From Patriotic to Tasteless: Exploring Consumer Reactions to 9/11/2001 Related Advertising

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ABSTRACT - In the weeks following September 11, 2001, marketers responded with a variety of advertising messages directly related to the events of that day. Four categories of advertising emerged from our content analysis of all newspaper advertising in the New York City area: condolence, information, inspirational or patriotic, and commercial. To better understand consumer reactions to these advertisements, we measured Attitude Toward the Ad and recorded consumer reactions. Our results suggest gender differences and a wide variety of attitudes for each category. In addition, consumer comments reflected a bipolar evaluation from deep-seated feelings of patriotism to outright cynicism.

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ABSTRACT

In the weeks following September 11, 2001 marketers responded with a variety of advertising messages directly related to the events of that day. Four categories of advertising emerged from our content analysis of all newspaper advertising in the New York City area: condolence, information, inspirational or patriotic, and commercial. To better understand consumer reactions to these advertisements, we measured Attitude Toward the Ad and recorded consumer comments. Our results suggest gender differences and a wide variety of attitudes for each category. In addition, consumer comments reflected a bipolar evaluation from deep-seated feelings of patriotism to outright cynicism.

In the days following September 11, 2001, marketers appeared to be concerned about consumers’ reactions to their advertising. As a result, some removed all of their advertising from the media, believing it was not a time for commercialism, while others, feeling a need to communicate to consumers about the events, placed advertisements the very next day. Advertisements related to 9/11 first appeared in newspapers, but eventually spread to radio, television, outdoor, the Internet, and direct mail.

The research described here is taken from a larger study consisting of a content analysis of the newspaper advertising related to 9/11. Our analysis of the appeals used in these advertisements suggested four basic types of advertisements: (1) condolence, (2) inspirational or patriotic, (3) informational, and (4) commercial advertising (McMellon and Long 2003). Many of these advertisements used some type of patriotic appeal (e.g., a picture of the U.S. flag), no doubt in the belief that the use of patriotism as part of their message strategy would evoke positive attitudes from consumers.

Yet, as Gelb (2002) and others (e.g., Elliott 2001; Garfield 2001) suggest, the combination of commercialism and patriotic appeal may instead evoke negative attitudes in consumers. We could find nothing in the academic literature examining the important subject.

Over 1,400 advertisements referring to 9/11 appeared in the local New York City newspapers in the first month following the attack. Obviously, advertisers felt this was an important issue to address, yet no one to our knowledge has made a systematic study of consumers reactions to these advertisements. As a starting point, we measured attitude toward the ad (Aad) for a variety of 9/11 related advertisements. This is an appropriate measure as attitude toward the ad (Aad) has been widely used over time and has been shown to influence both brand attitudes and purchase intent (MacKenzie and Lutz 1989). In order to further our understanding of consumers’ attitudes, we also conducted qualitative research and examined written comments about individual advertisements.

We begin with a discussion of the four types of message appeals reflected in our prior content analysis of 9/11 advertisements. Next, we describe our data collection method. The paper concludes with our analysis and findings.

BACKGROUND

Although the 9/11 related advertising was placed in all types of media, we focus on newspapers, as they appeared to be the dominant outlet for these messages in the New York City area. Because of the characteristics of newspaper advertising—immediacy, cost effectiveness, and short closing times—advertisers were able to respond immediately to the event. Our prior research employing content analysis of newspaper advertisements during the one-month period after 9/11 suggested four types of message appeals (McMellon and Long 2003). Although more than one type of appeal might appear in any single advertisement causing some confusion in categorization, generally a single message appeal dominated. Descriptions of the four types of message appeals along with examples of representative advertisements follow.

