Creativity in Advertising: Eyebrows, Greek Banquets, a Violin and Some Invisible Fish

Last summer I had an interesting experience in a cinema. I’d arrived early and was watching the ads while I munched on popcorn. The film was a popular one and the cinema was full. Around me, people were talking and laughing, waiting for the film to start.

Then another ad started. This one featured two serious-looking children, a boy and a girl, sitting side by side and facing the camera. A lively electropop tune began to play, and the children, still unsmiling, began moving their eyebrows in rhythm to the music. Within seconds, a hush fell over the cinema as the children’s eyebrow gyrations got faster and more complex. Conversations stopped as everyone turned their focus to the facial gymnastics being performed on the screen.

That ad for Cadbury’s Dairy Milk is a great example of one of the chief benefits of creativity in advertising: Creativity can grab attention. People are bombarded by ads on a daily or even hourly basis, but they screen most of the ads out, either actively or passively. When people are not interested in hearing about brands—which is most of the time—they’re not really interested in looking at ads either. But creativity can allow an ad to get past the normal filtering process. Creativity can make people stop what they’re doing and pay attention, even when they know what they’re looking at is an ad.

Simonides used this experience to develop the “method of loci,” a technique for memorizing. Using this method, you associate the items you need to remember with locations on a familiar route, or with rooms in your house, or, as Simonides did, seats around a table. For the system to work for you, the location must be familiar, and the associations you make must be vivid and striking. For example, if you want to remember your shopping list, and the first item on the list is milk, you might mentally place a carton of milk on your bed. You would then place the next item, bread, in the doorway of your
CREATIVITY IN ADVERTISING

POINT OF VIEW

Creativity in advertising

Creativity is an aid to memorability; it can plant associations so deeply that people simply can’t forget them.

Creation is a system used to help remember information. By forming vivid images, the system can make the information more memorable. Harry Lorayne, a mnemonic expert, emphasized the importance of irrational or illogical links. He suggested substitution, where objects are replaced by more familiar ones to aid memory. For example, instead of remembering a fact, one might imagine themselves sleeping on a giant milk carton.

Mnemonic systems have been used for years to aid memory, with varying degrees of success. The World Memory Champion used a journey through their house to memorize a large number of digits in a short time. These systems demonstrate that creativity is essential for memorability. Even ordinary people use them unconsciously—like when they recall an advertising jingle.

When creative qualities are harnessed effectively, associations can be formed that are difficult to forget. For example, the link between cute puppies and Andrex toilet tissue can hardly be forgotten. This is the third role for creativity—helping to stimulate interest and curiosity in a brand.

Early in the twentieth century, a store owner in New York City filled a goldfish bowl with water and placed it alongside a sign that read “Invisible Fish from South America.” This attracted crowds, and the police were often called to clear the sidewalks. This stunt, or something similar, can help generate interest in a brand.

From our point of view, mnemonic systems show us that creativity is an aid to memorability. Ordinary people use them, whether or not they realize it, as they recall advertising jingles. The right creative treatment can make associations so deeply rooted that people simply can’t forget them. Our analysis of advertising shows that the most memorable ads are typically one or more of the following: exciting, intriguing, funny, sexy, surprising, thought-provoking, different, enjoyable, or eye-catching.

IF YOU LIKE THIS YOU MAY ALSO LIKE...

“Creative Effectiveness”
THE VIOLIN PLAYER
In January 2007, at the behest of Washington Post journalist Gene Weingarten, the world-famous violinist Joshua Bell entered the L’Enfant Plaza Metro station in Washington, DC. Dressed in casual clothes, he stood against a wall, took out his $4 million Stradivarius, and began to play. His performance featured great works from the classical repertoire, including Bach’s Chaconne, which Bell describes as “not just one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, but one of the greatest achievements of any man in history.”

The “concert,” which lasted 43 minutes, was videotaped with a hidden camera. The film, which can be seen on YouTube, shows that during the time Bell was playing, 1,097 people passed by. While 37 of them gave money (for a total of $32.17), only five slowed down to listen.

