The Effect of Humor in Advertising on Consumer Attitude toward the Product

By

Daniel English

A Paper submitted
In partial fulfillment of the
Bachelor of Science degree
in Advertising & Public Relations

Degree awarded:
Summer Quarter, 2013
The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Daniel English presented on May 3, 2013.

__________________________
Tracy Worrell
Professor Directing Thesis

__________________________
David Neumann
Thesis Advisor

__________________________
Patrick Scanlon
Department Chair
Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................................4

Introduction ......................................................................................................................................5

Literature Review .............................................................................................................................6

Methods ..........................................................................................................................................11

Results ............................................................................................................................................12

Discussion ......................................................................................................................................14
THE EFFECT OF HUMOR IN ADVERTISING ON CONSUMER ATTITUDE TOWARD THE PRODUCT

Daniel English
Department of Communication
Dr. Tracy Worrell
BS, Advertising and Public Relations

The use of humor in advertising is a popular subject of study and discussion with past research creating a better understanding of how this humor affects recall, understanding and brand attitudes. But, little has been explored in terms of what these advertisements do to the viewer’s attitudes toward the actual product being promoted. This study seeks to investigate the difference between humor in advertisements and the consumer’s attitudes toward the product after viewing the ad. Drawing upon previous research, this study evaluates self-reported attitudes and purchase intentions in response to viewing a television advertisement to better understand the effect humor has on consumers. The results give insight into the practical applications of humor in advertising messages for marketers and companies to consider in their campaigns.
Advertising is a dominant part of our world’s culture. In 2007, a person living in a city saw an average of 5,000 advertisement messages per day, compared to 2,000 thirty years ago (Story, 2007). Ads are placed on everything now, from t-shirts to food packages and from stickers on lampposts to posters on the street. And of course they are still extremely prevalent in media ads are most commonly associated with – magazines, television and the Internet. Advertising on television continues to be a dominant form of selling to consumers. Over $72 billion was spent on television advertising in 2011 – a number that actually increased by 4.5 percent from 2010 (Report, 2008) – and companies are still shelling out top dollar for their ads to run on TV. All types of products and services compete for the attention of consumers. So how do they get that attention?

One way to grab attention is to make the audience laugh. Approximately 25 percent of television advertisements use humor (Shrimp, 2010). But, does humor actually make consumers like the product being advertised? Marketers and advertisers desire to have their products push to the forefront of a consumer’s mind, but if they are using humor to connect to audiences, will the humor actually affect attitudes toward the product or product category. This study investigates the interaction between viewing television commercials with or without humor and consumer attitude toward the promoted product.

This study builds upon previous research that has explored humor in communication, and more specifically, persuasive communication. In the past, research has looked at humorous advertising’s effect on memory recall and brand recognition (e.g. Chung & Zhao, 2011). The present study goes beyond this and focuses on the actual product being advertised, asking if the humor has any similar effect on how consumers feel about it after viewing the video. The present study would also be helpful in analyzing persuasion and humor in advertising and
communication overall, similar to how past research has used findings to explain certain techniques in communicating with audiences. While there is research that has already been presented in the areas of humor and communication, looking at attitudes toward products based on how humorously the communication is presented, can alter how we look at the effectiveness of these persuasive messages. If consumers are less likely to buy because of a lack of humor, or vice versa, companies can adjust their strategies accordingly. In terms of social aspects, the present study is important because it examines how humor is used in communication and the results can show how to effectively use it in a beneficial manner. For example, Public Service Announcements (PSAs) are a form of advertising communication that is not selling a product, but persuading the audience to accept an idea. Using the results of this study, the creators of PSAs can increase the effectiveness and persuasiveness of these messages by incorporating certain levels of humor in the ad to reach viewers better. Such examples of practical applications can benefit many different groups in enabling them to be better persuasive communicators and using resources, like the use of humor, more effectively and appropriately.

**Literature Review**

Humor is a topic that is studied for its impact on society (Wanzer, Frymier & Irwin, 2010) and is often scrutinized for the way it is used (Hackman, 1988). In communication, every facet of humor is explored for its importance and impact on the process of making communication work. Many previous researchers have explored the concept of humor, building an extensive foundation of results to consider in the midst of exploring the use of humor in the present study.
Humor as a Communication Tool

Advertising is, at its core, a communication process. It is the process of a company sending messages to a target group of consumers, with the hope that these consumers will decode the information in a way that makes them want to take action. In this view, the humor is encoded in the message along with the relevant facts or information. Advertisers include this tool in the hope of getting more reaction or response to their messages. It is up to the receiver to decode the humor, and if that does not happen in a particular way the message is skewed.

