

USING HUMOR IN E-ADVERTISING: AVOIDING THE DUAL MINEFIELDS OF OFFENSE AND CONFUSION

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ABSTRACT

While humorous advertising is popular and continues to win Clio awards for agencies, its effectiveness remains controversial. Humor sometimes supports the goals of an advertising campaign, but it sometimes confuses the target audience or offends viewers, whether they are part of the target group or not. In order to supervise advertising agencies and avoid these pitfalls, advertisers need a more sophisticated understanding of the complex relationship between humor and advertising effectiveness. In any medium, this involves a complex interplay among the goals of the campaign, product types, intended audience and humor style. These contingencies are introduced in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

Luckily, there are tools for analyzing each of the components in the communication process (such as the product, the medium and the target) to assess how much humor and what type of humor will support the intended message. Applying this knowledge can help us avoid the dual minefields of offending or confusing those who are exposed to the advertisement, whether they are in the target group or merely overhear the ad.

Humor is widely used in advertising, but often without a very sophisticated understanding of its operation. In fact, we rarely even think about what we mean by humor. Broadly speaking, there are three types of humor theories that might help to explain it. Incongruity theories suggest that we tend to laugh at things that do not go together – the unexpected. This suggests that humor is a great tool for pointing out absurdities. Superiority theories suggest that we laugh at (or ridicule) things to which we feel superior. This suggests that laughter might be a “roar of triumph.” Relief theories suggest that we laugh at things that express our repressed instincts toward sex or aggression.

Combining these theories, we could define humor operationally as the enjoyment of incongruity. To count as humor, an incongruity or absurdity must be presented in an enjoyable light (even if we are just enjoying the fact that it is not happening to us).

EFFECTIVENESS

Humor has been shown to gain attention for the message and, presumably because of this attention, to improve message comprehension and recall. It has also been shown to improve attitude toward the ad and consequently toward the brand. In general, humorous messages create a relaxed, positive mood which encourages liking for the source. Also, when advertisers seem willing to laugh at themselves, they inspire trust. Furthermore, humor acts as a distraction, inhibiting counter-arguing and thus supporting the persuasiveness of the message. In one study, advertisements that were rated as funny or clever correlated 53% with those that had sales success, while advertisements that were rated as being boring correlated 73% with those that failed to improve sales (Haley & Baldinger, 1991).

However, humor has not been shown to be more persuasive than other emotional appeals, such as fear, anger, pity or guilt. Audience characteristics can seriously complicate its effectiveness. Humor can sometimes distract from the message, confuse or offend viewers, or trivialize the message. Even when the humor “fires” and successfully improves attitude toward the ad (and thus the brand), it is often not strongly correlated with buying intention.

Because the components of advertising campaigns are known, and because there are tools in place to analyze each of them, we can use them to focus our use of humor in a productive way. In each case, we are trying to send a selected message to a given target market about a given product through a selected medium. Considering the characteristics of each of these components in turn, we should be able to select the degree and type of humor that will support our efforts.

PRODUCT

One way to categorize products is by using the Product Color Matrix. Products are classified on two dimensions according to whether they are necessary or discretionary (tools or toys), and whether they are major or routine (low risk) purchases. Sometimes this last distinction is referred to as the difference between shopping goods and impulse purchases. Anything that is both necessary and major, such as a refrigerator, is classified as a white product. Anything that is necessary but routine, such as a household cleaning product, is classified as a blue product. Anything that is discretionary and routine, such as chewing gum, is classified as a yellow product and anything that is both discretionary and major, such as a sports car, is classified as a red product.

In general, the Elaboration Likelihood Model suggests that humor will be more effective with routine purchases. People tend to think critically about major purchases, and demand substantive information, but are more likely to rely on peripheral issues like the style of the message when making routine purchases. Surveys of advertising executives agree with this conclusion. About 70% of executives opine that humor is appropriate with consumer non-durables, while less than 30% of them think it is appropriate with business, industrial or durable products, or with personal products such as laxative or tampons (Madden & Weinberger, 1984). Advertising executives report that humor is used widely with blue and yellow (low risk, impulse) purchases, but rarely with white or red (major purchase/shopping goods) products.

TARGET

Before deciding on whether to use humor, and what type of humor to use, we need to consider demographic and other characteristics of our target segment. What is the age, income, education and culture of our typical customer? These variables will impact whether humor is appropriate, how much humor, and what type of humor. Research suggests that men create more humor than women do, but that women laugh and appreciate humor more. Although there is little gender difference in responses to print media, better educated young males seem to respond better to humorous advertising in broadcast media. This may be because a lot of that humor is prepared by the well-educated young writers at the advertising agencies.

Besides the specific characteristics of the members of the target market, we have to consider the role in which they have been cast by the humor. Broadly speaking, and based on Freud's work, there are three roles apparent in any interpersonal joking. There is an initiator of the humor, and the object (or the butt of the joke), and someone who appreciates the humor. In our case, it is the advertiser who initiates the humor. It is rarely the listener/viewer who is the object (butt) of the joke. Usually, listeners/viewers are cast as the relatively disinterested observers of a humorous event. In that case, their enjoyment of the humor will depend on their relationship to the object (butt) of the humor.

MESSAGE

Not all advertisements are meant to generate sales directly. There are several phases of advertising messages besides just action including, for example, awareness, interest, and desire. An advertisement might be designed to create or increase recognition, recall, attitude toward the ad or the brand, purchase intention, or actual buying behavior. Depending on the product, its market position, its place in the life cycle, and the goals of the advertiser, one or another of these messages will be appropriate at any given time.

