Types of Humor in Television and Magazine Advertising.

By Codruta Catanescu & Gail Tom   |   [Review of Business](http://www.entrepreneur.com/tradejournals/pub/4375.html)  -  Spring, 2001

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Review of BusinessReview of BusinessSt. John's University, College of Business AdministrationGeneralTradeMagazine/JournalBusinessBusiness, generalCOPYRIGHT 2001 St. John's University, College of Business Administration0034-6454Copyright 2001, Gale Group. All rights reserved.200103222001Spring221Catanescu, CodrutaTom, Gail92Catanescu, Codruta^Tom, GailTypes of Humor in Television and Magazine Advertising.7313Radio, TV, publisher representatives7310Advertising7313200Television Advertising7315000Magazine Advertising54184Media Representatives5418Advertising and Related Services1USAUnited StatesUnited StatesMarketing industry  MethodsAdvertising  MethodsWit and humor  UsageMethodsUsageMarketing industry  MethodsAdvertising MethodsHumor  UsageTelevision advertisingMagazine advertising

Humor is used to sell products, but there are many types of humor and different hinds are used most effectively with different media. This article looks at various hinds of humor and how often they're used in print and television advertisements, helping managers determine when - and when not - to use humor.

Introduction

Humor is often used in print and television media to sell products. How effective is it? It depends on how you look at it

While it's used frequently, humor in advertising remains controversial. On the one hand, humor has been credited with calling attention to an advertisement [8,9,15], increasing comprehension of the ad [15], contributing to the positive attitude toward the ad [1,3,4] and enhancing the positive attitude toward the advertised product [4]. On the other hand, the use of humor may not be suitable for certain products or services, is thought to lead to faster advertising "wear out" [16], may offend some members of the audience and may result in the so-called "vampire effect," where the humor sucks attention away from the advertised product/message [2,14].

When deciding whether to use humor, therefore, it's important to think about your audience, your message, your medium, your product and, last but not least, the type of humor. This last component has been overlooked in most of the research previously done on advertising in the media, but could prove helpful to decision makers.

As previous research has revealed [17,18], our study shows that humor is used more frequently in television commercials than print advertisements. For the most part, however, previous research has lumped all of "humor" into one, indiscriminant category. In this article, we will look at different types of humor and which types are used most by which media The main purpose of this study is to help managerial decision makers use humor most effectively by considering the types of humor available to them.

Seven Reasons To Laugh

In a nutshell, our study set out to determine whether the type of humor used in advertising varies by medium. We found that it does, which suggests that managers should definitely consider the type of humor as a variable in their decision to use - or not use - humor in their particular advertisements. In other words, different types of humor are more effective and better suited to different types of media, as we'll see a little later in this article.

Since most research over the years has not recognized different types of humor, there is no universally accepted classification, or "taxonomy," of humor [5]. However, more recent research has recognized the value of developing a nomenclature for the various types of humor used in advertisements [10,13]. And some researchers have grouped humor into categories that are either conceptual, theoretically oriented [11,12], technique-oriented [6] or applied, practitioner-oriented [10].

To establish consistency with the scant previous research that has considered different types of humor, we used Reick's practitioner-oriented classification system. This system defined five types of humor: exaggeration, pun, put-down, silliness and surprise.

To provide a more complete - and more clearly delineated picture - we added two more categories: comparison and personification. Here's how we define each of these terms:

1. Comparison - Putting two or more elements together to produce a humorous situation. An example is a magazine advertisement for Hewlett Packard. On one page the ad features a happy family in a Christmas picture that is to be sent to the grandmother. Everything would be perfect if the son did not look like a punk in a leather jacket, chains and an outrageous hair-do. The second page of the ad presents the same picture, but this time with a very conservative son who is nicely dressed with clean, short hair. With the help of HP PhotoSmart System, which allows modification of pictures, the ad claims the "grandmother spared holiday shock, heirs breathe easy."

2. Personification - Attributes human characteristics to animals, plants and objects. The Benson & Hedges advertisement depicting cigarettes engaging in human-like activities is an example of personification (see Figure 1).

