

Marketing Minute ~ “To Buy or Not to Buy” Consumer Reaction to Persuasive Communication

Back in the late 1980s, I was the owner of an ad agency in Upstate New York. In that business community, I had achieved a level of success with both small businesses and the corporate world. In an area magazine, Rochester Business Magazine, I wrote a regular column. The other day, I was reviewing some of them, and saw this one. Even though some things have changed, such as the addition of social media and mobile marketing, many things have stayed the same, such as buyer reactions to communication. So, with that in mind, I would like to share that column with you here. Keep in mind, this is from 20 years ago.

Consumer Reaction to Persuasive Communication

Advertising is not an entertainment or an art form. It is **persuasive communication**, directly affecting the consumers' actions. So, the goals set for advertising are communication tasks—to reach a defined audience, to a given degree, and during a given time period. About 75 percent of the dollars spent for advertising messages are invested in six medias—newspapers, TV, direct mail, magazines, radio, and outdoor, in that order. Advertising flourishes mainly in free-market, profit-oriented countries. It is one of the most important factors in accelerating the distribution of products and in helping to raise the standard of living.

Advertising is one of the most important techniques of modern business enterprise. A company's decisions about advertising affect its product development, packaging, pricing, distribution and retailing. In turn, a company's advertising affects consumers' decisions as to **what to buy or not to buy**.

Easily Persuaded?

Fine-sounding speeches, long words, and the general air of saying something important are affective in result, regardless of what is being said. Often when we are hearing or reading impressively worded sermons, essays, or fine writing, we stop being critical altogether, and simply allow ourselves to feel as excited, sad, joyous, or angry as the speaker or author wishes us to feel. Like reptiles under the influence of a snake charmer's flute, we are swayed by the musical phrases of the verbal hypnotists. “That was such a lovely speech! You have such a nice voice!” Some people don't listen to what is being said, since they are interested only in what might be called the gentle inward message that the sound of the words give them. Just as cats and dogs like to be stroked, so do some human beings like to be verbally stimulated at fairly regular intervals; it is a form of rudimentary sensual gratification.

So consumers react to advertising emotionally at first—then objectivity sets in. They do not often change suddenly from uninterested individuals to convinced purchasers. In most cases, they go through several steps before buying a product or service. The message must appeal to their senses, such as stroking them in some way with the message. Then, they move from that initial awareness of the product or service to knowledge, liking, preference, acceptance (or conviction), and then to purchase of the product or service.

The evidence seems to indicate quite clearly that people are very capable of resisting attempts to change their attitudes and behavior. So, a great deal of advertising must function either to **reinforce** existing attitudes and behavior, or to **stimulate** or activate people who are already predisposed to act in the desired manner. If this is indeed realistic, then it would appear that a major function of effective advertising is to select people who are already predisposed to buy a product and present them with appeals to hopefully trigger the desired response.

No More Mass Marketing?

Many in the field of advertising feel that the era of mass marketing is over, because of the increasing fragmentation of retailing, television, and entertainment. In both marketing and advertising strategy, there is a growing emphasis on the need for market segmentation.

Marketers—retailers and manufacturers—employ a variety of demand figures to define markets. They commonly use income, age, location, education, and other criteria. In the last twenty years, an important market segment has been added to the categories—youth. Seemingly overnight, marketers became aware that the youth market had desires for goods, and the money to back them up. The result was a flurry of activities aimed at what was termed the **teen market**. This group, added to the before 30s group, is on the verge of its financial coming-of-age. These two, when added to the last of the 'baby boomers,' represent the last generation of Americans to live through the final phase of the industrial revolution. Future generations will be the children of the high-tech era. Today, they have some predictable consumption habits.

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Another emerging market segment is the **child market**, above and beyond those that influence their parents' buying decisions. There is now a group from ages 5 to 13 that makes purchases of goods and services for personal use and satisfaction.

Consumers Dictate An Image

Consumers not only have forced marketers to adjust their market segments, but contribute to the market measures of control over the image-building process. Product and brand images arise out of a complex interaction between marketer messages and consumer creativity.

The question of belief versus fact can obscure the actual nature of an image. Images are systems of inferences which may have only a tenuous and indirect relationship to fact. Image-building is usually not easily predictable.

