

The message in advertising is irrelevant, new research shows

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Creativity and emotion are what makes advertising successful, not the message it is trying to get over, new research shows. Dr Robert Heath, from the University of Bath's School of Management, found that advertisements with high levels of emotional content enhanced how people felt about brands, even when there was no real message.

However, advertisements which were low on emotional content had no effect on how favourable the public were towards brands, even if the ad was high in news and information.

Dr Heath, working with the research company OTX, tested 23 TV ads that were on air at the time in the USA and 20 that were on air in the UK, for their levels of emotional and rational content.

They then asked a second sample of 200 people in each country how favourable they were towards the brands in the advertisements. Those who had been exposed to ads with high emotional content showed a marked positive shift in their favourability towards the brand. But those who had seen ads with low emotional content showed no real shift in favourability, even when they had a high level of news and information.

In a paper in the December issue of Journal of Advertising Research, Dr Heath cites the Renault Clio as an example of successful emotional advertising. Launched in the UK in 1992, the firm avoided running a straightforward factual campaign in favour of the 'Papa/Nicole' series of ads about philandering French people.

"The launch of the Renault Clio was an outstanding success, despite the ad failing to communicate the main message of small car convenience and big car luxury" says the paper. "The success...suggests that it was some aspect of the emotional appeal of the scenario portrayed that influenced viewers."

The findings question "the assumption in most advertising models that it is the communication of the factual message that gives advertising its persuasive power. It seems to be the case that those who want their advertising to build strong relationships between the consumer and the brand would be well advised to focus more attention on the emotional metacommunication – the creativity – in their advertisements, than they do on the rational message communication."

The paper also suggests that evoking positive emotions lowers attention, making people less likely to realise that their emotions are being influenced.

But the research says that advertisers who want to get particular information across have a problem: the most effective advertisements seem to be those with little information and a lot of emotional content.

Dr Heath, who wrote the best-selling monograph *The Hidden Power of Advertising*, and has worked in advertising and marketing for 30 years, said of his findings: "It has been believed in the advertising industry for some years that the creative idea gives the brand a competitive edge, and that the claims in advertising are often there just to allow the brand to set up a dialogue with the consumer.

"Our research findings seem to indicate this is true. In advertising, it appears to be the case that it's not what you say, but the way that you say it, that gets results."

Source: University of Bath

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