

Emotional persuasion

Robert Heath, University of Bath, explains what emotional persuasion is, why it matters and how it can be measured

THIS ARTICLE DEFINES two different types of persuasion: rational and emotional. Rational persuasion, exemplified by performance claims, promotions, offers and the like, acts as an incentive for sales. But it is emotional persuasion that creates relationships and builds strong, successful brands. An important new research system is described – the CEP™ Test – which is able to quantify accurately in advance how well ads will perform on each of these two different types of persuasion.

Ehrenberg's Reinforcement Model

In 1974, Andrew Ehrenberg wrote a controversial paper about how advertising works (1). He rejected the notion that advertising is capable of changing attitudes on its own, and proposed that it usually worked by reinforcing opinions formed from what are often high levels of consumer knowledge and experience.

Ehrenberg's attack was focused on the general assumption that advertising was a strong form of persuasion, and his theory gained much popularity among advertising agencies. It was, bear in mind, a time when the sales effects of advertising were seen by many as longterm, hard to discern even in hindsight and virtually impossible to predict.

Ehrenberg had established that in most markets there were few 100% loyal buyers, and the majority bought more than one brand. He found that brand users held consistently stronger attitudes than non-users, but could not satisfactorily explain how these attitudes came about. This led him to question the core assumption within hierarchy-of-effects models: that attitude change precedes and drives behaviour change. He accepted that advertising can create, re-awaken or strengthen brand awareness, and can be one factor that facilitates trial purchase.

But he also envisaged a defensive role for repetitive advertising as 'reinforcing already developed repeat buying habits'. Later, he developed this further to address split-loyal purchasers (who regularly purchase more than one brand), and defined a further role for advertising as 'nudging' split-loyals towards a greater purchase proportion of one brand or another (2).

Recent experimental work by Kathryn Braun (3) has confirmed the power of advertising as reinforcement in a post-purchase situation. Braun created orange juice samples of varying quality and gave them to subjects to taste. Half the subjects were then exposed to advertising for the supposed new brand. It was found that the advertising confounded the subject's ability to judge accurately the quality of the juice, leading to substandard samples being highly rated.

The power of 'reinforcement' advertising was contested by Jones (4), who characterised it as a 'weak' theory of advertising, which contrasted with the traditional strongly persuasive model 'universally believed in the United States'. Four key differences emerged between Jones's 'strong theory' and Ehrenberg's reinforcement model.

1. Strong theory sees advertising as a dynamic force, driving sales and category growth. Reinforcement identifies an important additional defensive role, especially for repetitive advertising.

2. Strong theory sees advertising operating on an 'apathetic and rather stupid consumer' (*sic.*); reinforcement sees consumers as knowledgeable and intelligent.

3. Strong theory sees advertising working by changing attitudes, which leads to changing behaviour. Reinforcement rejects the idea that attitude change must always precede purchase.

4. Reinforcement sees persuasion as arising from advertising that takes 'an emotional instead of an informative tone'.

Two definitions of persuasion

The above suggests that Ehrenberg does not see persuasion the same way as the strong theory. The *Oxford Compact English Dictionary's* general definition of persuade is 'Cause someone to believe, convince' (*OCED* 1996). This clearly identifies persuasion as a rational, active thinking activity, which involves the manipulation of thoughts to create beliefs and change attitudes.

But this 'active thinking' is not the only definition. The *OCED* also defines persuasion as 'to induce, lure, attract, entice'. This does not necessarily imply that a verbal or rational process is needed for persuasion to take place, as the words used (induce, lure, attract, entice) all relate to feelings and emotions more than thinking. Ehrenberg's view of persuasion arising from advertising that uses an emotional tone suggests it is this definition of persuasion he envisages. It is this definition of persuasion that I call 'emotional' persuasion.

In modern practice, the word persuasion is used to encompass both definitions, and is often used to describe any activity that changes the attitudes or behaviour of the recipient. But Ehrenberg sees reinforcement advertising as influencing behaviour without necessarily having to change attitudes. This corresponds closely to the model that dominates academia in the US, Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM).

