

Emotion in TV ads

Chuck Young, Ameritest, and **John Kastenholz**, Unilever, explain how to use emotion in TV commercials, and look at the importance of dramatic structure

ON AN INTELLECTUAL LEVEL, television commercials work by telling us what we are supposed to think about a product or service, but on another level they work by showing us how we are supposed to feel about a brand. Good storytelling, which unites ideas with emotions, lies at the heart of advertising effectiveness. For television, that means constructing a visually compelling story with moving pictures.

In a recent interview with the *Harvard Business Review* (1), Robert McKee, one of the most respected screenwriting lecturers in Hollywood, discussed some of the structural principles involved in telling a good story, and pointed out the benefits of applying these to the practice of management. Most executives make the mistake of attempting to persuade using 'lectures' replete with statistics, facts, litanies of bullet points and quotes from authorities. McKee argues convincingly that executives could be more persuasive using 'dramas' – compelling stories packed

with emotional power. For the ad business, understanding the role of the brand in the context of the different structures of storytelling lies at the heart of how to analyse a television commercial.

Along similar lines to McKee, ad researcher Bill Wells (2) classified all TV commercials into two fundamental types: lectures and dramas. This simple categorisation brought some clarity to the debate about the role of reason and emotion in advertising. But while lectures tend to be simply a linear presentation of features and benefits designed to convey a rational argument for buying the brand – a unique selling proposition – when we talk about dramas, both light and comic as well as more emotionally serious, we must recognise that structural issues are more complex. Good stories can be told in more than one way.

In fact, from our pre-testing experience we have identified four distinct structures associated with effective

emotional advertising. And the role of the brand in each of these four types of stories is quite different.

To explain these structures we must first describe how we measure the emotion in TV commercials. For McKee, 'A story expresses how and why life changes.' To measure the emotion generated by a commercial story, therefore, requires a dynamic variable that captures how the audience's feelings change as they move through the film – we call the measure we use the 'Flow of Emotion'.

The Flow of Emotion®

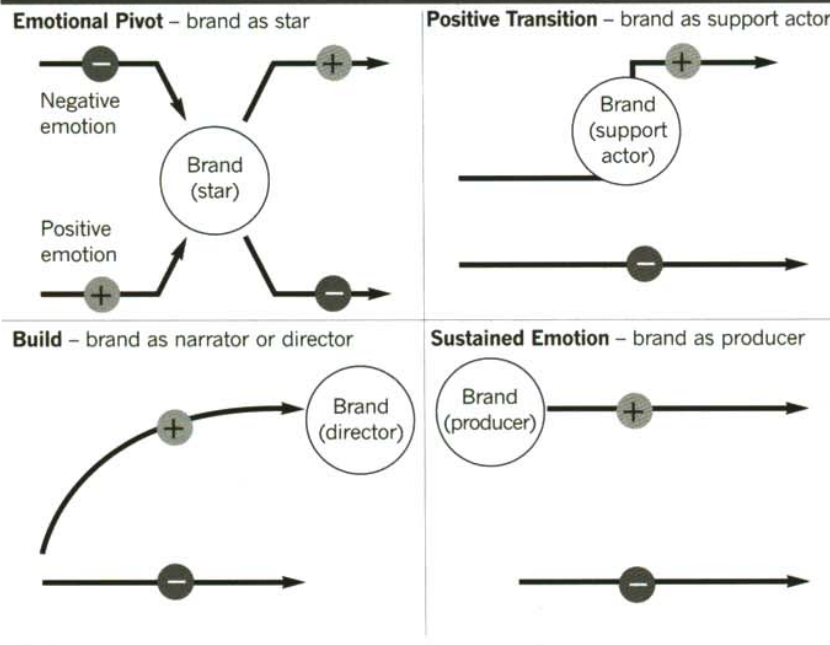
The Flow of Emotion® is measured using a similar picture-sorting approach to that used to measure the Flow of Attention®, described in previous articles and presentations (3, 4). A deck of photographic images, created by grabbing key frames from the commercial to represent the visual content of the ad, is sorted on a five-point scale ranging from very strong positive to very strong negative feelings.

Importantly, the number of pictures used in the sort is a function of the visual complexity of the ad – from 10 to 30 images for a 30-second spot – rather than as a mechanical function of time. By partitioning the advertising experience by the rate of visual information flow, rather than by the clock, we are measuring the change in emotional response in terms of the subjective time-flow of the story.

