

The use of negative emotions in advertising

Chuck Young, Ameritest, argues that the most effective ads are those that exploit the negative emotions of the consumer to drive advertising impact

MANY ADVERTISERS ARE wary of creating ads that evoke negative emotions in consumers, for fear of creating negative associations with their brand. This is not surprising, since the mental processes involved in transferring emotions generated by advertising to the emotional equity of a brand are not understood: playing with the dark force can be risky.

I remember one of the first copy tests we conducted for IBM. Ogilvy had created 'Blue Letterbox' TV executions; however, this one had an unusual twist. The commercial had a dark storyline about hackers breaking into a company's accounting systems and emailing sensitive payroll information to the entire company, but the story ended on a promise that IBM software would keep your systems secure.

There was a debate at the highest level about this. Lou Gerstner, then CEO of IBM, who was engaged in his turnaround of the high-tech giant, was not sure about it. Steve Hayden, head creative on the account was a strong advocate. To resolve their debate, the two agreed to research.

The lesson from research was that

negative emotion, properly used, can be a powerful driver of commercial performance. The commercial generated strong pre-test scores, and Lou agreed to run it. Tracking data validated the ad's effectiveness.

Negative emotions are a key ingredient in all forms of storytelling, to create tension and suspense. The best movies usually have the best villains. Even in comedy, at points where the hero's fortunes turn from good to bad, then from bad to worse, we witness essential narrative structures. Negative emotions ratchet up involvement with the plot, to build anticipation for the outcome.

The role of negative emotions in advertising can be equally powerful. Negative emotions at the start can grab the viewer's attention and draw her in to the ad. And turning points can define memorable branding moments. By dramatising a problem that your brand will solve, negative emotions can drive motivation.

One cause of weak or ineffective advertising can be under-delivery of negative emotions, resulting in a weak experience. This does not, as many agency creatives suggest, result from over-reliance on ad testing, which has been accused of pro-

ducing 'vanilla' advertising. Rather, the cause is usually conceptual. It may arise from timidity on the part of a cautious advertiser concerned about leaving a negative imprint on the brand, but this is due to lack of clear theory of how and when to use negative emotions. So, it is useful to look at what years of research have taught us.

Negative emotions and attention

The worldwide leader of commercial pre-testing, Millward Brown, derived its standard performance measure of the power of an ad, the ad's Attention Score, by correlating consumer ratings of many commercials from pre-tests with actual in-market ad awareness results from its tracking-study database. What it discovered is that there are two equally important, uncorrelated, dimensions of viewer response predictive of attention: enjoyment and engagement.

What, exactly, do these research constructs measure?

The first, enjoyment, appears straightforward. Quantitatively, it is highly correlated with liking – a bottom-line rating of the viewer's feelings about the ad as a whole. If you watch a good horror movie, you may experience a rollercoaster of feelings during the film, ranging from anxiety to fear to relief to security, but at the end you can say you 'enjoyed' the movie if you thought the experience was well done and you liked it. A viewer means the same thing when she says she found an ad enjoyable.

Engagement is different. It refers to how the viewer processes the ad, on a continuum from low to high involvement. Some commercials are processed passively, with viewers watching the ad in a state of mental inertia; others are processed more actively, viewers figuratively sitting on the edge of their seats riveted to the screen. More active processing, theory goes, is associated with more breakthrough advertising.

Engagement is measured by asking consumers to describe a test commercial by choosing the best descriptors from three sets of four descriptors. The results are plotted on a spider graph to show an

TABLE 1

Correlations between emotion and engagement

Millward Brown Engagement Scale	Ameritest Flow of Emotion	
	Positive emotion correlations	Negative emotion correlations
Active positive		
Interesting	-0.02	+0.31
Involving	-0.18	+0.32
Unique	-0.20	+0.44
Active negative		
Irritating	-0.20	+0.40
Unpleasant	-0.16	+0.45
Disturbing	-0.14	+0.43
Passive positive		
Soothing	0.29	-0.40
Mellow	0.23	-0.42
Nice	0.10	-0.44
Passive negative		
Ordinary	-0.12	-0.19
Weak	-0.05	0.20
Boring	-0.04	0.00
Overall engagement	-0.19	+0.49

Base: N = 60 ads

engagement profile of the commercial. The most engaging commercials rank high on dimensions like interesting, involving or unique. The least engaging commercials are described as ordinary, boring or weak.