Elaboration Likelihood Model

The ELM divides consumers into those who are 'involved' and those who are not. Involved consumers tend to process advertising using a higher level of thoughtfulness, which they term 'central' processing. Uninvolved consumers use a lower level of thoughtfulness – 'peripheral' processing. The key difference between the two is 'the extent to which the attitude change that results ... is due to active thinking' (5). Attitude changes resulting from central process-

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ing are enduring, so it is a strongly persuasive route. But an important characteristic of peripheral processing is that the attitude changes that result are weak and relatively transient, and the peripheral route also is one in which repetition of emotive cue-based advertising is more influential than the actual message. So Ehrenberg's reinforcement model in fact corresponds very closely to the less strongly persuasive peripheral processing. This might seem to confirm Jones's opinion that it is a 'weak' model, but recent findings show otherwise.

Decision-making and emotion

Traditional models suggest that behaviour change is driven by changes in attitudes. Early models like Lavidge and Steiner's (6) had decision-making driven by affect (feelings and emotions), but affect operated only as a consequence of cognition (thinking). Zajonc (7) successfully contradicted this in 1980, showing that affect is generally pre-cognitive, not post-cognitive. More recently, Damasio (8) has shown that cognition is 'hard-wired' via the emotions, and that feelings are therefore capable of driving decisions in the face of negative cognition. This has since been validated by Shiv & Fedhorkhin (9): by constraining decision time they found that subjects chose chocolate cake in place of fruit salad, ignoring the sensible guidance of their 'thinking' brain, and giving way to their emotions – exactly how busy parents act when shopping for groceries with their children. What this suggests is that real-life decisions are very vulnerable to advertising that operates emotionally.

Damasio (10) also found that, while cognitive processing depends on working memory and is enhanced by attention, affective processing is independent of working memory and attention. He established that emotions and feelings are formed subconsciously and autonomically (independent of will). But an even more important find-

ing has been made by Bornstein (11), who discovered that affect is more effective when it is processed subconsciously: Bornstein found that conscious processing of affective elements weakens their potency, because it allows the subject to evaluate rationally and counter-argue against the influence.

This implies that the less attention consumers pay to affective elements in advertising, the better they will work. Christie Norheim (12) has confirmed this experimentally. She has found that if ads are processed deeply, repeated exposure causes affective response to first rise and then fall sharply. But when ads are processed in a shallow, inattentive fashion, affective responses are enhanced, with no downturn from repetition.

There is also experimental confirmation that repetition at low attention has an effect on decision-making. D'Sousa (13) found evidence of 'small but significant' increases in brand awareness and brand choice arising from repetition of radio ads in a divided-attention situation. All this supports the Low-Attention Processing (LAP) Model (14), which suggests that advertising that operates emotionally can be processed without active attention and can exert a significant influence on choice, often without the consumer realising it. Whether you call it reinforcement, peripheral processing or LAP, advertising that works in this way is not weak, it is simply emotionally persuasive.

Emotional persuasion

The true importance of emotional persuasion emerges from findings by Paul Watzlawick (15). Watzlawick identifies two distinct levels for communication: a content level and a relationship level. The former he terms communication, the latter metacommunication. Rational persuasion takes place in the 'content' area of communication, is easily analysed and classified, but is the fastest to fade in memory. In contrast, the 'rela-

tionship' metacommunication is often subtle and disguised, but it is this part that endures and ultimately is most effective at changing attitudes. It is this relationship-building metacommunication that is emotionally persuasive.

If you think about when you meet someone, you'll realise that you might be influenced to meet them again by what they say, but you are influenced to become friendly towards them by the way they say things. Extending this analogy to marketing, brands can easily get sales using the content of their advertising – by demonstrating added value, cutting price, improving performance, and so on. But brands build enduring relationships and create loyal consumers only by the 'relationship-building' metacommunication in their advertising. For example, Colgate didn't become a super-brand just by preventing tooth decay like every other toothpaste. It became a superbrand because, through years of advertising, it has built up a relationship with people, so that they now trust and like it as a brand. This is exactly how brands like Andrex, Olay, Persil, Stella Artois, Orange, BMW and many others, have become so strong.