The construct employed here is to model emotion as a 'fluid' pumped through an ad – that is, the more emotionally engaging a commercial is visually, the more volume of emotion is pumped in. To expand the metaphor, emotion is thought of as coming in two flavours, positive and negative, so that the dynamic tension between the two can be analysed to understand the dramatic structure of a commercial. We visualise this structure by creating a graphic that superimposes two curves: one represents the percentage of respondents who choose the top two boxes (positive end of the scale) and the other represents the

FIGURE 1

Different emotional structures





Chuck Young is founder and CEO of Ameritest, an international advertising and brand research company.



John Kastenzholz is vice president of consumer and market insight, at Unilever home and personal care in North America.

percentage choosing the bottom two (negative end of the scale).

The Flow of Emotion® and pre-testing measures

The average level of these positive and negative flows is the area under each of these two curves. The relationship between these averages and commercial performance measures on two pre-testing systems used by Unilever is shown in Table 1.

For over a year Unilever North America has been collecting TV pre-testing measures from both Millward Brown and Ameritest (5, 6). The correlation between the diagnostic measure of the Flow of Emotion® and the performance measures produced by the two systems for a sample of 68 commercials shows a similar pattern.

The Flow of Emotion® does not strongly predict attention-getting power for either system. This is highly desirable, since attention and emotion are conceptually distinct. It is easy to think of commercials that break through the clutter but do not motivate you to buy, as well as those that have a compelling strategic message but do not get attention. However, there is a significant relationship between the emotion flows and both measures of branding; and an even stronger relationship between emotion flows and measures of communication effectiveness and motivation (for example, purchase intent).

We interpret this to be like the concept of 'working energy' in physics, where the distinction is made between the total energy of a system and the energy available to do work. The total emotional energy of an ad may contain a component of entertainment value or even borrowed interest for the purposes of attracting attention, but the Flow of Emotion®, as measured, relates primarily to the 'working emotion' in the system that is available to build the brand and sell products.

As we will see, the statistical relationship between the emotional flow and

motivation or selling effectiveness is in fact an understatement, because there is a type of advertising where negative emotions can be organised to sell brands.

Four dramatic structures

The dramatic structure of a commercial may be thought of as organised emotion. In our pre-testing work we have identified four types of emotional organisation or dramatic structures which, in general, are found in effective commercials (for example, commercials that score well on pre-test performance measures) – the Emotional Pivot, the Positive Transition, the Build, and Sustained Emotion (see Figure 1).

1. The Emotional Pivot This involves a 'phase transition' in audience emotional states, from a beginning negative state to an ending positive state. It is characterised by strong negative emotion ratings at the beginning, which then vanish abruptly and are replaced by strong positive emotions by the end of the ad. The point in the ad where the negative emotions flip over to positive emotions is the 'emotional pivot'. Problem/solution commercials are one genre of advertising with

this type of emotional structure.

2. The Positive Transition This structure also involves an abrupt or discontinuous change in emotion states, but this time from low-level positive to a higher-level positive state – like an energy jump in quantum mechanics. Thus, the flow graph looks like a step function. Executions that make use of a reveal technique, where there is a moment of sudden realisation that the ad is about something completely different from what one originally thought, are examples of this type of structure.

3. The Build The third type involves a smoothly increasing flow of positive audience feelings climaxing in an emotional high point at the end of the ad. Humorous commercials with a strong visual payoff produce examples of this type.

4. Sustained Emotion The fourth structure represents commercials that simply make you feel good from beginning to end. The flow graph shows a high positive, but flat, pattern, indicating a high volume of emotion being pumped ▶

TABLE 1

Flow of Emotion® and performance measures on pre-tests

	Positive flow of emotion	Negative flow of emotion
Liking	0.46 ¹	-0.51 ²
Ameritest measures		
Attention	-0.08	0.13
Branding	0.19 ¹	-0.24 ²
Communication (strategic message playback)	0.31 ²	-0.21 ²
Motivation (weighted purchase intent)	0.58 ²	-0.57 ²
Millward Brown measures		
Attention	-0.17 ¹	0.33 ²
Branding	0.29 ²	-0.27 ²
Communication effect	0.51 ²	-0.59 ²
Overall effectiveness index	0.44 ²	-0.33 ²

Notes: ¹Significance > 95% confidence, ²Significance > 99% confidence, N = 68 Unilever commercials

through the ad. Montage commercials with strong music tracks are examples of this type.

It should be noted that lecture-type ads will look like this last type of emotional ad in terms of the flow graph, the main difference being that the focus of audience attention in the ad is on rational information rather than aesthetic or emotional content. We should also mention that in a paper published last year we showed that the only type of structure rewarded by traditional day-after-recall testing systems is the lecture-type ad (4).

