Advertisers’ Theories of Consumers: Why Use Negative Emotions to Sell?

June Cotte, University of Western Ontario
Robin Ritchie, University of Western Ontario

ABSTRACT - This paper explores the views of advertising professionals regarding consumers, and uses them as a framework to compare practitioner and academic theories regarding negative emotional appeals in advertising. We identify three broad views of consumers that appear to guide advertisers when they develop ads: (1) a Desensitized consumer who pays little attention to advertising; (2) a Sophisticated consumer who is conscious of advertisers’ persuasive intentions and skilled at recognizing specific tactics, and; (3) a Tribal consumer who is driven by a fundamental need to be accepted as part of a larger group. In addition to identifying areas of agreement and discrepancy between practitioner and academic theories, our research exposes interesting limitations in the working theories of advertising professionals. We also argue that dialogue between academics and practitioners provides an opportunity to enhance advertising theory and practice, and suggest that our approach could be widely applied for this purpose.

[to cite]:

[url]: http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/9020/volumes/v32/NA-32

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the views of advertising professionals regarding consumers, and uses them as a framework to compare practitioner and academic theories regarding negative emotional appeals in advertising. We identify three broad views of consumers that appear to guide advertisers when they develop ads: (1) a “desensitized consumer” who pays little attention to advertising; (2) a “sophisticated consumer” who is conscious of advertisers’ persuasive intentions and skilled at recognizing specific tactics, and; (3) a “tribal consumer” who is driven by a fundamental need to be accepted as part of a larger group. In addition to identifying areas of agreement and discrepancy between practitioner and academic theories, our research exposes interesting limitations in the working theories of advertising professionals. We also argue that dialogue between academics and practitioners provides an opportunity to enhance advertising theory and practice, and suggest that our approach could be widely applied for this purpose.

When seeking to persuade consumers and stir them to action, advertising professionals select tactics based on their understanding of the effects these tactics are likely to produce. It follows, then, that the design of real-world ads is not necessarily driven by formal academic theory, but by the beliefs held by these professionals about the consequences of using various tactics and the moderating conditions that make such techniques more or less effective. Notwithstanding this fact—and in spite of the occasional bemoaning of it in the literature—there have been relatively few efforts to study the implicit theories of advertising professionals regarding “what works,” and compare these to the research-based models developed by academics (Kover 1995, is a notable exception). This paper helps to address this shortcoming by exploring general views of advertising agency creative staff regarding consumers, and using these as an organizing framework to compare practitioner and academic theories in an important but under-researched domain—namely, the use of negative emotions in advertising.

Such efforts to tap into the minds of practitioners are helpful for a variety of reasons—some less apparent than others. Most directly, they offer insight into the thinking that drives marketing practice. This is useful in its own right as a descriptor of prevailing industry sentiment on how best to influence consumers, since practitioners may hold different views from academics despite employing the same terminology (Cornelissen 2002). Moreover, observing such sentiment and its changes over time provides a basis for explaining the emergence and relative prevalence of specific advertising tactics and types of appeals in the marketplace. This can serve, among other things, as a source of guidance for public policymakers and social scientists seeking to draw connections between advertising and its impact on society.

A less direct but equally important benefit is that the implicit theories of advertisers offer a fresh and distinctly different perspective on the nature of consumers and their response to negative-emotion appeals. While they can scarcely be characterized as superior to formal academic models, practitioner theories have the virtue of a very different set of strengths and limitations: Although they are data-rather than theory-driven and only informally and subjectively tested, they are also descriptive of behavior in a naturalistic setting, based on extensive replication across a wide variety of product categories and ad types, and pragmatic with respect to their implications. Moreover, practitioner theories are not usually designed to abstract from the particular to the general, so they do not tend to disregard finer aspects of the phenomenon as academic theories often do, and capture insights that the latter may overlook (Brinberg and Hirschman 1986). As a final and added benefit, practitioner theories also tend to be grounded in the response of real audiences rather than student subjects, making them a useful “reality check” on academic theories that are based on student data.

The task of identifying and cataloging the full range of these practitioner theories is a daunting one. Accordingly, for the purposes of this paper we were somewhat less ambitious: After eliciting general comments regarding the nature of consumers, we probed advertising creative staff about their theories in a very specific domain in which the authors had some experience—the effectiveness of using negative emotions in advertising, and the conditions under which such a tactic might be more or less effective. This is a promising area to explore, in large part because appeals which seek to evoke negative emotions represent an increasingly common (Huhmann and Brotherton 1997) but under-researched advertising tactic. Just as importantly, the academic literature has struggled to adequately specify the conditions under which such approaches will be more or less effective.

