

IMPLICATIONS OF THE PERCEPTUAL PROCESS IN ADVERTISING

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Abstract

Everyday in our contemporary world our perceptual systems are bombarded by advertising messages which claim something that goes the gamut of the sublime to the ridiculous. These messages are not purposeless. Advertising messages are purpose-oriented communication which seeks, in the main, to persuade consumers and make them to be favourably disposed to a product, service, idea or cause. That such messages achieve their goals depends on the perception of the target audience exposed to them. Adverts perceived as credible, convince the audience and achieve the major advertising goal of "closing sales"; advertising perceived as "hullabaloo" by the audience achieves nothing but mere "show." This paper discusses the consumer perceptual process against the backdrop of the dynamics of advertising, and attempts to establish the part played by the perceptual process in eliciting a favourable or unfavourable response to advertising messages

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Consider these claims: "7up the Difference is Clear"; "No one Covers Nigeria Better than MTN"; "Omo Washes Clean and it Shows: "Rothmas: The Best Tobacco Money Can Buy"; Coca-Cola: Make it Real." Whether we like it or not, between the time we open our eyes in the morning and the time the sounds of nocturnal creatures pervade the night, our minds come under a deluge of hundreds of advertising claims. We see them in newspapers and magazines, on trade displays in local stores; unsolicited handbills in our letterboxes and pigeonholes; blazoned messages on vehicles; bumper stickers; supermarket window dressings, buses and even in golf course holes! All around us the war to get our attention rages.

So, what are the implications of our perception of advertising?

2.1 ADVERTISING DEFINED

The word "advertising" is derived from the Latin word "ad vetere," meaning, "to turn the mind towards." By implication, an advertisement is designed to turn people's minds towards the subject of advertising and favourably dispose a person towards buying a product, service or supporting a cause. It is meant to convince, persuade and prod the target audience into taking actions so designed by the sponsor.

"Advertising" as a term obviously defies any consensus definition and many authorities on the subject have defined it in many ways that serve different purposes and circumstances. Albert Lasker, the "Father" of modern advertising, as quoted in Bovee and Arens (1994), says

advertising is "salesmanship in print." But this opinion was held long ago before radio and television, and at a time when the nature and scope of advertising was quite limited.

From the contest of suitable definitions for the term "advertising", held in 1932, under the auspices of Advertising Age, came an aggregate definition which says: "Advertising is the printed, written, spoken or pictured representation of a person, product, service or movement, openly sponsored by the advertiser and at his expense, for the purpose of influencing sales, use, votes or endorsements." Bovee and Arens (1991: 6) define advertising as the non-personal communication of information, usually persuasive in nature, about products (goods and services) or ideas by identified sponsors through the various media.

The bottom line of these definitions is that advertising, in the main, is intended to be persuasive to win converts to a product, service, cause or idea. A company usually sponsors advertising to convince people that its product will benefit them.

3.0 ADVERTISING: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Advertising is as old as humanity. Advertising seems to be part of human nature evidenced since ancient times (Kleppner, 1979). In the biblical encounter between the serpent and Eve, the temptation to eat the forbidden fruit has the semblance of "advertisement." We see the qualities of the forbidden fruit craftily projected by the serpent. Inherent in this communication are the elements of persuasion and propaganda.

In its earliest form, advertising centered on drawing the attention of customers to available goods and services produced by early craftsmen. Town crying apparently was the oldest method of advertising used by these early craftsmen. In many European countries as in England, and in AD 1100, innkeepers often got town criers to blow a horn to gather groups of people who were offered samples of their wines. In Greece, during the Golden Age (450-399 BC) public criers were a civic institution. Men were paid to circulate through the streets of the cities advising the citizens of important news and announcing public events (Wright, 1982). According to Kleppner (1979), Roman merchants, too, had a sense of advertising. The ruins of Pompeii contain signs in stone or terra cotta, advertising what the shops were selling a row of hams for a butcher's shop, a cow for a dairy, a boot for a shoemaker. However, advertising was given impetus by the invention of a system of casting moveable type by the German, Johannes Gutenberg, in 1438. Today, advertising is ubiquitous.