Condolence Advertising

Advertisements categorized as “condolence” tended to be emotional in nature. They used words such as “condolences,” “prayers,” “sadness,” “sympathy,” “suffer,” and “tragic.” In Figure 1, the Emigrant Savings Bank advertisement is representative of a technique that combines sympathy (e.g., “Our deepest sympathies and prayers...”) with a patriotic motif. In this case, the use of the words, “God Bless America,” with the iconic images of the American flag and the Statue of Liberty provide the patriotic symbolism.

Inspirational or Patriotic Advertising

Meadow (1981) identified this particular type of appeal as communicating pride in America and its values. The advertiser used symbols (e.g., U.S. flags or the colors red, white, and blue) or words (e.g., “United We Stand” or “God Bless America”) that were meant to evoke patriotic thoughts and feelings. These advertisements used heroes, rebuilding, and courage as themes in an attempt to elicit feelings of hope or of a defiant American spirit. Advertisements in this category ranged from those that were clearly inspirational or patriotic to those that began to approach commercialism. For example, more than one consumer, when asked to comment on advertising with a patriotic appeal, stated that the name of the firm was too large, thus detracting from the patriotic aspect of the advertisement. In Figure 2, Computer Associates attempts to evoke feelings of patriotism using simple, yet strong imagery and a patriotic slogan.

Informational Advertising

Informational advertisements provided helpful, factual information to consumers. For example, they covered such topics as an announcement that the firm was still open for business, had started a fund for helping victims, or was there to help those who were in distress (e.g., providing assistance to fill out insurance claims forms.) Figure 3 provides information regarding the availability of free flag posters at a local store.

Commercial Advertising

Advertisements categorized as “commercial” looked very much like traditional product or service advertisements, with the exception of an added reference to the events of September 11th. They used various patriotic symbols or phrases along with a strong sales pitch for their products. In Figure 4, Baron’s Auto Mall proclaims “God Bless America” followed by “ONLY $20 DOWN ON EVERY CAR IN STOCK.”

CONSUMER ANALYSIS

Measures

In order to understand consumer’s reactions to the 9/11 related advertising, two approaches were used: (1) Attitude Toward the Ad (MacKenzie and Lutz 1989) and (2) an open ended question requesting opinions on an exemplar from each category.
FIGURE 1

Our deepest sympathies and prayers remain with all those who have lost loved ones, friends and colleagues.

We stand united with our fellow citizens as we begin to rebuild our great city.

God Bless America

FIGURE 2

GOD BLESS AMERICA

CA joins the rest of the world in mourning the needless loss of many lives that occurred on September 11. Our sympathies, hopes and prayers are with the families of those who have experienced the costs of a small act. And those brave souls that have been involved in the rescue and recovery efforts. Until, we will prevail.

© 2001 Computer Associates International, Inc. All rights reserved.
Many readers let us know that they have been unable to find American Flags in area stores as the demand for flags has been overwhelming.

We know that many of you would like to display the flag to show your support for our country and the victims of last week’s tragedy.

As a courtesy to our readers, we’re providing American Flag posters free of charge at the Newsday Store. The store is located at 235 Pinelawn Road in Melville, and is open from 9 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday.

This poster is a public service of the Newsday Marketing Department.

FIGURE 3

God Bless America!

BARON AUTO MALL
Queens

ONLY $20 DOWN
ON EVERY CAR IN STOCK!

2 DAYS ONLY! MON 9/17 & TUES 9/18

BEST BUY MENU

GARANTEED CREDIT APPROVAL

TREAT OF THE WEEK!

SAMPLE OF PAYMENTS WITH $20 DOWN

FIGURE 4
The Aad scale used in this study was the 7-point 3-item measure suggested by MacKenzie and Lutz (1989). The three semantic differential items were good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant, and favorable/unfavorable anchored by agree/disagree. An average of the three items served as a measure of the overall evaluation of the advertisement. In addition, consumers were also asked to respond in writing to one open-ended question: “Please describe the advertisement you have just seen in your own words.”