The paper begins with a brief review of the academic literature on the use of negative emotional appeals in advertising, in order to provide context for our research and set the stage for our own findings. We then present the results of our phenomenological interviews with advertising creative personnel, organized around three main views of consumers that emerged from these informants. Based on these findings, we propose a conceptual framework that summarizes these practitioner theories-in-use and relates them to their academic counterparts, with the goal of identifying commonalities and inconsistencies that suggest avenues for future research. We then conclude with a discussion of the implications of our research for advertising theory in general, and for the effectiveness of negative-emotion appeals in particular.

**ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES ON NEGATIVE EMOTION APPEALS**

A good deal of academic research has been conducted on the psychology of emotion (e.g., Lazarus 1984) and the ways in which ad-evoked feelings may influence consumer response to marketing communication (e.g., Batra and Ray 1986; Holbrook and Batra 1987). Scholars have also observed that advertising may evoke both positive and negative emotions when seeking to persuade. Indeed, Brown, Homer and Inman (1998, p.115), suggest that from a practical perspective, “the relative strength of positive and negative feeling effects potentially could guide advertisers’ decisions regarding executional strategies.”

The more specific question of why advertisers would purposely try to evoke negative emotions in consumers is intriguing, however, since ads that provoke fear, guilt or anger are by definition aversive, and risk prompting consumers to ignore the ad or dislike the product. It has been suggested that ads use positive affect to make consumers like the ad and then buy the product, and negative affect to evoke an uncomfortable state that makes consumers want the “solution” offered by the advertiser (Aaker, Stayman and Hagerty 1986). More generally, then, advertisers who use negative
emotional appeals presumably do so in hopes that this will (a) capture their audience’s attention, (b) induce an intended set of emotions, and (c) motivate them to purchase the marketer’s product or service (Richins 1997; for a review see Cohen and Areni 1991). Unfortunately, there are no guarantees that what the consumer actually experiences will be the affective response the advertiser intended to create. Research has shown that this kind of mismatch between advertiser intentions and consumer response occurs all too often (Cotte, Coulter and Moore, 2004; Englis 1990; Stout, Homer and Liu 1990).

Indeed, the academic literature inspires no definitive conclusions as to the wisdom of using negative appeals in advertising, with some studies pointing to its effectiveness and others suggesting the opposite (for a review and meta-analysis, see Brown, Homer and Inman, 1998). Although Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer (1999) propose a framework that explains how emotions can function as causes, effects, mediators and moderators in marketing behavior, their model does not address the inconsistent findings on the effects of negative emotions. Studies which have focused more specifically on fear-based appeals are also inconclusive: Such appeals seem to enhance persuasion in some instances (King and Reid 1990), but attenuate it in others (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953). Keller and Block (1996) offer some resolution to this inconsistency, but only tentatively so: They reason that weak fear appeals may be ineffective if they fail to prompt sufficient elaboration of the harmful consequences of the undesirable behavior, while strong fear appeals may fail if they induce too much elaboration of those consequences and thereby deter consumers from recognizing the solution offered in the ad.

Perhaps the most promising explanation for these otherwise peculiar findings is that consumers are active recipients of advertising messages, who actively “make meaning” from ads, rather than merely processing claims (see Mick and Buhl 1992). This is rapidly becoming a favored view within the consumer literature: Reader-response theory holds that different people interpret ads differently (Scott 1994), while the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad and Wright 1994) and its related empirical papers (Boush, Friestad and Rose 1994; Campbell 1995; Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Kirmani 1990; Kirmani and Wright 1989) argue that consumer response to advertising may be colored by their knowledge about marketers’ motives and the tactics they use to persuade. This suggests that the emotional response of consumers to a negative-affect appeal will depend not only on the appeal, but also the extent to which the consumer construes that appeal as a deliberate attempt to manipulate them. The general model implied by this is one in which the emotion intended by the advertiser is initially and automatically felt upon exposure to the ad, but subsequently “corrected” as consumers access their persuasion knowledge and “correct” their initial response (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Gilbert and Malone 1995; Gilbert, Pelham and Krull 1988; Winter and Uleman 1984; Winter, Uleman and Cunniff 1985).

