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Role of Advertising: Persuasion or Agenda-Setting?

By Max Sutherland

Dr. Max Sutherland's column is published monthly and posted on the web at www.sutherlandsurvey.com. Receive an advance copy by email - [free subscription](#). Max Sutherland is author of the book '[Advertising & the Mind of the Consumer](#)' (published in 8 languages) and is a registered psychologist. He works as an independent marketing consultant in Australia and USA and is also adjunct Professor at Bond University. Contact msutherland@adandmind.com.

Why is it so difficult to introspect on advertising and how it influences us?

Because we look for major effects. That's why! We too often look for the ability of an ad to *persuade* us. We look for a major effect - rather than the more subtle, minor effects that are not as obvious but in total can be equally as powerful. Especially in low involvement situations.

Most effects of advertising fall well short of persuasion. To understand advertising we have to understand and measure the much more subtle effects.

WEIGHING UP THE ALTERNATIVES - EVALUATION

Think of low involvement buying as a 'beam-balance' situation where each brand weighs equal. With a brand on one side of the beam-balance and another brand on the other side, the beam balance is level - i.e. in balance.



Low involvement: Deciding between 2 virtually identical alternatives

However, it only takes a feather added to one side of the beam balance to make it tip all the way in favor of that brand.

The brands that consumers have to choose from are often very similar. The buyer, confronted with these brands has to make a decision. Which one will s/he choose?

When we are looking for advertising effects we are looking for feathers rather than heavy weights.

We need to be measuring marginal differences in image i.e. perceived differences in

- a) The image of the brand itself i.e. its position on various attributes, and
- b) The image of the typical user of the brand.

These usually fall short of any rational, heavy weight, reasons that make perfect sense of any choice. But they can nevertheless swing the beam balance in favor of a brand.

It is these 'feathers', these minor effects that constitute much of the impact of advertising and that we need to measure - rather than looking for gross persuasion effects.

We have been told so often that the role of advertising is to persuade that we seem to have come to believe it literally ourselves. How often have you heard the facile comment "It wouldn't make me run out and buy it"? This is common in group discussions when participants are asked to introspect on how they react to an ad.

This demonstrates the myth or stereotype of how advertising is supposed to have its influence. I don't think anyone believes that any ad will make them run out and buy the advertised product. Nothing

has that kind of persuasive or coercive power. So why do they say it? Because they can't think of any other way the ad could work.

The effect is not to run out and buy. Especially with low-involvement products. It is beam balance stuff.

So look for subtle effects, marginal feathers such as image etc. that can influence this weighing up of alternatives in a situation where everything else is equal.

TWO MENTAL PROCESSES IN DECISION MAKING

There are two fundamentally different mental processes at work in choice decisions.

We have already considered the most obvious one i.e. the weighing up of alternatives. But there is another process that consumers and advertisers tend to be less conscious of.

Weighing up the alternatives is one process.

What alternatives get weighed up is another!

WHAT ALTERNATIVES GET WEIGHED UP?

What determines the alternatives that actually get weighed up i.e. considered?

Think about a consumer decision that probably happens every day to you. It's getting on to around noon, you are feeling hungry and you ask yourself 'what am I going to have for lunch today?' You probably start to generate alternatives....and evaluate each alternative as you think of it. The process goes something like this:

'Will I have a salad?'

'No...I had a salad yesterday'

'A sandwich?'

'No..the sandwich shop is too far away'

'I could drive to McDonalds'

'Yes..I'll do that'.

There are two things to note about this. First what is produced can be thought of as being like a mental agenda of alternatives i.e.

What's the choice for lunch?

1. Salad
2. Sandwich
3. McDonalds
4. Pub lunch
5. Pizza Hut

Second, the *order* in which the alternatives are elicited can be very important to the outcome.

To understand this, note that you might infinitely prefer Pizza Hut to McDonalds. Had you kept going instead of stopping the thought process at the third alternative (McDonalds) - you may have got to Pizza Hut which is fifth on the agenda. But you never got there. You never got to Pizza Hut physically because you never got there mentally.

How many times have you found yourself doing something and then realizing too late that there was something else that you would rather have been doing - but you didn't think about it in time?

This illustrates that the most preferred alternatives are not necessarily the ones you think of first. (Anyone who has ever left an important person off an invitation list will relate to this.) Try generating a list of restaurants to choose to go to tonight. There are two separate processes at work. One is generation of alternatives. The other is evaluation of alternatives.

If we want to influence the outcome of such buying decisions we can try to influence

- a) The order in which the alternatives are evoked or
- b) The evaluation of a particular alternative or
- c) Both.

Influencing the order has its basis in what is known as *the agenda-setting theory of mass communications*.

This says: O.K. - the media *don't* tell us what to think. But they do tell us what to think about! They set the mental agenda. The agenda setting theory of mass communications was originally developed to explain the influence of media in determining which political issues become important in elections. Adroit committee chairmen and modern day politicians claim that if you can control the agenda you can control the meeting.

A mental agenda is a formulation. It is formulated by reaching down inside yourself and pulling out what is there. It answers the question of what items are there in that category (of 'news' or 'what the choice is for lunch').

