

Evaluation of the implications of advertising in relation to attitudes, persuasion and compliance

By Gabriella Philippou, Psychotherapist-Counsellor, Trainer
for Personal, Professional and Business Development
Tel: +357 99342225 Email: gabriellaphilippou@cytanet.com.cy
Website: www.gp-cec.com

Undoubtedly, the implication of advertising in relation to attitudes, persuasion and compliance are many and varied. The target of an advertisement is to catch our attention. One way of achieving this is by appealing to our emotions by arousing feelings of fear, love, pleasure or vanity. As we and the world we live in are quite complex, advertising has to use a variety of techniques which are essentially psychologically based in order to motivate us to buy a certain product or to act or dress in a particular way.

First of all, an attitude is a combination of effective, behavioural and cognitive reactions toward an object. Attitudes do not necessarily correlate with behaviour. However, under certain conditions, there is a correlation.

According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour, attitudes toward a specific behaviour combine with subjective norms and perceived control to influence a person's action. Attitudes influence behaviour through a process of deliberate decision-making; impact is limited in four respects:

- a. Behaviour is influenced less by general attitudes than by attitudes toward a specific behaviour.
- b. Behaviour is influenced not only by attitudes but, also, by subjective norms - beliefs about what others think we should do.
- c. Attitudes give rise to behaviour only when we perceive the behaviour to be within our control.
- d. Intention to behave in a particular manner.

The most common approach to changing attitudes is persuasive communication which is the changing of attitudes by presenting information about another

attitude. ***This information is processed either centrally or peripherally.*** The central route to persuasion is the process in which a person thinks carefully about a communication and is influenced by the strength of its arguments. On the other hand, the peripheral route to persuasion is the process in which a person does not think carefully about a communication and is influenced instead by superficial cues. Consequently, depending on what advertising is aiming at, either route is chosen.

Communication is directly connected to three factors: source, message and audience. Attitude change is greater for messages delivered by a source that is high rather than low in credibility (competence and trustworthiness). The three examples listed hereunder illustrate this:

- a. From the moment he announced that he was infected with the virus that causes AIDS, basketball star Magic Johnson became a powerful spokesman for health organizations seeking to educate the public. The reason Johnson is so effective, even though he is not a medical expert, is because he fulfills two criteria – he is credible and likeable;
- b. In a study, conducted during the cold war era of the 1950s, subjects read a speech advocating the development of nuclear submarines. The speech elicited more agreement when it was attributed to an eminent American physicist than when the source was said to be the former Soviet newspaper Pravda; and
- c. In a study conducted by Kelman and Hovland, when subjects read a speech favouring more lenient treatment of juvenile offenders, they changed their attitudes more when they thought the speaker was a judge rather than a convicted drug dealer.

Secondly, attitude change is also greater when the source is high rather than low in likeability (similarity and physical attractiveness). Examples of this are:

- a. A study by Dianne MacKie and her colleagues (1990) illustrates the importance of similarity. Students at the University of California at Santa Barbara read a strong or a weak speech that argued against the continued use of the SATs. Half of the subjects were led to believe that the speech was written by a fellow UCSB student; the other half thought the author was a student from the University of New Hampshire. Very few subjects changed their attitudes after reading the weak arguments. Many who read the strong message did change their attitudes – but only when it was delivered by a fellow UCSB student.
- b. A study conducted by Berscheid in 1966 showed that the link between similarity and persuasiveness has implications for those who wish to exert influence. We are similar to one another in some respects. We might agree with each other's politics, share a common friend, have similar tastes in food, or enjoy spending summers on the same beach. Aware of the social benefits of similarity, the astute communicator can use common bonds to enhance his or her impact on an audience. There are limits, however. Similarity increases persuasion most when the similarities seem relevant to the content of the communication.

Thirdly, when an audience has a high level of personal involvement, source factors are less important than message quality. For example, Richard Petty et al (1981a) had students listen to a speaker who proposed that seniors should be required to take comprehensive exams in order to graduate. Three aspects of the communication situation were varied. First, subjects were led to believe that the speaker was either an education professor at Princeton University or a high school student. Second, subjects heard either reasoned arguments based on hard evidence or a weak message based on anecdotes and personal opinion. And third, subjects were told either that the proposed exams might be used in the following year or that they would not take effect for another ten years. As predicted, personal involvement determined the relative impact of source

expertise and speech quality. Among subjects who would not be affected by the proposed change, attitudes were based largely on the speaker's credibility. The professor was persuasive, the high school student was not. Amongst the subjects who thought that the proposed change would affect them directly, attitudes were based on the quality of the speaker's proposal. Strong arguments were persuasive whilst weak arguments were not.

