

12.3: Types of Appeals - How Ads Generate Resonance

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

1. *List* and *discuss* five advertising appeals that a creative team can use to structure advertising.
2. *Recall* and *explain* the six categories of values that are universal in advertising.
3. *Understand* how media and social networking sites can be used to advocate brands and brand messages.

All ads need some type of **appeal**—a psychological basis that motivates the viewer toward the advertiser’s goals. The creative team can choose from a variety of appeals to help structure the advertising. Let’s have a look at the most common ones.

Sex Appeal

Does sex sell? A **sex appeal** can be vaguely suggestive and subtle, or it can hit you over the head—like the Carl’s Jr. ad that shows a soapy Paris Hilton washing a car (as if she would ever wash her own car!). It’s important to consider cultural differences in gauging sex appeal, as some countries allow more exposure of skin or sexual situations than others. In the United States, a passionate kiss between man and woman is perfectly fine, whereas in India such a display in public could be punishable by a fine, three months of jail time, or both.

There’s no doubt that sex gets our attention—and companies often deliberately push the envelope. Yves Saint Laurent promoted its men’s fragrance M7 with a full frontal nude photo of former martial arts champion Samuel de Cubber in fashion magazines like the French edition of *Vogue*. “Perfume is worn on the skin, so why hide the body?” said the ad’s designer, Tom Ford. Some mainstream publishers, however, featured a cropped version of the ad. Similarly, Abercrombie & Fitch used nude models in its quarterly *magalog* but ended up dropping the campaign after loud and sustained protests from feminist groups and groups like the National Coalition for the Protection of Children and Families.

Given the potentially negative reaction, do sexual appeals work? Products for which sex appeals work best are those aimed at teen or college-age buyers or for products like wine, perfume, beauty products, and lingerie. Advertisers need to tread lightly and avoid the temptation to go all-out: although erotic content does appear to draw attention to an ad, a sex appeal runs the risk of alienating the audience. And ironically, titillating the viewer may actually hinder recall of the advertised product. In one survey, an overwhelming 61 percent of the respondents said that sexual imagery in a product’s ad makes them less likely to buy it.

In 2007, Dial rebranded its Soft & Dri deodorant with a focus on the sexy rather than on the functional attributes of the deodorant. “We’re trying to take the brand to a more emotional and less functional area,” said Vanessa Kamerer, Dial’s brand manager for Soft & Dri. To revive the brand, Dial conducted research and learned that consumers associated Soft & Dri with soft and sexy. Kamerer thought this was an important advantage and distinction for the brand because most other brands in the sector focused on technology. Kamerer pointed out, however, that the brand had to be careful with the “sexy” positioning. “Sexy is a tricky one with women,” she said. “For a lot of women sexy can be trappy or slutty and that’s not what we wanted.” Constantine Von Hoffman, “Dial Corp. Tries Bringing ‘Sexy’ Soft & Dri Back: Rebranding Makes an Emotional Appeal to Women.” She’s right: research shows that female nudity in print ads generates negative feelings and tension among female consumers, whereas men’s reactions are more positive. In a case of turnabout being fair play, another study found that males dislike nude males in ads, whereas females responded well to undressed males—but not totally nude ones. Penny M. Simpson, Steve Horton, and Gene Brown, “Male Nudity in Advertisements: A Modified Replication and Extension of Gender and Product Effects,” *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 24, no. 3 (1996): 257–62.

In some cases, the purpose of the nudity is simply to create buzz. In autumn 2007, actress Alicia Silverstone posed nude (though strategically covered) in a print and a thirty-second TV ad for activist group PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), saying that she attributes her slim figure to not eating meat. Comcast Cable pulled the ad, however, saying that it was too racy.

A campaign by Scotch-maker Johnnie Walker was *a bit* more subtle; billboards in California featured a seductive “Julie” and the message, “My number is 213-259-0373. And I drink Johnnie Walker.” Drinkers who called the number heard a prerecorded female voice deliver a sales pitch and then an invitation to order Scotch by phone. During the eight months that the billboards were up in nineteen cities, 526,000 people called Julie (perhaps hoping for more than a sales pitch). This response sounds impressive. But did the campaign motivate callers to buy the brand? Unfortunately not. In fact, sales of Johnnie Walker declined 5 percent during the year of the campaign.

Fear Appeals

Students who don't read *Launch!* will never land a job when they graduate.

A **fear appeal** dwells upon the negative consequences that can result unless a consumer takes the recommended action. A recent advertising campaign for the Volkswagen Jetta took this approach; spots depict graphic car crashes from the perspective of the passengers who chatter away as they drive down the street. Without warning, another vehicle comes out of nowhere and brutally smashes into their car. In one spot, viewers can see a passenger's head hitting an airbag. The spots end with shots of stunned passengers, the damaged Jetta, and the slogan "Safe happens." The ads look so realistic that consumers have called the company asking if any of the actors were hurt.

