Twentieth Century Magazine Advertising: Determinants of Informativeness

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Twentieth-Century Magazine Advertising

Determinants of Informativeness

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The communicative function of advertising is both transformational and informational. Clearly advertisers seek to transform consumers’ attitudes toward products and brands and do so through a variety of techniques, which may or may not include supplying much in the way of information. Ads that are intensely persuasive because they use atmosphere and association and because they stimulate our “feeling” capacities are the cause of much moral misgiving on the part of many social observers. These observers are typically much less concerned with the appropriateness and consequences of “thinking” ads, dense in information.

Potential informativeness is the cornerstone to the defense of advertising by economists and the industry, and it serves as a basis for the treatment of advertising in law and public policy. The essence of this argument is that advertising provides information essential to the exercise of economic freedom by consumers. The well-informed consumer is seen as king in the marketplace, and the shopping behaviors of such consumers produce an efficient marketplace, whose hallmarks are competitive prices and an allocation of productive capacity appropriate to the community’s needs. Despite the assertion of some critics to the contrary, specific ads are not exclusively persuasive or exclusively informative but are, to some extent, both.

Since the social validity of advertising seems to depend primarily on its informational content, this article will report results identifying the quantity, character, and variability of the information contained in ads spanning the twentieth century.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has not been a long-standing tradition of research into the potential informativeness of advertising, although advertisers and agencies, of course, intensely research the transformational consequences of advertising. Economists, lawyers, and marketing scholars have addressed the general question of informativeness by discussing the criteria by which information might be seen as useful and important to the consumer and the marketplace. In reviewing this literature for the Federal Trade Commission, Howard and Hulbert (1974) concluded that consumer information ought to have the characteristics of timeliness, intelligibility, relevance, truthfulness, and completeness, and that it ought to be substantial, delivered to appropriate audiences, and not previously known. Only with respect to completeness do Howard and Hulbert find U.S. advertising at fault. As appropriate as these criteria are, however, they are of little methodological assistance, because implicit in them is the valid notion that received information, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

While difficult, there has been some research on the subjective perceptions of informativeness of advertising. Bauer and Greyser (1968) in their classic report of American perceptions of advertising found through an open-ended question that only 6% of print ads were judged by consumers as informative. Bucklin (1965) surveyed 500 shoppers who reported using ads as a source of information for fewer than a quarter of their large purchase decisions. Most recently, Aaker and Norris (1982) studied the informativeness of TV ads by having self-selected subjects rate a large number of story boards, a print version of video commercials in which still photos are aligned with the script. Given the opportunity to identify information as one of several descriptive adjectives, only 10% of the ads were classified as informative by more than 30% of the respondents, and less than half of the ads were seen as informative by 20% of the subjects. The authors claim this to be “a sizeable number” perceiving the ads as informative.
informative than they might be. Sepstrup's (1981) report on Danish print ads emphatically notes this condition despite Denmark's active consumer movement and strict rules governing marketing agencies. Unanswered questions include, How is apparent informativeness changing with time and the growing sophistication of advertising research and execution? Are there patterns in the evolution of the type of information used in various eras? Does informativeness vary significantly with product class, time, and/or format? How sensitive is the observed level of informativeness to modifications in the measurement scales? And, if informativeness varies consistently with products, formats, or other variables, how influential are these as constraints on the copywriter?

**HYPOTHESES**

The research reported here was undertaken to answer most of these questions and to address in particular a number of elemental hypotheses.

1. **Advertising has become less informative during the twentieth century.** This hypothesis stems largely from the conventional wisdom of advertising's increasing sophistication. Ads seem to have become more focused on communicating fewer things more effectively and to have shifted to subjective appeals, mood setting, communication by association, and lifestyle portrayals. This hypothesis can also be derived from the notion that the marketplace is increasingly dense in mature products, for, as reported, mature products get and perhaps require less information transmittal than new products. The hypothesis is also consistent with the consensus of consumer critics.

1a. **Advertising has shifted in rhetorical focus from logic to forms of emotive argument during the twentieth century.** This is a corollary to hypothesis 1 but requires quite different measurements and suggests different dimensions of social concern.

2. **Over time, changes have occurred in the character of the information used.** Such a finding would presumably reflect differential effectiveness of various kinds of information to motivate consumers, as might result from changing conditions or the simple exhaustion of an appeal through overuse. This hypothesis is also consistent with the street wisdom of copywriters that what sells changes with the times. The frustrating lack of specificity of this hypothesis is the result of a lack of detailed theory regarding advertising's historical evolution.

3. **The information richness of ads is a matter of choice rather than the constraints of formats, page size, rhetorical style, product class, or even historical era.** If the informativeness of advertisements varies widely within (as well as between) product classes, formats, rhetorical styles, and the like, this implies that copywriting is relatively unconstrained by these so-called givens. A writer dealing with a specific product and working for a client who dictates format, style and page size has latitude and precedents for a wide variance of informativeness.

