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Persuasion in the marketplace

A marketing perspective

Stephen Downes

Marketing is often incorrectly equated with advertising — seen as 'beguiling' — and/or selling — seen as 'pushing'. Not surprisingly, this popular view of marketing leads to a perception that it is *all* about persuasion and especially 'making people want to buy stuff they don't need'.

However relatively little of contemporary marketing practice and academic study actually concerns persuasion and persuasive communications. The marketing concept, which came to the fore in the 1960s, emphasizes that profitable sales and satisfactory returns on investment can only be achieved by identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer needs and desires.[1] Most marketing effort is, in fact, focused not on persuasion but on:

- understanding markets and their structures and dynamics;
- understanding and responding to customers, both as groups (segments) and, in an age of what is called 'relationship marketing', as individuals; and
- configuring the offer, that is, the product, its positioning, pricing and channels of distribution.

The issue of persuasion is considered mainly in the relatively limited context of marketing communications and advertising, at the pointy end of a much broader and more complex set of marketing analysis and strategic activities. Even then, many specialised textbooks of marketing communications and advertising devote relatively little specific attention to persuasion; only one recent scholarly text has addressed persuasion as its central subject.[2]

The power of the brand

The main focus of persuasion in marketing communications is changing, maintaining or reinforcing customers' brand awareness and attitudes towards the *brand*. The brand has become a dominant central concept in contemporary marketing theory and practice since the late 1980s. Marketing science has increasingly adopted a neuro-psycho-cultural brand paradigm, integrating concepts from cognitive and social psychology, sociology and anthropology as well as — most recently — neuroscientific evidence suggesting that brands may have specific correlates in terms of cortical activation.

Academic marketers conceptualise a brand as a set of associations in the mind of the customer, linked to a name and/or other brand identity elements, capable of influencing customer perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, and hence significant in persuasion. More poetically, a brand has been described as a set of promises, a cluster of values,[3] a cultural icon with symbolic social meaning[4] and even a lovemark.[5]

At the core of a brand may be a physical good (for example, a BMW car), a service (for example, Westpac banking), a retail store (for example, David Jones), a person (for example, Elvis), a place (for example, Canberra as a tourism destination), an organisation (for example, Amnesty International), legislation (for example, WorkChoices), or even an idea (for example, safe sex). However dimensions added to this core — *brand associations* — differentiate the brand from other products or services designed to meet the same need. These associations may be tangible, to do with features or functional performance attributes linked to the brand, or intangible, concerned with the imagery conveyed or evoked by the brand, the relationship of the brand to the self-image of the consumer, and/or emotional responses evoked by the brand. Consider, for example, what the words 'Guantanamo' or 'WorkChoices' call to mind.

The role of the brand in persuasion is demonstrated by the continued success of branded variants over their generic equivalents and by the commercial value that accrues to these brands and the firms that own them. This is encapsulated in the concept of *brand equity*, typically defined as a set of assets linked to the brand that add to the value provided by the unbranded or generic product at its core.[6] A strong and well-managed brand creates value for both the consumer and the brand owner, by:

- enhancing perceptions of performance and quality;
- engendering greater customer loyalty;

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- commanding price premiums;
- providing trust and reassurance and thus reducing vulnerability to crises;
- promoting referral and more effective cross-selling; and
- enhancing opportunities for brand leverage such as co-branding and brand extension.

The customer's *brand knowledge* — comprising brand awareness and brand associations — is the focus of the marketer's attempts at persuasion: advertising and other forms of marketing communication are directed towards changing or maintaining brand awareness, brand associations, brand attitudes and/or brand preference, and hence brand equity.

At the same time, existing brand knowledge exerts a strong influence on persuasion and persuasiveness. Communications for a brand with high brand equity command higher levels of consumer attention, are more likely to be comprehended as the marketer intends, less likely to be counter-argued, more likely to be retained in memory and more likely to generate 'word of mouth' effects which in turn magnify communications effectiveness.[7]

Is advertising actually persuasive?

It's a great ad but it didn't make me want to rush out and buy … (insert name of brand here)

While marketers may be convinced about the persuasive power of the brand, many are rather less convinced about advertising, and there is significant continuing debate about how advertising works.

Attempts by academics to understand persuasion in marketing communications draw on concepts from a broad range of other disciplines, including psychology, sociology and behavioural economics. Numerous models have been developed — usually *post hoc* — to explain why certain communications are more effective than others and to guide their development. Of particular note are the emphasis in all advertising models and in advertising practice generally on the importance of visual images and symbols.

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Strong versus weak theories of advertising

The so-called 'strong' theory of advertising and other hierarchical models of strongly persuasive advertising effects date back more than a century and hold that advertising creates desired behaviour by impacting on attitudes towards the brand. The earliest and best-known of these models is AIDA, an acronym representing the presumed hierarchy of effects: the advertisement attracts *attention*, gains *interest* (if comprehended as intended), provokes *desire*, and stimulates *action* on the part of the recipient.[8] Naturally, this view of advertising's persuasive effects favours the creation of advertising that is thought-provoking, emotionally engaging and compelling, with a clear call to action.