Video Highlight

Brinks Home Security

This Brinks commercial uses a fear appeal.



Advertisers often resort to fear appeals when they want to bring about a radical behavior change, such as driving responsibly, eating healthily, or quitting smoking. Other fear appeals use ostracism by others—due to body odor or bad breath or limp hair or yellowed teeth or using outdated products—to create feelings of insecurity that the consumer can overcome by doing—guess what? A British print ad for a deodorant depicts a geeky young guy with the caption: "Yo, Sewer Boy!" Subtle.

How well fear appeals work depends on how easy it is to comply with the ad's message. A switch to a stronger, longer-lasting deodorant to avoid embarrassing stains is quite doable, and it is easy to see a benefit (if indeed the deodorant works). In contrast, fear appeals that discuss the negative consequences of smoking have to climb a higher hill because the behavior is extremely hard to change (despite good intentions) and it's harder to detect the (long-term) health benefits. Sometimes the fear appeal is too strong and makes consumers tune it out, especially if the ad does not present a solution. Scare tactics may also backfire as people cope with the negative feelings or guilt the ad inspires by deciding the threat does not apply to them.

One famous TV commercial that relied on a heavy dose of fear was an ad for presidential candidate Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1964. The campaign showed a little girl counting daisy petals in a field, "1, 2, 3..." Then, a voice-over started a countdown, "10, 9, 8..." leading to the image of a telltale mushroom cloud as an atomic bomb exploded. "These are the stakes," the voice-over said, concluding with "the stakes are too high for you to stay home" while the screen displayed the words "Vote for President Johnson on November 3." This classic spot stirred up voters' fears about the heavy trigger finger of Johnson's opponent, the conservative politician Barry Goldwater, and (analysts say) contributed to his huge defeat in the election.

Humor Appeals

"A guy walks into a bar..." A **humor appeal** makes us laugh and feel good. But it's often difficult to execute well, because people have to understand the humor and they have to get the link to the brand. Like sex appeals, sometimes the very humor that gets our

attention distracts us from remembering the ad or from influencing our behavior.

It also helps when viewers don't get offended; this can be an iffy proposition especially when ethnic or national stereotypes are involved. An outdoor ad in Belgium to promote the speedy new Eurostar train service from Brussels to London via the English Channel backfired when a group of British journalists discovered it. For some reason they didn't appreciate a poster that showed a shaven-headed English soccer hooligan urinating into a teacup. For Belgians this imagery made sense because the fan's pose mimicked a very famous Brussels landmark, the Manneken Pis statue. The Brits didn't appreciate the architectural reference.

One advantage of humor is that it reduces **counterarguing**; this occurs when a consumer thinks of reasons not to agree with the message. Because the comedy distracts us from our tendency to come up with reasons why we shouldn't change our opinions, we are more likely to accept the message a humorous ad presents, as long as it does not insult or make fun of us (somehow laughing at the *other guy* is OK).

Humorous appeals are seldom used by banks, which tend to project a more staid image. That's why Community Bank System decided to use a lighthearted campaign with the message "Bank Happy." "We really wanted to find something different, something that was unbank-like and, if you look at those headlines and the disclosures, there's humor built in," said Hal Wentworth, the bank's director of sales and marketing. The campaign was designed by Mark Russell and Associates and took five months to produce. How does the bank use humor? To establish the tie to happy experiences, one ad says, "The feeling you get when you eat chocolate. Now available in a bank." It even brings amusement to the fine-print copy at the bottom of the page. Although most people skip this, the fine print in the "Chocolate" ad says, "If you're reading this, you're probably thinking there's some kind of catch. Something that requires us to write more about it in the fine print. But there isn't. Oh sure, we could go on and on about ourselves. Like how we're committed to serving rural areas. And how most of our people have been working with us for years. And how all of our loan decisions are made locally by folks you've probably cheered with at soccer or baseball games. But we won't. Instead, we'll just tell you that when we say 'Bank Happy,' we mean it. We don't want you to 'Bank Reasonably Contentedly' or 'Bank Kinda Sorta Pleased.' We want you to Bank Happy. And we'll do whatever it takes to make that happen." These days, more people in the banking industry could probably use a good laugh.

