercy of his emotions. We know that emotional responses precede conscious thought, determine allocation of attention and can occur without our being aware of them. Some behaviours may even be driven by emotional responses without the mediation of conscious thought. So, much as we may stress the rational, persuasive merits of an ad, if it does not evoke emotion, it is still-born.

But if we have begun to review the importance of emotion in advertising, we have yet to question the assumption that emotions must be positive. In 1991 Haley and Baldinger published the findings from the ARF Copy Research Validity Project. This showed 'ad liking' to be the most effective of several measures in pre-testing and, in the wake of this article, Erik Du Plessis of Millward Brown has advocated, and claims to have validated, the metric extensively. Du Plessis has not been shy in backing 'likeability' as a measure of emotion and has rationalised that it's advertising's job to build or reinforce a brand's positive emotional associations. Why positive? Du Plessis bases his argument on an understanding of the brain's most primitive structures (with learnings derived from LeDoux's experiments on 'fear' in rat brains) and the inference that humans are drawn towards positive stimuli and repelled by negative stimuli. Accordingly, he argues that brand communications must aim to elicit positive emotions, with the powerful implication that emotions portrayed in ads should also be positive.

'We are all programmed to seek out the positive and shun the negative.'

Du Plessis, *The Advertised Mind* (2005).

But I believe human emotion, and the manner in which we experience brand communications, are much more sophisticated than a simple motivated-to-positive/motivated-away-from-negative model. Our evolution took place over millions of years and while we retain many simple adaptations from reptilian and early mammalian stages (for

example, basic fear response) the emotional adaptations that define us as humans evolved much later, to serve the social needs of hominid group-living (for example, jealousy, love, hope, empathy). These emotions are more complex and surely cannot be reduced to the simple positive and negative motivational terms that Du Plessis employs?

I hypothesise a hierarchy of human emotion, with social emotions being qualitatively different from their non-social precursors. Unfortunately, however, neuroscience remains far from having a firm grip on our most complex, social emotions... possibly because rats do not often experience empathy or love.

### **Sad-vertising: more emotive and just as likeable!**

In a recent study carried out by Pulse, McCann-Erickson's insight-generation unit and Prism Strategy, an online sample of over 1,000 consumers were exposed to 18 television ads, nine of which were purely positive or 'happy' in tone and nine of which were 'sad' or emotionally undulating.

Two findings are important:

1. The 'sad' or emotionally undulating ads evoked significantly more self-reported emotion than the 'happy' ads. This is a clear endorsement of the power of sad-vertising.
2. There was no significant difference between 'happy' and 'sad' ads on the measure of 'likeability.' This is clear evidence that negative scenarios or emotions do not necessarily 'repel' us.

### **Why does sad-vertising work?**

Here are some further reasons to be open-minded about the quality of emotions we use in communications, and to believe that sad-vertising can be employed to the profitable gain of brand owners:

► 'Advertising is an art, not a science.' I have heard this said so many times by lazy advertisers who will gladly disparage science if it makes less work for themselves. But maybe advertising can learn something from art. Art, which has engaged humanity for millennia, would be undone were it not able to portray the

gamut of human experience. Imagine if our greatest artists had been permitted only to portray positive emotions; there would be no *King Lear*, no Rachmaninov's second, no *Catcher in the Rye*. Great art confidently portrays and elicits the depths of human experience and through doing so rewards consumers with intellectual and experiential growth. At a time when everyone talks about engagement, about providing incentives for consumers to spend time with our brands, it's worthwhile to observe more closely the mechanics of art (pathos, catharsis ... and the way in which tragedy almost necessarily sits alongside comedy).

> The mood of both message and message-recipient influence the effectiveness of a communication. The cognitive psychologist Bower shows with his 'Mood Congruity' principle that a person will better attend to and learn information that tonally matches their mood - so if someone is feeling sad, they will better attend to and remember a message with a sad tone. This has strong implications for TV advertising - Czikszentmihalyi has evidenced that people watching TV are less happy than normal, experiencing depressed mood, mild guilt and anxiety. And, beyond TV, one in ten people rate themselves as prevalently unhappy, while certain parts of everyone's day involve lower moods. So we are wrong to hit people in a blanket fashion with pure positivity - instead we should make informed decisions on tonality, taking prevailing moods of target, medium and time of day into account.