Proponents of the more recent weak theory of advertising, such as the UK academic Ehrenberg, hold that most advertising, especially for fast-moving consumer goods, merely serves as a reminder, keeping the brand within the customer's portfolio of brands and that product trial, use and reinforcement — not persuasion — leads to attitude change.[9]

One model that somewhat bridges the apparent gulf between strong and

Figure 1: The FCB grid, with examples of product categories and persuasive hierarchies

LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT		TYPE OF DECISION PROCESS	
		Rational (thinking)	**Emotional (feeling)**
	HIGH	INFORMATIVE House, car, durables *LEARN-FEEL-DO*	AFFECTIVE Cosmetics, fashion, Harley Davidson *FEEL-LEARN-DO*
	LOW	HABIT-FORMATION Food, household items *DO-LEARN-FEEL*	SELF SATISFACTION Cigarettes, chocolate, liquor *DO-FEEL-LEARN*

weak views of advertising is the elaboration likelihood model (ELM),[10] which identifies two routes to persuasion — central and peripheral. The ELM suggests that a person's level of involvement, broadly defined as the degree of personal relevance of the purchase or decision to the consumer, during message processing is a crucial factor in determining the most successful route to persuasion.

When involvement is high, consumers are more motivated and able to process central or higher level message arguments. Conversely, when involvement is low, peripheral aspects of the message and its presentation, such as background music, colour and images may be more important, and effects on attitudes and behaviour — if they occur — are more likely to result from repetition and rote learning than from rational argument.

Strategic advertising approaches to the challenge of persuasion under conditions of low involvement often centre on enhancing motivation, opportunity and ability to process messages by, for example:

- using novel and intense stimuli;
- appealing to hedonic needs, such as appetite or sexual stimulation;
- increasing perceived relevance through fear appeals and rhetorical questions; and
- increasing curiosity through humour or 'teasing'.

Other approaches to how advertising works are implicit in a number of planning grids initially developed within the strategic planning departments of advertising agencies, the most famous of which — the FCB grid — emerged from the US agency Foote, Cone and Belding in the 1970s.

The FCB grid (see Figure 1) proposes that advertising be developed by considering the consumer's level of involvement in the message and another key dimension, the extent of thinking (rational and functional considerations) versus feeling (emotions) in the consumer's decision-making. The idea of this grid is that identification — through consumer research — of the appropriate quadrant of the grid for a particular brand and campaign assists the agency in developing a more targeted approach.

Australian academic John Rossiter and US advertising executive Larry Percy modified the FCB grid, retaining level of involvement but replacing the thinking/feeling dimension with assessment of consumer motivations as either informational or transformational.[11]

Experience suggests, however, that these psychological models of advertising effects and even the planning grids are little known and rarely used by those ultimately responsible for developing persuasive communications, namely creative teams in advertising agencies.

Identifying and framing the key benefit

Nobody wants to buy a drill. What they really want is a hole.

While debate continues about psychological models, there is solid recognition across the marketing discipline that customers will be motivated and persuaded by marketing communications that focus on the *benefits* that a brand or product offers rather than its features or attributes.

Benefits may be functional (*what the brand does for me*) or expressive (*what the brand says about me*), rational or emotional. Identifying the key benefit or benefits to be communicated is therefore a key part of the discipline of planning and executing persuasive communications.

Typically, the specific benefits for a particular brand and campaign are captured in the form of a key benefit claim or selling proposition, an accurate, persuasively sufficient and succinct statement of what the brand will do for the customer. For example, the athletic apparel brand Nike characterises its brand attributes, within in the company, in the form of the brand mantra *authentic athletic performance*,[12] while its proposition to the customer is better characterised in terms such as 'you will feel like a champion when you wear Nike'.

The creative idea

It is clear that the most effective and celebrated marketing communications are those based on a strong creative idea, which maximises attention, catalyses communication and dramatises a clearly-identified key benefit.

A vast range of tools and techniques for developing creative ideas, and styles for executing these ideas, have been documented.[13] However, knowledge of these does not guarantee persuasive success in non-creative hands!

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Ethical issues

The perceived persuasive power of marketing communications is often the subject of public and policy concerns.

Concerns raised in relation to marketing to children typically relate to perceptions of them as inexperienced and unsophisticated consumers, as well as to more specific issues such as the promotion of unrealistic body images and the sexualisation of children in advertising.

Another significant ethical issue in marketing communications concerns the blurring of programming and advertising, particularly undeclared product placement and 'cash for comment'. New digital media and technologies allow for ever greater degrees of embedding and contextualisation of marketing messages within editorial content, especially online.

Once regarded as 'the hidden persuaders', the advertising and marketing industries now seem to be automatic suspects when concerns are raised about troubling social issues such as childhood obesity. In 2004 a literature review undertaken for the UK Office of Communications concluded that there was evidence for only a modest direct effect of food promotion on children's food choices but insufficient evidence to show that TV advertising has a larger, indirect effect on children's food choices.[14] However without a similar enquiry having been conducted in Australia, the Australian Labor Party has committed to a policy of banning all food advertising during children's TV viewing hours.

Some observers do, however, argue that the growing 'advertising literacy' of consumers — their increasing ability to decode advertising and see through persuasive tactics — is arming them against the potentially unwanted effects of advertising.

At the same time, of course, this is likely to make persuasion ever more challenging for marketers. ●

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