Merolla (2006) focused on the relationship of communication constructs like nonverbal sensitivity, conversational sensitivity and receiver apprehension to understand humor orientation. It seems that, according to Merolla, humor in interpersonal communication is dependent on many factors including timing, understating the nonverbal cues, sensitivity and decoding. Stepping into small group communication, a 2010 study by Wanzer, Frymier and Irwin explored humor and its role in classroom learning by looking at humor in teachers. The results show self-disparaging humor was effective in the classroom, though the researchers attribute this to the surprise of the humor and lack of expectation for this type of humor. Here, the humor in the communication is not detrimental to the process, so long as all parties understand and accept the humor applied.

In a 1988 study Hackman, individuals viewed different versions of a speech, some including self or other-disparaging humor, and another version without any humor. Hackman (1988) showed public speakers using self-disparaging humor in an informative speech were deemed less credible and seemed less of an expert on the subject, while the speaker using disparaging humor towards others was deemed to have a lower character. However, both types of
humor gave the speaker a higher rating in sense of humor according to the subjects. Looking at this from the perspective of advertising, as the present study is set to do; it would seem that the perceived dip in credibility that Hackman identifies in his study suggests that humor is not always an appropriate tactic to use in advertising, depending on product and audience.

Wagle (1985) explores the idea of using humor to accomplish specific goals in the buyer/seller process in the industrial industry. In the end, Wagle concludes that humor is valuable tool to be used in conjunction with marketing and selling skills and techniques. He notes that it is “judicious” use of humor, applied appropriately and in tandem with other tactics, which makes progress in selling.

**Types of Humor in Advertising**

This study seeks to gain a better understanding of humor’s use in advertising. But humor is a very general category, with many possible sub-groups or variations that can have different implications. As demonstrated in by Wanzer, Frymier and Irwin (2010), the type of humor in a communication has the possibility to alter the effectiveness and impact of the message. A 2001 study by Catanescu and Tom looked at what types of humor where used in television and magazine advertisements. The researchers created seven categories for humor in advertising: Comparison, Personification, Exaggeration, Pun, Sarcasm, Silliness, and Surprise. This list of types of humor is designed to generally encompass all the possible humor tactics used in advertising. The categories allowed them to analyze which types were used in which mediums and how often.

Buijzen and Valkenburg (2004) explored the types of humor styles that appealed most to different age groups, before also analyzing television commercials for specific uses of humor in
order to create a comprehensive and detailed list of humor appeals. Flaherty, Weinberger and Gulas chose to focus on radio advertising in their 2004 study, using a different classification system for humor that led them to focus on incongruity humor. It is understood from these studies that the type of humor used varies across different mediums and can be defined in several ways.

In the advertisements used in the study, the humorous ad makes use of a combination of Situational and Surprise humor. That is, the commercial is funny because the man uses his iPad to buy a Kindle at the beach, and then, when we think he is hitting on the woman, he reveals that he has a husband. The unexpected end gives the commercial its punch line. Also, the conclusions from all three studies demonstrate that different styles can have different levels of effectiveness in certain mediums and appeal to contrasting age groups. It is important to note that this changes the dynamic of an advertisement and alters how the audience of the advertisement receives both the product and specific ad. Therefore, the humor in the advertisement chosen for the present study is appropriate for the age group surveyed and is not intended to be outrageously funny – the product is still the star of the ad.

**Use of Humor in Advertising**

Of course there is research that has already been conducted in the area of humor and its effectiveness in advertising. A 2011 study by Kuilenburg, de Jong and van Rompay, focused on the relationship between humor in an advertisement and brand linkage with the ad. It was concluded that, while both humor complexity and relatedness were connected to brand linkage, the interaction or combination of both produced a very strong effect on brand linkage. This is interesting in terms of the present study, because if there is a link between the humor and brand
linkage or recognition, the higher brand identity could be linked with a stronger positive attitude toward the product, the focus of this paper. If there is a relation, with the results from this study and the present results, one can make an accurate determination of how a customer will react to an advertisement, based on the level and use of humor in the ad.

