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Recognition, recall and persuasion

The phenomena that advertisers describe as ‘recognition’ and ‘recall’ both figure heavily in the history of copy testing techniques, and it is worth looking in a little more depth at these measures, and the newer criterion of *persuasion*. A more comprehensive review by Alexander Biel of the issues I briefly explore here can be found in *Admap*, May 1993.

MEASURING HOW ADVERTISEMENTS ARE REMEMBERED

Both recognition and recall are techniques that dredge memory for traces of awareness of an advertisement or brand, but recognition is a direct technique, while recall approaches the memory indirectly.

In other words, *recognition* is the term for trying to access a memory of something by prompting with that concept: so a prompt using the actual advertisement, trying to access any memory of having seen it before, is searching for recognition. *Recall* is the term used when one prompts with a brand name while looking for feedback on the memory of the advertisement; or conversely, prompts with the unbranded advertisement while looking for feedback on the brand that is being advertised.

In practice there are a number of ways in which it is possible to put these techniques into practice, and dredge a consumer’s memory for traces of an advertisement or brand. A researcher might:



- show respondents the advertisement and ask straight out if they remember it;
- remove the branding from the commercial, show it to respondents and then ask them to name the brand;
- describe the commercial to the respondents, omitting to mention the brand, and then ask them if they have seen it, and what brand it is for;
- ask the respondents if they remember seeing a commercial for brand A;
- ask the respondents to describe the most recent commercial for brand A.

Each of these techniques impacts differently on respondents' memories, so a researcher who applied different memory-dredging techniques to different sets of 100 respondents (for the same commercial) would be likely to get different results each time. Ignoring the statistical vagaries that can throw up the occasional wildly atypical sample, these different techniques give increasingly lower results as one use a technique lower on the list above: so a researcher who shows respondents the advertisement and asks if they have seen it before will get the highest proportion of positive responses, while a researcher who asks respondents to describe the commercial, without showing it at all or prompting them about its contents, will get the lowest proportion.

This does not mean that people have different 'memories' of an advertisement. It *does* mean that the same pattern of connectivity in the brain (the same 'memory') is stimulated in different ways by different prompts. If the prompt material is 'rich', and triggers lots of neural activity, the output (the memory triggered) is also likely to be rich. A stingy or indirect prompt (like the brand name) will generate relatively little output.

In 1932 Dr Daniel Starch started to measure the recognition of print advertisements in the United States. Starch was followed by Gallup and his partner Claude Robinson, who adapted Starch's initial *recognition* measure to a *recall* measure for television advertising. Alexander Biel has said that this started the greatest and longest-running debate in advertising measurement. The two organizations argued the relative merits of their approaches, other research companies adapted these approaches and entered the debate, and client companies supporting the different approaches also entered the debate.

The next development in advertising measurement (in the United States) was in the late 1940s, when Horace Schwerin introduced a 'persuasion' measure. This was based on asking consumers about their brand preferences before and after exposure to a commercial. If a shift in preference occurred, this was evidence that the advertisement had 'persuaded' the customer of the merits of the brand.

As Alexander Biel states, while there are now many research firms in the United States that provide measures of advertisement effectiveness, they almost all use variants of the methodologies pioneered by Starch, Gallup and Schwerin. To this day there is a lot of debate about the relative merits of recognition, recall and persuasion at US advertising measurement conferences. The UK seems to ignore this debate, other than criticizing the measures, but certainly runs the risk of throwing the baby out with the bath water by doing so.

LEFT- AND RIGHT-BRAIN MEMORIES

Possibly the most interesting turn that this debate took was in the 1970s, when Herbert Krugman related the measurements of recognition and recall to brain hemispheric theories (based on the differences between the 'right brain' and 'left brain': see Chapter 8). His 1977 paper is particularly interesting in this context, because it is the first attempt I am aware of to relate a view of how the brain works to how advertising works.

Krugman argued that:

- Recognition is an emotional task, and recall is a logical task. In other words, recognition makes use of the right hemisphere of the brain, which appears to be primarily concerned with emotional matters, and recall makes use of the left hemisphere, where there is most activity when logical thought is required.
- Print advertising tends to be logical, and television advertising tends to be emotional, in its appeal. (Therefore, according to Krugman's reasoning, print stimulates the left hemisphere and television the right hemisphere.)
- Therefore recognition is the correct method to use for television, and recall is the correct measure for print.

