



Point of view: Does advertising cause a "Hierarchy of Effects"?

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This paper addresses three general questions about hierarchy models of advertising effects: (1) Why hierarchy-of-advertising-effects models do not provide an accurate description of the effects of advertising, and (2) Why these hierarchy-of-advertising-effects models are not an accurate conceptualization of how advertising works as a marketing force in the real world, and, (3) Why, as long as our thinking about advertising and its effects is dominated by the hierarchy-of-advertising-effects frame of mind, it is unlikely that we will ever measure the true effects of advertising. In addition, the implications of these shortcomings of hierarchy models of advertising effects for the concept of integrated marketing communications are discussed.

ADVERTISING IS GENERALLY SEEN as a means of communicating persuasively with consumers. This communication process--if it is successful--ultimately results in the sale of the product or service advertised to at least some of the consumers that have been exposed to the advertising. If such sales do not happen, the advertising is judged not to have been effective.

As Russell Colley (1961) put it:

Advertising's job purely and simply is to communicate, to a defined audience, information and a frame-of-mind that stimulate action. Advertising succeeds or fails depending on how well it communicates the desired information and attitudes to the right people at the right time at the right cost.

What specific kinds of effects should advertising strive to produce? In the first place, it must be recognized that advertising must produce different effects in different people because, at any one time, not all people are equal with respect to attitudes toward, the information they have about, or their images of the brand that is to be advertised.

Advertising's role, therefore, is to make consumers, whatever their current state of attitudes toward, information about, or images of a brand, more informed about the brand and more generally favorable to it. Advertising must, that is, produce some sort of mental change in the consumer: he or she must think differently about the brand after being exposed to successful advertising.

The exact nature of this communications process has consistently been described in the marketing literature as a "hierarchy of advertising effects." Advertising is, in this formulation, responsible for creating a series of successive responses from individual consumers that lead, when the advertising is successful, to a completed sale.

Thus, in the hierarchy-of-advertising effects models of how advertising works, it is posited that advertising has multiple tasks:

- * If the consumer has never heard of the brand, advertising must, first, cause brand awareness.
- * If the consumer has heard of the brand but knows nothing of it, advertising must, second, arouse interest.
- * As the consumer's interest is being aroused, advertising must, third, describe the characteristics-- physical and ephemeral--of the brand so that the consumer will understand and fully appreciate them.
- * Once the consumer is aware of and understands the brand's characteristics, the advertising must, fourth, convince the consumer that the brand is superior to its competitors and should be purchased.
- * Finally, fifth, the consumer acts--he or she buys the brand, or mentally prepares to do so.

Hierarchy-of-advertising-effects models have been around in the literature of marketing, in one form or another, for more than 100 years.

For example, a hierarchy-of-personal-selling-effects formulation appeared in the literature as early as 1898 and it was later adapted to advertising, according to Edward Strong (1925). The crucial thresholds in this early formulation were

designated Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action, or by the acronym, AIDA.

The basic idea appeared in an introductory advertising text written by Albert Frey (1947). Frey suggested that those who create advertising must understand the mental steps through which consumers pass as they first learn about and then demand the advertised merchandise:

... the persons planning and building the advertisement consider that their task consists of the following steps:

1. Attracting attention to the advertisement.
2. Endowing it with qualities that will hold the interest of prospective customers and induce them to read (sic) it.
3. Presenting the appeal in such a way that, once read (sic), it will create consumer acceptance, and better still, consumer-preference or consumer-demand for the merchandise.

And, in yet another example, Darrell Lucas and Steuart Britt (1950), in their introductory text *Advertising Psychology and Research*, cast the hierarchy-of-advertising effects into a formula: "There is a popular advertising, or buying, formula that contains the steps: attention, interest, desire, conviction, and action."

Versions of the hierarchy-of-advertising-effects models received widespread dissemination as a specific description of the way advertising works in two independent publications in 1961. Russell Colley's (1961) book *Defining Advertising Goals for Measured Advertising Results* (or simply DAGMAR) was published by the Association of National Advertisers. And Robert J. Lavidge and Gary A. Steiner (1961) presented essentially the same formulation in a paper in the *Journal of Marketing* entitled "A Model for Predictive Measurements of Advertising Effectiveness."

