

How emotion affects advertising

 By John Laurence

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You really have to be operating in the dark ages of marketing if you haven't cottoned on to the importance of emotion in marketing communication.



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Scientists such as Antonio Damasio have shown that without the drive of emotion, humans are generally powerless to choose a path of action.

Advertising and emotion

Advertising execs can now provide backing to their insistence that advertising must build an emotional connection with the audience rather than simply expounding the features and benefits of their brands and products.

But that is tantamount to saying that a cake needs sugar in order to be delicious. How much sugar? When should I put it in? What type of sugar? Which leads us into an investigation into what balance of emotion is going to make people the most interested in purchasing a product. Should there be pain, should there be gain? Do we make people generally happy, or generally sad?

Quantifying emotion

One way to ascertain this is to simply ask people how the advertising made them feel. How many people can remember exactly how they felt at a particular moment when experiencing an ad though? Never mind being able to accurately quantify that emotion. Or be honest about how they felt.

Another method to accurately quantify an audience's response to an ad is to measure their brain activity using electroencephalography (EEG). The electroencephalogram carries a record of the actual emotional response that play out within the human brain, allowing an assessment of how different brand/product interactions affect the consumer.

After a few years of testing TV ads using this methodology, we decided to find out what the best mix of emotion would be in inducing purchase intent. So we selected a sample of 42 TV ads tested with over 500 respondents and looked for what pattern of emotion correlated with the highest self-rated purchase intent.

The results

What we found was that the ads that very high negative emotion (or more accurately, withdrawal) in their openings and very high positive emotion (or approach) in the conclusions were correlated with the highest levels of purchase intent.

We interpret this as follows:

- Negative emotion, through the influences of loss aversion or the negativity bias is very effective at gaining an audience's attention and exerts a greater influence on our moods and thoughts than positive emotion (think of the predominance of negative information in the news). It is usually therefore more effective to start an ad with negative emotion than positive emotion.
- It wouldn't be very useful to have an entire ad based on negative emotion – you require the audience to want to purchase your product or brand. Loss, aversion, or any form of conflict introduced into a TVC must inevitably be resolved by delivering a subsequent promotional message, wherein the brand is the catalyst in the resolution of the conflict. When the brand is heralded as the hero, positive emotional sentiment develops in viewers, but most importantly, such heroics on the brand's part are interpreted by the viewer as emotionally rewarding.

The ads that were best able to move the audience between these emotions were therefore the most highly rated.

Implications

We must, however, be clear that this does necessarily mean that all ads should now start including a logical justification style; where the ad makes a rational argument for a problem and solution. Indeed, the ad with the strongest emotional response had no dialogue whatsoever and featured CGI babies singing in a mother's womb.

Many of the effective ads made use of a story narrative where an individual overcame a challenge in their lives with the help of the advertised brand. Our study provides evidence of the effectiveness of storytelling in driving purchase intent – something innately understood by many advertising agencies, but difficult to prove.

Some ads did make use of a logical argument towards the purchase of the product advertised. The difference in our opinion is the amount of rational argument inherent in the product or category advertised. You may well be willing to expend some effort in processing an argument towards a brand of life insurance, but you are unlikely to do so for a soft drink. Other factors, such as brand familiarity and the importance of varying levels of attention are in all likelihood also important and have opened up new exciting areas for us to explore.

Modern science has opened up a whole new era for advertising and marketing, moving us away from gut feel and hoping for the best to accurate measurement and deep insight. There are exciting times ahead.

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ABOUT JOHN LAURENCE

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