These insights notwithstanding, a number of fundamental questions remain unanswered with respect to negative-emotion ad appeals. Why, for instance, do these appeals induce such powerful consumer responses in certain cases? What causes them to be more or less effective? And given the obvious risks involved in using them, when and why do advertisers employ these kinds of appeals? In the next section, we present research findings that offer a promising new basis for answering these and other important questions.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

Our research initially sought to explore a broad range of issues related to the use of negative appeals in advertising, so we had no specific expectations regarding the focus of our work or its likely results. As our project evolved, however, it quickly became apparent that advertisers have well-defined notions, or “theories in use,” about (a) consumers, and how their general reaction to advertising has changed over time, (b) the effects of various negative-emotion appeals, and (c) the conditions under which such appeals are more or less likely to induce a desired response. In particular, when asked about the presence of emotional appeals in the ads they create, our informants frequently prefaced their responses by describing their underlying beliefs about how and why consumers respond to such appeals. We recognized this phenomenon fairly early on and, consequently, elected to put a more concentrated focus on our questions.

We used an interpretive, phenomenological approach with general analysis that followed the process suggested by Moustakas (1994). Our procedures were conducted in accordance with the tenets of prior phenomenological research—the emic approach, text autonomy, member check, peer debriefing, and bracketing (Thompson 1997). The emic approach relies on informants’ own words, avoiding the immediate incorporation of theoretical conjectures or external verification of informants’ stories. The main benefit of this approach is its deep understanding of our informants’ beliefs about recipients of advertising and what drove them to create emotion-evoking ads.

**Sample and Interview Procedure**

We conducted 15 in-depth interviews with advertising creative personnel. Five agencies were chosen from Toronto and surrounding area, with an intentional combination of large, structured organizations and small, more informal agencies. We contacted the creative director at the selected agencies via telephone and described the purpose of our study. After securing his/her agreement to participate, this individual was asked to select two members of the creative team to serve as additional interviewees. Following the telephone conversation, we mailed a letter which confirmed the appointment time and outlined the project in more detail.

Our informants included 12 men and 3 women, with a level of experience ranging from junior (eight of the participants had worked in the industry for less than five years) to senior (three participants had more than 11 years of experience). Job titles were also varied, ranging from Senior Writer to Chief Creative Director. To encourage open participation, the identities of both the agencies and the specific interviewees were kept completely anonymous. The opening discussion began with the general question: “How do you create advertising?” From there, we used occasional prompts during the course of the discussion to extract specific views on the use of negative emotions in advertising. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, with each participant being assigned a pseudonym for ease of analysis.

All interviews were conducted during the winter of 2002/2003 at the advertisers’ offices, and were completed by a graduate student trained in interviewing methods but naïve to the advertising literature. Interviews were anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes long, with an average length of approximately one hour. Analysis of the more than 300 pages of transcribed responses entailed an intense reading to provide a holistic view of how participants created advertising, followed by a more focused reading to facilitate understanding of both idiosyncratic (one person) and shared (across-person) meanings.

**FINDINGS**

We begin by presenting three broad views of consumers which pervaded informants’ responses to our queries about what they
considered when developing ads—views which, for purposes of exposition, we have labeled the “desensitized” consumer, the “sophisticated” consumer, and the “tribal” consumer. Each of these theories seemed to provide some or all of our informants with critical guidance that helped them assess whether a negative-emotion appeal would succeed in persuading consumers. Accordingly, we organize our findings according to the view that informants appeared to be accessing when they offered a given comment. Doing so facilitated the creation of a more general theoretical framework for understanding marketers’ implicit theories about the way consumers respond to negative emotional advertising (See Figure 1). It also provided a basis for highlighting cases of rapprochement between academic theories and the practitioner views we report, along with instances where our data offer new insight into the contradictory findings on the effectiveness of negative-emotion ad appeals.

