

Virtual consumption

Eyewitness testimony is notoriously unreliable for finding the truth of past events. Not because people are untruthful but because our memory of what really happened can be changed, sometimes just by the telling of it. With the power of suggestion, psychologists can create false memories of childhood about things that never really happened. Similarly, one way advertising works is by creating artificial memories that enlarge our perceptions of the brand when mixed together with our memories of actual experiences with the brand.

Some years ago I was in a meeting with the advertising team for a major food manufacturer to discuss new work they had done for one of their well-established brands. In reviewing a storyboard, one of the younger writers expressed frustration at having to allocate precious seconds of commercial time to showing product shots which merely visualized “things the consumer already knows” at the expense of storytelling time, which he felt was important for building an emotional connection with the brand.

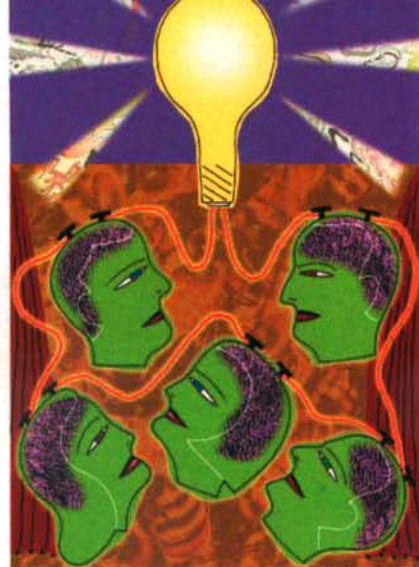
As I think now about that comment, I realize that many younger creatives operate with a mental model of how advertising works that is different from mine, particularly when it comes to food and beverage advertising. While I too believe that finding a fresh and original execution is critically important for breaking through media clutter, I also believe that showing iconic images of the product being consumed can be an important component of emotional connection.

Experience rather than emotion

The definition of emotion that many creatives operate with may be too limiting. When we talk emotion in advertising, it is often used in opposition to communicating rational sales messages about the functional benefits of a product. Additionally, emotion is a term that carries baggage, with overtones such as soft sell versus hard sell. Emotion is often a subject of

debate regarding its role in advertising effectiveness. For this reason, I prefer to deal with the larger concept of experience, which encompasses emotional values such as the happiness, laughter or joy evoked by the storyteller’s art as well as the equally non-rational but sensory responses generated by many effective food and beverage ads.

The grandfather of modern memory research, Endel Tulving, described



By Charles Young

How ads can
make your brand
their brand

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two memory systems in the mind, both of which are important for advertising professionals to understand. The first is the semantic memory system. This is where the part of our experience that we can describe in words – as in “semantics” – is stored. Product concepts, unique selling propositions, positioning statements go here. It is rational and verbally based, and is the part of the mind that traditional advertising copy testers access.

The other memory system is the episodic memory system. This is the memory system where your personalized memories are stored. The things that happen to you – your first kiss, your last bite (real or imagined) of Ben & Jerry’s ice cream on a hot summer’s day, where you were and what you were doing at exactly 9 a.m. Eastern standard time on September 11, 2001 – are recorded in your episodic memory system.

As Tulving told us, “knowledge from semantic memory represents an impersonal experience bound to the present moment. [In the episodic, in contrast]

remembered past events somehow ‘belong’ to the rememberer.”

The Coca-Cola brand is not just the property of a company based in Atlanta; it somehow also “belongs” to its consumers. I believe that this episodic system is, in fact, the key to brand loyalty.

Emotions are stored in the episodic system. But so are other things. Tulving pointed out, for example, that “a mere sensation is sufficient as a source of information into the episodic system.” The larger concept is experience, to which emotional response and sensory appeal are both subordinate concepts – for either of these can be important for connecting with the consumer with the promise of a relevant brand experience.

One of the characteristics of the episodic system is that, unlike the semantic system, it is changeable – like a rewriteable CD on a computer as opposed to an operating system which is read-only in the hard drive. While it is difficult to use persuasion to alter someone’s belief system, because it is

based on the world view tightly constructed in the semantic or conceptual part of the mind, I believe it is relatively easy to revise the memories stored in the episodic system. This can be inferred from the existence of false memories, or inaccurate eyewitness testimony. This provides much room for advertising to operate.

Amazing property

Advertising has the amazing property that it can reach through just one of our senses, sight, and activate the experiences of the other senses. A commercial can show you images of hot loaves of bread coming out of the oven and you can feel the heat on your face and smell the freshness. It can show you images of the bread being torn apart and you can feel it on your fingertips. It can show you golden butter melting on the thick slice of bread and you can taste it on your tongue. Or, the image of the bottle cap popping off a bottle of beer can release a whoosh of refreshment in your brain, even if the sound is turned down on your TV set.