An example of research more specific to the present study involving humor in advertising can be found in Chung and Zhao (2011). The researchers sought to find out what effect of humor in an advertisement has on attitude toward the ad, the brand and purchase intention in both familiar and unfamiliar brands. Results indicated a similar effect of humor on attitude toward the ad and brand in both familiar and unfamiliar brands. This would suggest that humor has a good chance of affecting attitudes toward the product as well, which is what the present study looks to explore. It is of note that these researchers did not find significant results in all categories however, so more testing would be necessary to garner conclusive findings. We can say that this research is a good base for the present study because it has revealed that it doesn’t matter if the consumer knows the brand or not, a humorous ad is still more effective at getting recall and attitude when it comes to the brand. So by this idea, the brand of a product can be disregarded and the focus can be shifted to the actual product being advertised, which is what the present research looks to evaluate.

So research has explored the effect that humor has on advertising messages, and specifically the recall and attitudes toward the brand or ad itself. But where is the research looking at the effect on the actual product being advertised? How can advertising and the use of humor affect the consumer attitude toward the product being sold? The study’s first research question is: What is the difference between humorous versus fact-based advertising and their effect on consumer attitude toward the product being promoted? And secondly: What is the
difference between type of advertisement viewed, humorous or not, and their impact on consumers’ desire to take action? For this, the study will look at the self-reported level of purchase intent of consumers, including seeking out more information or making a purchase, to see if it can be linked to feelings after viewing the advertisements and compares that to the types of advertisements viewed.

Methods

For this study, a convenience sample of undergraduate students enrolled in communication classes at the Rochester Institute of Technology was used. In total, 78 students participated in the study. The students were shown a 30-second television commercial for an Amazon Kindle product that used either a humorous (coded group 1) or a fact-based (group 2) appeal to advertise the product to the audience. The type of advertisement viewed was randomly assigned to each class that was surveyed, with two classes seeing the humorous ad and another two the fact-based.

Once the students had seen the commercial, they were handed a copy of survey that asked about their attitudes about the product and hypothetical intent to purchase the product (based on the advertisement they viewed). The first item asked students to rank the product advertised in the ad on seven semantic differential scales, each ranging from the one to seven. The seven scales were “Worthless/Valuable”, “Boring/Enjoyable”, “Useless/Useful”, “Inexpensive/Expensive”, “Weak/Powerful”, “I Dislike it Very Much/I Like it Very Much”, and “Uncool/Cool.” The next item asked students how humorous they found the commercial they viewed, rated on a semantic differential scale from “Not Humorous at All” to “Extremely
Humorous.” Next, the survey asked respondents how likely they were to consider the product in
a search for a new tablet (purchase intention) using a 3-point semantic differential scale. These
scales were “Improbable/Probable”, “Unlikely/Likely”, and “Impossible/Possible.” Both the
scales used for evaluating the dependent variables (attitude and purchase intent) are based on
structure used in past research (Chung and Zhao, 2011), which yielded reliability in previous
testing at .87 for attitude and .9 for purchase intent. Finally, the survey had students respond to
some demographic items in order to help categorize data. This included Gender, Age, Ownership
of a tablet/e-reader, and Familiarity with the Kindle brand/product. The class was then debriefed
on the purpose of the study by the researcher and thanked for their participation.

Results

All collected data from the 78 survey respondents was coded into numerical values to be
analyzed. The semantic differential scales for measuring attitude and purchase intent were tested
for reliability, returning Cronbach’s Alpha values of .808 and .940 respectively.

