

Tags are it

How advertising creates memories has long been a principle subject of advertising research. After all, it is only through the processes of memory that advertising can create the long-term value which sets it apart from other forms of marketing such as promotion or price competition. Indeed, the equity of a brand can be thought of as the sum total of the ideas, images and emotions that we associate with a given product or service and store in our long-term memories.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the first standard for measuring TV ad performance was day-after recall. This metric is still widely used today and generates much controversy among research practitioners and agency creatives because the counterintuitive results it regularly produces. Highly emotional advertising, for instance, frequently does not generate good recall scores. The reason for this conflict is the underlying assumption of recall testing that memory works in only one way. In fact, the current science of cognitive psychology suggests that traditional recall research has it only one-third right.

The grandfather of modern memory research, Endel Tulving, actually described three different memory systems in his book *The Elements of Episodic Memory*: 1) the semantic memory system, where the brain stores facts, concepts and language; 2) the episodic memory system, where the brain stores sensations, emotions and personalized memories, i.e., the private memories that define the self; and 3) the procedural

memory system, where the brain stores learned behaviors and sensations of bodily movement, such as how to tie your shoelaces, drive a car or play a violin.

The memory systems of the brain are highly organized, not simply “junk drawers” of the mind into which the traces of our experience are dropped at random. As modern

The four types of brand memories

researchers in cognitive neuroscience have pointed out, this organization of our memories is necessary for the brain to form internal models or representations of the external world (i.e., ideas, concepts, brands, etc.) which determine the functional usefulness of our memories of past experience in guiding our future behaviors. Critical to understanding how our memories are organized is knowing how the perceptions of our experiences are tagged for future retrieval.

Building blocks

In his book *Hidden Order* John Holland points out that tags are fundamental building blocks that make up complex dynamic systems of



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all kinds, from biology to the stock market. Tags are essential for creating order out of chaos. At a higher level of description, brands themselves are tags for the marketplace. To understand how advertising forms memories, we ad researchers need to be able to identify the four different types of tags that form the basis of long-term brand building.

In his book *Information Theory and Esthetic Perception* Abraham Moles writes about the different types of information that plug into the different memory systems of the mind. He makes a key distinction between what he calls semantic information and esthetic information, or the “non-literal” kind of information contained in works of art such as music, poetry and film. Semantic information is the part of a message that can be translated from one channel of communication to another, e.g., the part of a picture you can describe in words. The esthetic information is the part of message that is lost when you change channels - the part of the picture that you cannot put into words. For television commercials the primary channel for semantic information can only loosely be thought of as the copy (minus the word images or poetry) while the primary channel for esthetic information is the visual.

The way various types of information enter the brain is also different. Semantic information is processed in a linear, logical sequence, while the esthetic information is acquired through a non-linear, right-brain “scanning and sorting” process. One of the reasons the picture-sort methods described below work so well in explaining advertising performance is that pictures from the ad itself provide an ideal visual vocabulary for reverse engineering the scanning and sorting processes in which the brain acquires esthetic information from moving pictures.

Through the work of the imagination, information of different types can be expressed as images to be sorted into all three memory sys-

tems. Words can create mental pictures through poetic devices such as analogy and metaphor, to be stored by association in the semantic system. We have imaginary relationships with images of celebrities or even cartoon characters like Calvin and Hobbs that are stored in the episodic system. Golfers rehearse their swing by visualizing perfection in the form of a virtual swing just before they release the stored memories from their procedural system as they swing the club in real life.

How tags come into play

Let’s look at some examples from advertising of how tags for each of the three different memory systems might come into play.

1. Knowledge tags

Knowledge tags are the card catalog to the library of the mind. They are the key words, the author or title that you use to search through Amazon.com to find the book you want. Word tags are important, which is why good domain names can be so valuable on the Internet. Marketers spend a fortune just to put their names on the sides of sports stadiums.

Knowledge tags are critical at the beginning of a brand’s life-stage; when advertising a new product, semantic information content is high. That’s why new product commercials need to be introductory in tone, heavy with semantic baggage, because they have the job of introducing the baby brand to consumers, teaching them who the baby is and how it fits into their world.

Knowledge tags are the most familiar form of tags studied by advertising researchers since they’re the basis of recall testing, with the brand name being used to retrieve advertising memories. Because the semantic system deals with language, these tags can be identified by researchers through the study of verbatim responses to open-ended recall questions or closed-ended rating statements.

2. Emotion tags

The creation of easy-to-use tags by

YouTube for ordinary people to search through the creative landscape of a hundred million home-made videos is one secret of its current success. Hallmark built a fortune by marketing tags for human relationships in the form of greeting cards.

In an Advertising Research Foundation study conducted by Ameritest on two of the famous seven-minute online movies the Fallon advertising agency made for BMW, incorrect tagging of emotional memories made all the differences in how this new form of branded entertainment performed. One of the movies was a good ad for BMW, but the other - actually the more emotional of the two movies - was a good ad for cameras and film, but not for a BMW car. Incorrect tagging, in this second case, lead to the creation of a brand vampire movie.