Dig Deeper

Hillary Clinton and several other presidential candidates introduced humor into their political ad campaigns in late 2007. Surveys showed that the public thought humor was a good idea and a welcome change from negative ads. By the fall of 2008, candidates were practically becoming regulars on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, *Late Night with David Letterman*, *The Tonight Show*, and *Saturday Night Live*. People enjoy laughing, and it makes them more comfortable with the candidates. "Of course, the humor had better be funny," added Rob Earl, of Watson, Earl & Partners. Nancy Newnan of Catapult Communications also welcomes jokes—within limits. "A dose of humor is always welcome, as long as they keep it in its place and not forget the importance of projecting the image of a world leader." But not everyone wants punch lines from politicians. Humor is too subjective, said Alienware's Juan Carlos Hernandez. "Humor...leaves a lot to the public's interpretation, which at the end is negative because what I may think is not actually what the candidate was aiming for." What's your take on this issue—does humor have a place in political campaigns, where the issues are serious and the stakes high? Should Comedy Central's Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert do campaign ads—or run for President themselves?

Logical Appeals

The **logical appeal** is a rational one; it describes the product's features, advantages, and price. Although most of the appeals we've talked about so far have emphasized emotion, that doesn't mean that logic has no place in ads. Indeed, advertising that provokes a strong emotional response without providing sufficient product information is unlikely to change behavior and increase market share. It breaks through the clutter but doesn't necessarily induce people to buy. This is what the Center for Emotional Marketing discovered when it performed a *meta-analysis* that combined the results of eight separate research studies. The results held true across a range of consumer product categories from food and health and beauty to automotive and technology.

Purely emotional advertising is memorable but doesn't build business. The advertising connects with consumers, but it fails to make use of that connection with the credible information needed to change people's minds. This is particularly true of humor appeals. A study conducted by McCollum/Spielman shows that 75 percent of funny ads have an attention response rating equal to or higher than average, but only 31 percent are actually more persuasive.

The solution? Advertisers need to strike a balance with campaigns that integrate product information and emotion. Logic and emotion work in concert to help consumers make decisions. Effective advertising needs to convey both seamlessly.

Values Appeals

Finally, advertising can be relevant to consumers when it uses a **values appeal**; this type of message relates to people's strong underlying beliefs about priorities in their lives and morality. A research team conducted a comprehensive study of values across thirty countries to identify universal values that people hold regardless of where they live. The researchers found six categories of values that are universal:

1. *Striver*: Ambitious people who seek power, status, and wealth
2. *Fun-Seeker*: Individualists who seek excitement, leisure, variety, and adventure
3. *Creative*: Open-minded people who want freedom, fulfilling work, and self-reliance
4. *Devout*: Spiritual people who are traditional, respectful, modest, and obedient
5. *Intimate*: Supportive people who create strong, deep bonds with friends and family
6. *Altruist*: People who want equality and justice for everyone in society and care about the environment

Certain countries exhibit a predominance of some of these values over others. For example, more than one-half of all Swedes are Intimates, which means that they emphasize social relationships as guiding principles in their lives. In contrast, 46 percent of Saudi Arabians identify Devout values as their guiding principles, while 52 percent of South Koreans are Strivers. Another study found that North Americans have more favorable attitudes toward advertising messages that focus on self-reliance, self-improvement, and the achievement of personal goals, as opposed to themes stressing family integrity, collective goals, and the feeling of harmony with others. Korean consumers exhibited the reverse pattern.

Creating advertising messages that resonate with your target audience means identifying and appealing to the values that motivate their behavior. For example, Taco Bell's advertising campaign "Think Outside the Bun" appeals to Creatives who seek novelty and learning new things. In contrast, the "Night Belongs to Michelob" campaign appeals to Intimates who value romance and friendship. Finally, British Petroleum's "Beyond Petroleum" campaign appeals to Altruists who value social responsibilities and preservation of the environment.

Dig Deeper

Occasionally ad executions invoke a values appeal when they show how a product goes *against* a group's values. This approach appeals to target consumers who are rebellious or nonconforming. To appeal to teenage viewers, the CW network launched a campaign to promote the TV show *Gossip Girl* that includes quotes from the Parents Television Council, an advocacy group that has criticized the show for its graphic inclusion of sex and drugs. One ad shows two of the underage characters together in bed, below a caption that reads "Mind-blowingly inappropriate!"

It's interesting to note that **individuality** is a value most closely associated with the Fun-Seeker segment. Countries that have a high percentage of Fun-Seekers in their population include the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Germany. Creating a winning brand position in these countries might entail targeting the Fun-Seeker buyers with a brand that can offer an avenue to self-expression. In contrast, countries where individuality ranks lowest are the Devout-dominant countries of Indonesia, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, where duty and faith outweigh personal expression. Self-expression appeals would not work well in those countries.

Key Takeaway

An advertising appeal is the psychological basis the agency uses to create relevance and resonance with the target audience. Common appeals include sex, humor, fear, logic, and values. There is no one perfect appeal; the advertiser needs to calibrate the characteristics of the consumers with the message to ensure that consumers aren't turned off or don't tune out the message because they don't care for the appeal.

EXERCISES

1. List and briefly describe each of the five appeals that an advertiser can use to connect with the target audience.
2. List and describe the six categories of universal values.

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