Demographic data on age and gender were also collected as these two variables have been shown in the past as possible influences. For example, Han (1988) demonstrated a relationship among age, gender, and patriotic intensity. Patriotic intensity influenced choice. Although age cohorts (e.g., baby boomers, generation X, and the millennial generation) are difficult to categorize because of overlapping, generational attitudes, the use of age groups as a segmentation tool is growing (Tsui 2001). Thus, we suspect that attitudinal measures will differ across gender and age segments.

Data Collection Method

Graduate and undergraduate students from a mid-sized northeastern university were trained to administer the Aad scale and to collect written consumer reactions to the advertisements. The students were asked to collect 10 surveys when home on their Thanksgiving break. This approach provided some geographic dispersion of the sample, although most respondents were in the New York City area. Because of the local nature of much of the 9/11 related advertising, New York City area respondents provided an appropriate sampling frame. Since much of the imagery dealt with U.S. symbolism, non-US citizens were excluded from the study to avoid any potential bias.

Each consumer was questioned about one exemplar from the four shown in this article. A paper and pencil questionnaire was used to collect the Aad measure, a description of the advertisement, and demographic data.

Sample Description

The sample consisted of a wide range of consumers from the New York City area. It included 541 individuals with a mean age of 35, ranging from 11 to 85 years of age. More than half the sample was female (54.7%) while 45.3% was male.

The respondents were segmented into three age groups: 41 plus (n=136), 24-40 (n=228), and those below the age of 24 (n=170). We chose these segments to reflect noted attitudinal differences for each cohort (Tsui 2001). The 41-plus segment includes three groups commonly referred to as the “GI Generation,” “Silent Generation,” and “Baby Boomers.” This conglomerate cohort can be characterized as more conservative and civic minded than younger groups. The 24–40 age group, which includes “Generation X” and “Generation Y,” is known to be more cynical and media-savvy, while the 23 and younger group, sometimes called “Millenials,” are less affected by media, more accustomed to violence, and have grown up in an affluent environment.

RESULTS

The Aad scale demonstrated high internal consistency (alpha=.95). This was consistent with prior results from MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) who reported an alpha of .90. A principal component analysis extracted one factor containing 90% of the variance.

Analysis of variance was used to examine the effects of gender, type of advertisement, and age cohort on Aad. Table 1 shows that there were significant differences for gender (F=13.022, sig.=.000) and advertisement type (F=81.032, sig.=.000), but not for age cohort (F=2.122, sig.=.121). There were no interaction effects between any of the variables. Tukey post hoc analysis of the advertisement types suggested attitude differences between the Baron’s Auto Mall advertisement and all other types. Attitude differences also existed between the Emigrant Savings Bank and Newsday advertisements. In addition, the mean Aad score for each advertisement suggested that Newsday had the highest positive rating, with Computer Associates and Emigrant Savings Bank less positive and the Baron’s advertisement scoring the lowest.

Further examination of the data using one-way ANOVAs revealed that females had directionally more positive attitudes than males for all advertisements (see Table 2). Specifically, these gender differences were significant for the Emigrant Savings Bank (F=8.464, sig.=.004) and the Computer Associates (F=5.045, sig.=.027) advertisements.

In order to better understand the underlying reasons behind these attitude scores, we analyzed respondents’ written comments about the advertisements. Specifically, we asked them to “Please describe the advertisement you have just seen in your own words.” Their comments represented a wide diversity of opinion for each advertisement, evoking both negative and positive comments. Interestingly, the advertisements evoked deep feelings of patriotism among some of the respondents, while eliciting expressions of cynicism from other respondents. For each of the four different types of advertisements, the majority of comments reflected the mean attitude scores (positive or negative) reported in Table 2.

Condolence Advertisement–Emigrant Savings Bank

Emigrant Savings Bank’s condolence advertisement evoked a mixed response from consumers. On the positive side such comments as “sincere,” “appropriate,” “hopeful,” “patriotic,” and “comforting” were used. The negative comments included “cheap shot,” “served no purpose,” and “taking advantage.”