People differ in the priority of information at their disposal and in their creative ability to elaborate an image. A product or brand is a combination of attributes, and one person might construct his image on the basis of one feature and another person on a different one.

Uncertainty is hardly ever reduced to zero. Alternative reactions from the same facts or the same sequence of items are conceivable. For these reasons, images are statistical in nature. Different people will have different images of the same product; "images are ordered wholes built by consumers from scraps of significant detail" in much the same way that writers and artists use a significant detail to illuminate complex totalities. There must be a consistency with the total attitudes, expectations and beliefs associated with the product:

1. Are there key elements in my image—not necessarily the most conspicuous—which, if changed, might lead to a "change reaction" in the total image?
2. What elements in my image are structurally interrelated and give mutual support to each other? Do some of my **bad** points make my **good** points more believable?
3. How can plot value be exploited in my product design and advertising? Can I make some elements in my image more conspicuous than others?
4. What constraints can I build into my message mix to reduce uncertainty and make consumer response more predictable?

In the past, just about every advertiser has assumed that in order to sell his product, he had to convince consumers that his product was superior to the competitor's. That is not really necessary. It may be sufficient to convince consumers that your product is positively good—and do a clearer, more honest, more informative job of saying it. If the consumer feels certain that your product is good and feels uncertain about your competitor's, he will buy yours.

Brands Are Easier

When a seller designs advertising to promote the item he sells, his concern is with his brand's image in the market. This is a **product concept**. When he builds advertising to promote his company, firm or organization, his interest is in his institution's image. This is a **patronage concept**.

Imagery is a matter of personality. Brand image is what buyers see and feel when your brand name is called to their attention. Brand image is the buyers' picture of how that specific brand differs from other brands.

Among the determinants of brand image are corporate image, consumers of the brand, retailers who stock the brand, the product's physical features, the satisfaction the brand provides, the product's price, and the ads promoting the brand. Brand images are usually stronger than corporate images, because buyers know more about brands than about the firms behind the brands.

The word "Brand" is a comprehensive term, and in one way or another, it includes other, more particularized terms. A brand is "a name, term, symbol, design, or a combination of them which is intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from their competitors." A **brand name** consists of words, letters, and/or numbers which may be vocalized. A **brand mark** is the part of a brand which appears in the form of a symbol, design, or distinctive coloring or lettering. It is recognized by sight, but is not expressed when a person pronounces the brand. Tide, Cadillac, and Kodak are examples of brand names. Brand marks are illustrated by the colonial gentleman on Quaker Oat boxes and by the red "K" with yellow background on film packaging and products.

A brand can be of considerable help to the consumer or industrial user. Brands are the easy way for a purchaser to identify the product or service he desires. Furthermore, the individual units of a branded item maintain a consistency of quality

that buyers can depend upon. A brand also offers some protection to the consumer. It identifies the firm behind the product. Branding is an insurance of merchandise comparability when the buyer uses more than one source of supply.

Branded products tend to improve in quality over the years. Competition forces this improvement, because brand owners are constantly seeking new ways to differentiate their products in order to secure a stronger market position. In the constant search for more profitable sales volume, product improvements have frequently been the key to success.

The primary focus in advertising should be awareness of the consumer reality—their likes, dislikes, personalities, economical background, and most essentially, their history of buying. Without the right consumer reaction, an otherwise great advertising campaign will fail. Advertising agencies like success, so they must also be very aware and capable marketers.

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See what I mean by some things change, but many things stay the same? The Rochester Business Magazine is long gone, as is my old agency, Pilgrim Associates, but here I am, still doing the same thing. Taking my wealth of knowledge and experience, staying updated on business and marketing tactics, helping businesses. And the change? Well, my name has changed from Marilyn Wright-Schulz to Marilyn Dayton, I am two decades older (and wiser?), and I don't focus on large corporations as much anymore. My main focus is on small business and start-ups. I feel that is where the need is the strongest. Besides, it seems our country is going full circle—going from small businesses (Mom & Pop's) to large corporations, and back to small businesses again. And I for one am so happy to see that change.

Information provided for you by ~

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