Soon after Krugman's paper, Zielske published a paper (1982) which provided empirical evidence that recall penalizes 'emotional' advertising: that is, that recall techniques rate emotional advertising as less successful than it actually is. This is, he suggested, what Krugman's theory implied would happen. Then a paper entitled 'Not recall' was published by Larry Gibson (1994). This also purported to provide empirical evidence that recall is a misleading measurement. The closing line, from which the title of the paper is derived, is: 'I don't know what the answer is, but it definitely is not recall.'



Both Zielske's and Gibson's papers have subsequently been 'debunked': that is, the evidence they presented has been shown to be invalid. Nobody has attacked Krugman's paper, largely because it did not offer empirical evidence, but stated a theory. Zielske's paper was criticized by Professor Eve Thorsen, who pointed out that his research was based on measurements of only six commercials, and that if the two extreme results were ignored, it proved exactly the opposite. She conducted a much larger-scale experiment and proved what the mid-scale results from Zielske's research also suggested, that emotional advertisements score better than logical ones on recall measures.

Professor Joel Dubow reanalysed Larry Gibson's data and found that he was guilty of 'sloppy statistics'. There was a brief flutter of excitement when Larry answered Joel, and Joel answered Larry in the *Journal of Advertising Research*. Unfortunately the gist of the 'answering' was that Larry was offended that Joel had not consulted him before making the results public, and Joel had felt he did not need to. At the end of this unilluminating exchange, many people in the industry still thought that 'Not recall' provided real evidence that recall was not a valid way of measuring the effectiveness of advertising.

To my mind (as you will appreciate, if you have been following my argument this far), these researchers putting forward extremist arguments about memory-dredging techniques are just two gladiators fighting in the mist, and it is all driven by commercial interest. Neither one is right, because:

- Although it does seem to be the case that the left and right hemispheres of the brain have recognizably different functions, from what we know about the brain it seems that most memories and concepts include elements that one might describe as both 'emotional' and 'logical'. They are embodied in patterns of neuronal activity that spread widely across the brain, and are not confined to one hemisphere.
- There cannot be more than one physical embodiment of the memory of an advertisement, so although different measurement techniques may come up with different answers, they cannot be measuring 'different memories'. It is the techniques that are different, not the memories they access.
- Different techniques can only measure different aspects of the same memory.
- There is no way that one measurement technique can be 'wrong'. It can only be inapplicable to what is being measured.

RECOGNITION AND RECALL VERSUS PERSUASION

Understandably the whole debate gained a further dimension when Schwerin introduced a measure for persuasion. Suddenly the companies that were selling recognition and recall measures did not only have to fight each other; there was a new contender on the block. The amazing thing about 'commercial interest' is that it seldom stops to consider merits, it simply attacks what it perceives as a threat. Only the academics consider the relative merits of the methods. So, the recall and recognition companies, while fighting each other, also argued against persuasion.

Alexander Biel points out that this is a non-argument:

Recognition and recall are memory-dredging techniques largely viewing advertising as a learning process, whereas persuasion is a motivation issue.

In other words, while recall and recognition are attempts to measure whether or not there is a memory trace (that is, the consumer has a memory of the advertisement and/or the brand), persuasion considers *what effect the ad might have on behaviour*. It looks at the response of the individual to the advertisement, not whether the individual recalls it. There should not be an argument about these issues as being either-or; they must be complementary.

Recall too that advertising does not work immediately, because in most cases the consumer does not make the purchase decision immediately. It is the *memory* of the advertisement that is drawn on when the purchase decision is made.

Many attempts to measure persuasion use a pre-post-exposure evaluation: that is, they ask people whether they intend to purchase something, after they have seen the advertisement but before they have made a purchase. The weakness of this is that it does not take full account of the complex effects of memory and time delays on the impact of the commercial.

We believe that persuasion is a valid measure, and that it does reflect to some degree what impact a commercial might have, if it were recalled at the time of the purchase decision. However, the current research models of many companies that claim to measure persuasion do not reflect this thinking. Our view is that the persuasion model of how advertising works is mainly relevant to direct response-type advertising, and some launch or relaunch advertising. Here the strategy is to communicate relevant news, not to lay down a long-term memory, and an immediate short-term effect is hoped for.



In general, though, it is important for us to be clear how advertisements actually affect people's buying behaviour, and it is by no means clear that recognition and recall provide the whole story there. In the next chapter we start to look at the link between advertisement memories and brand memories, and in the process we put this small debate in a wider context.

