

Why advertising memories fade

Discovering which frames of an ad stay in the viewer's memory for up to a week is crucial to brand image, says Charles Young

Memory lies at the heart of what a brand is. And we now know that memory is more complicated than the original recall-testers thought. There are, for example, multiple memory systems in the mind, not just one. The place in the brain where memories of product facts and positioning concepts go is different from the place where the emotional memories of storytelling go, which is different from where the memories of our physical, sensory experiences with a brand are stored.

There are explicit memories, which we can recall with conscious effort, that are different from implicit memories, which may be evoked only with a recognition stimulus. Finally, there may be advertising-induced memories we associate with brands that may operate only at the level of the unconscious mind.

FORMING THE BRAND IMAGE

One of the most important things to learn about memory is which parts of an ad will stick to the brand to become part of that brand's image. An outmoded view is that memory is a recording process, where commercials are tagged and stored away in their entirety. In fact, memory involves a complex process of selectively deconstructing an experience into various parts that are later reconstructed when we call that experience back to mind. Our own research on advertising, for example,

has shown that an engaging television commercial will generally produce one long-term brand memory every five to seven seconds.

While the underlying mental activity driving this process of selective memory formation is not well understood, it appears that one factor that affects the creation of long-lasting brand memories involves the intersection of unconscious emotions and conscious feelings. One of the primary diagnostics that Ameritest uses for gaining insights into TV commercials is a simple frame-by-frame memory test we give respondents about 20 minutes after showing them a test ad.

While the technique was originally developed to explain recall scores, it quickly became apparent that by coding the visual peaks of an ad for different types of content, this technique is predictive of various breakthrough measures, such as the Millward Brown AI Score. The number of peak images in the memory graph of an ad is highly predictive of the ad's attention-getting power as a whole. This suggests the close connection between the two distinct mental processes of attention and memory. In fact, we call the memory graph generated by our picture sorting data the Flow of Attention because it is a measure of selective attention.

As neuroscience has now taught us, our unconscious emotions drive conscious attention. By definition, unconscious emotions



cannot be self-reported by respondents – one of the main reasons ad researchers have turned to physical measures like EEGs, or brainwave measurement, to better understand consumer engagement with advertising.

However, the Flow of Attention is an indirect way of measuring engagement with consumer emotions because we are measuring the effects of the unconscious emotional filtering process. We fire a stream of images at the brain in the form of television commercials and measure which images stick.

The images that we remember 20 minutes after seeing an ad – the ones that have moved from our short-term working memory to longer-term memory – are not necessarily the ones we remember the next day, or weeks or months later. While all memories decay over time, they don't decay at the same rate.

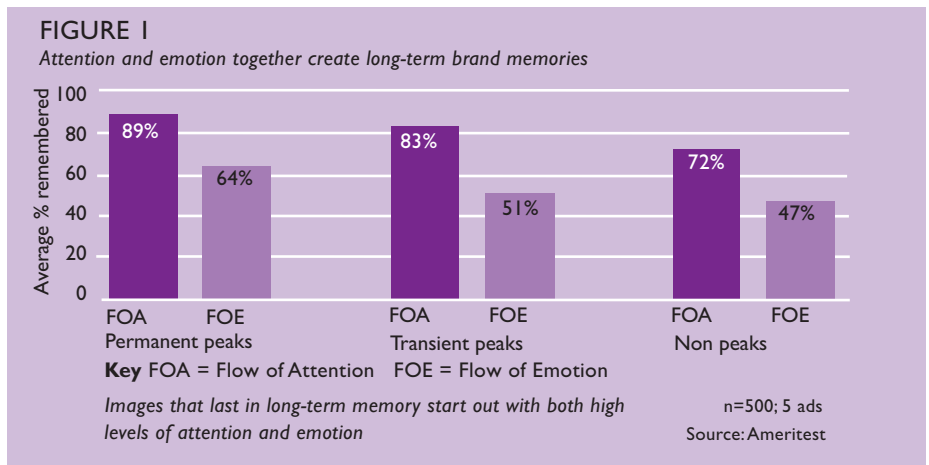
As ad researchers interested in using short-term pretesting data to more accurately predict the longer-term memories measured in ad tracking studies, we need to better understand the connections between short and long-term memories. To help explore these connections, we recently conducted an experiment in which we exposed 180 respondents to five fast food ads that tested above average in attention-getting power and then measured frame-by-frame memory of the ads after different periods of time: 20 minutes, one day, and one week after exposure.