### The Desensitized Consumer

It is widely recognized that consumers are bombarded with various and proliferating forms of advertising media—a situation which has led to U.S. consumers being exposed to an average of 3,000 to 5,000 advertisements per day (Bower 2000). This has obvious adverse effects on the ability of any particular ad to impact the viewer, and research has found growing consumer indifference to commercial messages (AdWeek 1993). Our informants were highly sensitive to this concern:

“I think one of the toughest things we face is just this huge attention deficit that exists and very many people are exposed to thousands of ads a day...they are just taking in so much information in terms of what is being communicated within the world of advertising, and then beyond that, through magazines and television and the internet and so on. It is getting harder and harder and harder to get anyone’s attention for even a moment.” (Interview C-2)

“The biggest single challenge any advertiser or any advertising agency faces today, in a world where the immediate clutter has proliferated beyond the statistics, or polling how much more media exposure we get in a given day than we did thirty years ago, the single biggest challenge is grabbing people’s attention. Universities teach that economics is the science of allocating scarce resources. Well, there is nothing scarce about media, knowledge, and technology information. What is scarce is people’s attention, and so stopping and grabbing somebody’s attention is our biggest job.” (Interview C-3)

Nearly all of our informants dedicated substantial time to this theme—that the ubiquitous presence of advertising in our lives had caused consumers to become increasingly “immune” to advertising, and that commercial messages often “wash over” people without making an impact. Each of our informants emphasized that capturing consumers’ attention and getting them to process the message was one of their most important tasks.

**Negative Emotional Appeals and the Desensitized Consumer.**

The notion of the desensitized consumer was not only universally and strongly held among our respondents, it also appeared to play a major role in influencing how and why they used negative emotional appeals in their ads. Virtually all informants stressed the ability of such appeals to overcome consumer apathy, as exemplified by this observation about the effects of fear-based ads:

“Fear works. It makes you sit up...fear works, in my mind, to jolt someone to make them at least, remember it.” (Interview A-3)

One informant even used the term “shock therapy” to describe charitable organizations’ use of unpleasant images to create emotional discomfort among consumers. When asked to clarify, he explained:
“You want to shake people up and I think the reason that happens in charities a lot is that charities, above and beyond brand advertisers, are vying for a very small piece of the pie...it shakes you up and it makes you think. And that’s normally why you see it in a lot of the charitable advertising.” (Interview C-1)

Despite this widespread belief in the attention grabbing properties of negative-emotion appeals, several informants cautioned that failure to vary the type of emotional appeal used could actually contribute to consumer desensitization to certain images and forms of advertising. They explained that certain charities have used the same ad over many years, to ill effect:

It’s unfortunate but many ads to raise money for starving children in third world countries probably become less effective, because people get used to seeing the same images on the TV...we make a person less affected by the image the more you expose them to the image (Interview D-1)

Notwithstanding their belief that negative emotional appeals provide an effective attention-getting device, most of our informants cautioned that attention does not equate to effectiveness. In their view, negative-emotion appeals had to be paired with a relevant message in order to succeed in inducing the desired behavior among consumers, especially when such behavior was to be sustained over time:

“Shock value will stop people. It probably won’t establish some kind of relationship. What it will do, it will stop people for a moment and get their attention. What happens after that becomes a little more difficult because you never really established a relationship with someone based on what your company is about, or what your product is about—all you have done is shocked them. You know, it’s like standing naked on the street. You’ll get people’s attention, but will they want to be your friend? I don’t think so...shock is there in order to show how dramatic the situation is.” (Interview C-2)

Several informants also mentioned the importance of ensuring that the level of discomfort was appropriate and the appeal legitimately related to the product or behavior being advocated. There was also broad agreement that the ad should offer some kind of solution to the negative feeling evoked—a call-to-action which provides the consumer with an opportunity to dissipate the negative emotion and turn it into a positive one. In fact, nearly all of our respondents strongly cautioned against leaving the audience in a negative affective state:

“If there’s no light at the end of the tunnel, then it is just depressing. If there’s a light at the end of the tunnel, it might be depressing and shocking, with a purpose...as long as there is a ‘do this to avoid that’ or ‘help us to avoid this’.” (Interview D-3)

Overall, our informants’ notion of a desensitized, somewhat “numb” consumer was consistent with the popular academic view (see Pieters, Warlop, and Wedel 2002 for a review), though the advertising professionals seemed to feel that the problem was especially serious. Their assessment of the conditions under which negative appeals achieve desired results also agreed with formal research findings, which have found that negative emotional appeals are most effective when they (a) evoke a moderate (versus a high or low) degree of discomfort, and (b) offer a resolution for the negative emotion (Bozinoff and Ghingold 1983; Yinon et al. 1976, Coulter and Pinto 1995).

