

Making connections

How persuasive a TV commercial is depends on how well connected each component part is to those that come before and after it

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The art of persuasion usually involves solving the problem of how to make a connection with your audience. For consumer brands, this problem can be solved in one of two ways. You can reconnect with your existing customers, using advertising to strengthen their attachments toward the brand. Or, you can connect a new idea or a new feeling to consumers' existing neural network of beliefs to stretch what the brand means to them.

Advertising film connects our thoughts and emotions in time. But, though images from TV or the internet are delivered in a linear sequence, that is not to say that we, in the audience, experience the meaning as a logical, one-dimensional pattern. Our memory and imagination interact with each successive image on the screen to create our interpretation of the overall content of ad film.

The movie pioneer Sergei Eisenstein pointed out that the meaning of the whole film emerges from the unexpected juxtaposition and fusion of images in the mind of the audience. The concept of metaphor is like this, where the juxtaposition of two seemingly disparate images creates meaning by revealing the hidden connection between the two. And metaphor is certainly one of the most commonly used

FIGURE 1
Paired recognition of pictures N and N-1

Ad type	Both high or average (%)	One or both low (%)
High persuasion ads (9)	93	7
Average persuasion ads (6)	80	19
Low persuasion ads (9)	69	31

The more the images are connected (glued together), the more persuasive the ads are
Source: Ameritest

rhetorical tricks in the advertiser's toolkit.

The order in which we see the visuals in a TV commercial also matters. Comprehending the context of the images that came before the image we see at a particular moment on the screen – and anticipating those that come after – is key to our understanding the intended communication of the advertiser. Continuity shapes the meaning of a film experience.

Continuity in film means each image on the screen is well connected to the image that came before it in the viewer's mind. In mathematical terms, this means each image in the time-series of images that form a movie

should be correlated with its neighbouring images. This idea of autocorrelation is an indicator of how much structure a message contains; it's the degree to which, if you interrupt the transmission of a message, the receiver can extrapolate the succeeding part of the message.

STORIES AND PERSUASION

This kind of structure is important in two types of advertising. The first, of course, is narrative structure, where storytelling is used to move an audience emotionally closer to the sale. The second is rational advertising, where the logical connections between the ideas in a presentation form a persuasive argument.

Whether emotionally or rationally, how well connected the parts of an ad are to each other would seem to be related to the performance of the ad as a whole. To explore the relationship between visual connectedness in TV commercials and persuasiveness, we performed some research-on-research.

This study was done among 24 TV CPG commercials. All these ads were also tested by one of our competitors, a system well-known for the predictability of its report card measures in marketing mix models. This system measures persuasiveness by means of a pre- and post-exposure brand-choice technique. Of the commercials in our sample, nine were considered to be highly persuasive, six were considered average, and nine were considered below average in terms of persuasion.

One of the interesting aspects of this study is that one group of respondents was used to predict the responses of a separate group of respondents, so that the internal autocorrelation between different questions in the same interview, ie persuasion and diagnostics, is not a potential factor contaminating our conclusions.

In the study, the Flow of Attention was a particularly good diagnostic for testing the idea of how visually connected these 24

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commercials were. Because it is based on sorting pictures from a commercial based on what respondents remember from the ad, we could explore the idea of film continuity in the context of memory.

Mathematically, we define 'connectedness' in terms of the conditional probability that picture 'n' is remembered, given the recognition of the picture 'n-1' that preceded it. We did this for all the adjacent pairs of images in our picture sorting decks for each commercial.

What we found was that, in persuasive advertising, viewer attention to each picture in the ad is highly correlated with attention to the picture that follows it. In contrast, for ads low on persuasiveness, there are many more instances of well-remembered pictures that are followed by pictures that are poorly remembered. In other words, in persuasive ads, the imagery seems to be better 'glued together' in the mind of the audience.

