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Do TV commercials need a USP ?

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The answer would appear to be no, given that much advertising does not even make the slightest attempt at saying the brand is better than others. But a fair amount of advertising does – so is this particularly good advertising ? Does it work better ?

David Stewart, a Professor at University of Southern California, has published several important large content analyses of TV advertising. The 1980s US TV ads (more

than 2000) were analysed in terms of 160 aspects of content, e.g.

- appeal based on enjoying life
- surrealistic visuals
- male principal character/ female principal character
- demonstration of results using product
- number of times brand name is mentioned
- health related information
- presence of a brand differentiating message

Such aspects of creative design were then correlated against the advertisements performance in laboratory pre-tests, specifically in terms of recall, comprehension and 'persuasion shift' (the difference in the % of respondents selecting the brand in a lottery before and then after exposure to the commercial).

With such a large list of creative design aspects many featured in too few ads to allow for meaningful analysis. So only aspects that occurred reasonably frequently were reported, and they had to perform across product categories and new and established brands. In some analyses these executional aspects were collapsed into about 25 factors.

Stewart and his co-authors concluded that "presence of a brand differentiating message" was the aspect of content that was most associated with the three measures of ad quality. This would seem to be powerful empirical evidence of the value of a brand differentiating message.

Ahh, if only the secret to quality commercials were this simple!

The main reason that "presence of a brand differentiating message" came out well was that it was a very general (i.e. non specific) aspect. One would hardly expected specific tactical aspects such as "photographic stills used in part of the commercial" or "number of camera cuts" to have been the key to effective advertising. And it would be difficult for aspects such as "contained nutritional or health information" to perform across product categories.

And when the authors said that "brand differentiating message" performed best, they mean it was able to explain a tiny amount (a few percentage points) of the variation in the effectiveness variables. Yes, the correlation was that weak.

So what are we to conclude ? Advertising that you are better and different from the other brands is probably sometimes useful. Probably when you really do have something believable and important to say. Then it is relevant news, and your ad will be of more interest and better liked for it.

But a brand differentiating message is not essential for every ad, nor is it guaranteed to improve a TV commercial.

References:

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