The Sophisticated Consumer

A second theme that emerged from our interviews was the notion of consumers as savvy and sophisticated, rather than mere processors of advertising claims. Our informants claimed that consumers had become increasingly sophisticated:

“I think consumers are smart and I think they are sensitive...I don’t think they are gullible. I think they’re generally very bright and skeptical.” (Interview B-3)

“Consumers over the past 10 years have become much more savvy, so they won’t allow you to manipulate their minds too much...Consumers are pretty effective watchdogs against being manipulated by advertisers. In part because they were manipulated for so many years, but in part also because they have been exposed to so many ads that they are very savvy about ads. I mean, we’ll sit in focus groups, listening to people talk about advertising, and they’ll know a lot of things—they’ll understand all the things that we are trying to do...we have a very savvy audience. Which in a way is good, because if we understand the basic elements of marketing, and they understand them as well, then it is going to be easy for us to create a relationship with them.” (Interview C-2)

“As a viewer, they know it [when something’s real]. They know when something’s fake and when something’s not.” (Interview B-2)

Our informants spoke of this consumer savvy not merely in terms of a general public awareness of the persuasive intentions of advertisers; they also felt that consumers had become more skilled at recognizing specific advertiser tactics, and that this meant that viewers were processing ads differently than in the past:

“I also think everybody know that they are ads...That’s it, I think. We need to give people the credit that they are due. They understand this is just the product that they are trying to sell me.” (Interview C-1)

This increase in consumers’ media savvy and ability to detect and defuse specific kinds of persuasive attempts was seen as having made the job of advertising creative personnel more difficult: In addition to the fact that they can no longer assume that the viewer is naïve to their marketing tactics, advertisers must also be concerned about unfavorable reactions to such tactics:

“...they almost want to say—‘I don’t care about that, you know, I am going to do that regardless, you can’t tell me not to.’ And sometimes it puts their hackles up and you might do the opposite of what you intended to do.” (Interview A-3)

Several respondents even indicated that they would sometimes explicitly assume that the consumer was “in on the game” and produce ads reflecting this shared recognition that the purpose of the ad was to persuade. In some cases, this took the form of an ad that specifically acknowledged the advertiser’s persuasive goals, while in others the impact was simply to produce a message that would not be perceived as unfairly manipulative. 

Negative Emotional Appeals and the Sophisticated Consumer.

Our informants felt that increased consumer savvy had both positive and negative implications for the effectiveness of negative
emotional appeals. On one hand, it has meant that consumers can generally be relied upon to understand the advertiser’s intentions in using such appeals:

“They’re a very sophisticated audience we are advertising at. You can show a single prop and they know exactly what we’re trying to tell them. If you showed a smoldering teddy bear, they’d say—‘oh my God, children died’.” (Interview E-3)

By the same token, however, many informants expressed concern that negative emotional appeals were an “obvious” persuasive tactic, which could be construed as an attempt by the advertiser to manipulate the consumer’s emotions. There was broad agreement that such appeals were therefore risky, and that this had made many advertisers reluctant to use them:

“You are kind of rolling the dice in terms of your emotional appeal, so to take it too far, you would turn people off.” (Interview A-2)

“Sometimes you screw around with that (negative emotions) and all of a sudden it’s nothing, or it has negative emotion, but not the irony or not whatever it was you were trying to associate with it. You stand more risk when you try to use negative emotions, but it can be done.” (Interview E-1)

According to these professionals, the perception that an advertiser had abused a negative-emotion appeal usually exacted a heavy toll. Moreover, most agreed that consumers rarely gave advertisers the chance to recover, and repair damage caused by perceived misuse of negative emotions. As one informant commented with respect to fear-based appeals:

“Fear and shock is a very dangerous area to play in because, if you turn off people, they become very disloyal, very quickly.” (Interview C-1)

Virtually all of the practitioners we spoke with made the point that consumers do not naïvely process advertising, but are instead conscious of the persuasive nature of advertising, and interpret commercial messages with this in mind. When specifically asked about negative emotional appeals such as fear and guilt, most informants indicated that such ads are becoming increasingly less effective because sophisticated consumers recognize them as persuasive tactics and may therefore fail to exhibit the emotional response the advertiser seeks to create.