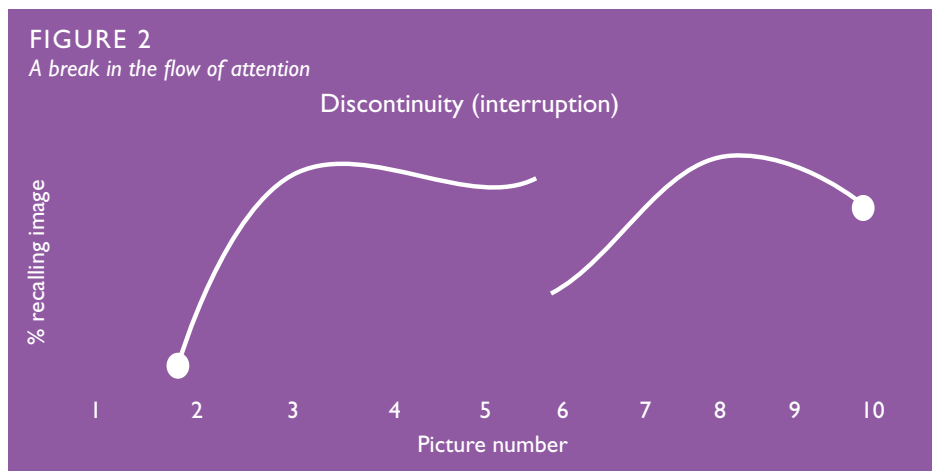
Figure 1 summarises the distribution of the joint probabilities for image recall for all adjacent pairs of images from all 24 ads in our study, representing more than 500 data points. For the high-persuasive ads, we found that 93% of the time, sequential pairs of images in the advertising were recognised at average to high levels. This is higher than the percentage obtained for average-persuasive commercials, 80%, and much higher than the percentage obtained for low-persuasive ads, only 69%.

Conversely, for low persuasion ads, we see that 31% of the time, recall is low for one or both of the images in the image pairs, suggesting that something is interrupting the ability of these images to stick in consumer memory. This problem only happens 7% of the time in high persuasion ads, and 19% of the time for average persuasion ads.

What this tells us is that, for low-persuasive commercials, there is a frequent failure to achieve linkage between images. Failure to recognise one or both images in a pair of pictures is clear evidence that viewers are not connecting the dots in terms of the intended meanings of the commercial imagery.

In general, it appears that high-persuasive ads are characterised by high levels of paired-recognition – and by inference, a high degree of linkage is occurring between images juxtaposed in the flow of the viewer's visual experience of the advertising. This visual connectedness reflects the continuity of the audience's experience of persuasive advertising.

In diagnosing the problems associated with poorly performing advertising, we have



identified two distinct types of discontinuities that undermine commercial effectiveness.

To understand the difference between the two, think about the following simple metaphor. Imagine that the information coming through an ad is like water coming out of a tap. If you turn the handle just a little bit, the water comes out in discrete drips. This is like the features and benefits of a brand being enumerated by a simple stand-up presenter.

Turn the handle a bit more and water begins to rush out more quickly. But, if you look at the stream of water closely, you can see it has a braided structure holding together the shape of the stream. This is like an emotional ad, where the narrative structure holds together the fast moving flow of imagery in the mind of the audience.

Finally, if you turn the handle further, the water begins to rush out in a torrent, losing its structure and splattering everything around. This is like a poorly executed montage, where the audience failed to grasp the controlling idea linking all the images together. Montage commercials that fail to communicate a simple idea that glues all the images together in the mind of the consumer will generate low scores on persuasion. Unfortunately, when this type of problem occurs, it is difficult to fix because there's usually not a clear idea at the centre of the ad.

The second type of discontinuity is what happens when you've opened the faucet to release the flow of water and you put your finger over the spout to momentarily interrupt the flow. An example of this type of break in continuity is shown in Figure 2. This break is usually a result of a

poorly handled transition between one idea and another in the flow of an ad. If the break occurs in the wrong place, it can hurt the overall persuasiveness of the ad quite a bit. But if it is diagnosed properly by research, this type of problem can almost always be fixed easily in the editing room.

CONCLUSION

Persuasive commercials are more likely to preserve the continuity of visual imagery in consumer memory. Conversely, non-persuasive commercials are characterised by a high degree of fragmentation of picture recall. You might think of this as a kind of entropy, or disordering of the imagery of a commercial as it is stored in consumer memory.

Since advertising creatives tend to think of creative ideas holistically, and not in the frame-by-frame way that researchers analyse ads, they may fail to appreciate that many good creative ideas fail the test of persuasion because of the consumers' inability to see the whole idea, or at least to process it wholly into memory.

Breaks in the continuity of an ad film are a failure of execution, and not usually of the creative concept. One way to use research effectively in the creative development process, therefore, is to identify those moments in the flow of the film when the visual storyline makes a change in direction, and the audience fails to make the turn, so that the continuity of the illusion is broken.



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