One of the longest ongoing debates among ad researchers concerns the correct types of cues - or tags - to retrieve long-term memories of advertising: recall versus recognition. Both methods are valid since ad memories reside in all the memory systems of the mind. But emotional memories are more likely to be retrieved with visual recognition cues - which is the reason we all keep family albums of photographs to retrieve the Kodak moments of our past.

The historical emphasis on verbal recall is really an artifact of last-generation technology: telephone WATS centers were the cheapest way to collect advertising tracking data. Now that all ad tracking is moving online, the shift to visual recognition cues is gaining momentum, and with it the growing number of articles on the importance of emotion in advertising creative.

3. Action tags

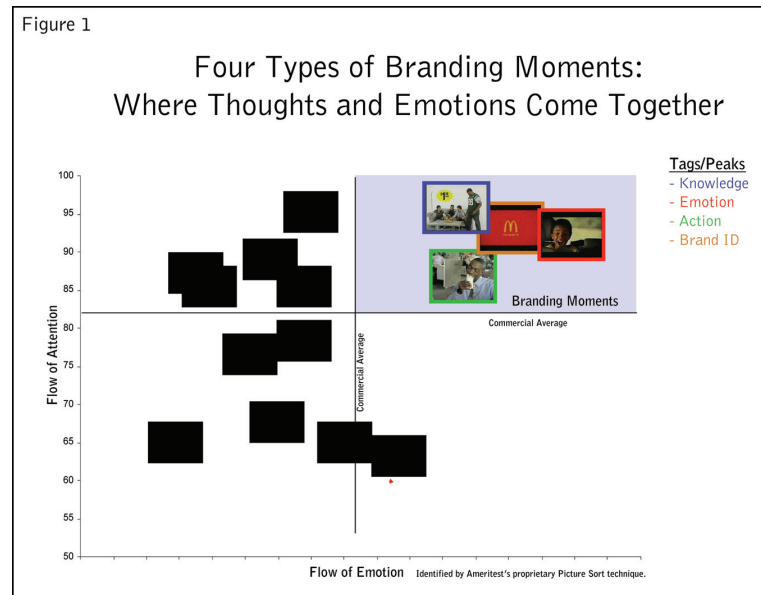
The greatest trick Google ever played on us was teaching all our fingertips to learn its name. The images of flying in an IMAX theater can make you experience motion sickness. Video games, one of the

most important advertising forms of the future, will deliver their value to advertisers to the extent that the embedded brands, integrated into the action of the games, become the tags for reliving the excitement of the game experience. Action tags reference the physical body, real or imagined. The Google experience is a form of kinetic imprinting. For ad filmmakers, the focus is on how to use the camera to reach through the eye to activate the other senses/sensations of the audience, such as smell, taste, heat and movement.

Product-in-use shots, bite-and-smile food shots, the images of cars accelerating around California coastal highways, and accident scenes where your insurance man was there to hold your hand are all obvious examples of advertising imagery that imprint an image into the procedural memory system. When the camera “consumes” a McDonald’s hamburger on screen, it’s as if you – taking the point of view of the camera – ate the burger. Similarly, in other ads you drove the car, let your fingers do the walking or reached out and touched someone. That’s how it’s recorded in your mind.

It is the interaction of memory and our projective imagination that creates the experiences of our inner life. Indeed, it seems likely that one of the chief functions of advertising is to create false memories of brand experiences that you never really had in real life. When these imaginary experiences are mixed together in the mind with real experiences of the brand, the mind stores the false with the real in the same memory systems. Importantly, when these memories are later played back, the mind does not distinguish the false from the real.

Food advertising can constitute a form of virtual consumption, which is why advertisers have long been taught to sell the sizzle not the steak. Virtual consumption events multiply the number of experiences you share with a brand beyond the real ones. That’s one of the reasons large advertisers enjoy such a strong business advantage over non-advertisers in terms of their ability to use advertising to strengthen brand relationships. You can create



more memories that this product, which the consumer may have never actually eaten, tasted really good.

It is important not to interpret the role of action tags literally, however. Not every food commercial needs to show a bite-and-smile shot. The role of metaphor can be important here. Target’s advertising is not just about style – all that cool color and dancing are metaphors for the store experience so that you remember how much fun it was shopping at Target. It’s the visual warping special effects on screen that make you feel the sensation of the tight curve of the road, so that later you remember what a fast car that was. It’s the warm-and-fuzzy hug from the Snuggle bear that makes you remember that this product is soft enough for your baby’s skin.

In general, while both emotion and action tags are about feelings generated in the audience, the difference is that emotion tags are centered on human relationships (including the relationship to the self) while action tags are centered on objects and physical behaviors.

