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Is advertising flogging a dead horse?

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JANE Raymond is cradling a bottle of mineral water like a baby. She is caressing the sides and cooing over the label. After all it is no ordinary bottle; despite being made of clear plastic it looks as if it has been carved from a block of ice. This simple feature means shoppers are drawn to this bottle over the others on the shelf and cannot resist picking it up, Raymond says. How does she know this? Because she has tested it herself.

Raymond, a consumer psychologist at the University of Wales in Bangor, studies on a daily basis the subtle factors that motivate us to buy what we buy, and advises big companies on the best way to persuade us to part with our money. She can test how powerful a brand or advertisement is, and how it could be pitched to stick more firmly in your memory. Most of all, however, she works out how to grab your attention.

In today's hurly-burly consumer world, attention is in short supply. Whether in a shopping mall or supermarket, surfing the internet or just watching television, consumers are bombarded with messages - up to 3500 a day or one every 15 seconds of our waking lives, according to some estimates. In 2004, companies worldwide spent \$401 billion on advertising, according to the independent World Advertising Research Centre based in Henley-on-Thames, UK. But as the graveyard of failed products shows, they usually get it wrong.

Nine out of 10 new products meet an early death, says Jamie Rayner, director of research at ID Magasin, a UK consultancy specialising in consumer behaviour. And the reason is simple: traditional advertising has ceased to work. Rayner and his colleagues have measured how consumers react to advertising and their conclusion should send a chill down any executive's spine. They used a camera embedded in a pair of glasses to record people's gaze as they glanced at ads during a shopping trip or journey to work. After analysing the recordings and questioning the subjects, they found that most of the ads made no impression at all: only around 1 per cent could be recalled without prompting. It seems that

although we may be looking at brands and advertisements all day long, most of the time we're not taking anything in.

Raymond thinks she knows why. Her move from research in visual processing into consumer psychology began in the early 1990s, when she discovered a quirk in the brain's attentional system. She showed people a stream of letters and numbers on a screen and asked them to look out for a white letter or an X. When she asked her volunteers afterwards what they had seen, she found that if the X appeared up to half a second or so after the white letter, or vice versa, people failed to see it.

She concluded that if something catches your attention, your brain is blind to anything else for a short period afterwards. She called the effect the "attentional blink". It has since become an established example of how our awareness plummets when the brain is occupied, according to Nilli Lavie, a psychologist specialising in attention at University College London.

And attentional blink is just one of a range of "grand failures of awareness" that occur when our attention is overloaded, says Lavie. "People can be blind to all sorts of information. Considering that the whole point of advertising is to catch your attention, this would seem to be extremely relevant for advertisers."

In short, the reason most advertising doesn't work is that we're in a chronic state of attentional overload. Unless advertising is presented in a way the brain can absorb, it is simply not seen, Raymond says.

So what does this mean for advertisers? A typical television ad consists of a series of grabby images interspersed with the product. But unless the scenes in the ad are cut to take account of attentional blink, the brain is likely to ignore the information the advertiser wants to get across. Similarly, in a magazine or TV ad, viewers often register the main image but fail to pick up on the secondary images - which are often the bits advertisers desperately want us to see.

The 'attentional blink' is just one of the failures of awareness when our attention is overloaded

It seems obvious, but Raymond says advertisers consistently fail to consider how easily the brain loses the plot. It's not that they haven't realised that the space and time they have to get their message across has shrunk. But advertisers respond by cramming in ever more information. Raymond's advice is simple: slow it down and stop shouting so loud.

Advertisers have also yielded to the temptation to buy as much exposure as they can, but again Raymond has found that this doesn't necessarily do the business. After her work on the attentional blink, she wondered whether attention would be linked to other processes in the brain, particularly emotion. Could our attentional state influence whether we like or dislike a brand, for example?

Feelgood factor

Today, companies are hugely interested in the emotional value of their brand: they want their products to make us feel good. And the reasons are not hard to fathom. It is well known that your emotional response can influence how you pay attention. If something elicits positive emotions then you are more likely to take notice of it. The water bottle is a good example: its unusual shape makes people want to touch and hold it, Raymond says.

But the relationship between emotion and attention is not a one-way street. In 2003, Raymond found that if people are distracted by an image or brand when performing an intellectually demanding task, they tend to instantly dislike it, regardless of its emotional value (Psychological Science, vol 14, p 537). So for example, if you are reading a web page when a banner ad starts flashing, or are watching a film with blatant and intrusive product placement, the chances are you'll end up disliking the brand whatever it is.

This contradicts the more-exposure-the-better rule most of the industry follows, says Raymond, and means that advertising can backfire horribly. Perhaps the most treacherous time, says Raymond, is Christmas, when advertisers are clambering over each other to grab people's attention. "Marketers don't realise that humans digest information like they do food. Once they are sated, if they are shown any more food, they're disgusted," she says.

Raymond is now embarking on a study with researchers at the University of Oxford, King's College London and Birkbeck, University of London, to dig deeper into the link between emotion and attention, and discover at least how to avoid advertising that acts as a turn-off.

The work could have big implications for marketing. Raymond believes, counter-intuitively, that when it comes to making an impact, less might be more - which is probably a mixed blessing for consumers. While you may feel less bombarded in the future, you'll notice ads more. In the meantime, luxuriate in the fact that even if you are feeling a mite overwhelmed while Christmas shopping, your brain isn't paying attention.



