

# TOM

## Has Advertising Killed Itself?

# ASACKER

"Video killed the radio star." Maybe that's true, I'm not really sure. I am pretty sure, however, that advertising killed itself -- or, at the very least, took the wind out of its own sails.

Advertising used to work, and work well. What do I mean by "work?" I mean that once upon a time, when products and services of obvious differentiated quality and value were popping up like weeds in a field, consumers were predisposed to believe advertising claims, both overt and subtle ones. Since belief leads to action, sales of those advertised goods increased as well.

### **An Old Lesson from a Dutch Philosopher**

Heinz's relish was, in the mind of the consumer, a perceivable improvement over generic relish. Sensory evidence -- a full jar, no grit to chew, consistent texture and taste -- proved it out. The same was true for many other modern wonders of the American age of mass production: the radio, telephone, automobile, television, instant cake mix, washing machine, dishwasher, air conditioner, etc. They were special products that, in fact, improved people's lives.

During those heady marketing times, consumers were predisposed -- based on past experience (a.k.a. memory) -- to endorse and thereby become behaviorally susceptible to advertising's representational content. Times were indeed very good for advertising, as well they should have been. Then something happened.

Before I tell you what happened, let's go back 325 years. At that time, the great Dutch philosopher Benedictus de Spinoza postulated that to comprehend something was also to believe that something. For example, if you said, "My eyes are brown," I would simultaneously understand and believe your statement. To disbelieve your statement would require a subsequent act of rejection, based on logic or, in this case, sensory evidence.

Recent research in social and cognitive psychology suggests that Spinoza was right: The acceptance of an idea is part of the automatic comprehension of that idea, and the rejection of an

idea occurs subsequent to, and with more effort than, its acceptance. What does this have to do with advertising effectiveness? Everything.

During the heyday of mass marketing, consumers were predisposed to comprehend, accept and act upon advertising because of the following reasons: Our memories of past representations supported its acceptance. Or, we simply wanted to believe. It felt good to believe that through marketplace activities we could become more successful, desirable, live longer, be happier, etc.

Read it again: we wanted to believe. We're funny creatures that way. We are happiest when we're imagining happiness. If you say to me, "Tom. You're the smartest guy I know," I will probably simply choose to believe you. Why? Because it feels good to believe you, and there is no risk involved in believing. Also, it would likely be difficult and time consuming to disprove your statement since I would have to understand what you mean by "smart," work with you to list everyone you know, agree upon the best test for smarts, etc. All in all, it benefits me to simply believe without verification ... unless, of course, past representations by you have proven to be instrumental bullshit or a waste of time. Which takes us back again to advertising.

Our brains are pattern-mad, expectation creation machines. We continually map the marketplace, attempting to predict the probable future, based upon chunks of information — like advertising. To believe that advertising, in general, provides true and useful information requires that we have the statement "most advertising is true and useful" tagged and stored in our memory. So yes, we accepted advertising when our "tagged" memory informed us that those patterns were valid, or even when we had no way to verify their representations and simply wanted them to be true. To a limited extent, we still behave this way.

But what happens when we become overloaded with stuff, inundated with options and bedazzled by information. How do we decide what to pay attention to when time is such a costly currency? We do what we've always done. We plumb the past to solve present problems. We quickly and imperceptibly access our stored memory of filtered and tagged patterns, and then decide what to do.

### **Past Experience Provides the Edge**

Experiments with master chess players showed that they could glance at the position of pieces on a chessboard and later perfectly recall the precise position of every piece. However if they were shown a chessboard with randomly arranged pieces, their memory failed. It wasn't a photographic

memory that gave them an edge: It was their past experiences. They could chunk information into meaningful patterns and recall those patterns for later use.

The same is true of our marketplace gaming. We've become active discerners and pattern makers of marketplace information. We easily recall memories of responding to ads that claimed "specialness." We quickly conjure up images of products and services that we were led to believe would improve our lives and make us happier. What patterns emerge? In more cases than not, sameness and disappointment. Since our brain abhors dissonance, we easily solved this information problem by tuning out the source of said conflicting information: advertising. "Oh, that again", says the savvy mind. "I won't be reeled in this time."

The more ads look and sound the same, the more we simply let them fade into our subconscious. They become background noise and their place in the mind, their meaning, is reinforced by past memories and associations. Like master chess players, we know exactly what their position means. With the game clock moving, in a rapidly changing environment like today's marketplace, we're compelled to detect new experiences, quickly review our options, decide what to do and then learn from our choices. We don't have time for intellectual rigor, nor the option of being frequently wrong.

What's an advertiser to do? It may appear that one should load the subconscious mind with jingles and taglines. That way, the brand will emerge as an appropriate pattern when a marketplace need arises. Unfortunately the brain doesn't think in words. A study at the University of Nevada, where students wrote down whatever was in mind the second a beeper went off, showed that for most of the time the mind is thinking wordlessly. When we do pause to consider a problem, we search our memories for past experiences. Where that search fails us more and more, we search the global brain -- the Internet.

So beyond a keyword search, the answer must be to create advertising that looks and sounds different. Right? After all, the mind is always on the lookout for the new and the unexpected. "Make it entertaining," we think. "Make people want to talk it up, search it out," we say to ourselves.

Indeed, it must be new to capture one's attention and engaging to hold onto it. But advertising can't simply stop there. Here's a thought: What if advertisers created information that consumers tagged

and stored as something other than "advertising?" What if we viewed the information as engaging and credible, designed to deepen and simplify our lives instead of junking it up?

What if the information was designed to inspire? "Wow. People dancing to their unique play list, while wearing little white earbuds. I want to experience that mood." What if it was designed to educate? "Cool. Mario's has a new, lowfat Chicken Fajita Sub. I'd really enjoy one of those babies."

What if it was designed to provoke? "Hell yes, we're addicted to oil! And I'll be damned if I'm going to contribute to the mess that that causes. Let me check out that new hybrid car." What if it was designed to enhance our desire to connect with others? "I can't wait to tell the guys about . . ."

When I returned home last week from a presentation to a meeting room full of advertising salespeople, this e-mail was in my inbox:

"I heard you speak last week. Empowering and entertaining. But I think your concepts and principles are for decision makers, CEOs, owners and operators. Your grass-roots principles focus in on what the "big" guy is doing wrong -- not listening to the customer. It would be difficult for me to solicit advertising from a client if I said, 'Here's what you're doing wrong.'"

### **Advertising Is Solicitation of Advertising**

There you have it! Advertising is in the business of soliciting advertising. They are not in the business of helping businesses make deeper connections with their customers. This had better change, and change fast.

We'll hold ideas in our brains for years, occasionally checking to see if things have changed. If not, we will return them back to the expectation shelf from which they came, only to bring them down again if we believe they require review and a possible revision. We'll give advertising another chance, but if it keeps littering our mental landscape with the trash from its parade of good intentions, we will end up storing it away in a very hard to reach place.

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