To understand the role of emotion in this measure of engagement we analysed 60 packaged goods commercials for which we had a unique set of data. For each ad we had both Millward Brown's engagement ratings and our measure of emotional response, the Flow of Emotion®.

Flow of Emotion measures moment-by-moment emotional responses to a commercial by having viewers sort through pictures from the ad on the basis of positive and negative feelings towards the images. In previously published research this measure of emotional response has been shown to be highly correlated with other measures of commercial performance, such as motivation or persuasion.

What we discovered confirms the important role negative emotions can play in ad effectiveness. Table 1 shows the correlations between emotion and engagement. The most engaging ads among these 60 commercials have a strong correlation with negative emotions. The active-engagement ratings of the ads as interesting, involving and

unique are all significantly correlated with negative emotions generated by the ad. There is no such correlation with positive emotions.

Negative emotions are highly correlated with the active/negative engagement dimension – irritating, unpleasant and disturbing – which is not surprising. We also see a strong negative correlation between negative emotions and the passive/positive form of engagement, for ads that are described as soothing, mellow or nice. There is no correlation of emotional response with the most passive form of engagement, for ads described as ordinary, weak or boring.

What is it about negative emotion that makes ads more engaging? It is probably for the same reasons that news programming focuses more on negative than positive news.

Attention to negative input, from within the mind and from outside, is hard-wired into the emotional reptilian brain as a survival trait: failure to attend to negative signals from the environment can be far more dangerous than failure to attend to positive signals. Negative emotions can be an important trigger to activate more highly engaged mental processing. For example, negative emotions generated by a problem or need such as hunger or discomfort activate the higher

mental processes of problem-solving.

Advertising charged with negative emotion, therefore, can be very engaging, and hence very attention-getting. We should not, however, confuse this conclusion by interpreting it to mean that the engaged viewer has negative feelings towards the ad as a whole.

Some types of advertising attract attention by leveraging negative emotions for shock effect. These ads work by polarising the audience, causing consumers to feel either hot or cold, but not lukewarm. Edgy, over-the-top ads operate on the principle that you cannot please everybody. So long as the consumers you turn on are in your target audience and those you turn off are not, and therefore do not matter, this can be effective. The TV commercials for Axe Bodyspray, targeted to teenage males, are an example of this type of advertising. While this is certainly an example of how negative emotions can attract attention, this particular application of negativity is not what our study was about, since this brand was not included in the data set of commercials we analysed. The commercials in our study represented more mainstream examples of negative emotions in advertising.

The analysis of engagement using moment-by-moment picture-sort data deals with negative emotions as part of ▶

FIGURE 1

Flow of Emotion graphs for two versions of the same commercial

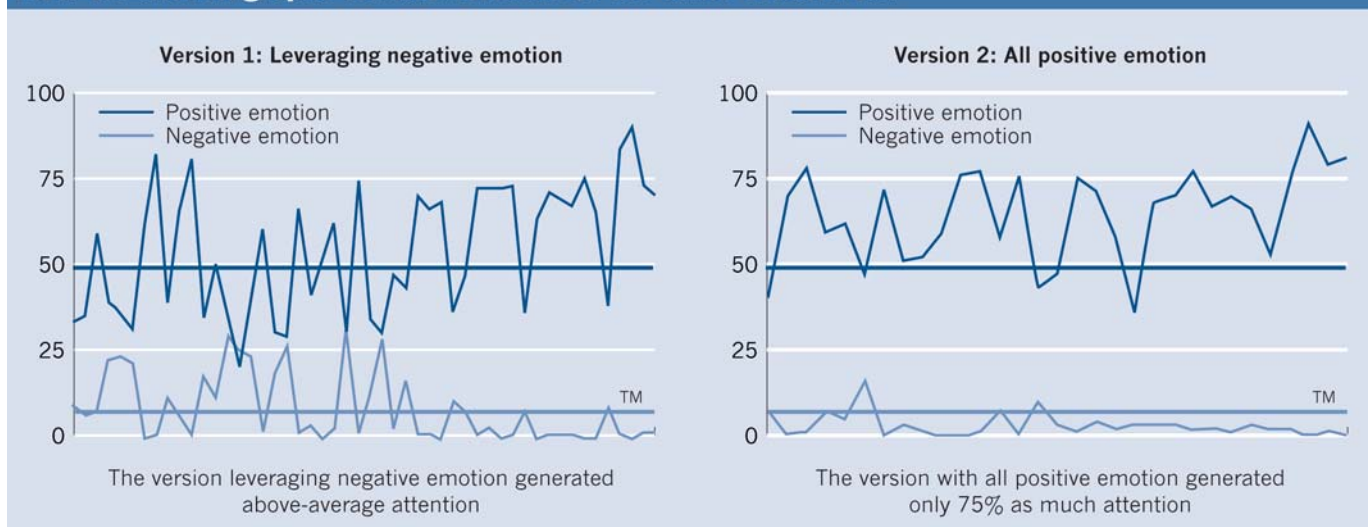
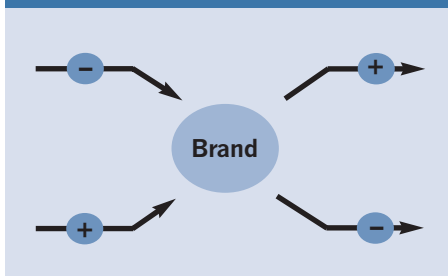