3. Exaggeration - Overstating and magnifying something out of proportion. One of Wendy's commercials makes use of exaggeration as two young men order "4 Biggie Fries and 4 Biggie Drinks" at a drivethru. As soon as they pick up the order, the car tilts on one side.

4. Pun - Using elements of language to create new meanings, which result in humor. The phrase "absolute masterpiece" takes on a new meaning when it is pictured with Absolut Vodka (see Figure 2).

5. Sarcasm - According to Reick, sarcastic comments or situations are classified as silliness. In our study, however, sarcasm is a separate category including blatant ironic responses or situations. An advertisement for Lexmark features a sister and a brother in conflict. The brother, with his legs up on the desk, is thinking of printing "some sort of a real cool sign" for his room. The sister's sarcastic response is "How about 'For Rent'?"

6. Silliness - In this study, silliness ranges from making funny faces to ludicrous situations such as the one created in the commercials for "1800-Collect," when a couple of muscular men run around the beach on their toes to avoid the hot sand. Another example is the commercial for the Weather Channel in which two men paint their faces red and blue in an effort to predict the weather.

7. Surprise - Includes all advertisements where humor arises from unexpected situations. The advertisement for Primestar Satellite TV makes good use of the surprise element to arrive at a hilarious outcome. The ad starts with a man carefully washing his car. Just before he gives the car a kiss, he notices a giant pipe rolling down the street toward him. In a state of desperation, the man manages to quickly move his car. As he breathes a sigh of relief, the punch line hits the audience: The car is badly damaged as he saves the satellite dish, which he initially intended to protect by moving his car.

How We Conducted the Study

Once we clearly defined the types of humor, we analyzed the content of advertisements appearing on television and magazines. We selected the following magazines for their diverse target audience:

Fortune (bi-monthly) - one issue per month between January 1997 and June 1998 was randomly selected

New Woman (monthly) - every issue between January 1997 and June 1998

Time (weekly) - every issue between January 1997 and June 1998.

The sample consisted of 4,064 advertisements in all. Duplicates were not included. We also selected television commercials broadcast during the week of June 15, 1998 to June 21, 1998 on cable television in Sacramento, California. All specific channels and times are illustrated in Exhibit 1. We recorded a total of 633 commercials, excluding duplicate commercials and commercials about shows and movies.

The categories of humor we outlined earlier made it easy to classify the advertisements, and contributed to the reliability and validity of our analysis. In those few cases where the advertisement displayed more than one category of humor, we selected the type of humor that was judged to predominate.

Results

As previous research has shown, our study revealed that humor is used more in television commercials than print advertisements (see Exhibit 2). These findings support the belief of advertising and creative executives that television is a more effective channel to use humor [91.

But there's much more to the story than that. As shown in Exhibit 3, our study reveals that the type of humor used in television and magazine advertisements differed (chi square =27.65, p=.000O1). "Sarcasm" is the most popular form of humor used in magazines, while "silliness" predominates in television.

Conclusion

What are the managerial implications of all of this? First, it's important to decide whether or not to use humor at all in your advertisements. Humor may not he appropriate or effective when advertising certain types of products. The type of product can also determine the best execution style, how to best communicate a message and how effective a television commercial will be as measured by recall, comprehension and persuasiveness.

According to previous research [7], the most effective execution styles for various products are not always those used (which indicates that more research may be needed in the future).

Previous research also indicates that the demographic and psychological charactristics of the target audience may very well have an impact on how effective humor in advertisements will be. For example, research has found that using humor in advertisements has a positive effect on attitude and purchase intentions for individuals whose need for cognition is low rather than high [19].

Our study goes beyond most previous research to consider the various types of humor and which types might be most effective under which circumstances. The fact that certain types of humor are used more often by different media suggests that the effectiveness of the type of humor may differ by medium. Different types of humor may be better suited for different types of products as well.

In short, it's important to consider the type of humor when making a management decision about whether or not to use humor in the execution of advertisements. For example, presenting your message using silliness may be well received by the target audience, whereas sarcasm may be offensive. Considering humor type - rather than a single, generalized category - should refine and improve managerial decision making

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