

# What is the 'information' in an ad?

**Charles Young**, Ameritest, explores how ads convey information – which need not be just facts

**I**N A MEETING at a medium-sized baked goods company, the ad agency realised that the newly minted CEO, promoted from the financial side of the business, was operating with a mental model of advertising that you might call the 'news programme' model. It was evident, he believed, that if you have nothing new to say about a brand, you should not say anything.

The reason to spend money on advertising, he believed, is simply to introduce new products or to announce product improvements. Not surprisingly, the ad team invested a deal of effort in explaining the role that emotion has in strengthening the relationship between an already-established brand and the consumer.

At a large fast-food restaurant chain that does a great deal of new-product advertising, a product manager and an agency creative director are engaged in a familiar debate: how much time in a commercial should be devoted to showing the product? The creative director argued that the first job of advertising is to attract attention and build awareness, which was the main argument for investing time in attention-getting, non-product visuals. But the client wanted to 'light the money!' The new product itself is the attention-getting 'news' in the ad. So they should spend as much time as possible showing the product, to motivate consumers to try it.

## Balancing act

Both stories illustrate the balancing act involved in creating effective ads. Debate can be framed in various dichotomies: rational argument vs emotional appeal, attention vs persuasion, strategy vs execution. The creative tension generated by these opposites can sometimes energise breakthrough thinking, but confusion frequently results from the failure to recognise that every piece of human communication is a double helix of information content. To see why, we need to ask ourselves, at a philosophical level, what exactly 'information' is?

In *Information Theory and Esthetic Perception*, the late musicologist Abraham Moles distinguishes two kinds of information: semantic and aesthetic.

Technically, semantic information is the part of a message that can be translated as you cross from one channel of communication to another; aesthetic information is the part lost in translation.

The adage that a picture is worth a thousand words is wrong. Every picture contains information that cannot be put into words, which is its aesthetic information content. There are no words for the feeling I get when I look at a picture of my six week-old grandson practising his first smiles as I push him in a pram through Hyde Park in England on a spring day. To capture and store those wordless feelings is why we take pictures.

## Science and the self

Individual one-of-a-kind experiences are the stuff of our interior universe. Where were you at 9:00 in the morning (EST) on 11 September, 2001? Though I am sure you recall the moment vividly, your answer is totally different from mine, because it is a personal memory. The public facts have become part of our history. But your private memories will die when you die.

Knowledge of the particular is fundamentally different from the knowledge scientists deal with. Scientific researchers deal with repeatable, generalisable information that can be replicated from one experiment to the next. One-time-only experiences are the realm of the artist. Both kinds of information – the general and the particular – can be true, but each represents a different reality. Scientists seek knowledge, while artists seek emotional truth.

Semantic information, expressible in words, is outer-directed. Its frame of reference is the objective world-out-there. Aesthetic information, conveying emotion and feelings, is inner-directed. Its frame of reference is the subjective 'I', the Self. The first kind of information is collected from observable data; the second from insight. Both kinds are important for marketing brands.

A consumer's mind can be thought of as continuously engaged in the process of defining the self and orienting it to the outside world. A brand's image is constructed through emotional associations with the consumer's self-concept. A

brand's positioning is determined within a universe of competing brands. One advertising task is to add image associations organically to a brand, like the growth rings of a tree. Its other task is to signal the brand's positioning coordinates, to anchor those images to a fixed place in the mind so that it is clear what the brand stands for. Volvo owns the word 'safety' in the minds of car buyers. These two different jobs – building an image and positioning a brand – are performed by managing the yin and the yang of the two kinds of information communicated by an ad.

## What is 'news'?

Another way to think about the information in an ad is to think about 'news'. The new and unfamiliar is the opposite of the old and familiar. Frequently, the mission of advertising is to get consumers to take a second look at a brand they already know, to put a fresh face on an old acquaintance. Persuasion, Plato taught us in the *Phaedrus*, is the process of moving someone by small logical steps from the head-nod of an accepted belief – the comfort zone of the familiar – to the edge of a new conclusion. A piece of communication made up entirely of new information would be incomprehensible. The familiar provides a necessary Rosetta Stone for translating new information into relevant concepts.

Just as in journalism, news in advertising is more than simply information you didn't know. To be newsworthy, information must contain surprise. News is 'unexpected information'.

Storytelling thrives on surprise. The turning points in a movie occur when characters do not behave as expected, when new information is introduced that changes the audience's understanding of what's going on. When that happens, according to the film-writing guru Robert McKee, a 'gap' opens up between expectation and reality, releasing emotional energy that drives a plot forward.

In the bazaar scene in *Casablanca*, when Ilsa informs Rick that she was already married to Victor Laslo when they were having their love affair in Paris, Rick's emotions turn from hopeful positive to dark negative. This new information

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revealed a gap between his mental picture of the faithless lover he imagines Ilsa to be and the faithful wife she really is, forcing him to re-interpret completely the wreck of their relationship.

### A changed world-view

Surprising information is important because it can change your mental model of the world. This is information we pay attention to, which the unconscious mind instinctively filters for, because to do otherwise can be dangerous. An animal that is not sensitive to the 'news' in its environment will not survive.