Fourthly, ***the sleeper effect*** shows that people often forget the source but not the message, so the effects of source credibility dissipate over time. Hovland and Weiss (1951) varied communicator credibility and found that the change had a large and immediate effect on persuasion. However, when they re-measured the subjects' attitudes four weeks later, the effect had vanished. Over time, the attitude change produced by the credible source decreased and the change caused by the non-credible source increased.

The Message. Naturally, the size and the nature of the advertising message have different impacts on different people and vary from culture to culture. People are not consistently hard or easy to persuade. Different kinds of messages influence different kinds of people. It is believed that on the peripheral route, lengthy messages are persuasive. On the central route, length works only if the added information does not dilute the message. For example, when people process a message lazily, with their eyes and ears half-closed, they often fall back on a simple heuristic: the longer a message, the more valid it must be. In this case, length gives the appearance of factual support – regardless of the quality of the arguments (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984; Wood et al., 1985). On the other hand, when people process a communication carefully, length is a two-edged sword. If a message is long because it contains lots of supporting information, then longer does indeed mean better. The more supportive arguments you can offer, or the more sources you can find to speak on your behalf, the more persuasive will be your appeal (Harkins & Petty, 1981). However, if the added arguments are weak, or if the new sources are redundant, an alert audience will not be tricked by length alone. When increasing length means diluting quality, an appeal might well lose impact (Harkins & Petty, 1987; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984).

Secondly, whether it is advantageous to present an argument first or second depends on how much time elapses not only between the two arguments but, also, between the second argument and the final decision. This point is again illustrated in the research conducted by Norman Miller and Donald Campbell (1959) whose aim was to discover the relative effects of primacy and recency. It is worth pointing out that they discovered that the link is time. In a jury simulation study, they had subjects (1) read a summary of the plaintiff's case, (2) read a summary of the defendant's case, and (3) make a decision. The researchers varied how much time separated the two messages and then how much time elapsed between the second message and the decisions. When subjects read the second message right after the first and then waited a whole week before reporting their opinion, a primacy effect prevailed, and the side that came first was favoured. Both messages faded equally from memory, so only the greater impact of the first impressions was left. Yet when subjects made a decision immediately after the second message but a full week after the first, there was a recency effect. The second argument was fresher in memory, thus favouring the side that went last.

Thirdly, the most extreme the message, the greater the attitude change produced – but only up to a point. Research shows that communicators should adopt a compromise between the two approaches and advocate a position that is moderately discrepant from that of an audience. In other words, increasing discrepancy results in greater change – but only to a point, beyond which it produces less change. This is clearly illustrated in a study by Stephen Bochner and Chester Insko, where subjects read an essay arguing that the average adult sleeps too much and should get either 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 or 0 hours of sleep per night. For some subjects, the essay author was identified as a Nobel Prize-winning physiologist. For others, he was said to be a YMCA director. In both cases, attitude change increased with message discrepancy up to a point and, then, it decreased.

Fourthly, high-fear messages motivate attitude change when they contain strong arguments and instructions on how to avoid the threatened danger. This is a technique that is widely used during U.S. presidential campaigns whereby

candidates will often use negative advertising to frighten people about the consequences of voting for their opponents.

Fifthly, positive emotion also facilitates attitude change, as people are easier to persuade when they are in a good mood. According to Schwarz et al., depending on the situation, food, drinks, a soft reclining chair, tender memories, a success experience, breathtaking scenery and pleasant music can lull us into a positive emotional state – ripe for persuasion.

Sixthly, research shows that subliminal messages do not produce meaningful changes in attitudes. In a controlled experiment, Anthony Greenwald and his colleagues had subjects listen for five weeks to a music tape that contained a hidden message designed either to improve memory or raise self-esteem. For half the subjects, the tapes were correctly labeled; for others, the labels were reversed. Subjects were tested both before and after the five-week period. They were also questioned afterward on their beliefs concerning the tapes. Test scores on objective measures of memory and self-esteem were no higher after exposure to the tapes than before. Second, however, subjects perceived an improvement in their memory or self-esteem – depending on which label was on the tape, not on which message the tape actually contained.

Finally, a third factor that needs to be taken into account as far as persuasion by communication is concerned is the audience. The impact of the message is influenced by the receiver's personality, expectations and individual differences. The need for cognition is a personality variable that distinguishes people on the basis of how much they enjoy effortful cognitive activities. In other words, if people are prone to approach or avoid effortful cognitive activities, then the knowledgeable communicator could design messages unique to a particular audience. Also, self-monitoring plays a decisive role in that people that are high self-monitors are particularly responsive to messages that promise desirable social images. The cultural factor also plays an important role. Of course, forewarning increases resistance to persuasive communication. It inoculates the audience by providing the opportunity to generate counterarguments, and it arouses reactance.

