

For marketers, failing to align the emotions of your ads with TV programs may turn off consumers

April 6 2015

A sad TV drama comes to conclusion, fading to black as music swells, and leaving the audience emotionally torn about the future of the main characters. Suddenly, the TV cuts to a peppy commercial and viewers are faced with the relentless cheer of an insurance spokesperson pitching their latest money saving product. This is a common occurrence in today's prime time-driven entertainment culture, but new research from Columbia Business School shows that this juxtaposition of emotions can leave TV viewers puzzled at the swing in content and emotion, so much so that these potential consumers may ignore the ad altogether and will be unlikely to recall the advertiser.

Columbia Business School Professor of marketing Keith Wilcox calls this phenomenon the "deactivating" emotion and shows why marketers and ad buyers might want to opt for ads that are only moderately energetic as opposed to ads with boundless energy and pep. The paper, titled "Consumers' Response to Commercials: When the Energy Level in the Commercial Conflicts with the Media Context," was co-authored by Nancy M. Puccinelli of Oxford University's Saïd Business School.

A viewer in a state of high activation is alert, both physically and mentally, while one in a state of deactivation has relatively lower physical and cognitive activity, which makes the viewer less responsive to high-energy commercials. "When you feel low or sad, ads that are high energy are difficult to watch," Wilcox says. "So you spend less time

watching, and the ad is less effective."

Although previous research has looked at how media-induced emotions can influence [consumers'](#) opinions of ads, the new study is among the first to analyze how the "activation," or energy levels of media-induced emotion, influences consumers' responses to commercials. An emotion's activation level isn't a simple question of whether the emotion is considered positive or negative, Wilcox explains. Anger is a negative emotion, but triggers a state of high activation. On the other hand, both sadness and contentment tend to induce a state of deactivation, or low energy.

The researchers conducted a series of six studies to examine these activation levels. In one study, 142 people watched one of two short videos: a clip from the 1979 movie "The Champ," in which a young boy cries over the death of someone close to him; or a clip from a documentary about Albert Einstein. Next, the participants watched one of two 30-second commercials—one rated highly energetic, or one rated moderately energetic—for Geico.

The study found that viewers who had watched the clip from "The Champ," and were therefore experiencing a deactivating emotion, spent less time watching the highly energetic commercial, compared with viewers who watched the moderately energetic commercial. The study also showed that viewers who had watched the Einstein clip, and were therefore in a neutral state, spent just as much time watching the highly energetic commercial as they spent watching the moderately energetic commercial.

Based on these findings and similar results from five other studies, Wilcox and Puccinelli concluded that the effects of media-induced emotion are significant. A meta-analysis of the six studies shows that consumers experiencing a deactivating emotion will respond 50 percent

more favorably to a moderately energetic commercial than to a highly-energetic commercial. And, perhaps because of the increasing difficulty of reaching consumers, a vast majority of ads—for example, over 80 percent of those embedded on Hulu, the researchers found—are highly energetic.

"If you're going to place an ad during a sad movie or TV show, you shouldn't go with an ad that is highly energetic," Wilcox advises. "If you can't tell or don't know what media your ad will be placed in, you should go with a moderately energetic ad."

More information: journals.ama.org/doi/abs/10.1509/jm.13.0026

Provided by Columbia Business School

Citation: For marketers, failing to align the emotions of your ads with TV programs may turn off consumers (2015, April 6) retrieved 22 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-04-align-emotions-ads-tv-consumers.html>

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