News is to semantic information as originality is to aesthetic information. This is why creatives strive for originality, for fresh creative executions. Their goal is to communicate the information the client wants, in a way they did not expect. In a sense, the quest of the product manager for news and the quest of the creative director for originality is the same, though the information domain each operates in is different.

From a communication standpoint, advertising for new products clearly differs in fundamental ways from advertising for established brands. Coming in the critical first stage of the product life cycle, a new product commercial must generate

awareness of the product, starting from zero. It must, therefore, communicate lots of new information. It must communicate the brand name; the category; the attributes of the product and how those differ from other products in the category, and what the benefits of those differences are.

By contrast, advertising for established brands has the benefit of prior advertising or marketing history. Usually, its job is to remind consumers of the brand and to reinforce existing attitudes and loyalties. Typically, established-brand ads have much less factual information to convey than ads for new products.

It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that consumers will respond differently to new-product ads from established-brand ads. This has been confirmed empirically by a number of researchers in recent years. For example, in an analysis of a thousand TV commercials, Stewart and Furse found that recall scores and persuasion scores were highly correlated for new-product ads, whereas for established-brand commercials they were uncorrelated (1).

### Information processing

Interestingly, such differences not only confirm that the information content of the two kinds of ad is different, but

suggest that how the mind of the consumer processes information content in new-product ads is different from how it processes information in established-brand ads. For example, because the rational, semantic content of new product commercials is less familiar, we might expect that the brain must work harder to process the information.

To explore differences in cognitive processing, Ameritest analysed a sample of 41 packaged-goods TV commercials, 23 of which were ads for well-established brands and 18 introductory spots for new products. The Flow of Attention®, which is a Picture Sorts® tool for measuring how audiences process film, was used to deconstruct audience attention to the different types of information contained in the ads.

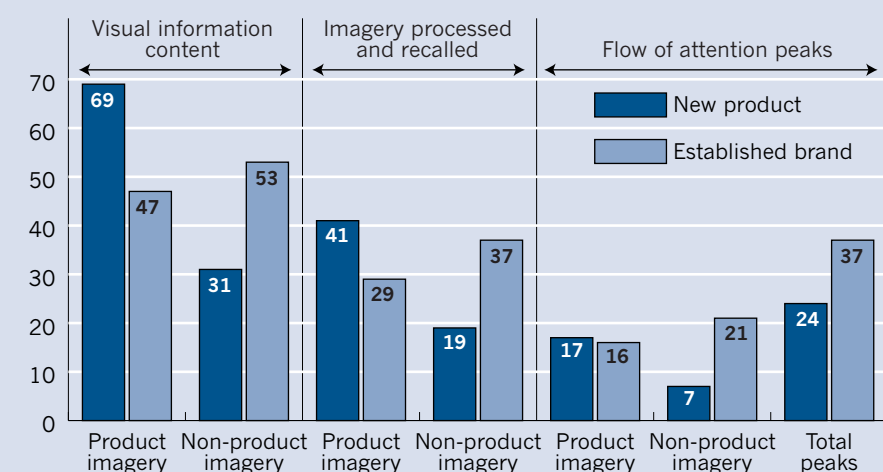
The information content of each ad was determined by frame-by-frame coding the individual pictures used in the picture-sorting task. A simple two-way classification scheme was used where the dominant information content of each picture was classified as either P- or E-type. P-type pictures contained explicit product-related content such as the name, the package, visualisations of product attributes or benefits, and product demos or pictures of the product in use. E-type pictures were basically all other visuals. The images in E-type pictures represent much of the aesthetic content of the video portion of the commercial.

Each series of Ps and Es represents the sequence of pictures taken from one commercial in the order shown, coded according to our binary categories. The proportion of P- to E-type pictures in a commercial, and the order in which each type of picture occurs in the flow of images, varies considerably between ads.

When we analysed our sample of commercials we found that new-product commercials contained substantially more P-type information than established-brand ads. Less than half, 47%, of the visuals in established-brand commercials were of the product, or P-type, while 69% of the visuals in new-product ads were, a level nearly one-and-a-half times higher. This is consistent with the commonly held perception that new-

FIGURE 1

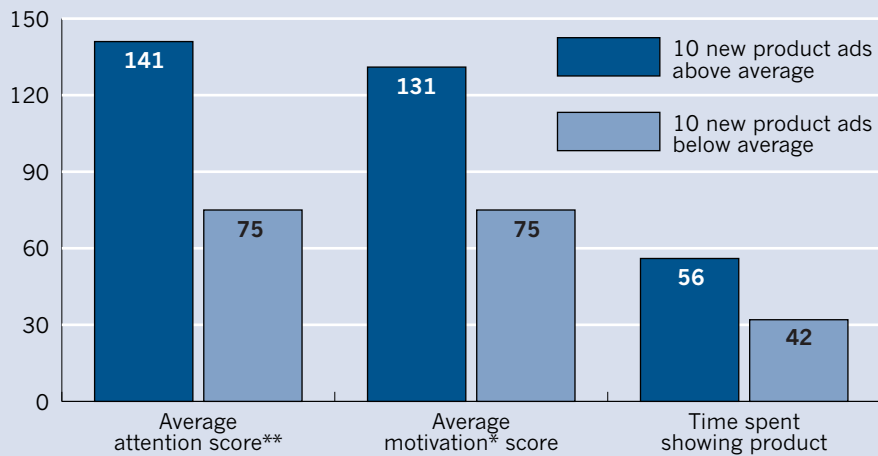
### Visual information processed by audience in new and established brand ads