Just three days earlier, listeners had filled Symphony Hall in Boston to hear Joshua Bell play. Good seats went for $100 and up. But a free performance in the DC Metro generated little interest. Why? What was the difference?

The difference was context. People expect to hear great music in a famous concert hall. They don’t expect to hear great music in an underground station, and so they are not prepared to recognize it when they do. As Eli Wilner’s book on antique picture frames, The Gilded Edge, makes clear, the beauty of a fine painting is enhanced by the right frame. Gene Weingarten’s experiment proved the opposite is also true.

The way experiences are framed can fundamentally affect the way they are perceived.

CREATIVE LIONS
Earlier I wrote about using mnemonic systems to commit things to memory. Imaginative and amusing associations can help people remember things, from grocery lists to random strings of numbers. Advertising also creates associations to help people remember things, though the means used are usually more subtle and sophisticated than the simple mnemonic techniques described here. It is the job of the creatives in the ad agencies to set up these associations to leverage the power of creativity in linking brands with motivating ideas and concepts.

So vivid advertising memories can powerfully enhance perceptions of the product experience.

But creative advertising may also associate specific emotions with brands. When warm emotions are evoked by well-branded advertising, those emotions will color perceptions of the brand itself. When you try a brand, conscious of its great advertising, you may unconsciously hope that the product is great too. And then you will tend to find, on the evidence of your senses, that the product is indeed very good.
But what is creativity? What criteria do the judges use in making their decisions? Many people would assert that creativity defies definition—that no definition can possibly encompass all the things that might be creative—but that they know it when they see it. Dictionary.com defines creativity as “the ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships, or the like, and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations.”

There are no patterns, no rules to producing highly creative advertising.

The question of how to define and evaluate creativity is an important question for those of us in the advertising industry, especially those of us who do the work of copy testing. Quantitative pretesting has been criticized for encouraging a “cookie cutter” approach to making ads, for not fully recognizing and rewarding creativity.

But our Link copy testing results belie this assertion. Our study of Cannes Lions award winners (published in Admap in November 2011) found that the winning ads scored high on enjoyment, involvement, positive emotions, and—crucially—being different from other ads. So our Link system confirms the notion that there are no patterns, no rules to producing highly creative advertising. The reality is that the most successful ads are those that are unlike any other. They are “creative” in the sense that Dictionary.com described: They transcend traditional ideas to create meaningful new ones. This is a finding many will find liberating, and one that should resonate with creatives everywhere.

MAKING CREATIVITY EFFECTIVE

In the previously referenced paper, we also analyzed the Link results of ads deemed highly effective by virtue of receiving IPA or Effie awards. Those ads scored high on all the same measures as the Lions winners (enjoyment, involvement, positive emotions and being different). But they also excelled on branding—and that is what made those ads not only creative but effective. Their creativity was linked to the brand.

In 2011, Cannes introduced a new “Creative Effectiveness” category. The Grand Prix winner was a campaign for Walkers Crisps (chips) that creatively illustrated the idea that a pack of Walkers Crisps added excitement to lunchtime sandwiches. The ad did this by highlighting the excitement generated when a host of celebrities, including a boyband, the racing driver Jenson Button, and the actress Pamela Anderson, visited the small English town of Sandwich.

The ad was also judged a winner by our Link system. It grabbed attention and was clearly memorable and well branded, as evidenced by an Awareness Index that was well above average. It generated interest in the brand, demonstrated by a sales increase of 26 percent. And the ad framed the brand experience; endorsement of the statement “Makes my lunch more enjoyable” rose from 21 to 39 percent over the campaign.

FISH FIDDLERS

Creativity has long been at the heart of successful advertising. This point of view goes some way toward explaining why: Creativity helps grab attention, makes an ad memorable, makes a brand seem more interesting, and helps frame a brand experience. And maybe the image of a dozen fish in Greek togas, all playing violins and wiggling their massive eyebrows, will help you remember the importance of creativity.