**KNOWLEDGE POINT**

**DOES HUMOR MAKE ADS MORE EFFECTIVE?**

Some form of humor is used in almost half of all TV advertising, where it often contributes to very effective ads. Humor can make ads more enjoyable, involving, and memorable. However, if the humor distracts from branding and communication, it can impede the ad’s effectiveness. In addition, perceptions of humor are different around the world and across different audiences; this may limit the ability of a funny ad to be used across markets.

**HUMOR MAKES ADS MEMORABLE**

Humor is a common element in advertising, as shown below. About half of all ads around the globe are considered either “funny” or “light-hearted.”

Around half of all ads globally make use of humor

![Humor Frequency Chart](chart.png)

It is not surprising that advertisers invoke humor, as it can make a big contribution to an ad’s memorability. In North America, where humor is used more than in any other region, 69 percent of ads in the top impact (Awareness Index) quintile are humorous (i.e., funny or light-hearted), versus only 44 percent in the bottom quintile—a difference of 25 percentage points. This difference is even larger in Europe (28 percentage points).

AdsWith humor tend to be more impactful

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of ads with Humor in:</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highest impact group</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest impact group</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa/Middle East</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia Pacific</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLOBAL</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And the funnier an ad is, the more memorable it is likely to be. The following chart shows the strong relationship (r = 0.52) between an ad’s mean score on humor and its impact (Awareness Index) for almost 200 ads in the United States.
Based on 238 Funny/Light-hearted TV ads: USA (Online)

The more humorous the ad, the more impactful it is likely to be

We observe a strong relationship between humor and impact because humor can drive involvement, which drives memorability. On a global basis, ads with humor on average score in the 74th percentile for Involvement (i.e. higher than 74 percent of other ads), while ads without humor score in the 42nd percentile.

HUMOR AND BRANDING

Branding, an important component of impact, does not seem to have a direct relationship with humor (see following chart). In general, in ads where both branding and humor are strong, the humor tends to be related to the brand. (Exceptions do occur, such as when an ad is part of a campaign in which the style, slogan, and/or characters are well established and closely associated with the brand.) In humorous ads where branding is weak, the humor is often unrelated to the brand.

A weak relationship between branding and humor

HUMOR, COMMUNICATION, AND PERSUASION

Humor’s relationship with communication is less straightforward than its relationships with enjoyment and impact. Certainly, the right humor can aid communication—but the wrong humor can just as easily impede it. Humor that is not related to an ad’s key message may be so distracting that the key message is missed; humor that misses the mark can detract from an ad’s overall effect.

For example, one ad we tested was working well in many aspects, but it used a joke that was just not funny. Viewers described the ad as boring and irritating, and enjoyment was below average. We advised the client to keep the description of the brand’s benefits unchanged while using more original humor. With stronger humor, the enjoyment rating improved, and so did the message communication.

As shown in the following chart, humor does not aid persuasion, as humorous ads are seen as a little less credible and relevant. However, the difference is small, and may simply be due to a tendency among advertisers, to avoid diluting strong persuasive messages with humor. There are plenty of examples of humorous ads that are also persuasive.
**Knowledges Points**

**Humorous Ads Are Slightly Less Persuasive**

Global percentiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persuasion</th>
<th>No of ads</th>
<th>Persuasion</th>
<th>No of ads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>(28,334)</td>
<td>(38,284)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New info</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>(30,191)</td>
<td>(39,543)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>(30,047)</td>
<td>(38,410)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believable</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>(20,474)</td>
<td>(32,003)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**HOW WELL DOES HUMOR TRAVEL?**

Humor is subjective and often culturally specific. Types of humor that don’t travel well include mockery, parodies, kitsch, off-the-wall and dark humor, as well as humor that depends on subtleties. In addition, there are some specific country issues. In China, sarcasm is not widely appreciated. In Singapore, humor based on sexuality is taboo. The English have a particular love of irony, while images found sexy in most of Europe may be considered sexist by British women.

So, in view of all this, is it possible for humor to work across markets? Yes, we find that it can, provided that:

- The subject matter is universal
- The references used are universally understood (e.g. young romance, new baby)
- The subject is not offensive or taboo
- The humor is visually based, rather than relying on something that may be lost in translation

**HUMOR AMONG MEN AND WOMEN**

While lots of advertising is seen as equally funny by both sexes, some humor may be perceived differently by men and women. This is especially true of scatological, violent, or sexist humor.

In the following example, which summarizes the reaction to an ad in which the humor is based on body parts being pulled off, men found it distinctive, involving, and interesting, whereas women considered it disturbing, unpleasant, and irritating.

One type of humor that women tend to find particularly enjoyable is that which makes jokes at the expense of men. In Brazil, where fabric conditioners tend to be purchased by women, and humor is rarely used in that category’s advertising, women really appreciated an ad that showed a man doing the washing while the woman relaxed and watched TV. Housewives saw it as involving, distinctive, and interesting, and 80 percent found it funny.

**THE RIGHT MEDIA FOR HUMOR**

Choice of media can have a substantial influence on the effect of the humor, because humor may be perceived differently depending on whether the medium is public or private. Online ads are a great example of ads which are generally initially viewed privately. But when the most successful online ads go viral, they can enjoy a very public life; this is a consideration when you intend your ad to go viral (although it is always worth remembering that only a small proportion of ads achieve this).

In the U.K., one ad based upon a crude joke was aired in two adjoining regions, but in one it aired on TV, while in the other it only appeared in the cinema. The demographic profile of respondents was similar, but those who saw it in the cinema enjoyed the ad more than those who viewed it on TV — with 61 percent of the cinema viewers saying they “enjoyed the humor” compared with 52 percent of the TV viewers.

If you liked “Does Humor Make Ads More Effective?” you may also be interested in...

“Do men and women respond differently to ads?”
“What are the pitfalls of using sexual imagery in advertising?”
“Can I make my ad go viral?”