Bower also talks about 'Mood-state Dependent Recall' - a memory more readily comes to mind when our mood-state matches the mood of the memory - so, unless the consumer is in a jokey state of bliss while shopping, we are wrong to talk about our brand in a jokey, blissful tone.

All this seems intuitive - when communicating with another, we are most effective when we mirror that person's feelings. Unfortunately most advertising acts like the psychotherapist who advises his patient to 'cheer up and look on the bright side' - his ignorance of patient feelings and apparent absence

of empathy make for an ineffective intervention.

► Is your brand someone I would like to hang out with? Or is it the irritatingly and inauthentically happy person one meets at a party who, through saying only positive, predictable things, is quickly identified as of zero interest? Likeability is so important in a world where we construct identity from our brand choices and evaluate brands as we would people. If we like people who are 'real', authentic, similar to us, honest and interesting, then surely brands with more complicated moods will stimulate greater likeability?

We bond with others through adversity, shared experience, the exchange of uncomfortable truths about ourselves. And we indicate we are open to sharing a more intimate relationship by displaying our vulnerabilities. So why do brands not behave like this?

Interestingly, Du Plessis in *The Advertised Mind* reports that 'empathy' and 'meaningfulness' are important facets of 'likeability' for an ad.

Humans can be drawn to negative affect. Not only can depression be functional, designed by evolution to motivate reappraisal and change in behaviour, but our evolved capacity for empathy makes us responsive to sadness in other humans - we want to help, console, cheer up. If your brand behaves like a person who is vulnerable, humble, occasionally in need of support, might the consumer suspend cynicism, increase empathy and spend more time listening to what you have to say?

The experience of positive and negative emotion may not really be that different -

in fact all emotion may have the same initial impact on the body (the autonomic responses of increased heart-rate, adrenalin, and so on). Emotion may be labelled only as good or bad as a result of subsequent, higher-brain processing, when the cortex uses context to decide why an emotion has been aroused.

In fact so similar is the experience of positive and negative emotion that they are readily confused. Consider the principle of 'Excitation Transfer' or 'Love at First Fright' researched in the 1970s and 1980s. One study showed that the emotional arousal you experience on a rollercoaster can easily be misattributed to the person you are sitting beside - that is, what we would normally describe as a fear response could wrongly be interpreted as the early stages of sexual attraction - exactly the same physiological experience, but subject to different labelling because of context.

So, the means by which we arouse consumers should not matter - 'positive' stimuli (a gurgling baby, a smile) and 'negative' stimuli (a crying girl, a death) may have the same initial attention-grabbing impact. After that, it is up to the brand to provide a context in which it becomes associated with the heightened emotion or supplies a positive resolution to the emotional journey.

• Finally, I believe positive emotions are experienced more intensely when preceded by the experience of negative emotions. Sadvertising probably works best when the brand offers a positive, cathartic finale after a glut of sadder emotions. Consider the iconic 'Hamlet' advertising - the meaning of 'happiness'

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is entirely dependent on the misfortune that precedes it. And, for J.R. Hartley, finding his book is all the sweeter after repeated failures to do so.

## Conclusion

As a consumer, I want to be moved by advertising, to experience something true and life-enhancing. As an advertiser, I want to feel proud of my work - and sadvertising gives me scope to bring texture to consumers' emotional and mental lives, to adopt moral and meaningful stand-points, just as art does. But most importantly, for brand owners wise enough not to put the entirety of their investment behind positive emotion, sadvertising is extremely emotive, palatable to an increasingly sophisticated consumer, and ultimately a very effective return-on-investment.

So here's to a time when advertising reflects the true complexity of human emotion. I leave you with a taste of this complexity and the undoubted wisdom of *South Park*

'I love life ... Yeah, I'm sad, but at the same time, I'm really happy that somer thing could make me feel that sad. It's like ... It makes me feel alive, you know. It makes me feel human. The only way I could feel this sad now is if I felt something really good before. So I have to take the bad with the good. So I guess what I'm feeling is like a beautiful sadness.' Trey Parker and Matt Stone, *South Park 'Raisins'*, 2003. •



McCann Erickson findings: There was no significant difference between 'happy' and 'sad' ads on the measure of 'likeability'

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