**METHOD**

The information content of advertising was measured by adapting the scales originated by Resnik and Stern (1977). This adaptation entailed rewriting definitions to achieve a uniformity of style, thus avoiding the mixed rhetorical styles evidenced in Laczniak (1979). This rewriting also eliminated qualifying phrases from the definitions, phrases that might have caused raters to question the validity of the advertiser's assertions. Two of Resnik and Stern's dimensions were dropped. "Taste" was dropped because Resnik and Stern's definition required evidence in addition to the opinion of the advertiser and because such assertions could alternatively be coded under the dimensions of research, testimonials, or simply product performance; "new ideas" was eliminated because its definition required a totally new concept, a judgment extremely difficult to make reliably on any sample, especially a historical one.

Four scales were added on the basis of prior experience with television ads and pilot studies of print ads. New scales permit the recoding of assertions provided by the advertiser relative to product variations, endorsements or testimonials, directions or other instructions regarding use, and the absence of specific contents. Thus the measurement of advertising information used in the present study permits the recording of data along sixteen dimensions in contrast to the fourteen used in previous studies. The definitions actually
RESULTS

The range in copy volume was from one word (the brand name) to a four-page treatise of over 3500 words introducing a new toilet soap in 1905. The number of dimensions of information used ranged from 0 to 10 of the 16 possible. For this sample of magazine ads, both the mean and the mode indicate that the typical ad presents assertions along 4 of the 16 dimensions, a measure of its potential information richness. Some 78% of the sample was judged potentially informative along 5 or more dimensions, while only 8% contained but one type of assertion or, as is sometimes the case, none at all. Almost exactly one-half of the sampled ads rely on communication of these information bits as indicated by their rhetorical focus of “logos.” Although it ranges widely over time, on average about one-third of the ads studied have a product focus, with the balance focused on the benefits to the consumer, the classic “steak versus sizzle” strategic choice.

Table 1 shows how the use of the dimensions of informativeness and focus has changed over the decades. The use of each shows a fairly dramatic evolution, which contrasts the first four decades with the last. Ads from the earlier era were more informative in each decade by any of the measures, although advertising had begun in the 1920s to shift dramatically away from the strategy of simply describing the product toward a focus on the consumer benefits. Despite this shift, and the popularity in the 1930s of testimonials and fear appeals, both copy volume and information richness remained above average. Informativeness shifts most dramatically in the 1940s presumably because World War II placed restraints on consumer output, so that advertisements served only to remind consumers of a brand name, or to maintain goodwill. With little to sell, advertisements had less to say. Since World War II the informativeness of advertising has been consistently less than it was before World War II. As is most dramatically evidenced in the 1960s, the postwar era includes a larger number of ads more sharply focused on communicating fewer assertions. Testing of information richness and rhetorical focus versus decade shows significant results, confirming the first hypotheses in general. The pattern of results, however, also suggests a recent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Richness by Decade</th>
<th>1920s</th>
<th>1930s</th>
<th>1940s</th>
<th>1950s</th>
<th>1960s</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>(Number of Dimensions Utilized)</td>
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<td>(Percentage of Cases)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>2.4</td>
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<td>4.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
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<td>2.7</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
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<td>Copy volume index</td>
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<td>TACTICAL FOCUS**</td>
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<td>Product benefits</td>
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<td>Attaining positive</td>
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<td>Avoiding negative</td>
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<td>RHETORICAL FOCUS**</td>
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<td>Logic (logical)</td>
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<td>Pathos (tone)</td>
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* p < .01; ** p < .001; *** p < .0001
specific dimensions of information across these product classes. These variations are much as one would expect upon reflection on the nature of the product. Ads for durable products contained the highest average level of information, more likely than the average to discuss quality, availability, price, and contents or to offer guarantees. Ads for domestic consumables shifted away from these dimensions to give greater than average emphasis to basic product performance, along with endorsements and attention to package design. Ads for digestibles, food, and drink contained greater than average emphasis on directions, nutrition, and the absence of certain specific contents, as in "caffeine-free." Ads for personal care products also scored high in nutrition because of vitamin pills, sundry health tonics, and enriched shampoos. Personal care products are also packaged goods for which endorsements were popular and for which assertions regarding safety were frequent.

Since the informativeness of advertising varies significantly with both time and product, an analysis of variance was performed on information richness, the number of employed dimensions. In addition to decade and product variables it seemed appropriate also to measure the variation attributable to the formats of ads (before-after, demonstration, editorial, and so on), their rhetorical focus, and their size (partial, full, or multiple paged). Each of these variables is significantly related to information richness, but all told these five variables explain less than 10% of the variation, thus supporting the third hypothesis. Thus, while we can observe systematic shifts in the quantity and character of information on average, our ability to detect these differences is a tribute to statistical inference and sample size, for there is substantial variation independent of these analyzed variables. The results of this analysis of variance and its associated multiple classification analysis are shown in Tables 4 and 5.

