

Emotionally appealing ads may not always help consumer memory

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Emotional appeals in advertisements may not always help improve consumers' immediate recall of a product, says a new paper co-written by Hayden Noel, a clinical associate professor of business administration at the Gies College of Business at Illinois. Credit: Gies College of Business

In almost all successful advertising campaigns, an appeal to emotion

sparks a call-to-action that motivates viewers to become consumers. But according to research from a University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign expert who studies consumer information-processing and memory, emotionally arousing advertisements may not always help improve consumers' immediate memory.

A new paper co-written by Hayden Noel, a clinical associate professor of business administration at the Gies College of Business at Illinois, finds that an ad's emotional arousal can have a [negative effect](#) on immediate [memory](#) but a positive effect on delayed memory—but only if the level of emotional arousal elicited by the ad is congruent with the ad's claims.

"Emotionally arousing appeals have long been used in [advertising](#), but the impact of those appeals on consumers' memory has always been a bit unclear," Noel said. "So we examined the impact of different aspects of emotionally arousing ads on memory. Why did we focus on emotion? Well, in the majority of business-to-consumer ads that are crafted to drive sales, eliciting emotional activation, or arousal, plays a critical role."

In three experiments using print and video ads from different English-speaking countries, Noel and co-author Hila Riemer of Ben Gurion University of the Negev tested the moderating roles of retention time and the fit between the emotional arousal communicated in the ad and the ad [claim](#). All experiments used combinations of low- and high-emotionally arousing ads.

The researchers found that when the level of emotional activation elicited by the ad doesn't fit the ad's claim, then the message conveyed ultimately doesn't stick in the consumer's mind.

"It's an examination of boundary conditions under which you can maximize the use of emotional appeals," Noel said. "And the role of

retention time shows that low-arousal stimuli are better remembered in the short term, but high-arousal stimuli are better in the long term. But if the emotional arousal doesn't match with the ad's claim—if you're trying to promote the idea of a relaxing vacation with images of activity—then there's no effect. Ultimately, advertisers should use emotionally arousing messages only if they are interested in improving consumers' long-term memory of the ad, and avoid such messages if the goal is to enhance their short-term memory of the ad and its claims."

Emotional appeals continue to be essential tools for marketers, and emotionally arousing ads are generally the most successful type of advertisement, "leading to higher levels of profit relative to other ads that may [appeal](#) to intellect or rational thought," Noel said.

"Ads that pump up the emotional content really move the needle," he said. "Advertisers know that for an ad to be effective, it needs to be memorable, which accounts for how often they use high-intensity appeals. But over time, that's problematic. Creatives tend to fall in love with the quirky and funny ads that otherwise have little to do with the claims the ad is making. So emotionally arousing advertisements may not always be helpful or provide an advantage in remembering the ad's content.

"You don't want creatives to ignore fit or relevance at the expense of the emotion."

Noel said the research has practical implications for advertisers and marketers interested in developing suitable message strategies under various circumstances.

"In 2019, \$239 billion was spent on advertising," he said. "In election years, we typically see an increase in advertising, but COVID-19 will put a damper on 2020's final tally. However, advertising will continue to be a

very large and important industry in the U.S., which is home to some of the largest advertising spenders on the planet, as well as consumers who are routinely exposed to extensive advertising campaigns.

"All of those factors make it even more critical now to ensure advertising effectiveness, given that the market and budgets have shrunk so much because of the pandemic."

The paper was published in the *International Journal of Advertising*.

More information: Hila Riemer et al. The effect of emotionally-arousing ad appeals on memory: time and fit matter, *International Journal of Advertising* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/02650487.2020.1822670](https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2020.1822670)

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