4.0 THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BASIS FOR ADVERTISING

The major purpose of advertising is to persuade people to act or believe through overt appeals to reason or emotion (Okigbo, 1990). Advertising makes the case for a product, service or idea; persuading people to accept them and reminding those who have already used them that their continued patronage is welcome and beneficial. Advertising provides a persuasive strategy that dramatizes the marginal difference which distinguishes competing products and services, and via the psychological processes of rehearsal, coding and cognition (cognitive processes, the message may become internalized and that, readily it is rather obvious that there is no much difference in the various beverages like Eagle Stout, Legend Stout and Guinness Stout, but advertising creates the belief that one brand is really better by persuading consumers that a

brand of beverage, say, Guinness, tastes better. Advertising therefore persuades and influences people on what to buy and do. It fills people's heads with images.

Arguably, advertising has more power to persuade than the solo efforts of the average individual or organization, both in terms of available resources and access to the channels of mass communication. Compelling and often repetitive advertising messages verges on brainwashing. The persuasive power of advertising makes it smack of "relentless propaganda on behalf of goods in general" (Galbraith, 1968). The more abundant goods become and the more removed they are from basic physical and social needs, the more open we are to appeals which are psychologically grounded (Domatob, 1990).

Although advertised products may not usually relate to our urgent needs; we nonetheless desire them because advertising creates desires that hitherto have not existed. Advertising therefore arouses our interests and emotions in favour of certain goods and services upon which our very survival may not depend!

5.0 SOURCE CREDIBILITY: A PERCEPTUAL ISSUE IN ADVERTISING

The source of a message in the advertising communication system is where the message originates. Credibility is the extent to which the recipient [of a message] sees the source as having relevant knowledge, skill, or experience; and trusts the source to give unbiased and objective information (Belch and Belch, 2001). Therefore, source credibility could be said to be those qualities that determine the total character, trustworthiness and perceived experience of the source of the persuasive message. Source credibility is an integral part of the persuasive process; one that can have a massive impact on the relative success or failure of a persuasive message (Adum, 2006). It was certainly in this light that Aristotle pointed out over two thousand years ago, a speaker's integrity is "the most potent of all the means to persuasion" (Berquist and Coleman, 1993).

The issue of source credibility in advertising is determined entirely by the perceptions of the audience receiving the persuasive message (Nelson and Pearson, 1988). The message source may attempt to increase their credibility through revealing relevant experience, learned knowledge and expertise, but the final determination of source credibility is up to the audience

Communication research shows that expert or trustworthy sources are more persuasive than the sources that are less expert or trustworthy, Information from a credible source influences beliefs, opinions, attitudes or behaviour through a process known as internalization, which occurs when the receiver adopts the opinion of the credible communicator, since he or she perceives information from this source as accurate. Once the receiver internalizes an opinion or attitude, it becomes integrated into his or her belief system and may be maintained even after the source of the message is forgotten (Belch and Belch, 2001).

The subject of source credibility has been inexorably linked with the study of persuasion and rhetoric since the time of the Greeks. One of the most fundamental and comprehensive studies of persuasion was conducted by Aristotle and collected in the *Rhetoric* (Bequist, 1993). Aristotle's study of rhetoric is widely regarded as one of the best treatises on the subject ever recorded. Over two thousand years later, his theories regarding the formation of proof are still a fundamental part of persuasion education as a testament to the power of his ideas.

Regarding the formation of proofs, Aristotle believed that there were three primary types:

Logos, defined as the type of proof derived from presenting truth or logical assumptions;

Pathos, defined as the form of proof that depends on stirring emotions within the listener and

Ethos, defined as proof that depends on the believability of the speaker, of the three forms of proof, Aristotle contends that ethos is the most powerful. He writes in the **Rhetoric**:

Ethos is wrought when the speech is so spoken as to make the Speaker credible for we trust good men more and sooner, as a rule about everything: While, about things which do not admit to precision, but only guesswork, we must trust them absolutely

Because source credibility is entirely dependent upon audience perceptions of the message source, it is not hard to understand how perceived credibility can vary widely from one audience member to another.