In the earlier treatments of the hierarchy-of-advertising effects, the emphasis was on describing and understanding enough about the consumer to conceptualize and to write effective advertisements. With the 1961 publications of Colley and Lavidge and Steiner, the emphasis shifted to a description of consumer research measurements that, once made, could be used to demonstrate either that advertising was working, or that it was not. Thus, the hierarchy-of-advertising-effects model now led directly to advertising research measurements such as brand awareness, brand feature awareness, brand preference, and intention-to-buy specific brands.

The marketing literature continues to embrace the hierarchy-of-advertising-effects formulation as a basis for measuring the effects of advertising. In 1995, the Association of National Advertisers released a second edition of *Defining Advertising Goals for Measured Advertising Results* by Solomon Dutka. Although the original Colley text was revised by Dutka, the fundamental concept of the hierarchy-of-advertising effects and the measurement of these effects on consumers remained unchanged.

No evidence was presented in either of the DAGMAR editions or in the Lavidge and Steiner paper or, for that matter, in any of the earlier publications, that demonstrated, unequivocally, that the hierarchy-of-advertising-effects model was a valid description of how advertising works. These publications emphasized that advertising must move individual consumers through a series of phases or steps before product or service purchase actually occurs. But these models have never been explicitly validated--hierarchy models of advertising effects are little more than rationally and intuitively sensible.

In spite of the enthusiasm with which the marketing community has embraced the hierarchy-of-advertising-effects explanation of how advertising works, there is still no specific evidence that the consumer research measurements implied by the specifics of the model like brand awareness, brand feature awareness, brand preference, and intention-to-buy specific brands actually do reflect the way that advertising works or its specific effects in moving consumers toward purchase action.

As Vakratsas and Ambler (1999) said about hierarchy models of advertising effect in their broad-ranging review of how advertising works: "... the concept of hierarchy (temporal sequence) on which they are based cannot be empirically supported."

The most that can be said about the hierarchy-of-advertising-effects model of how advertising works is that it has been in the marketing/advertising atmosphere for over 100 years, expressed in one context or another, as an intuitive, nonvalidated explanation of how advertising works.

Meanwhile, no comprehensive alternative model of how advertising works has ever gained general acceptance in the

marketing community.

It should also be noted that although all of these hierarchy-of-advertising-effects models suggest that purchase action is the ultimate goal of advertising, the Colley (1961), Lavidge and Steiner (1961), and Dutka (1995) publications each acknowledge that advertising is not solely responsible, among marketing activities, for causing sales. For example, Colley (1961) says: "Let's start with the recognition that advertising is only one of several marketing forces that lead to the ultimate objective of a sale."

Colley then goes on to identify some of the other marketing factors that also contribute to the final sale: The product must be competitively excellent; it must be conveniently available to consumers; its package design must be attractive and appropriately functional; it must be supported by personal selling (as necessary), supported by promotion, and supported by publicity; it must be priced competitively; and so on. Beyond these product-intrinsic factors, there are other extrinsic factors affecting specific brand sales over which the marketer has no control, such as competitive activity, the economic climate, and so forth.

INCONSISTENCIES IN THE HIERARCHY MODELS OF ADVERTISING EFFECTS

Multiple advertisements, singular effects

The hierarchy-of-advertising-effects model implies a consumer mental process that is activated by an advertisement. A single exposure to a single advertisement may move a consumer through the entire series of steps from creating awareness to compelling action. But, more likely, the concept describes a continuing interaction between consumers and advertisements wherein some consumers are moving up the hierarchy continuously and ultimately are taken to the action stage by the collective effects of several advertisements for a specific brand.

In any event, none of the published descriptions of the hierarchy describe exactly how the hierarchy works with different consumers exposed to various advertisements for a brand in the different pre-action stages prior to the final product purchase.

Competitive hierarchical interactions

And, certainly, the hierarchy of effects is fragile with respect to the relation of any consumer to any particular brand. The model implies an immutable connection between a brand's advertising and the prospective customer. But consumers, after all, live in a world of multiple brands within particular product/service categories and multiple advertisements for each of the individual brands within the category.

