

THE EFFECTIVE USE OF HUMOR IN E-ADVERTISING

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ABSTRACT: Humor has long been a popular tool of advertising agencies. However, its effectiveness has been controversial. Humorous ads win Clio awards, but do they generate sales? There has been plenty of speculation on this topic and some rigorous analysis. The analysis suggests that the use of humor is not superior to direct messages. While it can promote message comprehension and improve attitude toward the ad (and presumably the brand), it is rarely related to purchase probability. These findings are applied to recent changes in the use of e-advertising. Given the move from direct-marketing (click-seeking) ads to brand image messages, there is an opportunity to use humor more selectively and carefully track the results. Advertisers are advised to use humor with teaser ads rather than destination pages, and with synchronous media such as Flash and streaming video rather than asynchronous media like text ads..

INTRODUCTION: Humor is widely used in advertising. It is thought to gain audience attention, aid recall, and create a favorable attitude toward the ad (if not the brand). However, its effectiveness has always been controversial. Humorous ads win Clio awards and acclaim, but do they generate sales for clients? Are we just embezzling client funds to make ads that showcase our own creativity? Although we enjoy using humor, we want to ensure that we are using it as effectively as possible.

AMBIVALENCE: A 2004 Silver Award went to OgilvyOne Singapore for its “Levi’s 501 Reborn” e-advertisement. That is a firm that is very modern and successful. Yet its founder, David Ogilvy, was one of the earliest detractors of the use of humor. In his first book, he advised strongly against the use of humorous copy. He worried that the attention humor attracts to an ad is wasted unless it is successfully linked to the name (or a key feature) of the product. He argued that humor was just as likely to offend prospects as it was to win them over.

Others have expressed concerns about humor, too. Used in a direct marketing way (to generate clicks), humor is likely to amuse prospects and leave them satiated, rather than entice them and leave them primed for action. It will almost certainly turn off some prospects, and there is no reason to risk losing even one prospect (Rieck, 1997). On the other hand, when humor is used in brand or image advertising, it has other risks. In industries such as financial institutions that involve trust, humor draws attention to itself and may make the product, brand or sponsor seem frivolous (Raphel, 1987).

David Ogilvy later changed his mind about the use of humor (Ogilvy, 1982), but the firm still retains some ambivalence. As recently as six months ago, Matthew Zucker of OgilvyInteractive New York wrote that humor and sarcasm are likely to be misinterpreted, especially in a text-dominated web message. He points out that the gold standard in online communication is a message that users will pass on to friends to show off their good taste. While the industry clearly sees the benefit of using humor as a hook, it is also wisely wary of using humor for its own sake.

E-ADVERTISING TRENDS: The internet is now considered “essential” by 20% of people in general and 30% of college graduates. Billions of dollars are spent on e-advertising each year. The biggest advantage of e-advertising may be its exceptional accountability. We can track who visited a site, how long they looked at specific pages, and what (if anything) they did about it. In this environment, there is a unique opportunity to assess which appeals are working and which ones are not.

The earliest e-advertising focused on banners (and, later, skyscrapers) with static graphics and some headline-style text. They were quite basic, but were able to create direct click-throughs and sometimes build brand awareness. More recently, the focus has been the sponsored links that appear alongside search results on the major search sites. According to comScore Media Metrix, the top three search sites (Yahoo!, MSN and AOL) each attract well over 110 million unique visitors per month. Ads that are linked to users’ search terms on these sites are well targeted and expensive, with banks paying up to \$5 per click for a listing tied to the search term mortgage. However, the ads themselves are not at all sophisticated, and look very much like classified ads from a local newspaper. In part because of this stripped-down appearance and rising cost, they have been used almost exclusively in a direct marketing way (to generate clicks) rather than to build brand identity.