FIGURE 2

The emotional pivot



the internal structure of the ad. For the typical commercial, negative emotions are used in the first part of the ad to capture audience attention with a set-up of a problem or a need, or simply the inciting incident of a storyline; in the rest of the ad, there is a counterpoint of positive emotion.

Figure 1 shows the Flow of Emotion graphs for two different versions of the same very emotional commercial. Version 1 makes strong use of negative emotions in the storyline, which can be seen in the seismograph-like picture of dramatic tension between positive and negative emotions in the first half of the ad. The negative emotions are resolved and replaced by strong positives in the second half. Version 2 is a re-edit of the film, with all the negative emotions taken out. Both versions were tested at the same time. The first generated an above-average Attention Score. The second, 'safer' version, produced only 75% as much attention.

Negative emotion and motivation

When most ad researchers measure the emotional experience of a commercial they use rating scales to describe, in a very static way, the emotions generated by the ad. It is as if the job of advertising is to turn an emotion 'on' or 'off', like a switch.

Reality is more complicated. Our emotions are always on. A different mental model of emotion's role in advertising is to think of emotion dynamically, as a 'flow' of emotion.

When we say we have been 'moved' by a film or a piece of music we are talking about emotion. Motivating advertising moves the consumer emotionally closer

to the brand. It is the change in the emotion state of the consumer from beginning to end of the ad that matters. The job of a commercial is not just to evoke an emotional response, but to organise the flow of emotional reactions throughout the film, to achieve particular dramatic effects.

Negative emotions at the beginning of a commercial disturb mental equilibrium and create a dramatic tension that calls for resolution by the end of the ad. Commercials like these are designed to operate like electric batteries, with both a negative and positive charge; the goal is to create a current of emotional energy between the two poles.

A model for this structure is the 'emotional pivot' (see Figure 2). The emotional state of the viewer at the beginning of the ad is strongly negative, but somewhere in the middle the brand arrives to make the negative emotions go away, so the viewer's emotion is strongly positive by the end. It is the dramatic change in emotion state from the beginning to the end, pivoting on the brand, that gives this advertising its power.

A general example of this is the problem/solution genre. This type of commercial is designed to work by selling the problem before selling the product. By dramatising the problem, you make the solution more important as well. The role of negative emotions is to raise the level of concern about a problem the consumer might not normally think about.

A specific example is shown in Figure 3. It is the Flow of Emotion graph for a Progresso Soup ad recently tested as part of an ARF multi-company project studying emotion in advertising.

The commercial is a vignette about an older sister who lectures her twentysomething brother on the difference between Progresso and Campbell's Soup. The idea is to reposition Campbell's, an icon of American family values, as a product for kids, so as to position Progresso as an adult brand.

The commercial opens with the sister demonstrating how weak and watery Campbell's soup is – which generates two strong negative spikes in response to the competitive Campbell's product. She

then dramatises the difference in the Progresso product, which looks rich and satisfying, resulting in two strong positive spikes in response to Progresso Soup in the second half of the ad.

The emotional contrast between the negative images of Campbell's and the positive images of Progresso was a strong driver of the ad's motivation score. Indeed, the greater the contrast, the more motivating the emotion. With correlation analysis we found that the more negative the response to the pictures of Campbell's, the higher the consumer's intent to purchase Progresso.