Thus we see that the old dualities of the mind-body problem of classic philosophers, updated to the rational versus emotional debates that take place every day in advertising agencies, lead to an incomplete analysis of the communication problem; interpretation of the creative image must

deal with the trinity of mind-heart-body.

In the language of ad researchers, the trinity was the classical hierarchy effects model: think, feel, do. Contemporary researchers debate the order of the first two constructs. Does feeling come before thinking, or thinking before feeling? What’s been overlooked is the “do” leg of the triad, the consumer consumption behavior, which is usually interpreted as taking place after the ad experience. What’s new here is the understanding that the doing can also take place inside the ad, with action images mentally rehearsing the consumer behaviors the advertising is trying to motivate.

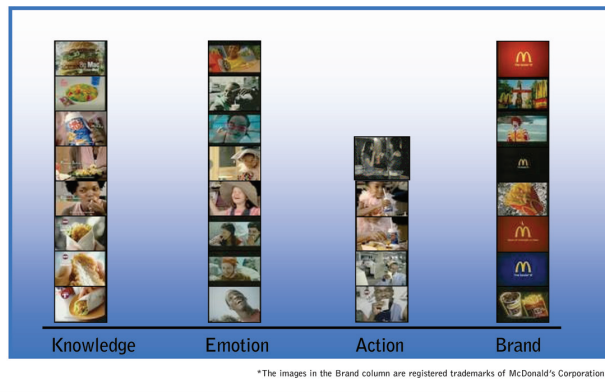
A fourth tag

Finally, while there are three memory systems of the mind involved in the processing of experiences of all kinds, for brand-building advertising a fourth kind of tag is needed to integrate the other three: the identity tag. Without a brand identity tag, advertising still might drive sales by growing the category but it won’t drive market share.

Names are only one way of tagging a commercial so that your brand doesn’t end up in the lost luggage of the mind. Visual icons, like the McDonald’s golden arches, can tag a commercial. Sounds, like the Intel

Figure 2

Deposit Levels in the Four Image Banks



tones, do the same. Recognizable shapes, like the curves of the classic Coca-Cola bottle, can tag a moment of falsely-remembered refreshment. Even colors can tag memories - if the actors are drinking out of a blue can, and not a red one, do you know which brand of cola it is? And, of course, verbal taglines such as Nike's "Just do it" can act as brand identity tags.

Put the pieces together

How can we put these different pieces together to get a whole picture of how advertising creates meaning and memory in the mind of the consumer? We know from our pre-testing work that the Flow of Attention and the Flow of Emotion picture sort graphs provide different and complementary insights into how an audience interacts with film, in terms of the cognitive processes of selective attention and with respect to their emotional response to advertising images.

If we plot the two time-series of visual information in a grid, like that shown in Figure 1, we can now cross-reference the two dimensions of how the audience thinks and how the audience feels about each image in the ad. What we get is a scatter plot, confirming the independence of the two measures. Pictures plotted in the upper-right-hand corner of this grid are special - they represent the

moments in the commercial that are both high in audience attention and emotional engagement.

We know from our earlier published research on long-term ad effects that these are the branding moments of the ad. Only these key images from the ad enter the long-term memory of the consumer to form the long-term image of the brand. In other words, these images are the memory tags.

Content analysis of the branding moments can now be used to code for each of the four types of branding moments, or memory tags, we have described. This classification of images can be done using the trained judgment of skilled researchers, or more precisely, using consumer input based on a three-dimensional picture sort. The output of this analysis can then be shown in the form of a four-tiered histogram, as shown in Figure 2, which shows the cumulative branding moments across a number of commercials in a fast-food campaign.

This graphical display gives brand managers a tool for managing advertising campaigns. Each of the four tiers can be thought of as a memory bank into which brand images must be deposited by advertising. A given commercial might, for example, deposit one or two or even three images in the knowledge bank. Another might make deposits in the

emotion bank. A third commercial might deposit images in the first two banks but make the heaviest contribution to the action bank. Each of the commercials, to be well-branded, must also make deposits in the brand id bank.

Importantly, this leads us to a new form of "triple-entry" bookkeeping for the three different memory systems of the consumer. Current neuroscience suggests that, over time at least, an ad campaign should try to keep the image deposits roughly in balance. To build a complete representation of a brand in the mind of the consumer, all three memory systems must be engaged. If deposits are only made in the knowledge bank, you are building a concept, not a brand. Similarly, if deposits are only made in the emotion bank, without regard to rehearsing consumption behaviors in the action bank, or without occasionally grounding the brand in product news for the knowledge bank, the brand image will be similarly incomplete and out of balance over time.

In the end, this discussion about the different memory systems in the mind of the consumers leads us to a more simplified and holistic view of advertising. In an age where the various media alternatives for reaching the consumer seem to be growing exponentially, and where the focus of advertising research is shifting to the measurement of integrated advertising campaigns, it's useful to remember that all forms of advertising must do their work against the mind of the brand customer, measured one at a time. | Q

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