There are many factors to consider when applying the theory of source credibility to the advertising industry, but chief among them is the fact that the credibility of advertising is usually affected profoundly by the publics' perceptions regarding the brand or product. Established brands like Coca-Cola that have enjoyed long-term success are more likely to be perceived more credibly than unknown brands that are just beginning to communicate with the public. Additionally, the private actions of a company or a corporation can have both a positive and negative effect with regards to credibility.

Many agencies often rely on the credibility of others to bolster their messages when they cannot rely on the inherent credibility of the brand. Some celebrities are so likeable and well known that their very image in the presence of a particular product can help bolster the image.

6.0 THE ADVERTISING COMMUNICATION PROCESS

In human communication process, a source encodes a thought or idea into real or physical forms (spoken words, written words or symbols) and transmits them through a medium to a receiver. The receiver decodes the source's language and actions into a recognizable thought and sends a feedback to the source, provided both partners understand each other (that is in the absence of noise). The model below explains this process:

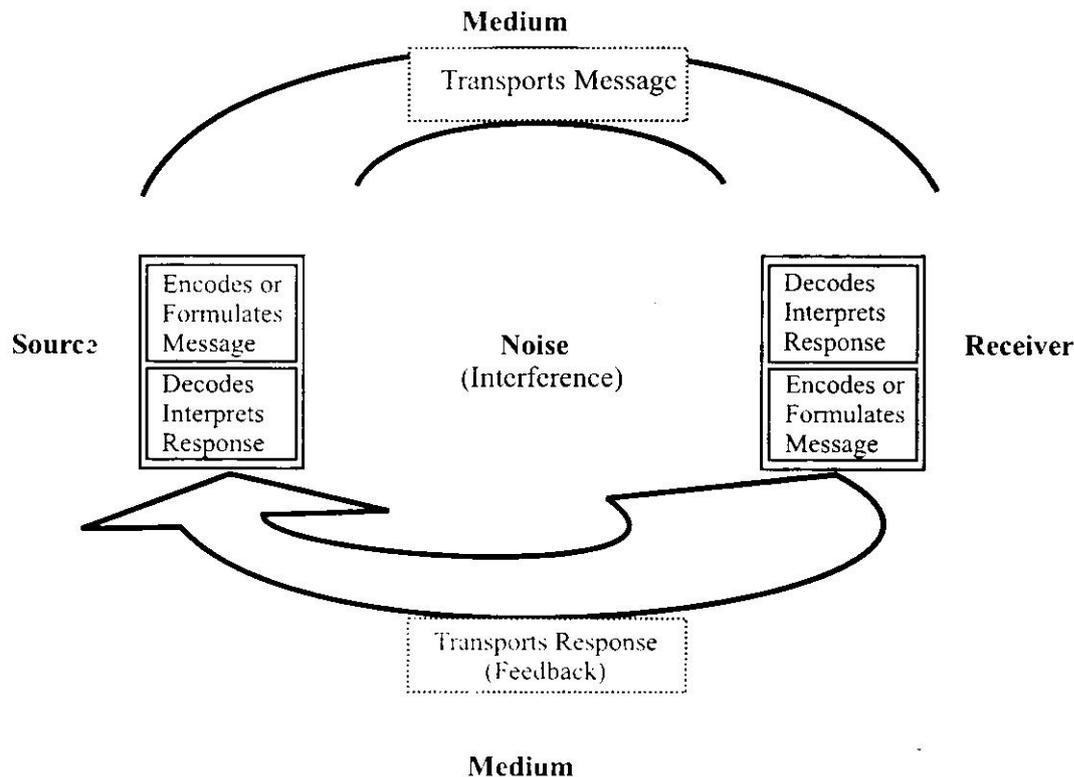


Fig.1 A Communication Model

Many people take communication for granted, therefore they do not appreciate that it is a complex process. However advertisers cannot afford to take this process for granted. They must appreciate that success or failure depends on getting the message into the audiences' general awareness (Bovee and Arens, 1994).

