

4.3: Is the Medium the Message? Components of Communications

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this section, students should be able to do the following:

1. *Identify* the components of communication that one must master to successfully communicate with consumers.
2. *Compare and contrast* one-sided versus two-sided messages.

Elements of who, how, and where an advertiser sends a message significantly affect how—or if—the audience receives it.

Source Effects

Who communicates the message (the *source*) has a big impact on whether a receiver will accept the message. You're a lot more likely to download the latest Rihanna cut if your buddy recommends it than if you get the same advice from your kindly old uncle (unless he happens to be Jay-Z). The power of **source effects**, in fact, underlies the millions that celebrities make when they agree to endorse products. Obviously, advertisers feel it's worth the substantial expense to pay a movie star or athlete to associate themselves with a certain brand's message. Indeed, the pairing of a well-known person with a product is hardly new: Mark Twain's image appeared on packages of flour and cigars in the late 1800s, while Buffalo Bill Cody hawked Kickapoo Indian Oil and Elvis was the face of Southern Maid Doughnuts. What makes an effective source? The important characteristics are credibility and attractiveness.

Source Credibility

Source credibility means that consumers perceive the source (the spokesperson) as an expert who is objective and trustworthy ("I'm not a doctor, but I play one on TV"). A credible source will provide information on competing products, not just one product, to help the consumer make a more informed choice. We also see the impact of credibility in Web sites like eBay or Wikipedia and numerous blogs, where readers rate the quality of others' submissions to enable the entire audience to judge whose posts are worth reading.

Source Attractiveness

Source attractiveness refers to the source's perceived social value, not just his or her physical appearance. High social value comes partly from physical attractiveness but also from personality, social status, or similarity to the receiver. We like to listen to people who are like us, which is why "typical" consumers are effective when they endorse everyday products.

So, when we think about source attractiveness, it's important to keep in mind that "attractiveness" is not just physical beauty. The advertising that is most effective isn't necessarily the one that pairs a Hollywood hottie with a product. Indeed, one study found that many students were more convinced by an endorsement from a fictional fellow student than from a celebrity. As a researcher explained, "They [students] like to make sure their product is fashionable and trendy among people who resemble them, rather than approved by celebrities like David Beckham, Brad Pitt or Scarlett Johansson. So they are more influenced by an endorsement from an ordinary person like them."

Still, all things equal, there's a lot of evidence that physically attractive people are more persuasive. Our culture (like many others) has a bias toward good-looking people that teaches they are more likely to possess other desirable traits as well. Researchers call this the "what is beautiful is good" hypothesis. Unfortunately, in many cases, while beauty is only skin deep, "ugly is to da bone." Some of the material in this chapter was adapted from Michael R. Solomon, *Consumer Behavior: Buying, Having and Being*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2008).

Is It Better to Be an Expert or Hot?

Is source attractiveness more important than source credibility? The answer depends on the product or service you sell.

When to use credibility. If the product is utilitarian and complex (that is, consumers may not know much about how to use it), then a credible expert will be the most effective at persuading people to buy the product or service.

When to use attractiveness. If, on the other hand, the item is simple to understand (like clothing) but has a high social risk (that is, we're concerned about the impression we'll make on others if we're seen with this item) then an attractive source will be more persuasive.

Sometimes you're lucky enough to have a spokesperson who is both credible and attractive. This was the case for SS+K's *pro bono* campaign for the United Nations peacekeepers when ads featured hunky UN messenger for peace George Clooney.



Figure 4.4 SS+K used actor George Clooney in its work for the United Nations peacekeepers.

Message Effects

How the message is said or presented is just as important as *who* communicates the message. **Emotional messages** appeal to, resonate with, or attempt to create an emotional response in the receiver. One common emotional message style is the **fear appeal**, which depicts the consequences of not using the product (e.g., social ostracism due to body odor). Another advertising strategy is to use humor. A study by Mediamark Research Inc. found that humor is the element in advertising that most appeals to kids. Mark Dolliver, "Critical Beer Drinkers, Confident Eaters, Etc." *Adweek*, January 8, 2007, 24.

Rhetorical questions engage the receiver, *don't they?* The question makes the receiver an active participant even if the medium of the message is passive or one-directional.

Examples versus statistics. Although examples and statistics can convey the same information, they do so in very different ways. Examples help put a human face on the product or its use, which creates an emotional connection and helps the receiver see how the product might influence his or her life. Statistics provide cold, hard numbers that may provide a rationale for purchase but not an emotional bond with the brand or product.

Interestingly, even among products whose purchase you might expect to be more rationally driven, such as pharmaceuticals, consumers are persuaded more by words and pictures from people who have had good results using the drug. Having Mrs. Jones's picture with the words "Acme Sleep gave me my first restful night in fifteen years!" turns out to be more persuasive. Indeed, a study that included television ads for seven of the top ten best-selling prescription drugs for 2004 found that 95 percent of them used a positive emotional appeal (such as a character who's happy after taking the product). Alicia Ault, "Drug Ads Play on Emotions," *Family Practice News*, February 15, 2007, 45; Steve Smith, "Mastering the Direct Appeal," *Sleep Review* 8, no. 4 (2007): 54.

One-sided messages present only the positive attributes of the product—they provide one or more objective reasons to buy the product. These often include **objective variables** such as price, performance, size, and power.