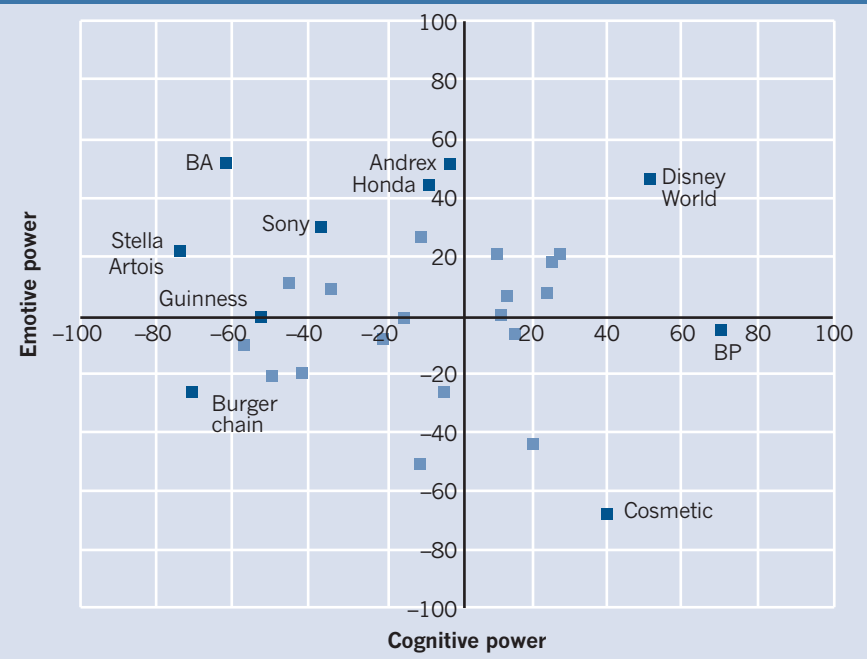
Measuring rational and emotional persuasion

Part of the problem with emotional persuasion is that it is really hard to measure. It is relatively easy to measure rational persuasion – you can pretty much just ask people if they feel more inclined to buy the brand. But if you ask them if they feel inclined to form a relationship with the brand they are likely to think you are nuts.

Working in partnership with OTX, we have devised a research system that solves this problem: the CEP™ Test (patent pending). The CEP™ Test uses a set of ten dimensions to measure the Cognitive Power™ and the Emotive Power™ of an advertising execution. Cognitive Power measures the rational persuasion of the advertising – how ▶

FIGURE 1

CEP™ test results



well it will achieve sales. Emotive Power measures the emotional persuasion of the advertising – how well it will build the brand relationship.

In the first six weeks of the launch we performed approaching 120 tests of brand communication material. We have found that the system works not only on TV, print, poster, radio and cinema, but on internet ads, promotional banners – in fact, any form of brand communication. What is more, we have found that high scores on cognitive power or emotive power are validated in 90% of cases by positive shifts in favourability between those who have and have not seen the advertising. But low scores show no shift. Some results are shown in Figure 1.

Take as an example six of these advertisements we tested during our development and validation phase. In the US, we tested a highly creative and quite well-liked ad for a burger retail chain. But the scores for Cognitive Power and Emotive Power were way below average. And the advertising showed no shift at all on favourability between those who recognised and did not recognise it. In contrast, Disney World's 50th Anniversary ad scored well above average on Cognitive Power and Emotive Power, in fact it was the highest-scoring of all ads we tested. And it also scored the highest shift in favourability, among both users and non-users.

In the UK we tested a corporate ad for BP. It spoke a lot about global warming and what BP was doing to stop it, and scored very well on Cognitive Power, but the Emotive Power score was below average. This indicates the ad won't make consumers like BP any better. This result was reflected in very small increases in favourability, mostly among existing users. Sony's spectacular release of thousands of coloured balls in San Francisco, for the launch of their Bravia TV, caused much excitement amongst creatives. It doesn't explain why the Bravia is better, but it is emotionally persuasive, as we can see from the very high score it achieves on Emotive Power. What's more, there is a substantial upward shift in favourability.

What about Guinness' recent 'evolution' ad? Very creative, but only average on Emotive Power. Non-users rated it below average on both scales, users rated it above. And when we looked at the favourability shifts there was a big shift amongst users and no shift at all among non-users. So the message for Guinness is that if they want to reinforce their user base, this ad works fine.

The Honda Diesel ad also created a stir, two minutes long and totally iconic. And it creates a stir in Emotive Power as well, nearly as high as Andrex. But that's not a recent Andrex ad, it is the very first Andrex Puppy ad ever made. It is still as emotively persuasive as it was 20 years ago.

Bottom right is a cosmetic ad. It gets over a lot of information but it is almost entirely lacking in empathy. This advertising isn't going to score any relationship-building points with the consumers. In contrast, the star award for relationship-building goes to one of last year's British Airways ads, top left. But what would happen if they decided to abandon their wonderfully soothing all-important operatic music track? We could tell them! ■

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