This perspective on the consumer is well in line with current academic theory, which has increasingly taken the view that people actively construct meaning from an ad based on their own experiences (Scott 1994) and perceptions of what the advertiser is trying to accomplish (Friestad and Wright 1994; Meline 1996). In particular, the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad and Wright 1994) argues that when some dimension of an ad is recognized as a tactic, a fundamental change of meaning occurs whereby it is no longer seen as an innocuous feature of the ad. In the case of negative-emotion appeals, this would not only tend to mute the consumer’s “normal” affective reaction, it could also prompt reactance as the consumer rebels against the advertiser’s perceived manipulativeness. Ultimately—and much to the advertiser’s chagrin—it may even disrupt consumers’ elaboration and comprehension of the advertising message itself (Boush, Friestad and Rose 1994; Friestad and Wright 1994).

According to Friestad and Wright (1994), acquisition of persuasion knowledge happens at both the level of (a) the individual, as one learns from personal experience, and (b) society, as conventional wisdom incorporates consumer knowledge about particular tactics. It was striking, then, that practitioners readily acknowledged—and perhaps overestimated—the rise in persuasion knowledge at the societal level (i.e., “people are becoming more savvy”) while virtually ignoring it at the individual level. Remarkably, not one of our informants made mention of individual differences in marketplace sophistication during our interviews.

The Tribal Consumer

A third broad view of consumers that emerged in our interviews was the notion of the individual being driven by a fundamental need to belong—to be accepted as part of a larger group. Most of our informants shared a common belief that their audience responded well to advertising that called on them to behave (and consume) in a way that would affirm their membership in a larger collective:

“People are all tribal...there’s a certain tribalness in there when people say, ‘I want to be,’ ‘I want to identify myself as part of something,’ and yet it’s something that I buy.” (Interview E-1)

A common view that emerged from many of our discussions was the notion that, despite being more independent than in prior generations, North Americans (and consumers in general) are still driven by a primal desire to belong. Several informants said that they saw themselves as selling memberships in these groups, as well as the product itself. They specifically mentioned a number of product categories—beer, automobiles, and clothing—as examples of cases where ads regularly stressed the need to belong, and/or identify with a certain group.

Negative Emotional Appeals and the Tribal Consumer. The need to belong to a collective seemed to play a central role in driving advertisers’ use of negative-emotion appeals, since such appeals were widely regarded as particularly effective when used in this context. Interestingly, guilt was mentioned much more frequently than fear, sadness or anger as a device for such ads. When asked why this was so, one informant explained the situation as follows:

“Guilt is probably the oldest trick in the book when it comes to advertising, so it is still being used a great deal...I think we do feel very guilty as a culture...we feel guilty about not being fit enough, or not having the right stuff...a lot of advertisers will play on that guilt...guilt works to make you see where you don’t fit with the norm, [it] can make you feel bad because you don’t fit in.” (Interview C-2)

The choice to use guilt versus some other emotion was sometimes justified by the idea that guilt is the added element needed to get someone who is almost ready to engage in the desired behavior, over the top. One informant expressed his reasons for using guilt this way:

“Usually people that can be motivated by guilt...are already halfway or three-quarters of the way there...I think guilt is kind of directed at the righteous and the people that always want to do it, or sometimes the people that need to tell other people that they are doing it, but they are not...It’s an aspect of being acceptable to others, like them.” (Interview A-1)

In general, our informants seemed to regard negative-emotion appeals as a powerful tool for calling attention to the perils of being isolated from the collective. While positive appeals—i.e., ones that...
focused on the benefits of group membership rather than the costs of isolation—were also quite common, they were characterized as more conventional and less motivating for the consumer. As a result, there seemed to be a sense that negative-emotion appeals of this type would become increasingly popular.

The resurgence of group identity and the concomitant need to belong to a collective self is an oft-cited theme in several streams of research outside of the consumer domain (see Maffesoli 1995). In spite of the emphasis placed on multiple selves by numerous postmodern authors (e.g., Bauman 1996; Cushman 1990; Gergen 1991; Grossberg 1996; Lifton 1993; Sampson 1985), it has been argued that individuals struggle to consolidate their sense of personal identity. One way this can occur is through affiliations with similar others. The informants in our study seemed to intuit this cultural shift, perceiving that a sense of belonging—and validating oneself through psychological bonds with likeminded individuals—is increasingly important to North American consumers.