The idea of a hierarchy of effects cannot be postulated in a vacuum. The hierarchy of effects for the advertising of any one brand must be in constant competition with the hierarchy of effects for all the other brands in the category as each brand tries to move the individual consumer along the brand's own hierarchy. None of the published descriptions of the hierarchy of advertising effects addresses the issue of the development by consumers of multiple competing brand hierarchies within a product category and how these multiple hierarchies interact, if at all, in the consumer's mental processes. After all, there is no evidence that every hierarchy of advertising effects ends in a sale.

Crucial conceptual weaknesses of hierarchy models of advertising effects

There are at least four reasons why the hierarchy models of advertising effects that purport to describe how advertising works have not and cannot be validated:

A. The only form of marketing communications that the model is concerned with is advertising, that is, with discrete brand-centered sponsored and content-controlled media messages. Advertising may, by itself alone, occasionally cause sales for some brands in some marketing situations. But in the vast majority of marketing situations, sales are caused by a combination of marketing factors: superior product, widely and uniformly available to prospective customers, competitively priced, supported by an aggressively focused sales organization as well as an effective total program of marketing communications including, but not limited to, advertising.

In addition to advertising, and, in greater or lesser degree from brand to brand, the total marketing communications program will also include public relations; a broad range of sales, price, and point-of-purchase promotional activities; brand websites; direct-response marketing; sponsorship programs with athletes or other celebrities; sponsorship of sporting events and stadia, pop culture events, and classical cultural events and halls; in-store display and sampling

programs; movie and TV show product placements; and who knows what else?

An advertisement connects the brand name with some sort of a consciously created selling message. The advertiser spends a great deal of time, working with an advertising agency, in crafting and perfecting the content of these selling messages. Once perfected, the messages reach consumers through paid appearances in advertising media. The advertiser is, therefore, in complete control of these selling messages from creation through delivery. This definition of "advertising" includes paid media advertising, direct-response mailings, advertiser-controlled websites, and so on.

Most of the other forms of marketing communication differ significantly from advertising messages controlled by the advertiser, and from price-reducing sales promotions and direct-response programs. First of all, these other forms of marketing communications do not provide the opportunity for the delivery of a specifically defined and crafted selling message, or, as in the case of direct-response and price-reducing sales promotions, a specific incentive to respond or buy. Rather, they mostly offer only the opportunity for repeated brand name appearances directed at consumers both through traditional advertising media and in other places such as in retail stores, in conjunction with a wide variety of sporting events and stadia and entertainment events and concert halls, in nonadvertiser-controlled websites, in movie appearances, and so forth.

The advertiser usually controls the context within which such brand name appearances are made. Thus, for example, Mercedes-Benz sponsors various professional tennis tournaments over the course of the year. As a result of these sponsorships, the Mercedes-Benz star logo appears in every sponsored tennis match on the extreme sides of the tennis court net (over the doubles alleys). All the spectators of such matches (including the television audience when the matches are televised) are exposed continuously to the Mercedes-Benz symbol in the context of professional tennis tournaments. A good deal of marketing communications involve only such appearances of the brand's name, without other supporting message content, but usually in a context that provides putative unconscious emotional or intellectual support for the brand.

The consumer is, thus, continuously immersed in brand-sponsored communications that differ in significant degree from content-controlled advertising messages. It can be argued that all these brand-name-appearance communications activities merely reinforce the central brand-building efforts of discrete brand-centered sponsored advertising messages, and that the real work of brand building is done only by advertising.

The most obvious way to prove that only content-controlled advertising matters in brand building would be in market tests or in single-source database experiments where brand sales measured with content-controlled advertising only are compared to brand sales with all marketing communications programs except content-controlled advertising—if such a comparison is logistically possible.

In any event, if only advertising in which the content is controlled by the advertiser counts in brand building, why spend significant sums of money to support brands with other marketing communication activities?