Mental Agenda	
What's news?	Choice for lunch?
1 Presidential allegations	1 Salad
2 State of the economy	2 Sandwich
3 Youth suicide rate	3 McDonald's
4 A child abducted	4 Pub lunch
5 The Olympics	5 Pizza Hut

When we reach into our minds to generate the 'news' agenda or the 'lunch alternatives' agenda, the items do not all come to mind all at one time. They are elicited one at a time. It is the same with brands in a product category.

Not all items are equal in terms of the probability that they will come to mind. The ones on top of the agenda are those that are most likely to be elicited. This begs the question of what influences a brand like Pizza Hut's position on the agenda? What makes one brand more *salient* than another?

Advertising is clearly one influence.

SALIENCE

Salience is defined as the probability that something will be in the conscious mind at any given moment of time. How can advertising influence brand salience? One way is through cuing.

Let me ask you a few questions....

What's the first thing you think of when I say:
 "Have a break." ?

What's the first thing you think of when someone asks:
"Where do you want to go today"?

What's do you think of when I say *"I can't get by without my mum"?*

Words or expressions such as these are cues that naturally occur in the environment. By tying our brand to them through repetition, they help increase the salience of the brand. In this way advertising helps influence what pops into our minds next.

An actor in a play takes his cue from a line or some other happening or event. The human mind takes its cue from its intentions and its immediate environment. Such cues in the immediate environment can influence what we think about next.

That's how we go to sleep at night. We turn off the cues. We turn off the light, the radio etc. We try to reduce all such distractions or cues so that things won't keep popping into our minds.

The mnemonic trick here I discussed in one of my earlier columns. It is to tie your brand to something that is frequently recurring in the everyday environment.

The way to develop this is to look for possible candidates to become associational cues, i.e. words, expressions, symbols or music that occur frequently in the natural social environment that can be developed with repetition into mnemonic devices which trigger the brand. If the expression or symbol is frequently recurring in the particular environment *where the product is likely to be consumed*, like at lunch time, then all the better.

For most of the time we are generally unaware of this cuing effect - because it is always happening. It is so much a part of us, so much a part of the way we process the environment that we are largely oblivious of the process. We can't see the wood for the trees. As someone once said fish are probably unaware of water because it is so ever-present.

If you have ever had trouble getting to sleep at night because your mind can't switch off then you can relate to how involuntary this process usually is i.e. what pops into our minds at any point in time is not totally under voluntary control.

Our minds are in a sense a 'stream of consciousness' - an inexorable flow that is frequently diverted, sometimes paused but seemingly never stopped. But what determines where it flows is often the cues in the outside world? Cues can influence what pops into our conscious minds. Advertising is about creating cues that orient us to notice a brand.

THE NEED TO BREAK THE ROUTINE

I conducted an observation study of supermarket shoppers some years ago. We were amazed by the major finding. 56% of all buying episodes observed were what we came to call 'simple locating behavior'. That is people were simply locating the brand they bought last time or the one that they came in to buy and putting it routinely in their shopping basket with little or no attention to evaluating other alternatives.

For some other displayed alternative to get noticed, let alone considered, it would have to cut-through the display clutter and stand out in some way. In order to be considered it first has to cut- through into conscious attention.

In low involvement situations many people tend to do what they did last time unless there is something to interrupt the routine. Thus a brand or pack has to cut-through the display clutter just like an ad has to cut-through the clutter of other ads. And the two can work together.

CUTTING THROUGH THE CLUTTER AT POINT OF SALE:

It is not sufficiently well recognized that brands or packs have to cut-through the clutter at point of sale just like ads have to cut-through the clutter on the TV. Especially with highly cluttered product categories like candy, ice creams, packaged bread etc the product in the form of the pack has to cut-through the clutter at point of sale - in order to get into the alternatives to be weighed up.

It is not true that because the packs are there, all displayed in front of people, that they are all equally likely to be noticed - let alone considered. One function of advertising is to help your product cut-through and get noticed (and considered) at point of sale. P.O.S. material that has a visual tie-in with the advertising helps considerably.

The importance of being seen was clearly demonstrated recently when we asked regular buyers of a product category had they seen a particular new brand on the supermarket shelves. We showed them color pack shot displays of the new brand's packs so that it was a recognition task rather than a recall task. Only 45% said that they had seen the brand despite the fact that it had been in-store for more than 5 weeks, with virtually 100% distribution.

Just because something is present in the environment it will not necessarily get noticed or considered. And the more cluttered the environment i.e. the greater the number of alternatives in the product category, the greater the problem is.

INTROSPECTION ON ADVERTISING - MISLEADING

What all this means is that the mechanisms by which advertising works are not obvious; that you need to look for and measure subtle effects - ones that are frequently unavailable to normal introspection.

If we ask a random sample of the population if advertising affects them, we get probably 80% or more of people saying 'no'. On the other hand if we ask the same people if advertising affects other people, probably 90% or more of them will say 'yes'.

People believe that they are rational but they believe that other people are not. We can now see why this is so - why most people believe that they are unaffected by advertising but that advertising affects other people. They know it must work - but they are not personally conscious of it working on them - so they rationally conclude that if it is working, then it must be working on other people. Q.E.D!

Perfectly rational!