Engaging Content - Does It Improve Advertising Receptivity or Cause Resistance?

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How neuroscience can help to evaluate Print and TV Advertising

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Intuitively we may be inclined to say yes. After all it doesnâ€™t seem that far-fetched that readers who have a high regard for their newspaperâ€™s editorial content will transfer some of that authority onto the advertisements placed in such a publication. But when it comes to television, the picture is less clear. Does the same principle apply and do viewers who engage with a TV programme also pay more attention to the commercials? Some claim the opposite and say that a high degree of programme involvement only makes the commercial break even more intrusive.

There are of course many studies for Print media, Television or Radio that set out to demonstrate a positive link between editorial environment on the one hand and advertising impact on the other. More recently, approaches based on methods developed by neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists seem to be gaining in popularity as one way forward to measure advertising impact.

Two papers given at the 2005 Worldwide Readership Symposium (http://www.readershipsymposium.com/) dealt specifically with the application of neuroscience.Â The first by Rolf Pfleiderer (TNS Infratest) provides a useful and informative summary of the most relevant neuroscientific research methods, from EEGs to functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and positron emission tomography (PET). The paper also includes a short description of a number of interesting case studies on unconscious advertising effects in choice decision situations and the credibility transfer of magazine brands.

The second presentation (by Scott McDonald of CondÃ© Nast Publications) looks at consumers and their relationship to magazine and television advertising. The author uses Gerald Zaltmanâ€™s metaphor elicitation techniques that can be applied to both Print and Television and which are directly based on many recent neuroscientific advances. Television and magazines both help people relax and provide an escape from daily life. Television in particular makes few demands on the viewer to become involved; it helps to disengage from active thinking and generally provides low-stress entertainment and escape. Magazines are also described as relaxing but they provide the reader with a sense of intimacy, where readersâ€™ expectations gel with the magazineâ€™s content. Magazines are also strongly related with learning allowing readers to exercise their mind and open up to new knowledge and ideas.

When it comes to advertising consumer often feel overwhelmed by the relentless barrage of commercials on US Television, which they canâ€™t easily control and which interrupt their enjoyment. The more involved viewers are with the storyline of a programme, the more irritated they become at the commercial break. Unlike television, magazines allow the reader to retain control; the Print advertisements allow them to enter a different world (if they so wish), to linger and absorb the images or simply to turn the page if the advertisement is not relevant. Some of the metaphors used by respondents for magazine advertising include bridges or highways (connecting, providing a flow), maps (informative, helping to orientate) and the colour blue (relaxing, working together) whereas TV commercials are often associated with the colour red (attention-getting, but also loud, disruptive and battle).

Scott McDonaldâ€™s study strongly indicates that with newspapers or magazines a strong involvement with editorial content tends to increase advertising receptivity, because â€˜advertising is part of the pleasure of the experienceâ€™. Conversely, when it comes to television, engagement with editorial content leads to increased advertising resistance, that is viewers, irritated by the interruption â€˜retaliateâ€™ by switching channel or zapping the ads on their recording device.

None of this is good news for television sales executives and their current business model, especially when taking into account the results from a US study by Starcom, which found that the most time-shifted (hence ad-avoiding) TV viewing happens with the most popular programmes with high ratings. TV executives may well be faced with a growing trend of advertisers shifting budgets from TV commercials with questionable effectiveness to product placement within programmes.

No wonder they are beginning to fight back. One such attempt comes from Viacom Brand Solutions (VBS), the sales and

marketing arm of channels such as MTV, Nickelodeon and Paramount. Respondents where shown different programme genres and commercials. To study the impact of TV programmes and commercials, an MRI scanner recorded the subjectsâ€™ brain activity as they watched. One of the main findings is that advertising content that is relevant to the programme environment in which it appears is more likely to stimulate brain activity in areas of the brain commonly associated with advertising effectiveness. Thus congruence between programme and commercial content should be a key consideration when buying specific airtime segments. But the survey also shows that programme content primarily activates the part of the brain that deals with absorption, indicating that viewers lose themselves in the programme. But as soon as the commercial break starts, viewers re-engage with their surroundings â€“ memory and decision-making faculties take over again. Call me a cynic, but switching the television off would probably have the same effect.
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Using neuroscientific methods to investigate the impact of commercial messages is a welcome and interesting antidote to the conventional price and cost-per-thousand approach normally used to measure ROI.

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