A 25-year-old female stated: “I think it’s an appropriate advertisement as it encourages patriotism and unity at a time of despair and distraught (feelings of hopelessness)”

A 25-year-old female says, “This advertisement is a wonderful way to express sympathy for those who have lost loved ones in the terrible tragedy, while at the same time portraying a sense of hope for the future of our country.”

A 22-year-old male negatively states: “I feel offended when people try to cash in on the 9/11 event. Let people rest. Do not use a tragedy to try to make money.”

A 60-year-old female suggests her feelings run deeper: “Unfortunately in our society, we forget too fast how quickly life can change. For so many their lives were completely turned upside down that day, never to be the same again. I feel it is a good reminder that we never forget that day or the people who lost loved ones.”

On a more cynical note, a 20-year-old male feels that the Emigrant Savings Bank is: “A bank that is being sympathetic for their own needs, not necessarily to be sympathetic.”

Patriotic or Inspirational Advertisement–Computer Associates

The Computer Associates advertisement elicited the most consumer comments, both in frequency and detail. However, responses to this patriotic/inspirational advertisement were mixed.
Advances in Consumer Research (Volume 31) / 627

TABLE 1
Results of Univariate Analysis for Gender and Age Cohort

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
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TABLE 2
Gender Results of Oneway ANOVA for Attitude Toward Ad

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* The lower the mean score, the more positive the Aad.

Compared with the other advertisements, respondents’ positive comments reflected more emotional feelings with such words as “very poignant,” “patriotic,” or “heartfelt.” There were also some negative comments ranging in intensity from mild (e.g., “it’s feel good advertising”) to strong (e.g., “bad taste,” or “cheap ploy”). Respondents provided more detailed analysis for this advertisement, perhaps because of the strong imagery. A 27-year-old male digs deep into his inner feelings as he describes the advertisement:

“I think that this advertisement says a lot about the events of 9/11 and it also symbolizes what American stands for. I believe the most powerful aspect of this ad is the silhouette of a woman and child playing. This picture is a true unbiased representation of America. America is the home of the free. This is depicted in the silhouette as the mother and daughter frolicking through the fields. In addition, you can not conclude what race or ethnic background the people are from. The only disturbing part is that there is no man in the image, for some it can represent a lost firefighter or dad. The image also represents the future of America. From the bright sun in the sky we can ascertain that life will go on and the lost will be watching over us. Overall, in my opinion this ad was created in good taste and is appealing to a broad audience.”

Many consumers were also cynical about this advertisement because a corporate advertiser placed it. A 24-year-old female writes:

“The ad is an acknowledgement of the losses suffered as a result of Sept. 11. The statements are moving and powerful. However, it is an ad, and because of this fact, I’m trying to figure out the real motivation behind the statements.”

A 26-year-old male plays art director while making his point: “I feel the ad does show some sincerity, but the logo should have been smaller to draw less attention to the organization. The focus should have been more oriented towards the families.”
On a less cynical note, a 23-year-old male states: “I feel that it is a good gesture by Computer Associates to place their advertisement. You get the feeling that they truly care about what happened on Sept. 11th.”

**Informational Advertisement—Newsday**

Newsday’s informational advertisement evoked few strong comments. Consumers tended to give a more literal explanation of the advertisement. It did not appear to bring forth the same level of emotional response as the other three advertisements. Comments such as “an act of support,” “tasteful,” “they care,” “helping,” and “positive” were common. The negative comments were milder than those for the other advertisements. For example, “Newsday wishes to raise its public image.” However, some respondents saw more than just the simple message of “free flags” in this advertisement.

An 18-year-old female states with a hint of cynicism: “While they want to be perceived as patriotic and compassionate toward the victims, I see that they are only doing this just for the appearance. Although Newsday is providing people with posters, they in return are advertising.”