In advertising, the encoding stage begins when advertisers translate an idea or message into words and illustrations or symbols which meanings the audience is able to understand. The message of advertising is passed through a medium (electronic, print etc.) to the receiver. The message is decoded (i.e. interpreted) by the receiver who sends a response (feedback) perhaps by way of responses to a survey, telephone inquiries, requests for more information, visits to stores, sales or redeemed coupons.

It is the way in which the receiver interprets the message that determines the success or failure of advertising messages and this poses a great challenge to advertisers. The way people receive and respond to advertising messages and how they behave as customers in the market place are largely determined by such influences as attitudes, perceptions, personality, self-concept, and culture. This phenomenon is further explained by the Individual Differences

Theory of communication. This theory stipulates that some kinds of communication on some kinds of issues brought to the attention of some kinds of people under some kind of conditions have some kinds of effects (Berelson, 1960). The import of this statement is that a persuasive media message, such as advertising, may or may not have the desired effect on the target audience, depending on the personality, characteristics or make up of the individual members of the audience. Acceptability of an advert message therefore depends on how the audience's perceptual process focuses on organizing, categorizing and interpreting the incoming message.

This perceptual process is oftentimes very individualized and influenced by internal psychological factors.

7.0 THE CONSUMER PERCEPTUAL PROCESS

The first step in promoting any new product is to create awareness perception that the product exists (Bovee and Arens, 1994). The model below depicts how the consumer perceives, accepts, and recalls advertising messages:

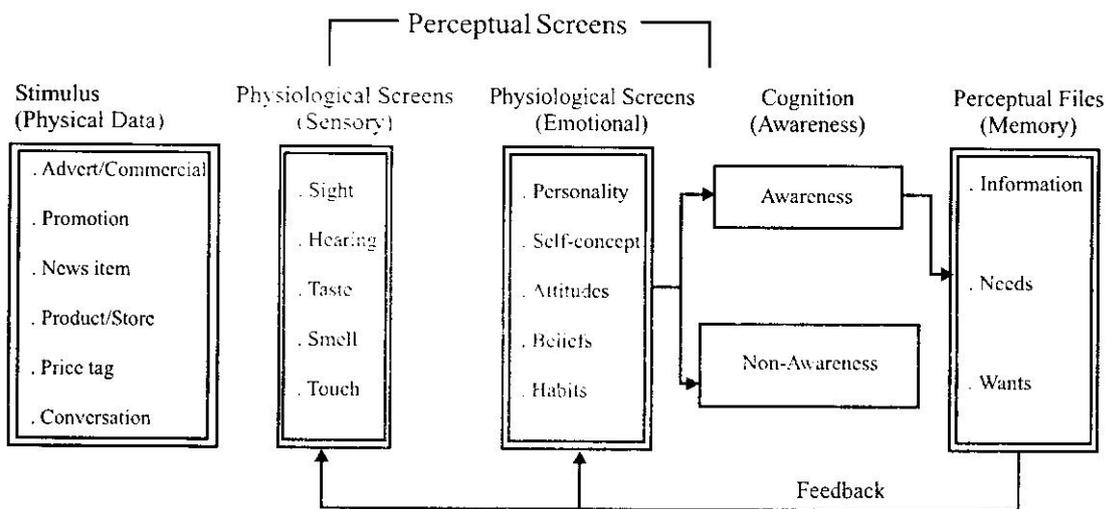


Fig. 2 A Model of Consumer Perceptual Process
(Based on Bovee and Arens Model)

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Perception is our personalized way of sensing and comprehending the stimuli we are exposed to (Settle and Alreck, 1986). This definition reflects the key elements for understanding the consumer perception process, as depicted in fig. 2 above.