Nor are sponsored brand marketing communications—content-controlled advertising and brand-name appearances—the only influences that affect consumer brand perceptions. At least some of the consumers reached by marketing communications for the brand have had their own prior direct experiences with that brand. In addition, many consumers share, consciously or unconsciously, the brand experiences that are discussed in their presence by members of their immediate family, friends, and random acquaintances or that appear in media editorial material.

For most brands, the consumer mind is not a blank sheet awaiting information and instruction from advertising. Rather, it already contains conscious and unconscious brand perceptions caused by all kinds of sponsored marketing communications and direct or second-hand personal experiences with individual brands.

And, since content-controlled advertising or any other type of sponsored brand communication activity rarely reaches the consumer just as a purchase choice is made, it is the collective residue of all the prior experiences—both those sponsored by the marketer and those incidentally acquired as life experience—that form the context for the consumer within which he or she makes actual brand selections or purchases. And this collective residue will almost certainly differ from individual to individual.

B. Hierarchy models of advertising effects are based on a discredited model of human thought processes. Hierarchy models of advertising effects are simplistic to an extreme. Advertising is conceived as a discrete stimulus that ultimately leads through an inflexible series of stages or steps to the ultimate response of a consumer brand selection or purchase.

The trouble with this is that it completely ignores the wide store of information and experience that is always available to a consumer prior to and after advertising exposure as he or she thinks about or actively makes brand purchases.

In thinking about the hierarchy of advertising effects in psychological terms, a distinction must be made between the behaviorist formulation of human behavior--which has now largely been discredited in the contemporary literature of cognitive psychology--and the burgeoning understanding of human thought and behavior processes now being developed by the cognitive scientists.

As Kandel, Schwartz, and Jessell (2000) reflect about behaviorist psychology:

In the first part of the twentieth century, to avoid untestable concepts and hypotheses, psychology became rigidly concerned with behaviors defined strictly in terms of observable stimuli and responses. Orthodox behaviorists thought it unproductive to deal with consciousness, feeling, attention or even motivation.

As soon as one begins to deal with the complex human processing of varied, complementary, and even contradictory simultaneous stimuli in the context of stored residues of past mental activities and experiences, one cannot reasonably conceive of a response to advertising as a routinized, predictable series of mental stages or steps.

Kandel, Schwartz, and Jessell (2000) put behaviorist psychology into contemporary perspective: "Unlike the behaviorists, we no longer focus only on the stimulus response properties of behavior; instead, we focus on the information processing in the brain that leads to behavior."

Consumers simply do not think and act as behaviorist psychology would have had us believe. If a view of a specific aspect of consumer behavior--like interacting with advertising--is formulated in terms of a psychological theory that is simply not true, then we end up with an understanding that is both incorrect and totally inapplicable to the real human behavior that we are trying to understand and influence, as well as the forces that combine to cause it.

C. Hierarchy models of advertising effects assume that all advertisements have identical specific effects. Inherent in hierarchy models of advertising effects is the idea that every advertisement works in exactly the same way when it reaches consumers as every other advertisement works. In the model, "advertising" is not conceived as myriad, highly differentiated, advertisements. Rather, it is conceptualized as a single ineluctable and monolithic force.

In a typical day a consumer is exposed to literally hundreds, if not thousands, of advertisements. He or she may see, for example, a long-copy print advertisement for a brand that is packed with descriptions of brand features and benefits. He or she may also see a few minutes later a highly produced 30-second television commercial for another competing brand that makes little or no attempt to deliver rational arguments about the merits of that brand.

How could these two advertisements (stimuli) produce the same patterns of effects (responses) in the reader/viewer? In fact, it can be argued that the advertising agency creative people responsible for these differing advertisements could not, in their wildest dreams, think or seriously plan that two such different advertisements would produce the same basic effects on their recipients. In fact, they probably think that each of these individual advertisements may have quite different effects on different recipients.

Much of the creative mystique of advertising depends upon the idea that advertisements for a brand must be strikingly different from advertisements for competitive brands if they are to have any chance of successfully influencing consumers. In fact, the content of advertising varies widely just because its creators are always striving in each individual advertisement for a particular rather than a uniform response.

