

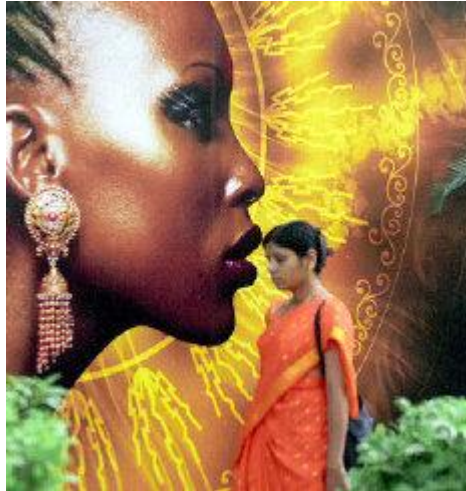
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How advertising works

— Shashi Ashiwal



Powers of persuasion: Traditional views of advertising hold that ads basically communicate a message and keep improving a brand's image gradually. However, an effective ad also has to persuade.

This is not just a topic but also the title of a famous series of books written by Prof. John Philip Jones.

We have all been intensely involved with advertising in one capacity or the other — some of us as brand / advertising managers, and all of us as audience for TV / press / radio ads.

So how exactly does advertising work?

The first task of any advertisement campaign is to make the consumers aware that such a brand / product exists in the market. This is more important than it sounds.

There are plenty of good products out there on shop shelves or in the world of IT and other services that consumers are not aware of.

Therefore, though most of us often see advertisements as a nuisance when they interrupt a match or serial telecast, the fact is that advertising serves the social purpose of enabling consumers to exercise choice.

For brands that already enjoy high awareness, advertising can either serve to create awareness of a new variant or a new scheme as the case might be.

However, the fact that a brand enjoys high awareness and has no new variant or schemes does not mean it should go easy on advertising. A brand needs to be constantly visible in the mass media, partly so that consumers don't forget it, and also to reassure loyal consumers that their brand is still going strong.

Creating awareness for the brand itself has two dimensions to it. The first is that the ad must be good enough to cut through the enormous clutter of other ads and get noticed. Run-of-the-mill ads need enormous amounts of media spending to avoid getting lost in the crowd.

An ad which is unusual enough or attractive enough to get noticed makes life a lot simpler. The second dimension to creating awareness is bonding the brand name clearly to the ad. I am sure most of us can think of ads that were really good and memorable in terms of the storyline or the music, but are unable to recall what brand the ad was for. Such ads are good at cutting through the clutter, but don't do anything for the brand as the brand name is not registered.

The next consideration for effective advertising is communication of the right message. The message could be some product feature; or it could be about establishing what kind of audience is being targeted; or – most effective but also most difficult – creating an emotional bond with the consumer. The current Vodafone series is an excellent example of such advertising

When the brand name and the message have been clearly communicated, the first part of the ad's job is over – that of effectively conveying something to the target audience.

Traditional views of advertising have held that ads basically communicate a message, and keep improving a brand's image as a gradual process.

Ads were not expected to do any actual, immediate selling. However, over the last decade-and-a-half, it has been recognised that ads also have the power to persuade the consumer to buy. This has been demonstrated through rigorous experiments conducted by Prof. Jones and others.

Therefore, an effective ad also has to persuade. Persuasive power is partly a function of the creative execution of the ad (attractive, emotional connect through a scenario / song, entertaining, etc.) and partly a function of the product benefit being communicated. The product benefit needs to be sufficiently important from the consumers' point of view, and also sufficiently differentiated from what the other brands are claiming.

The above is really a wish-list of what makes an ad effective. Very few ads probably get everything right; and in an increasingly crowded marketplace, the bar is constantly being raised higher

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