

SHORT AND LONG TERM EFFECTS OF SHOCK ADVERTISING

Tatiana GAUGAȘ

Catedra Economie Generală și Relații Economice Internaționale

În ultimii ani, din ce în ce mai mulți agenți economici recurg la utilizarea tacticilor de șoc pentru reclama produselor sale. În acest articol autorul se referă la avantajele și problemele ce pot apărea la utilizarea acestui tip de promovare. Reclama de șoc creează diverse efecte pe termen scurt, ca, de exemplu, diferențiere față de concurenți și atragerea atenției consumatorilor prin exclusivitate și unicitate, iar pe termen lung poate ajuta la crearea și creșterea notorietății mărcii. Printre principalele neajunsuri ale reclamei de șoc se numără încălcarea sau violarea normelor de etică în promovare și efectul slab pe care îl are asupra incitării și convingerii consumatorului de a face cumpărătura.

The review of current academic debates about commercial advertising revealed that there is no universally accepted definition of “shock advertising”. In fact, shock advertising is not a determined term for advertising campaigns that cause certain strong emotions. For instance, Waller (1999) introduces the notion of “offensive” advertising, speaking of advertising appeals that promote sensitive products which bear “controversial status” and became “unmentionables”. Waller derives his notion of “offensive” advertising from the academic findings of Wilson & West (1981, cited in Waller, 1999) who focused on studying attitudes towards the advertising of various controversial products, legal restrictions on advertising and possible strategies for marketing sensitive products. Both Wilson & West (1981) and Waller (1999) interpreted “controversial” and “offensive” advertisements in terms of promotion of sensitive products, where product itself could cause certain controversy or shock effect. However, no inferences were found about controversial or offensive advertising as a specific technique of advertising conventional products.

A different view is expressed by Falk (1997) when speaking of Benetton advertisements that caused a lot of shock and controversy. He does not call it shock advertising, but refer to this practice as transgressive advertising practice since the company “did extend the normal aesthetics to include more spectacular imagery”. He does not treat it as a mere marketing techniques, designed to increase brand awareness and memorability. He suggests that the extension of conventional advertising is used “to deal with real world and with problems which concerned people and made people concerned” (Falk, 1997).

The similar view can be found in the work of Cosper (1997) who suggests that shock advertising can and shall be used in certain occasions to remind people about the real consequences of their deeds.

Manchanda et al. (2002) introduce the meaning of “shocking advertising content” which is “used to draw attention to an ad content with the expectation that the further procession will take place once an ad is noticed”. They extend the meaning further pointing out that shocking advertising content is “unexpected and incongruent with expectations for social norms”. In other words, when the content of the advertising violates social norms it causes certain surprise or shock effect in a consumer’s mind. This surprise or shock effect attracts attention, encourage additional information processing and is easily retained in memory.

Shock advertising is not a new invention. According to Falk (1994) already in XIX century advertisers realised that in the pursuit of positive end effect one does not need to use the message only within positive register. They believed that negative elements could be fit in the advertising message in ways which were consistent with the ultimate aim, which was to draw attention on the positive values of the product and coerce buyers to purchase decision. Falk (1994) refer to the advertisements of the patent medicines – in which the ailments the medicines promised to cure were listed, described and over exaggerated.

Despite the existence of different views of incongruent, controversial and shocking advertising there is one commonality that shall be pointed out. All three views stress the fact that shock or confusing or incongruent advertisements violate existing cultural norms by shedding the light on sensitive issues.

There is a very exhaustive explanation of the reasons behind the use of shock advertising. They claim that there are very powerful limits that significantly reduce the effectiveness of conventional advertising methods such as:

- 1. Activity of competitors;**
- 2. Selective perception of consumers;**
- 3. Shallow processing.**

1. Competitors

The activity of competitors is one of the most important limitations on any advertising power to influence consumers. For every product category which is being advertised there is a lot of other advertisers of the same products, that usually apply similar techniques thus creating immense communication “noise”. In order to explain this effect it is important to refer to the principles of cognitive psychology, which state that making choices people are influenced by two things:

- What they think;
- What other people think.

The second aspect is known as the principle of social conformity, which postulates that under certain stimuli people might go against their own perception and give the popular response. Conformity is believed to be a very powerful human motivator. It can make a crucial difference in many alternative decision choices. Given that competitors’ advertisements suggest alternative popular responses, consumers may be seriously confused.