Jeremy Bullmore (1991) suggests the richness of the creative process in advertising: "Again and again I found myself having to explain that saying something did not mean that you have communicated it, and, almost as often, that not having said something didn't necessarily mean that you had not communicated it."

D. If the postulated effects of the hierarchy of advertising effects are measurable, they must be true. A continuing problem in the fields of advertising and marketing research is the fallacy that if a measurement can be made of a construct, then the fact of the measurement proves the construct to be true.

In contemporary practice, measurements are routinely made of consumer awareness of brands, awareness of brand features, of what brands are considered before a purchase decision is made, and of brand preferences.

Clearly these measurements are consonant with the hierarchy-of-advertising-effects model. They are specifically relevant

to the steps or stages that consumers are postulated to pass through as advertising affects them in ways specified by the model. **But if the model is wrong, the measurements are irrelevant.**

The troublesome thing about such measurements is that, since they can be made, and since they are used in making decisions about advertising programs, they lead to an uncritical acceptance of the hierarchy-of-advertising-effects model. **In fact, such measurements reflect nothing more than what marketing practitioners have come to believe, erroneously, about how advertising works.**

The ambiguity of measurements of such constructs as brand awareness is suggested by the late Rosser Reeves, then Chairman of the Bates advertising agency, (1961) reporting on advertising content awareness measurements for a brand handled by Bates:

We found out the exact number of people who remembered the advertising of a big brand which we handle. 50% knew it and 50% did not. We kept the names and addresses of these people (something not normally done as a matter of course) and six months later went back to the same people.

Keep in mind that the same campaign was still running.

We were astonished to discover that half of the people who had known our story had now forgotten it; and half of those who had not known it could now describe it.

It is difficult to interpret a result like this on the basis of the hierarchy-of-advertising-effects model of advertising effectiveness.

BEYOND HIERARCHY MODELS OF ADVERTISING EFFECTS

It is now very widely recognized that the human brain is a very complex organism. We experience the end products of its processes as clear, well-ordered, instantaneous representations of our interactions with the world within us and around us. In actuality, the brain as a totality is multifaceted and loosely organized. Information about a single subject is stored in multiple locations throughout the brain and processed and organized in a way to satisfy instantaneously our perceived informational/attitudinal needs at a particular moment in time in a particular experience context.

As Kandel, Schwartz, and Jessell (2000) put it:

One difficulty with breaking down mental processes into analytical categories or steps is that our cognitive experience consists of instantaneous, smooth operations. Actually, these processes are composed of numerous independent information-processing components, and even the simplest task requires coordination of several distinct brain areas.

When we think about a particular brand, we synthesize all our stored memories from marketing information about that brand and, if we have actual experience of the brand, with that brand experience. These diverse sources of brand information are processed in parallel by the brain itself--different residual traces are simultaneously thrown up into our consciousness in an organized way. This produces the synthesis of multiple units of information and experience that we perceive as our reality of the brand, at a particular moment.

It can not now be said that the cognitive psychologists have a clear or final understanding of exactly what happens in the brain to produce the mental processes by which, as individuals, we perceive, learn, remember, and act.

This means that we may never be able to measure, let alone understand, the specific effects of marketing communications, including advertising, to which individual consumers are exposed. It also means that we may never be able to parse out the effects of advertising from all the other marketing factors and marketing communications forces that affect consumer interactions with and predispositions for and against individual brands. There may be no direct line of consumer questioning that can ever tap into exactly what happens in a person's mind either generally or specifically with respect to the perception of brands.

We may have to conclude that ultimate understanding of the effects of marketing communications, including advertising, may be illusory and depend not so much on what we as marketers and marketing students know and can discover as upon what cognitive scientists do to expand our understanding of the brain and how, exactly, it interacts with its environment.

But, such a conclusion cannot excuse us from thinking about marketing communications, including advertising, and its

effects on consumers, in a totally new way.

INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

This new way of thinking about marketing communication--content-controlled advertising and noncontent-controlled brand name appearances--is called "integrated marketing communications" in the contemporary marketing literature. It is based on the notion that all forms of marketing communication should carry the same message to the consumer. Thus, there should be a single, integrated marketing communications strategy for all communications directed to the consumer by the marketer, not a different strategy for each individual communications activity. As Schultz et al. (1993) put it:

In this new era of integrated marketing communications, the communication strategy is the imperative element in the communications process for all departments within the marketing organization. It forces every aspect of the communications process to reach the consumer in a unified manner, with one personality, one benefit, one selling idea. Every communication tactic that flows from the integrated communications strategy reinforces the reason why the consumer should believe in the product.

This extension of the hierarchy-of-effects model to all the communications activities that have been "integrated" has at least three shortcomings: First, it assumes that marketing communications activity can proceed pretty much as it has in the past except that all of the individual means of communication will carry a common message.

But each of these individual means of communication--content-controlled advertising and brand-name appearances--presumably affect consumers in different ways and achieve different results. Some types of brand messages might, for example, be more effectively delivered by public relations than by direct-response advertising. Others may be more effectively delivered through the sponsorship of sporting events than through conventional media advertising.

It is up to the marketer to decide not only on a single integrative marketing communications strategy but also to determine the specific combination of marketing communication elements that will maximize the effect of that strategy. The effect of different mixtures of marketing communications activities will differ depending on the individual elements contained in the mixture, even if all the communications in each mix are based on the same strategy.

Strategic planning for integrated marketing communications must go beyond merely the identification of a single integrative communications strategy. It must specify what marketing communications vehicles, in what combinations, will be most effective in delivering the single integrated message.

All of this suggests the need for much greater knowledge about and insight into how consumers process and absorb information that is communicated about brands than we now possess. How do consumers respond to individual marketing communications activities--both singly and in combination?

Second, this line of thought throws into sharp relief the shortcomings of the system of planning marketing communications programs as a composite of individual functional activities within the marketing organization, each operating independently of each other. Before we can plan an effective integrated marketing communications campaign, we must know how and with what effects consumers synthesize individual integrated marketing communications inputs into a single, hopefully positively revised conception of the brand.

That is why the management of marketing communications within a company cannot be spread around to different activity centers within the company, nor dispersed among a variety of outside specialist agencies. Public relations should not, for example, be managed by itself in the public relations department with help from an outside public relations agency. And, for example, price promotion activity should not be managed solely by the brand manager with help from an outside sales promotion agency.

Rather, marketing communications must be managed as a single, synthesized activity within the company. Synthesis is different in kind from the integration of marketing communications, at least as such "integration" is currently practiced. Synthesis means a single marketing communications program centrally managed, not several distinct programs, with centralized "integrated" coordination but independently managed and running independently of one another within a single integrated communications strategy. Synthesis means a single responsible executive with a single marketing communications perspective, not groups of specialists whose primary concern is the maximization of the contribution of their own specialty, within a single integrated strategy, to the overall marketing communications program.

Such synthesis will require managers who possess a broad range of skills across all the marketing communicati

disciplines with a good grasp of the potential effects of alternative, synthesized integrated marketing communication approaches.

Finally, we may have to give up, at least for now, our obsession with measuring communications effects by asking consumers questions about subjects that have not been validly connected to marketing results. We will probably have to admit--at least until a lot more is known about exactly how the complex processing of information about and experiences with brands occurs in the human brain--that final insights into the relative effectiveness of marketing communications programs, including advertising, cannot be found through marketing research studies of individual consumers.

What can we do now to understand the effects of the dollars marketers spend on marketing communications, including advertising?

Hopefully, the answers will lie in controlled market tests and/or single-source database experiments where all the marketing factors except marketing communications are controlled (same product, equivalent distribution, and same price) and distinctly different marketing communications programs are tested against each other in terms of the brand sales they produce.

In any event, we must move beyond a dependence on hierarchy models of advertising effects to explain the effects upon consumers of only our advertising programs. And we must move beyond a dependence on hierarchy models of marketing communications effects to explain the effects upon consumers of our integrated marketing communications programs.

Let's abandon misleading conceptions of human behavior and marketing solutions that are based upon them.

Let's move toward an informed synthesis of marketing communications and all that this implies.

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