Each of these structures may be thought of as an elementary building block that in longer pieces of film may be combined with others in different ways to create more complex stories, though most 30-second commercials are short enough to represent fairly pure examples of one type.

In analysing an ad, we should also be careful to distinguish between emotional effects intended by the creative – the purposeful use of negative emotions in an emotional pivot – versus unintended effects, which represent opportunities for polishing or improving the ad. Our extensive pre-testing experience has often shown that suboptimal commercials (those that fail to meet or exceed hurdles or norms for attention, branding, communication and motivation) do not introduce the brand at the proper time so it can ‘take credit’ for an emotional pivot, or use an unclear, disorganised or incompletely realised dramatic structure.

The four different roles of the brand

Notice that, in two of the four structures, the brand identifier is introduced in the middle of the commercial, as part of the action, while in the other two the brand is a bookend, either at the beginning or the end of the ad. The timing of the introduction of brand identifiers – for example, package, name, logo – is key to defining the role of the brand in the different structures. A simple way of thinking about the differences is to think of the brand in terms of four different Hollywood types.

1. Brand as the star The most obvious role for the brand is as the star of the little

movie that is a TV commercial. In the first type of drama, the Emotional Pivot, the plot is quite simple: negative dramatic tension is created at the beginning of the ad, then the brand arrives on its white horse and makes the negative feelings go away, so the audience leaves with a happy ending. If the brand arrives at just the right time, which is at the boundary between the negative and the positive emotion state, then the brand receives the credit of being the cause of this change or resolution of emotional tension – the brand clearly becomes the hero. This is the role of the brand in our Thermasilk illustration.

2. Brand as supporting actor In the positive transition, the brand is not the star, but plays the role of supporting actor. It is Sancho Panza to the consumer’s Don Quixote. The consumer, by projection, is given the starring role. The brand is part of the action, however, necessary to advance the scene and create twists in the plot. The role of the sporty car in some automotive advertising, for example, is to take ordinary life and elevate it to a higher plane of experience – which is the promise the brand is making to the consumer as driver. Again, timing is key with this type of dramatic structure: the brand should arrive at the boundary between the low and the higher emotion state – so that the brand receives the credit as the cause of the enhanced consumer experience.

3. Brand as director In the Build, the brand is not an actor in the story but is only acknowledged in the credits at the end of the film. The brand is the director, an unseen but always-present intelligence, building a story to give meaning or definition to the experience promised to the consumer. Many of the IBM blue letterbox commercials are of the director type.

4. Brand as producer The fourth type – the thrilling exciting hilarious celebration of amazing sights and sounds you have never seen before – brought to you by – presented to you by – the brand!

It is the brand as the producer of

sustained emotions, the rock concert promoter of good vibes, the PT Barnum of emotional end benefits. And it is upfront about telling you so. No shyness here. (But remember, substitute rational selling propositions for emotions in this model and – hey presto! – you suddenly have brand as lecturer.)

Summary

We have seen all four approaches to emotional advertising work effectively in the sense that they score well on measures of performance. Yet the four types represent a considerable repertoire for deploying emotions in the service of building brands. This analysis is confirmation of the idea that advertising can work in more than one way, particularly on an emotional level. What this means from a practical perspective is that creatives should be empowered to depict and attempt to evoke the full spectrum of human emotion from despondence to elation. It is also a reminder to students of advertising – and good storytelling – that structure and content are also important, regardless of the type of advertising we are talking about. ■

1. B Fryer: *Storytelling that Moves People: A Conversation with Screenwriting Coach Robert McKee*. *Harvard Business Review*, June 2003.
2. W Wells: *Lecture versus Drama*. In P Cafarella and A Tybout (eds), *Cognitive and Affective Responses to Advertising*. Lexington Books, 1989.
3. C E Young: *Brain Waves, Picture Sorts® and Branding Moments*. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 42(4), July/August 2002.
4. J Kastenholz and C E Young: *Why Day-After Recall Misses the Emotion in Advertising that Builds Brands*. Paper presented at the 49th Annual Conference of the Advertising Research Foundation, April 2003.
5. J Kastenholz and C E Young: *A Film Director’s Guide to Ad Effectiveness*. *Admap*, September 2003.
6. J Kastenholz, G Kerr, and C Young: *Focus and Fit: A Look at Three Measures of TV Commercial Branding*. Paper presented at the Advertising Research Foundation Week of Workshops Conference on Marketing ROI, September 2003.

chuck@ameritest.net
john.kastenholz@unilever.com