According to McCarthy already in 1991 the average consumer was exposed to about 300 advertising messages what summed to 9,900 a month or 109,500 a year. Thus to distinguish itself from the competitors and to break through the clutter advertisers try to create advertisements which will attract viewers attention though incongruity.

2. Selective perception of consumers

Consumers will pay attention only on what appeals to them. The problem is that people tend to put different priorities on the same kind of information and have a selective perception. The research done by Kolb (1979) identified that people tend to learn the things which are in consonance with their existing cognitive maps. This view is further developed by Jarvis (1987), who states that “*new information may not be acquired if the learner is not able to interpret the language or concepts presented, or if the learner perceives the information simply reinforces what is already known, or if what is presented is contrary to the values of the person*”. In other words if the message does not appeal to target consumers it will be ignored and there will be no response. The other problem related to clarity of message is various unconscious signals, which appeal to consumer senses. The message might create ambiguous unconscious signal, causing confusion and avoidance behaviour. In other words, the mere presence of a brand on the market does not insure that it will be noticed and recognised by customers. The more competitive is the market, the greater is the communication noise (clutter), thus the more difficult it is for a particular brand to be spotted.

The importance of standing out in order to be noticed was demonstrated by the study of Fazio et al. (1992). Regular buyers of a product category were asked if they had seen a particular new brand on the supermarkets shelves. They were shown color photographs of the new brand’s products in order to find out about buyers’ recognition of new brands. Though, the shown brands were in every supermarket for a significant period of time, only 45% claimed that they had seen the brands.

3. Shallow processing

Unattended message is not processed deeply enough to create certain associations. In other words its content is not retrievable after more than a few seconds. Unless a person is induced further to process it by greater level of attention or even repetition the message is likely to fade away from the short memory without producing the desired affect.

According to Franzen (1994) people tend to skim through the communication media without paying significant attention (3/4 of a second). Hence more stimuli a person is exposed to the less attention is left over the processing other stimuli. Putting it in a practical term the more a consumer were effectively exposed to advertisements of the competitors the less psychological energy he has left to process new advertisements.

The belief in the effectiveness of shock advertising is based on the various research papers that indicate ads where different (verbal and visual) elements are incongruent with each other are more memorable and might increase both advertising attitude and brand attitude. Thus, marketers believe that shocking advertising will produce surprise, shock or awe effect that will trigger the attention span.

According to Andersson et al (2004) “*shocking pictures have become the most effective way of selling commodities today*”. They point out that shocking advertising goes far beyond sensitive or explicit issues.

They refer to the use of violence advertising in fashion by various prominent brands as Benetton, Diesel and Sisley, which try to stand out using shock and awe effects.

Sutherland & Sylvester (2001) stress the point that the congruency and incongruency of an advertising message is not a universal thing and strongly depends on the various social and personal factors.

According to Bush & Bush (1994) whether an advertisement is controversial or not, it is questioned on the basis of its ethicality. Ethics has been defined as “*a set of moral principles directed at enhancing societal well being*”. At the same time Bush & Bush (1994) defines ethics as “*the study and emphasis on the determination of what is right and wrong*.” Both theorists state that, ethics is referred to as the acceptable standards of behaviour which is based on moral principles. This is further reinforced by Zinkhan (1994) who claims that an individual obtains a set of moral principals which enable them to decide what is right and wrong in advertisements. He also states that this choice maybe developed from the individuals own conscience, beliefs, values, experiences and religion. Both Zinkhan (1994) and Bush et al (1994), present some of the issues which affect the ethicality of an ad. These include sexual and racial stereotyping, influence on children, use of fear, sexual exploitation and the portrayal of religious and cultural values. A study by Treise et al. (1994) stated that many advertising controversies have breached a number of these ethical issues, with a manipulative and persuasive nature, and a preoccupation with materialism. Both Bush et al (1994) and Treise et al. (1994) suggest that there are now many advertisements of controversial nature what indicates a lack in societal responsibility or ‘*social well being*’. An ad to be determined as ethical or unethical depends on an individual’s moral principals. Their study suggests that because of different individual natures, conflicting ideas, rules and interpretations may occur, which lead to conflicting evaluations of whether an advertisement is deemed ethical/unethical or right/wrong.