A 33-year-old male cynically states: “I feel that Newsday used the tragedy of 9/11 as a ploy to buy Newsday. It was considerate of the people at Newsday to give away free flags but it was another sales tactic.”

Deeper feelings were evoked in a 58-year-old female: “I am very sorry that it took such a great loss of lives and a tragedy that shook the world for us as Americans to display our flag or to sing our national anthem with pride, honor and love of country. President Roosevelt said a chicken in every pot, I say a flag in every window and on every lapel.”

**Commercial Advertisement—Baron’s Auto Mall**

Baron’s Auto Mall evoked the most negative comments, although this viewpoint was not unanimous. Positive comments such as “well done” and “clearly patriotic” appeared in a few respondents’ comments, but as one consumer succinctly stated: “One’s patriotism cannot be equated with automobile purchases.” Most consumer comments reflected this point of view with such words as “opportunistic,” “tasteless,” and “offensive.” (Our favorite negative comment came from a 21-year-old female who said, “It sucked.”) There was also a strong strain of suspicion for any automobile advertisement. As one 50-year-old consumer stated, “…most of the prices shown will have hidden costs—usually if it sounds too good to be true, it most likely is.” Interestingly, many consumers did not make any comments, choosing to ignore our request for a description. As shown by the mean ranking of advertisements in Table 2, the Baron’s Auto Mall advertisement was rated significantly less positive for Aad than the other three.

A 31-year-old male speaks negatively about the advertisement and its cynical reflection of American society: “A poorly laid out advertisement which tries to capitalize on the strong patriotic sentiment in the country, at the moment, in an effort to make money. But that is the American way.”

**DISCUSSION**

One basic assumption about this type of advertising is that it usually works in the best interests of the firm that places the message (Waltzer 1988). Our findings suggest this may not be true for some of the advertising placed after the attack on the World Trade Center. We found significant differences in attitudes and a wide range of comments from deep-seated feelings of patriotism to cynical observations of commercialism.

The results also suggest that males and females respond differently to this type of advertising. Specifically, in the case of the 9/11 related advertisements, females generally scored higher on a measure of Aad than did males for those appeals that had more emotional content. Significant differences were found for both condolence and patriotic/inspirational types of advertisements (i.e., Emigrant Savings Bank and Computer Associates). Interestingly, there were no significant gender differences for informational or commercial advertisements, which, in our judgment, had less emotional content.

Contrary to what we anticipated, age cohort did not appear to be an influential factor on Aad. However, from our analysis of respondents’ comments, it seemed that younger consumers more often expressed skepticism regarding the advertisers’ true motivations for placing these messages. On a more positive note, for some consumers these advertisements could also elicit deep emotional feelings of patriotism for the U.S. culture. In summary, our findings suggest that the more commercial in nature the advertisement was perceived to be, the less positive the reaction to the advertisement.

Marketers may have placed some of the advertising for patriotic reasons based on small group behavior patterns (Sherif and Sherif 1953; Hinshelwood 1987), while some of it may have been placed for commercial gain. Either way, there are concerns that these types of ads are exploitive, jingoistic (Elliott 2001; Garfield 2001), or self-serving (Coe 1983; Gelb 2002) and that they will evoke a negative response from consumers. We found this to be true for some respondents. Thus, advertisers should use caution when thinking about placing advertising in response to national events. In particular, for industries or companies, which already suffer from negative consumer perceptions (e.g., auto sales), it is likely that these advertisements will be viewed as self-serving.

Our research suggests that firms walk a fine line between being viewed as sympathetic versus exploitive. Companies that wish to acknowledge a tragic event through advertising should consider how they might counter consumer perceptions of commercialism. The effectiveness of this type of advertising has never been supported in the literature (Coe 1983). The events of September 11, 2001 were horrific to all Americans. Marketers should moderate their urge to communicate personal feelings because, although it may be personally satisfying, it may not be in the best interests of the firm.

**REFERENCES**