Independent sample T-Tests were conducted on the data, measuring type of
advertisement viewed (1 for humorous or 2 for fact-based) versus the attitude and also versus the
purchase intent. Neither of the variable returned significant results – attitude saw a .055
significance (see Fig. 2) and purchase intent a .181 (see Fig. 4; both with equal variances
assumed) in the t-test for Equality of Means. Attitude had a mean of 4.63 for humorous and 4.97
for fact-based (see Fig. 1), while purchase intent had a mean of 3.99 for humorous and 4.44 for
fact-based (see Fig. 3). Note: a few respondents were dropped from each variable due to a
missing data point(s) that left their scales incomplete.
Figure 1: Group Statistics (Attitude)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AdType</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude 1</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>4.6312</td>
<td>.66950</td>
<td>.10210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4.9667</td>
<td>.79556</td>
<td>.14525</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Independent Samples Test (Attitude)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equal variances assumed</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>Std. Error Difference</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>-.33544</td>
<td>.17214</td>
<td>-.67868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
<td>.064</td>
<td>-.33544</td>
<td>.17754</td>
<td>-.69118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Group Statistics (Purchase Intent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AdType</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PurchaseIntent 1</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3.9852</td>
<td>1.40338</td>
<td>.20920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4.4375</td>
<td>1.51086</td>
<td>.26709</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As seen before in research, humor in advertising is something of a wildcard. The present study set out to uncover how exactly humor could affect the way a consumer views a product being advertised to them on television. While the results of the research are not significant, there are interesting trends that suggest further study might lead to a breakthrough. In both attitude and purchase intent, the average rating of those students who viewed the fact-based advertisement was higher than those who viewed the humorous ad. This would appear to follow the model of previous research stating that humor can detract from the value of the communication message received (see: Hackman, 1988). One can argue that, by looking at the average attitude and purchase intent, the inclusion of humor does little to make a consumer think more positively about the actual product and does even less for the desire to change behavior and purchase the product. However, the data in this study does seem to counter the findings of Kuilenburg, de Jong and van Rompay (2011) and Chung and Zhao (2011), which present positive effects of

**Figure 4: Independent Samples Test (Purchase Intent)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PurchaseIntent</td>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

As seen before in research, humor in advertising is something of a wildcard. The present study set out to uncover how exactly humor could affect the way a consumer views a product being advertised to them on television. While the results of the research are not significant, there are interesting trends that suggest further study might lead to a breakthrough. In both attitude and purchase intent, the average rating of those students who viewed the fact-based advertisement was higher than those who viewed the humorous ad. This would appear to follow the model of previous research stating that humor can detract from the value of the communication message received (see: Hackman, 1988). One can argue that, by looking at the average attitude and purchase intent, the inclusion of humor does little to make a consumer think more positively about the actual product and does even less for the desire to change behavior and purchase the product. However, the data in this study does seem to counter the findings of Kuilenburg, de Jong and van Rompay (2011) and Chung and Zhao (2011), which present positive effects of
humor on advertising goals such as attitude and recall. This might suggest that humor in advertising does more for the brand personality than it does for product expectations, meaning that companies looking to sell their personality to consumers would be better suited to using humor in commercials. As far as effect of humor on purchase intent goes, the lack of significance is not entirely surprising as advertising is a long-term marketing tool that leads to a sale further down the road. It would not be expected for a single television commercial to incite an immediate purchase or slight behavioral change.

Although this may not be a concrete finding currently, more investigation could reveal a potential area of caution for advertisers. This research would imply that attitude change and the foundation of behavior change are not positively increased by the presence of humor. As pointed out above, if a company is promoting a product through advertising, they should focus more on fact-based, rational appeals in their advertisements in order to increase positive attitudes. If a significant finding could be presented, a better knowledge of how and when to use humor in advertising could be applied.

Naturally, this study is not without its limitations. The use of convenience sample of students does not accurately represent what might be true of the general public. Also, the brand is well established and the commercials had been playing for some time before this study, meaning that respondents could have formed predispositions that skew their ability to answer questions specific to the commercial in this setting. Plus the design of the study hinges on the self-reported answers given by students in classes surveyed. There is no natural observation going on – so there is a possibility for respondents to lie on the survey, which means that the reliability of the study could be limited if respondents answer without considering their feelings toward the product.
There is lots of room for expansion and variation in subsequent testing of this study. For example, different types of humor could be explored, different mediums of advertising could be used, or different products focused on. A wider range of study designs and results might be able to give more impact to the findings of the present research. For example, a replication of this study looking at personification humor in commercials could explore the attitudes toward insurance ads that feature personifications such the Allstate “mayhem” character. Another option for future research could explore if there is a difference between the use of humor in clothing commercials versus car commercials or something similar. There is a strong base built on the present research that allows for many further studies to expand upon and establish a greater knowledge of the subject.
References


Report: Tv continues to hold the lion’s share of ad dollars and consumers’ media time. (2012, May 08). Retrieved from NielsenWire: online blog of the Nielsen Company


van Kuilenburg, P., de Jong, M. T., & van Rompay, T. L. (2011). 'That was funny, but what was the brand again?'. International Journal of Advertising, 30(5), 795-814