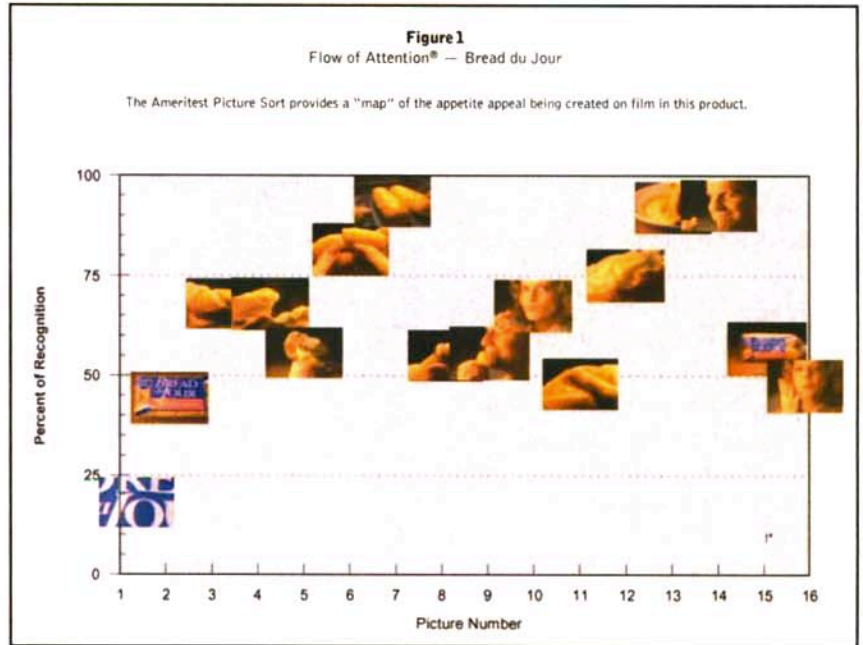
Each of these sensory experiences created by television can lead to a “virtual consumption” event which is stored in your episodic memory system. And once that memory is recorded as an experience you associate with the brand, your mind doesn’t distinguish between events that really happened to you and those you only remember but never really happened!

This is the reason why advertising has the power to multiply the consumer’s experiences with your brand. Suppose you sell a product that your customer actually consumes on average four times a year. And next suppose that you run advertising so that when this customer sees it they have a pleasurable virtual consumption experience six more times during the course of the year. All together then, from the standpoint of episodic memory, your customer has had 10 remembered experiences of your brand compared to just four experiences they might have had with a competitive product that did not run advertising.

To find the traces of brand memo-

ries created by advertising in the episodic system requires more than verbal probing with traditional open-ended questions and rating statements, which are more appropriate for uncovering ad effects on the semantic side. Qualitative researchers use projective techniques, metaphors and photo

montage approaches to elicit the brand associations that are embedded in this part of the consumer’s mind. For quantitative measurement, the Ameritest approach is to sort pictures taken from the commercial itself - which we view as the most “natural vocabulary” for describing the experi-

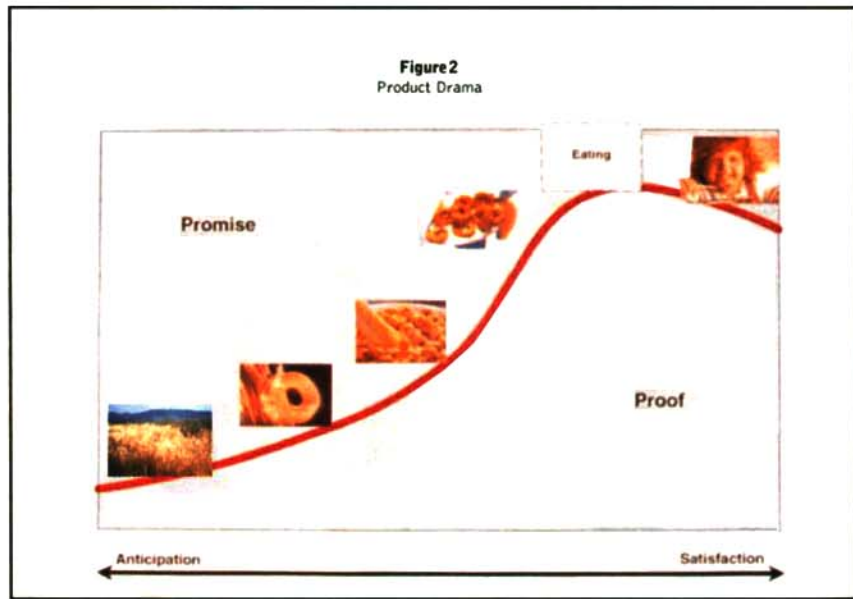


ence created by the advertising.