Note: n = 41 commercials

FIGURE 2

## Screen time showing product is linked to new product ad performance



\* Ads tested from the following restaurants: Arby's, Dairy Queen, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Quizno's, Sonic, Subway, Taco Bell and Wendy's.

\*\* Index scores, 100 = average for all ads in QSR category.

product ads tend to be loaded with rational 'information'.

The types of visual information actually processed by viewers, as measured by the percentage of pictures recognised in the sorting task, was also different for the two kinds of ads (see Figure 1). More product imagery was recalled from new-product ads, 41% versus 29%, while more non-product, executional imagery was processed in established-brand ads, 37% versus 19%.

In the Flow of Attention, the average number of images recalled was much less predictive of commercial performance on dimensions such as attention, branding and recall, than the number of peak points (the mountain-tops of the sine-wave-type attention curves) of attention. More of these attention peaks were associated with stronger attention-getting power for the ad as a whole, and more peaks containing product imagery were associated with better branding and recall scores.

Our analysis of peak experiences suggests that new-product ads are indeed processed differently than established-brand ads. We see the same number of P-type visuals in the viewer's peak experiences of both categories of advertising, 17% for new products and 16% for established brands, despite the imbalance of P-type information in favour of new-products ads. This suggests that, even for established brands, explicit product imagery plays a role in focusing consumers' attention and anchoring the emotional, aesthetic imagery in their mind.

However, for established-brand ads, executional, E-type information occurs in peak experiences at a rate three times higher than for new-product ads – a rate much higher than we would expect from

the imbalance of information types between the two categories of ads.

Previously published research by Ameritest has shown that it is only rational, product (P-type) imagery in Flow of Attention peaks that drives day-after-recall scores. To the extent that product imagery is also relevant and motivating to consumers, this would explain the correlation between persuasion and recall scores found by Stewart and Furse for new-product ads. But for established brands, emotional imagery is more likely to play a role in driving motivation. (In other research we have shown that emotional engagement can be a strong driver of purchase intent for established brands.) Since emotional imagery does not drive day-after-recall scores, this explains why recall and persuasion are uncorrelated for established-brand advertising.

### Hierarchy of effects

From a theoretical standpoint, P-type information is the type of information we would expect to produce the cognitive learning response predicted by the classic 'learn-feel-do' hierarchy-of-effects model of how advertising works. This is exactly what happens with viewer processing of new-product ads.

On the other hand, aesthetic or emotion-generating imagery is the type most frequently processed at peak levels by viewers of established-brand ads, at three times the rate of P-type information. In terms of a hierarchy of effects, this is the 'do-feel-do' model developed in the 1980s as an alternative to the original learning model of advertising. Importantly, these findings are consistent with the assumption by many advertising practitioners

that established-brand advertising often works using an emotional rather than a rational mechanism.

However, one variable left out of this simple analysis is the question of which of these new or established-brand ads were effective? As a follow-up, we analysed a second group of new-product ads, half of which were determined to be quite strong and the other half quite weak.

Over the past six months, we have tested 20 new-product ads for 10 different restaurants in the QSR category (see Figure 2). We measured attention-getting power and motivation for each ad. Using our Picture Sorts diagnostic, we conducted a frame-by-frame analysis of how much time was spent showing the new product, including ingredient shots, food-prepping shots, bite and smile, etc.

We found that above-average new-product ads spent one-third more time showing the product (using frame counting) than below-average commercials. 56% of the visuals in the 30-second commercials showed the product in successful ads, while only 42% of the visuals showed the product in unsuccessful ads.

Moreover, successful ads showed the product more without trading off attention for motivation. In fact, successful ads were above average in both, while the unsuccessful ads were below average in both.

These are only average differences, and do not provide a formula for developing new-product ads. One of the most successful of the ten strong ads showed the product only 23% of the time, while one of the least successful showed the product 58% of the time. But the strong correlation between the amount of time the new product is on-screen and commercial performance reminds us that new-product ads form a distinct genre of advertising, which must be taken into account when developing creative work.

When discussing the content of advertising we need to think more deeply about information. Each of our five senses contains information that cannot be translated into the other four – smell has a language all its own, incomparably different from the language of touch, or sound, or sight. The language of advertising film conveys emotional truth to our eyes that our ears cannot completely understand. Pictures are not the same as words. To create effective advertising, we need both. ■

1. D Stewart and D Furse: *Effective Television Advertising: A Study of 1000 TV Commercials*. Heath Books, 1986.



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