Some messages are better suited to humor than others. For example, if you want to convince the public that you are the "gold standard" in your market with a long reputation and high reliability, too much humor could appear frivolous and detract from that message. If you want to convince people that yours is a fun and relevant company, which can work with young people, then a broader range of humor may be appropriate.

Research into counter-arguments suggests that a distracting message, such as a humorous one, will interfere with a receiver's analysis. Thus, prospects who are busy processing and enjoying the humor may neglect to apply critical thinking to the claims that are being made. Also, and perhaps surprisingly, the use of humor in a message has been shown to bolster weak arguments, but to only distract from stronger ones.

MEDIUM

There are many media that can be employed, and their number is increasing daily. Text messaging, pod-casting and stealth marketing are just some of the new media that should be considered as part of the promotional mix these days. There are different ways to categorize these media, including the contingencies of the pace, intrusiveness, clutter, involvement and motivation to process the message. An important variable for humor is whether the medium is synchronous or asynchronous.

In audio/visual media such as radio and television, the viewer is passive and must keep up with the message. In written media such as web pages and magazines, the reader is active and can stop at any point to go over something they are unsure of, or skim over some points to see where they are leading. Some humor is well-suited to the fast and advertiser-controlled pace of the television, as a set-up builds to a surprising punch. Other humor, such as storytelling, is better suited to a medium in which the consumer controls the pace of digesting the story. New media tend to be hybrids. Some, such as pod-casting and TiVo, allow the consumer to control the pace of the broadcast message and to review anything that they want to.

HUMOR STYLE

Research suggests that people prefer messages with a high entertainment component and a lower information component. It also suggests that a humorous commercial is more effective as a break from a serious program than within a humorous one. Once the decision is made to incorporate humor, the advertiser has to consider how much humor is appropriate (intensity) and what type of humor. Should it be raucous humor that will generate a belly laugh but might risk offending someone? Or should it be gentle positive humor that might only elicit a smile, but will never be controversial?

There are many schemes with which to classify humor. Freud's was the simplest, categorizing humor as either tendentious (sexual and aggressive themes) or non-tendentious (nonsense and absurdity). Others have created more complex systems, such as Paul Speck's (1991) humorous message taxonomy. It includes the five categories of comic wit, sentimental, satire, sentimental comedy and full comedy. Not all of them are suited to each product, message or medium. The humorous ads classified as full comedy scored highest on perceived humor. However, message comprehension was low along with advertiser's knowledge and trustworthiness. Recently, Krishnan and Chakravarti (2003) found that moderate humor generated more claim recall than no humor or high humor treatments.

A recent and well-calibrated classification system is Rod Martin and associates' (2003) Humor Styles Questionnaire. This model classifies humor into four styles, arranged in a two-by-two matrix according to whether it is internally or externally focused and whether it is positive or negative in tone. This characterization results in the categories of affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive and self-defeating styles. Self-enhancing humor is positively correlated with agreeableness, openness and self-esteem. Aggressive humor is been negatively correlated with agreeableness and conscientiousness. A self-defeating humor style is negatively correlated with emotional stability, conscientiousness, security in attachment and self-esteem. Each of these creates a different mood and must be selected carefully to suit and support the intended message.

ADVICE

Humor in advertising continues to win Clio awards because it is popular and people like it. Humor generates a relaxed and open mood that is amenable to persuasion. Also, if you can get your target audience to associate your product with those good feelings, you can enhance their attitude toward the brand. Humor is very effective for highlighting (ridiculing) absurdity, such as the absurdity of choosing your competitor's product. Humor distracts listeners/viewers from counter-arguing and can thus serve as an appeal to emotion.

Bold and risky humor can cut through the clutter of television advertising and attract attention. This is especially true during a serious program, to which the humorous ad is a contrast. On the other hand, gentle humor can soften the interruption when using an intrusive medium like television. Any humor will lead to recall and recognition of the humor itself. If you can link that memory directly to your product or its benefits, that can be very helpful.

Humor will tend to be more effective for impulse (low risk) buys, because consumers are less committed to finding and considering thorough evidence on which to base their decision. Even with an important and difficult purchase decision like a new car, we can successfully use humor on the site (such as Cars.com) that links customers to further information.

However, we have to supervise advertising agencies. There is a conflict of interest when they can use our money to create a humorous ad that might win them a Clio award. The award will increase their business, but it might be at the expense of focusing on our own goals for the advertising project.

Superiority theory teaches us that humor usually makes fun of something and relief theory reminds us that we enjoy venting repressed sexual and aggressive feelings. There is always a chance that humor (especially spontaneous humor) can accidentally turn into an uncontrolled rant that reveals too much and unnecessarily hurts or offends someone. Sometimes, when making fun of a competitor, and advertiser makes the mistake of addressing an issue (like dropped cell phone calls) that hurts sales in the entire industry! Unless there are play signals, so that the audience is certain to know that you are joking, there is the chance that they will simply be confused. As it is in the classroom, dry humor such as sarcasm may not be understood to be a joke and your audience may simply take some outrageous claim literally.

Used as a direct marketing tool (to generate clicks), humor can fail utterly. It can 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 of them. 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.

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. It can, however, be used effectively to reposition a popular brand. Humor is more likely to offend the target audience if the advertiser is not thoroughly familiar with them and with their sensitivities. On the other hand, if they are too myopic they may produce some humor that the target audience loves but which offends others who come across it.

Overall, then, humor is a great thing to use in support of your advertising goals. Armed with the above knowledge and awareness, we should be able to avoid the dual minefields of offense and confusion to generate an effective humorous ad campaign.

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