This view is extended further by Robert Bean, chairman of London-based consultancy Brand Bank, who says that “*A piece of stimulus in itself is difficult to be universally offensive unless it goes into taboo areas like child abuse. Setting out to get something banned or cause offence is far from foolproof. In the advertising industry it is not a recognized strategy – and the publicity you get for it is often negative*” (Colyer, 2002)

This stance is empirically supported by the research carried out for Marketing by OMD Snapshots (Marketing, 2003). The majority of respondents did not find the “controversial” images used in advertising by charities such as Barnardo's shocking. Of the 1097 people asked whether they are shocked by the images, 62.5% said they were not, while 37.5% said they were.

Only 11.9% said they were shocked enough to give money, with 18.2% saying the images turned them off donating money or time.

Additional explanation of the relativity of shock and controversial issues is given by CampaignBriefAsia (2003). It claims that “*controversial advertising is only controversial to certain groups in the community - and rarely, if ever, does everyone agree on what they find offensive or controversial. 18-24 males, in particular like ads that offend segments of the community. Even if they personally don't love the ad, they love the fact that it offends someone. The quandary we face is that brands targeting young males and increasingly, young females, are often more liked if they offend the target's parents or grandparents*” (CampaignBriefAsia (2003).

In other words, the controversy and shock effects may be determined by psycho-demographic characteristics of the consumers.

This notion can be explained with the use of expectancy-value framework, which is based on two components:

- The expected consequences of the act (the amount of pain and satisfaction),
- The influence of social norms times a motivation-to-comply factor

Thus, if certain group of people reject accepted social norms and have an insignificant motivation-to-comply their response to shock advertising would be different from compliant consumers.

Cognitive abilities:

Hemispheres and the use of different media

According to (Sutherland & Sylvester, 2001) an alternative to this approach is suggested by the research regarding differential hemispheric activation. Based upon neuropsychological theory and research Tucker (1981) distinguished two types of cognition: syncretic cognition - hot (direct and immediate), and analytic cognition - cold (sequential and linear information processing). He related the difference between analytic

and syncretic cognition to processing modes characteristic of the left and right cerebral hemispheres, respectively. According to Buck et al. (2004) these findings of this research regarding the differential operations of the hemispheres create space to suggest that it may be possible to increase the effectiveness of a particular type of emotional appeal by creating the ad in a context that activates a particular hemisphere. He develops his point referring to the existing evidence confirming that the left and right hemispheres contribute to emotional functioning differentially: the left hemisphere tends to be more active during the experience of positively valenced moods, whereas the right hemisphere is more active during the experience of negatively valenced states. Hence, he concludes that it may be possible to influence response to emotional advertising appeals by manipulating hemispheric activation: “*Since differential hemispheric activation can be achieved by asking participants to perform either a verbal or visual task, it is possible to explore this hypothesis without relying on the use of programming or editorial content which could confound the results*” (Buck et al., 2004). Buck et al. is not the first to suggest this type of manipulation. The research made by Wegener et al. (1995) focused on examining the impact of presenting high and low-arousal advertising appeals is examined under different stimuli. Based on the findings, they predicted that response to various appeals that differ in valence (negative or positive) will depend on whether the stimulus is visual or verbal. Specifically, when participants are engaged into visual task prior to advertising exposure, mean liking for positively-valenced ads is higher than mean liking for negatively valenced ads. In contrast, when participants are engaged into a verbal task prior to ad exposure, mean liking for negatively-valenced ads is higher than liking for positively-valenced ads. These findings sets the basis for the development of various hypothesis regarding the effectiveness of combined and hierarchical use of various communication media.

Demographic factors

An interesting argument about the effect of shock advertising across demographic groups was introduced by Stout and Rust (1993). They found that females and older people are most easily persuaded by emotional advertising. These groups are more likely to feel empathy toward the situations presented in emotional ads and as a result, view the brand more favorably than those competitors advertising based upon rational appeals. The relationship between emotional response and the interpretation of advertising may be constructed by different factors, including individual characteristics, such as sex, age, and learned or innate predisposition to buy particular types and classes of goods. They present distinct response modes that relate to different ways viewers may interact with or relate to a commercial. These different modes of response -descriptive, empathic and experiential – are linked to different psychological states associated with empathy. They also suggest that the content of the commercial and the viewer's past history of exposure to advertising might be important determinant of viewer's emotional response to an ad.