In short, a motivating ad expresses a relevant thought in a dramatic way, and negative emotions play an essential role in creating that drama.

Intended vs unintended negative emotions

That is not to say that all negative emotions generated by an ad are good. Sometimes a negative reaction to a creative element in a commercial means just that: the consumer does not like it.

An example can also be seen in the Progresso ad. Looking at the graph of negative emotions we can see, in addition to the negatives towards the competitive product, there are negative feelings towards the images of the sister standing over her brother and talking down to him.

When we probe the meaning of these images using a third Picture Sort, the Flow of Meaning, we find that different segments of the audience give different interpretations. Some interpret the teasing of the sister in a positive light, as evidence of her 'caring' concern about her younger brother; others take it as evidence that she is 'bossy', and react negatively. Consumers who react negatively are less motivated by the ad, which we again discovered through correlation analysis, which showed that negative emotions towards this part of the execution inhibited intent to purchase Progresso.

This underscores the importance of understanding the creative intent before trying to interpret consumers' emotional response to different parts of the ad.

Chuck Young is founder and CEO of Ameritest, an international advertising and brand research company. In his 20 years in the advertising business Chuck has worked extensively in packaged goods, retail, fast food, entertainment, automotive, telecommunications and e-commerce categories. He is a five-time winner of the David Ogilvy research award.



Clearly, the creative intent was to make consumers feel bad about the competitor's product, and feel good about the sponsor's brand. Therefore, the more negative the feelings towards those images the better, because those negative emotions drive motivation.

It is not clear, however, that the intent was to polarise the audience's reactions towards the sister. Unfortunately, it is the nature of communication that consumers do not always interpret commercials as intended, which is one reason we do research. Since this unintended negativity undermines the persuasiveness of the advertising, identification of these unintended negative emotions represents an opportunity for improving the campaign by having the creatives revisit the way in which the sister/brother relationship is handled.

Making the distinction between intended and unintended negative emotions generated by a commercial is fundamentally important for understanding how to use negative emotions to create motivating advertising.

Negative emotion and branding

Advocates of recall testing preach the importance of the 'early and often' rule for

creating well-branded advertising. Recall testing, which research has shown does not measure the emotional response to TV commercials and may penalise highly emotional ads, suggests as best practice that commercials should always show the brand in the first 5 seconds of the ad and repeat the name as frequently as possible. This has justifiably led to vocal criticism in American advertising circles that recall testing leads to formulaic advertising.

Our research shows that commercials can be well branded regardless of when the brand is introduced. That is not to say that the timing of branding moments in an ad can be arbitrary. Indeed, the right time to introduce the brand into the commercial is quite specific and tied to the chosen dramatic structure or emotional design.

For commercials that use negative emotions, the right time to introduce the brand is at the boundary between the negative and the positive emotion states, when emotions turn. As social scientist Erving Goffman pointed out in his studies of social communication years ago, the transitional boundary between two perceptual regions is the place of maximum drama. Introducing a brand at the turning-point in an ad is analogous to an actor

making a dramatic entrance at exactly the right time.

But the more important reason why the brand should be introduced at the boundary point is that it should get credit in consumers' minds for the change in emotions. Like an old Western, where the hero arrives in the nick of time to rescue the girl, when a brand finally arrives in a commercial after a negative emotional build-up it gets credit in the consumer's mind as the cause of negative emotions going away. It literally becomes the 'hero'.

The Progresso ad is well branded because the branding visual comes in at the right time, halfway through the ad, at the end of the attack on Campbell's, as the rest of the message turns positive.

We have a number of examples of commercials that scored below average on brand linkage because the brand was actually introduced too soon, before the emotions turn; and other examples where the brand arrives too late, so that some other executional element steals the credit for resolving the emotional tension.

The key, then, for making sure that negative emotions used in a commercial do not rub off on your brand is to understand clearly the role of the brand in the dramatic structure, and get your timing right when introducing it.

Conclusion

Negative emotions can have a powerful effect on all three dimensions of advertising performance: attention-getting, brand linkage and motivation. However, because of the risk of inadvertently creating negative associations with the brand, many advertisers shy away from using negative emotions. Taking this option off the table unnecessarily limits their options. The full spectrum of emotions can be employed to your competitive advantage if you learn how to use negative emotions to drive advertising impact, you clearly understand the role that your brand must play in these dramatic structures, and you use research to avoid unintended negative emotions. ■

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FIGURE 3