Not surprisingly, the more time consumers had to forget, the less of each commercial they remembered. While viewers remembered 77% of the images from the ads 20 minutes after exposure, they only remembered 62% after a day, and only 52% after a week.

Of course, the story told by these data is incomplete and potentially misleading because not all of the images from an ad are forgotten at the same rate.

For example, a Flow of Attention graph that plotted recall of a Taco Bell ad 20 minutes after seeing it revealed a rhythmic structure and variability in image recall, which we typically expect to see as a result of selective attention. The overall pattern of remembering was high, with over half of the images recalled at levels above our database average, and with average recall of 76%. There were also six peaks of attention – an above-average number, which is characteristic of highly attention-getting advertising.

After 24 hours of forgetting, the average level of image recall falls significantly to an average of 55%, so that none of the pictures is remembered at levels above the average line. While at first glance the rhythmic pattern produced by selective attention appeared intact,



close inspection revealed some slight shifting around in relative memory.

After one week of forgetting, the average level of image recall fell further, to 43%, so that the average image was remembered by less than half of the sample. There were now only five peaks, instead of six, as the memory of the opening storyline became flattened – though the five peaks that remained were the same ones that were identified after 20 minutes.

PATTERNS OF REMEMBERING

As we looked across the five commercials in our experiment, we found similar patterns: fewer images are remembered over time, but the rhythmic peaks and valleys of remembering stay intact. But we also found that across all of the ads, there are slightly fewer peak images remembered over longer periods of time: there were an average of five peaks across the five commercials after 20 minutes of forgetting, but only four after a week – a statistically significant difference.

This is relevant because one of the most important uses of the Flow of Attention is to identify the peak images that stand out as consumers engage with a commercial. The number of peaks, along with the type of visual content present in these peaks, is predictive of other important commercial metrics, such as attention, recall, branding and communication. What this experiment reveals is that while the majority of Flow of Attention peaks are long lasting, some of them are only transient.

To better understand the difference between long-lasting and transient peaks of attention, we went back to the original pretest results for these five ads and examined another measure that we collect as a standard part of a normal pretest – the Flow of Emotion.

The Flow of Emotion is a second picture

sort that we collect by having respondents do a frame-by-frame sort of images based on how they felt about each image as they were watching the commercial. In general, the Flow of Emotion graph looks quite a bit different than the Flow of Attention and is predictive of different kinds of commercial performance characteristics. For example, while the Flow of Attention is predictive of attention and recall, the Flow of Emotion is more predictive of motivation and persuasion.

When we compare the ‘permanent’ peaks from our five test ads, that is, those peaks that last at least a week in consumers’ memories, to the ‘transient’ peaks, which fade after a day, we find that the best-recalled images are more highly charged with consumer feelings. In Figure 1, you can see that the long-lasting permanent peak images score better than non-peak images on the short-term memory measure of the Flow of Attention and on the Flow of Emotion. In contrast, transient peak images are better recalled than non-peak images in the short term, but perform no better than non-peak images in terms of generating a conscious emotional response.

In other words, the imagery from commercials we remember for a long time is not just the imagery our unconscious minds select to allow into the working memory of our conscious minds. It is also the imagery for which we have the strongest conscious feelings.

So what’s our short answer to why some advertising imagery lasts a long time? It goes something like this – the unconscious mind says: “Look at this!” And the conscious mind responds: “Wow, that was something!”



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