Recently, there has been increased interest and investment in non-search sites. According to an eMarketing report last month, non-search sites now account for about a third of the market. While the big sites rapidly run out of real estate on their pages, resellers like ValueClick and Blue Lithium are prospering by clearing out the excess space on other sites. The availability of economical space on destination sites presents an opportunity to introduce more sophisticated technology. It is now easy to

use moving images, sound and rollover; sometimes floating obtrusively over the site's main content. This changes the typical web ad from being like a classified ad to being more like a television spot.

STRATEGY: Now that the space being used is less expensive and more available, and the technology is more like television, it makes sense to think about using the internet for brand advertising. This change fortuitously comes at a time when internet-savvy agency employees are reaching the age of thirty and gaining more responsibility. It makes sense that they would now consider using e-advertising for the broader purpose of building brand identity, instead of just creating immediate clicks.

If the medium is getting more like television, so are some of the techniques. Stephen Baker reports in *Business Week* that Ford bought 24-hour banner ads on AOL, MSN and Yahoo! on the day it launched its new F-150 truck. That led to a 6% increase in sales, and was repeated two months ago for the new F-500. Baker compares this with the old "roadblock" technique of advertising simultaneously on all three television networks. He reports that some major advertisers (such as Ford) are now setting aside 10% of their budget for e-advertising.

Others are setting aside a portion of their budget for integrated advertising, instead. They combine e-advertising with other media. For example, a broad electronic campaign at ABC news includes messages sent out to cell phones. Sometimes television ads act as teasers, like the Toyota ad that introduces a comparison test and then refers viewers to a web site to "see what happens next." It turns out that detailed information is absorbed better on the computer. It seems that users are paying more attention to the computer, having learned to tune out television commercials. For example, only 39.4% of television viewers got the message that a new DVD of ET included "never-before-seen footage." However, fully 48.1% of users got that message after seeing animated ads that floated on top of the web page.

Even television documentaries are using the internet as a sort of footnote or appendix, inviting viewers to visit a website to "hear the rest of this 911 call," for example. Television is being used to generate click-through to a destination site, where the detailed information is then provided. What does this tell us about the use of humor?

THE RESEARCH: Let's begin with an operational definition of humor as anything intended to evoke laughter (or mirth). Sometimes it is meant to elicit a gentle smile, other times to generate belly laughter. Sometimes it is used to generate a click-through to the client's site, other times it is on the destination site to build brand image. In every case, though, there are certain guidelines that are suggested by the established research on the effectiveness of humor in advertising. Let's not forget these when we design e-advertising.

As a practical matter, some people like humor better than others. For example, men are known to use humor more than women (Thorson & Powell, 1993) and a December AOL survey indicated that men use the internet for shopping more than women. Also, Canadians seem to like humor better than Americans. According to comScore Networks, while 17.8% of US internet users visited humor category websites last summer, 31.8% of Canadian internet users did. However, although their interest in humor may differ, Canadians and Americans seem to roughly share a sense of what is funny. Of the top ten visited sites for Americans and Canadians, six appear on both lists (comedy central, miniclip.com, flowgo.com, funnyjunk.com, thespark.com, and netscape @Play).

There are some other helpful findings in the literature. Humor has been shown to gain attention for the message (Madden & Weinberger, 1982) and, presumably because of this attention, to improve message comprehension (Duncan, Nelson & Frontczak, 1984). It has also been shown to improve attitude toward the ad, although this was not shown to relate directly to outcome variables such as purchase intention (Gelb & Pickett, 1983).

The effects of humor depend on a variety of factors. Intense and even risky humor should be used when the goal is direct sales (or clicks), while a more gentle dose will improve attitude toward the brand (De Pelsmacker & Geuens, 1999). Humorous ads get more attention when placed within contrasting non-humorous programming than when placed within a comedy program (Murphy, Cunningham & Wilcox, 1979). Humor will have more of a positive effect when there is already a positive attitude to the brand, in other words, when the humor is least needed (Chattopadhyay & Basu, 1990). It can, however, be used effectively to reposition a popular brand (Gofton, 2002).