**DISCUSSION**

The present study reports more potentially informative assertions in print advertisements than do previous studies. The observed shift in apparent informativeness is a result of the modification of the measurement scales used and, perhaps, of the liberality of their interpretation, although all scholars in this tradition claim to give manufacturers the benefit of all doubt. The modification of the
The apparent differences in the levels of information or the adequacy of any particular level of measured potential informativeness cannot be meaningfully addressed. The adequacy issue cannot be addressed without consideration of what information the consumer needs in order to be well informed. Even more important, the adequacy issue also requires addressing the issues of intelligibility, relevance, completeness, truthfulness, and substance. Reconciling the two studies, like calibrating two thermometers, is less important than knowing, by either measure, when and where informativeness begins or ends and by what proportions it varies. While it is not possible to measure how informative ads actually are, it is possible to note the conditions precipitating the use of more or less information.

Clearly, it can be assumed that advertisers are sensitive to nuances of each historical period in their use of language and choice of principal copy premises. It does not necessarily follow, however, that the total information contained in the ad would also vary with time; but it does. Advertising in the early part of the century was consistently richer in its information, reflecting the early advertisers' intent to get as much across as possible by fairly simple narrative means. By the 1920s and 1930s the effort to communicate a great deal of information was manifested in complex formats with multiple sections, fine print and variable typeface, multiple formats within single advertisements, and a generally unfocused shotgun approach to communication. The war years saw the informativeness of advertising drop considerably as advertisers shifted their focus more toward goodwill, communicating favorable brand images rather than specifics about products that in that era were in short supply.

Since World War II, the advertisements have been less informative for two basic reasons. The average ad is more focused than its predecessors on doing an effective job of communicating information along fewer dimensions. The reduced complexity of these print ads may also reflect the amount of time and effort the typical reader might be assumed to give to this print medium, given the consumer's access to multiple alternative media. In addition to the reduced complexity of the average ad, a growing but, in this sample, modest proportion of the ads clearly have the intent of communicating attitudes and creating consumer intentions without using information. These ads use symbols and mood creators and portray life-styles to create the imagery and the effect to be associated with the product and brand. Thus the intent of these ads is not cognitive but affective or—in the terms of the advertising agency of Foote, Cone and Belding—not thinking but feeling (Vaughn, 1980). Needham, Harper and Steers—another prominent advertising agency—identifies these ads as transformational as opposed to informational (Wells, 1983).

The character and magnitude of information contained in advertising also varies across product, format, page size, and rhetorical style. These variations are consistently in the direction that might be expected. For example, ads for durables display more information than ads for domestic products purchased on a repeat basis for smaller sums. The exception to this general rule is page size, for full-page ads are slightly less rich in information than part-page ads. The magnitude of the variation associated with each and all of these explanatory variables is small compared to the total variation in the sample, with less than 10% of the variance explained by these five variables. This suggests that the information richness of an ad is not strongly determined or constrained by the product advertised, the format used, the size of the ad, its historical period, or even its basic rhetorical style. Rather, it suggests that a large amount of discretion remains in the hands of the copywriter and creative team faced with any particular specific situation. This implies that the answer to the question, why are ads less information rich now, must be that copywriters and creative teams choose them to be so.

There are clearly some large-scale historical trends in advertising copy, in particular the trend toward selling consumer benefits rather than product attributes and the trend toward creating favorable attitudes rather than communicating cognitive content. Data for print ads in the 1970s suggest a slight reversal of these general trends, with a growing proportion of these ads rich in information and a growing proportion focused on the product rather than its consumer benefits. This finding may be of some consolation to those who find advertising's validity in its informational role, but it may create ethical concerns for those who see the social consequences of advertising solely in its transformation character.

On the other hand, the chairman and chief executive officer of Ogilvy and Mather International recently addressed a distinguished meeting of the Conference Board and advised them as to the "technological catch-up" that produces products with a "frustrating sameness to them." He noted that as functional differences decline, the perceived differences between brands are the "added value in psychological terms" that advertising provides as "the last stage in the manufacturing process," thereby turning the product into "the
Logos—message designed to focus attention on the claim being made, with encouragement to accept the urged position through logic, facts, or even some general principle that is presumed.
Pathos—message designed by text and/or artwork to generate receptive emotional reaction in reader by creating a pleasant mood (humor, sentimentality), enhancing ego (flattery), reminding of responsibilities (guilt), or offering bonuses (greed).

Format

Before and after—demonstration of product performance or effects by contrasting appearances of feelings prior and subsequent to product use.
Demonstration—exhibition or explanation of the product's attributes or benefits by example, experiment, or sometimes by analogy; may include presentation of scientific results, such as data, microscopic images, or diagrams.
Editorial—imitating the format, layout, or prose style of the nonadvertising sections of a magazine or newspaper; sometimes noted in margins as "advertisement."
Miscellaneous—simple narrative styles, visual appeals, including surreal or incongruous situations, and all formats not otherwise classified.
Tangential—main emphasis on information, benefits, or behaviors not directly associated with the product itself; e.g., recipes, contests, premiums, social comment or public relations.
Testimonial—association of a product with a known or identifiable personage or group, often with specific statements regarding use or product attributes; includes use of nobility, professional athletes, and others specifically named, but not anonymous John or Jane Does, or the "testimonial" of the producer.

REFERENCES
