

Fear factor isn't enough: Ads have to gross you out to work best

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(PhysOrg.com) -- We've all seen the ads meant to scare us into buying products like protective sunscreen or to avoid doing something like drugs. Well, it turns out those advertisements may only freeze us with fear and inaction. New research from the W. P. Carey School of Business at Arizona State University shows, in order to work best, these ads also have to disgust and gross us out.

“Fear creates uncertainty and insecurity over what to do, but [disgust](#) gives us a very strong impulse to avoid and distance ourselves from the item or situation as quickly as possible,” explains Andrea Morales, W. P. Carey School of Business marketing professor, lead author of the work. “When you add a disgusting message or image to an advertisement, it can significantly increase the ad’s effectiveness.”

The new research from Morales and her colleagues was just posted online by the Journal of Marketing Research. It points to successful, disgusting campaigns, such as one by the New York City Department of Health that centered on images of soda turning into gobs of fat. Department officials say sugar-rich beverage consumption in the area dropped by 12 percent after the campaign. Other popular advertisements in the disgusting category include a medication ad with a creepy yellow rat-like creature attacking a human toenail, a pain-medication ad featuring a pair of feet covered in fire ants, and an anti-smoking matchbook with graphic images of decayed, blackened teeth.

“Disgust dramatically enhances persuasion and compliance above and

beyond just fear appeals,” says Morales. “You have to go beyond scare tactics to produce a strong and immediate avoidance reaction or a change in behavior. For example, disgust is especially good at motivating people toward losing weight, quitting smoking or changing another behavior to improve their health.”

In particular, the research discusses a real ad campaign in Britain that showed graphic images linking cigarettes with fat-filled arteries. The 2004 campaign by the British Heart Foundation and the local Department of Health was so successful that the United Kingdom’s government is planning to print these pictorial-warning images on all tobacco products sold in the U.K.

“We’ve also seen several recent ads for cleaning products that disgust viewers by talking about and showing the dirt, grime and germs left behind when you use other, less effective mops, cleansers, even toothpaste,” says Morales. “A new series of Febreze commercials shows people in filthy rooms, but smelling pleasant odors thanks to the spray.”

In a series of five experiments, the researchers repeatedly found the same thing. When people looked at ads with neutral messages or those simply meant to induce [fear](#), they didn’t work as well as those using disgust.

For example, 155 undergraduate students looked at various versions of a real anti-meth ad with the same words and format, but different, altered images. The version with a teen whose face was covered in open sores was found to be much more effective than the versions with a picture of a coffin or two teens sitting side by side. The coffin, while scary, didn’t portray an immediate, imminent, disgusting threat.

Another experiment involved showing participants a [sunscreen](#) ad with identical images, but different text in each case. The most persuasive

version talked about “open sores that crust and do not heal for weeks,” “scaly red patches” and “wart-like growths that ooze and bleed.” The reaction to it was far more significant than a neutral ad version and one that simply talked about “a severe sunburn” and the “possibility of heat stroke.”

Morales’ co-authors are Eugenia Wu, assistant professor at Cornell University and Gavan Fitzsimons, professor at Duke University.

More information: The full write-up called “How Disgust Enhances the Effectiveness of Fear Appeals,” is available at the *Journal of Marketing Research* website at [www.journals.marketingpower.co ... /10.1509/jmr.07.0364](http://www.journals.marketingpower.com/10.1509/jmr.07.0364) .

Provided by Arizona State University

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