As an example, a Flow of Attention graph for a bread commercial is shown in Figure 1. In this graph the height of each picture is the percentage of the audience that remembers seeing that particular image in the ad when probed just a few minutes after viewing. As you can see, there is a great deal of variability in image recognition, which demonstrates selective perception in action – the intelligent eye of the consumer does a great deal of filtering of the visuals in the ad, pre-consciously selecting those images which will be allowed into long-term memory.

The peak images in the rhythmic flow of images in this ad are those in which the commercial has done a good job of activating multiple senses – fresh smells of hot bread coming from the oven, tactile images of bread being torn apart, butter dripping off the bread. Evidently, the “information” that the intelligent eye of the consumer searches for in this commercial is experiential – it answers that question, “What will this product taste like if I put it in my mouth?”

In short, what we see is a map of appetite appeal created by the camera – and a memory profile of the virtual consumption event created by this commercial. Research-on-research recently conducted by Unilever has



shown that these peak visual moments of a commercial can be found lodged in consumer's memories years after the ad has been off air.

An analysis of picture-sort data across a great many food and beverage commercials has taught us that the sensory component of motivating advertising can be conceptualized as a dramatic build, analogous to the emotional build in a classic Greek play (Figure 2). We can use this curve of experience to frame our understanding of creative choices an agency creative director makes as he or she creates product drama with advertising film.

In its totality, this idealized curve represents the range of different images that form our experience of a product, from the promises made by images that anticipate the experience, to the proof of satisfaction delivered by smiling actors who have just consumed the product. Importantly, this curve is not a formula for creating exciting product drama, but rather it shows us the continuum of choices the creative director faces in deciding how to show the product in an ad.

Leo Burnett's classic Heinz ketchup campaign from the 1970's, built around the song "Anticipation," is a memorable example of effective advertising that operates entirely on the left side of this continuum. Like sex, much of the excitement involved in creating virtual consumption is anticipatory.

Other ads do their work by focusing completely on the right side of the curve, the satisfaction side of the story. Again a classic campaign, the famous Pepsi Challenge, suggests the role that proof, rather than visual promise, can play in selling product.

Product drama, however, like emotional storytelling, must in general have a progressive pattern, a build where the least important information comes first, the next most important later, the critical experience last. The rising shape of the product drama curve reminds us that, like the reveal in emotional storytelling, you do not keep the audience's interest by giving it information, but by withholding informa-

tion until the timing is ripe to deliver it. Simply showing a product beauty shot early in a commercial can be a way to undermine the product drama of the experience.

Many ways

There are, of course, many ways to tell a product story. A creative might choose to tell the story of the product from the beginning, by showing the wonderful ingredients the product is made of - in a cereal commercial, for example, the camera may pan across fields of grain, it may linger on the golden drops of honey; a fast-food commercial may show the meat sizzling hot on the grill, green and red toppings from the garden tumbling in slow motion through the air. How you create anticipation is simple: you build the product on screen in front of the eyes of the consumer.

Another, less frequent approach to creating appetite appeal is to destroy the product on camera. In the bread commercial, fingers tear the bread apart! In the soft drink ad, the cola explodes into the air. On camera, messiness trumps neatness as your inner child prepares to consume the product.

Next, moving up the anticipation curve, the creative may use the camera to rehearse the act of consumption in the mind of the consumer: the cereal fills the bowl, the milk is poured on top, the full spoon is lifted from the bowl. In the fast-food commercial, the camera prepares to consume the sandwich as a stand-in for the consumer.

Then comes the climactic moment of consumption - the moment the product is actually eaten - though perhaps it occurs discreetly off-screen; like sex in a '50s romantic comedy, it may be better left to the imagination. And on the other side of consumption, the promises created by anticipation are replaced by proof of satisfaction, the denouement of the bite and smile.

The product visuals that have just been described, of course, may be embedded in the larger trajectory of an executional storyline, involving social setting and characters, dialogue and plot. But later, it is those images of

product that reassemble in the episodic memory, flashing like the shards of a mirror reflecting something exceptional that the viewer remembers having consumed, that add to our storehouse of experiences with the brand.

Build loyalty

Short term, advertising exists to create sales. But long term, advertising must build brand loyalty to pay off over time. Through virtual consumption,

ads can create the personal experiences that makes your brand their brand. | Q

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