Two-sided messages present both positive and negative information about the product. Although most advertising messages are one-sided, research indicates that a two-sided message is very effective. Although it seems counterintuitive that an advertiser would want to publicize negative attributes of a product, doing so actually builds credibility by making the message more balanced. People who hear only one-sided arguments may be more skeptical of the message, wondering what hasn't been said. **Refutational arguments**, therefore, which raise a negative issue and then refute it can be quite effective if the audience is well educated and if

the receivers are not already loyal to the product. (If they are already loyal to the product, then discussing possible drawbacks has little merit and may actually raise doubts.)

Comparative messages explicitly trumpet a brand's virtues vis-à-vis one or more named competitors. To promote its latest line of chicken sandwiches, the Arby's fast-food chain aired TV commercials that took direct aim at rivals McDonald's and Wendy's. In one spot, a young man stands in a (fictitious) McDonald's boardroom as he tries to convince McDonald's executives to serve a healthier type of chicken. Framed against a familiar golden arches logo, he proclaims, "I propose that McDonald's stops putting phosphates, salt and water into its chicken. Consider replacing your chicken, that is only about 70 percent chicken, with 100 percent all-natural chicken." Board members break out in laughter. At the end of the spot, a voice-over chimes in: "Unlike McDonald's, all of Arby's chicken sandwiches are made with 100 percent all-natural chicken." Suzanne Vranica, "Arby's TV Spots Play Game of Fast-Food Chicken," *Wall Street Journal*, July 5, 2006, A16. This messaging strategy is more common in the United States than in other cultures like Japan, where it is extremely rare because some people consider it a rather abrupt and even rude way to communicate.

SS+K Spotlight

SS+K developed a comparative message in recent work for its client My Rich Uncle to draw attention to the different options that parents and students have to pay for college. See the ad below and listen to the radio spot, titled "Ahem." At the beginning of the spot you'll hear a man's voice stating an ISCI code, agency, and title of spot. This is called a *slate*, and it is used by radio stations to ensure they are playing the correct spot.

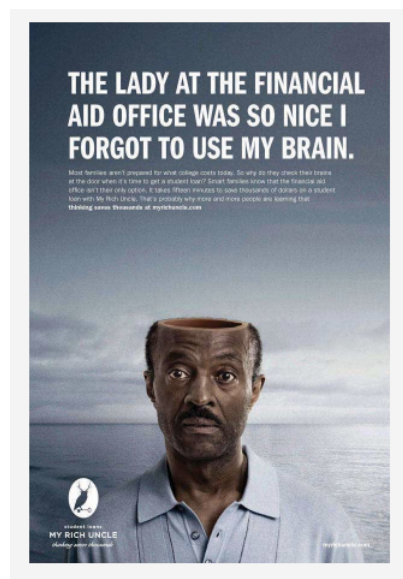


Figure 4.5 One of the Print Ads SS+K Created for Its Client My Rich Uncle

Situational Effects

Where a message is said—that is, our **physical and social environment**—affects how receptive we are to the advertising message. What's part of the physical environment? Surroundings and decor, for example. Our arousal levels rise when we're in the presence of others. This arousal can be positive or negative. Watching a funny movie is often more enjoyable in a full movie theater where everyone else is laughing, too. But if we feel uncomfortably crowded, we may put up our guard.

Intangibles like odors and even temperature affect our ability and desire to listen to messages. Indeed, a growing number of marketers are counting on scents to turn into dollars as they invest in costly new technologies to create scented ads (a magazine ad with a scent strip costs four to eight times as much as an odorless version). Sure, we're used to a bombardment of perfume smells when we open a fashion magazine, but today the boundaries have widened considerably. Kraft Foods promoted its new DiGiorno Garlic Bread Pizza with a scratch-and-sniff card (good to carry with you if you plan to encounter vampires). On behalf of its client the pay-cable Showtime network, TV Show Initiative (a unit of Interpublic Group) promoted the popular show "Weeds" by adding the scent of marijuana to strips in magazine ads. (So far, no reports of anyone trying to roll up the page and smoke it.) Stephanie Kang and Ellen Byron, "Scent Noses Its Way into More Ad Efforts," *Wall Street Journal*, October 8, 2007, B7.

Finally, the message has to stand out from the **clutter** of competing messages and stimuli, which can be a challenge given the multiple stimuli vying for our attention at any one time. Consumers often are in a state of **sensory overload**, where they are exposed to far more information than they can process. The average adult is exposed to about 3,500 pieces of advertising information every single day—up from about 560 per day thirty years ago.

Getting the attention of younger people in particular is a challenge—as your professor probably knows! By one estimate, 80 percent of teens today engage in **multitasking**, where they process information from more than one medium at a time as they attend to their cell phones, TV, instant messages, and so on. Jennifer Pendleton, “Multi Taskers,” *Advertising Age*, March 29, 2004, S8. One study observed four hundred people for a day and found that 96 percent of them were multitasking about a third of the time they used media. Sharon Waxman, “At an Industry Media Lab, Close Views of Multitasking,” *New York Times*, May 15, 2006. Advertisers struggle to understand this new condition as they try to figure out how to talk to people who do many things at once.

Key Takaway

How a message is said can often be as important as *what* is said. Key elements to consider include the nature of the message’s source, how it’s structured, and the environment in which people see or hear it.

EXERCISES

1. Explain how advertisers use source credibility and source attractiveness to communicate more effectively.
2. List and describe the various types of messages that advertisers can use to communicate with their markets. Use specific terms in your description.

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