- **Stimulus:** This is the physical data that the audience senses. It can appear in the form of billboard display, window display, TV commercial, radio jingles, photography etc. They stimulate the senses in different ways and with varying degrees of intensity that could be measured.
- **Perceptual Screens:** Before data are perceived by the audience, they necessarily must penetrate a set of perceptual screens or filters. These are of two types:

Physiological and Psychological. The psychological screens comprise the five senses sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. Incoming data are detected and measured by these physiological screens. If an advertising message is screened out, perception will not occur and sales which is the ultimate aim of advertising would not be achieved. For instance, an advert message laid out in illegible type may not be read by an average reader and where this is the case perception may be impeded. Also, commercials or jingles which are too loud or shrill may put off the audience, causing perception to suffer.

Incoming data are not only limited by the physical capacity of the senses but also by their feelings and interests. The psychological screens are used by the consumer to evaluate, filter and personalize information according to subjective standards (Bovee and Arens, 1994). These screens make evaluations based on the criteria that include the consumer's personality, self-concept, attitudes, beliefs and habits. These screens help the audience to make up summary notions and concepts from a medley of complex data that ordinarily may be too difficult to articulate. Perceptual screens simply help the audience to accept or reject stimuli. This is called the selective perception process as illustrated in the diagram below:

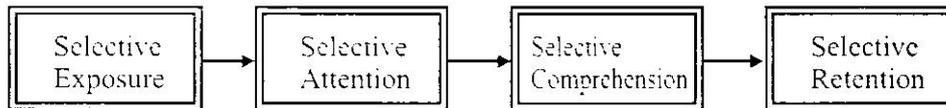


Fig.3 The Selective Perception Process

Selectivity occurs throughout the various stages of the consumer perceptual process. Selective Exposure occurs when consumers choose whether or not to make themselves available to information. A viewer for instance has the power of choice to leave or remain in a room during commercial breaks that is to say, he or she chooses whether to be exposed to the advertising message or not. Selective Attention occurs when the consumer chooses to focus attention on certain stimuli while excluding others (Belch and Belch, 2001). Some studies of selective attention estimate that the typical consumer is exposed to nearly 1,500 adverts per day. yet perceives only 76 of these messages (Bauer and Greyer, 1968). Selective Comprehension implies that consumers interpret information on the basis of their own attitudes, beliefs, motives, and experiences. Selective Retention implies that consumers choose to forget or remember certain information they see, hear or read after attending to and comprehending them.

- **Cognition:** This has to do with awareness. When our senses detect a stimulus and allow or filter it through the screens, we become aware of it. Whereby it relates to our previous experiences, we also comprehend and accept it. At this point we can say that perception has taken place. For the consumer, this is an important experience since comprehension and acceptance of a stimulus enkindles perception, bringing it into the reality orbit of the consumer.
- **Perceptual Files:** When cognition takes place, the consumer has to decide where to file what has been perceived. Just like a computer, our minds are like memory banks, and the stored memories in our minds are called the perceptual files (or mental files). As new information hits our perceptual system, we necessarily file it. else we instantly forget it. This filing is done both consciously and, more often unconsciously. In our information society, stimuli deluge our senses and crowd our mental files. It is important for advertisers to understand what is in the consumer's mental files so as to know how to employ some positioning strategy to penetrate the consumer's perceptual screens.

8.0 CONCLUSION

Knowledge of how consumers acquire and use information from external sources is very important to advertisers and marketers in formulating communication strategies that would "close sales" (i.e. get the consumer to make effective purchase). With a better understanding of mental processes, advertisers become well positioned to evaluate how consumers perceive their messages. They can ascertain what prospective consumers think or know about their products, and how such prospective consumers might develop the habit of purchasing them.

In the final analysis, it is how the audience perceives advertising messages that determines whether such messages have the intended effect or not; and a well-managed consumer perceptual process, to a very great extent helps the cause of advertisers and advertising.

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