DISCUSSION

This research stands as a rare effort to survey advertising personnel on their views about consumers, and the resulting implications for advertising practice. In doing so, it makes several important contributions to the consumer literature. Most obviously, we build on work by Kover (1995) to identify some of the implicit theories that advertising professionals use to guide their decisions when formulating ads. These theories—rarely considered explicitly, even by advertisers themselves—offer valuable insight into how such decisions are actually made, and thus why modern advertising has assumed its present form. Second, our work helps to validate and inspire academic research by contrasting the implicit theories of practitioners with the more formal models of scientific study. Since each type of theory has a distinctive set of strengths and limitations, comparing the two provides an opportunity to identify areas of convergence and divergence, and thus areas where further research may be helpful. Finally, our efforts provide a model for making use of practitioner views in order to advance academic theory. The initial phase of our research drew on the beliefs of advertising professionals to construct a general framework of theories about consumers, while the second phase applied that framework to the study of some specific questions that academic research has yet to fully resolve.

The answers to these questions are themselves of some interest. For instance, we had wondered why negative emotional appeals seemed to elicit such powerful responses among consumers, relative to other kinds of ads. Clearly, one reason is that these ads are, by definition, affect-based and therefore emotive. But our conversations with industry professionals also revealed that such appeals are commonly used by advertisers as a means of breaking through ad clutter, and are therefore chosen specifically for their capacity to shock—in other words, there is a powerful selection bias at work.

We had also been curious about factors that moderate the effectiveness of negative-emotion appeals. Most of the points raised by our informants had already been recognized in the academic literature—that such appeals fail when the level of induced affect is too low or too high, when the ad fails to offer a solution to the problem, or when consumers see it as an attempt to manipulate. Interestingly, however, our interviewees also added that negative-emotion appeals were particularly effective when paired with efforts to invoke the consumer’s need to belong to a broader collective. Though the theoretical explanation for this latter phenomenon is not immediately apparent, it is certainly an interesting question to pursue in future research.

Finally, we had sought to understand the practitioner rationale for using negative-emotion appeals at all, given that positive approaches seem to carry fewer risks. Our respondents made it clear that negative appeals are often used because advertising professionals view them as an effective means of breaking through advertising clutter. Yet this raises an interesting paradox: While negative-emotion appeals may help the advertiser to overcome the apathy of the “desensitized consumer”—and perhaps arouse the affiliative needs of the “tribal consumer”—they run a serious risk of being viewed as manipulative by the “sophisticated consumer.” Since all three of these labels describe the same group of individuals, it seems apparent that the working theories of advertising professionals suffer from some fundamental contradictions. Making these theories explicit, as we have done here, provides a critical first step toward reconciling the inconsistencies inherent in practitioners’ mental models of consumer behavior, thereby offering the potential for improvements in advertising practice.

Limitations and Future Research

Like all research, ours was characterized by certain limitations which bear some attention. First, our interviews were conducted using a select group of informants in a single urban center, suggesting a need to validate our findings with advertising professionals in other cities. Second, our work was qualitative and exploratory, so the manner in which we gathered, interpreted, and organized informant responses was shaped partly by our own idiosyncratic worldview. Additional work will be needed to develop and test our conclusions more formally. Third and finally, our conclusions are unavoidably culturally rooted, in that they reflect the views of practitioners who are not only based in North America, but also seek to appeal primarily to consumers there. Although we believe that many of our conclusions have broad applicability, we caution that they do not necessarily apply to consumers or to advertising practice in other places.

Apart from follow-up work to address such general matters, opportunities also exist to conduct more specific research in a number of areas. For instance, there is a need to determine which products or services have been advertised using negative emotional appeals, and assess whether and why such appeals were more effective in the case of certain product categories. In addition, although our project ended up focusing specifically on advertisers’ use of negative-emotion appeals, it is clear that this is a narrow part of a much broader picture. The three “views of the consumer” identified here could be used as a framework to explore other research questions, and possibly identify other inconsistencies in advertisers’ implicit theories.

Overall, it is clear that further study of the views, schemas and assumptions of advertising practitioners is sorely needed. Notwithstanding our efforts and the prior work that inspired us, the beliefs and practices of advertising professionals remain largely unexplored by academics. Cataloguing and assessing the implicit theories of those who design and implement advertising every day may serve as a fertile source of inspiration for more formal models of consumer response to ads. Indeed, we submit that encouraging dialogue between academics and practitioners offers a promising and underappreciated opportunity to accelerate both theory and practice for marketing in general.

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