Habituation

The current marketing theory supported with empirical research findings highlights that the consumer attitudes are constantly changing (Kotler, 1997). The reason for this change is attributed to the nature of attitude formation process. According to Piercy attitude is “*a learned predisposition to respond consistently with respect to a given object or act properties*” and its psychological function is to organise world and operate easily and efficiently. Attitudes create propensity to certain type of behavior. Attitudes can be of cognitive, affective and conative nature. The nature of a particular attitude and the way it relates to other attitudes determine its propensity to change. Kotler believes that attitudes are shaped by social reality of a particular person where opinion-leaders play a very important role. Thus, according to Andersson the sexuality has been heavily exploited in advertising for such a long time, that it already does not produce shock on UK and US consumers.

Speaking of shocking advertising techniques Stephen Marks, the founder of FCUK, suggests that it is important to distinguish between different types of shocking advertising since “*Shock tactics are valid as long as they are relevant*” (Marketing, 2003). He suggests that a marketer have to ask himself the question: “Is this advertising shocking merely for the sake of shock?”. If the shock advertising approach is “Remember my name, I have shocked you” then the company will fail to build an important link between advertising message and brand values, and even can damage the brand goodwill.

According to the integrated information-response model. This model suggests two different orders of cognitive resistance to the advertising message: high and low. If shocking advertising message creates a high order of cognitive resistance, it translated into the low order of acceptance, which as the result reduces

consumer's perceived probability of association between the product and advertised attributes. It is important to consider that fashion-related products are connected to the self-image concept. It means that people change to choose the clothes that appeal to their identity. When buying fashion related products consumers consider the way it will reflect their personality, mood, social status, etc .

The other aspects is offered by Zeitlin and Westwood (1986) who believe that the use of fear as a motivation in advertising places emphasis on the severity of the threat. They found that fear appeals might differ in intensity ranging from mild to severe. Their research suggests that in order to be most effective, fear-based messages should present a mild to moderate threat and provide a certain feasible solution. If the level of exposed fear is too high or not followed up with a explicit feasible solution, a viewer will not be able to pass over his/her sense of dread and process the advertising message.

The overall aim of the advertising is to communicate the core values and benefits of the brand to customers and to induce customers to buy products. It is designed to create strong bonds of customer with particular brand, so that in future he will resort to limited decision-making pattern and will choose the communicated brand.

According to McGoldrick (2002) advertising shall work on various levels of consumers' awareness shaping:

- Creating Brand awareness;
- Persuade people about its superior to competitors qualities;
- Induce a person to buy the product;
- Reaffirm during post-buying reevaluation concerning the presence of promised benefits;
- Reach and affect the diversity of public;

In this light, Saxena (2003) believes shock tactics may create awareness in a short-term, but it can cause a real damage in long-run.

1. Lack of consistency in the integrated marketing communications, where the mass media advertising never matched with the rest of the consumer touch-points, hence creating a mismatch in brand personality-image.
2. Inability of constantly re-inventing the 'shock' appeal so as to stay relevant & exciting to the consumer.
3. Losing the 'shock' appeal and inability in being seen as unique/distinct & clutter breaking.
4. Lastly, a possible mistake on stretching the 'shock' appeal too far instead of restricting it to a short-term strategy – where it was very successful – the brand owner thought might as well carry on with the success instead of finding a more substantial brand promise for long term sustainability.

The advertisings that are incongruent with the brand image may be more effective in raising brand interest and brand memorability. However, they emphasise that in case of unfamiliar brand, advertisement-brand incongruency might reduce brand memorability. Although opinions vary on the effects of shock tactics used in advertising, press coverage of the subject makes it clear that shock is widely used in contemporary ads and brings more benefits to its users.

Bibliography:

1. Tomblin M. Shock Advertising, Brand Strategy, November 2002.
2. Shannon J. Why Shock Ads Have Their Place, Marketing Week, November 10, 1995.
3. Dahl D.W., Frankenberger K.D., Manchanda R.V. Does It Pay to Shock? Journal of Advertising Research, September, 2003.
4. Aaker D. & Bruzzone D.E. Causes of Irritation in Advertising, Journal of Marketing, 12 (2), 1985.
5. Barnes J.H. & Dotson M.J. An Exploratory Investigation into the Nature of Offensive Television Advertising, Journal of Advertising, 19 (3), 1990.
6. Dzamic L. Shock Advertising: Shock and Controversy in Advertising, Dakini Books Ltd, 2004.

Prezentat la 09.04.2007