In spite of calls for more systemized study of humor's effectiveness (e.g., Duncan, 1979) there have been few responses (for an exception, see Speck, 1991). Brian Sternthals's review from thirty years ago is still current and informative:

- 1) Humor messages attract attention and hold the audience.
- 2) Humor creates a relaxed, positive mode which will improve liking for the product being advertised.

- 3) Because advertisers are seen as willing to laugh at themselves, the ad is perceived as being more honest.
- 4) Because humor makes a message more memorable, it will be acted upon for a longer period of time.
- 5) Because humor acts as a distractor, counter-argument is inhibited, resulting in increased persuasion.
- 6) Humorous appeals persuade, but their persuasive effect is at best no greater than that of serious appeals.
- 7) Audience characteristics may confound the effect of humor.
- 8) Humorous messages may detrimentally affect comprehension (Sternthal & Craig, 1973).

APPLICATION: The elaboration likelihood model (Petty, Cacioppo & Schumann., 1983) tells us that people will consider “central” factors (such as product features), when making a high-involvement decision. However, with low-involvement decisions, they are more susceptible to being swayed by “peripheral” factors such as the attractiveness of the presenter and, of course, humor. We can recall an example from just last summer. The comedic site jibjab.com got three times as many hits as the George W. Bush and John Kerry sites combined during the summer. However, as the election approached and users got more involved in this important decision, the situation reversed itself. Many more people visited the candidates’ official sites. The elaboration likelihood model reminds us that humor is best used for low-involvement decisions.

It would seem that humor is most appropriately used during the television teasers, and less appropriate on the web page, where users have gone specifically to get the details. Finding humor there might be like finding jokes in the small print at the bottom of a contract. The use of humor in a message has been found to bolster weak arguments but detract from stronger ones (Cline & Kellaris, 1999). This again suggests that the use of humor should be kept separate from the presentation of strong (central) arguments.

Research into counter-arguments (Osterhouse & Brock, 1970) suggests that a distracting message (such as humor) will interfere with a receiver’s analysis. Thus, prospects who are busy processing and enjoying humor will “forget” to apply critical thinking to the claims that are being made in the advertising message. This suggests that humor will support persuasion, but there is one important *caveat*.

The inhibition of counter-arguing that humor causes depends to some extent on the pace of the medium. If viewers are distracted from counter-arguing during a television commercial, they are likely to miss the opportunity to critically analyze the arguments that are being presented. However, when reading a magazine or newspaper ad, they can easily resume their analysis of the message after having been distracted by humor. When a print media is involved, it would take a very disorienting humor intervention to distract the reader from counter-arguing. Today’s destination sites are more like print media, in that they can be absorbed at the user’s own pace, than they are like television messages that move on relentlessly. Once again, the use of humor in the television message is preferred over its use on the internet.

THE ADVICE: The elaboration likelihood model reminds us that humor is more effective with low-involvement decisions than with high-involvement ones. Thus humor should be more effective in a teaser message such as a banner ad than on the destination website itself. In the teaser ad, humor should generate interest and good feelings about the product. These should be sufficient to generate a click-through. However, once the prospect follows through and arrives at the destination site, a more serious and informative approach is preferred.

Our knowledge of counter-arguing reminds us that humor is more effective when used in a synchronous medium than with an asynchronous one. Thus, a television teaser ad or an e-advertisement using Flash or streaming video is more appropriate for humor than a destination web page with lots of text. Humor in the teaser ad may distract the prospect from forming counter-arguments, but the asynchronous text page would not.

It would make no sense to inject humor into a message about buying a car. Such an important decision requires serious consideration. However, it makes perfect sense to use humor to advertise cars.com. That site is just a portal through which visitors can access information about their purchase. Thus, humorous ads for cars.com are likely to be both appropriate and effective.

One *caveat* is in order, though. The use of humor in introductory teaser ads means that a humorous appeal will be the first approach to a prospect. Thus, care must be taken not to offend or scare away a prospect with the over-use of humor. Prospects who do not follow up on a click-through teaser will not only be lost, but may take with them a bad impression of the brand, product, or sponsor.

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