

IS ADVERTISING "BORING INTO THE CONSUMER'S MIND"?

--An Appraisal of Market Research Techniques

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When Dr. Warne first informed me of the topic on which he wanted me to offer some observations, it seemed necessary to stand on my head, cross my eyes, and look at that one through a periscope in order to fathom your real interest. After a slight attack of vertigo, I came to the conclusion that the topic really resolves itself into four questions--not just one. By your leave this evening I shall raise the following four questions and will offer some cold observations, some kudos, and some misgivings in connection with each:

First, does advertising in its current state of development really influence people?

Second, has market research really bored into consumer minds to learn the true motives and attitudes which influence their actions?

Third, is advertising really making proper and full use of the market research facilities and information about consumers already available?

Fourth, how really good or bad are current developments in advertising and market research--from the standpoint of the consumer's welfare and the healthy progress of business?

I shall try to speak frankly and I hope scientifically and morally on all these questions, without pulling punches on any of them.

1. Does Advertising Really Influence People?

On the first question, advertising cannot yet qualify as an all-powerful, sinister menace which can make anybody do anything, nor, on the other hand, can it be condemned to a 99-year term of unemployment as a loitering wastrel who can do nothing at all to earn his keep.

Taking the negative arguments first, we would expect that if advertising were supremely powerful, as Vance Packard's sensational review called The Hidden Persuaders would have us think, then every time the effectiveness of advertising programs were researched one would strike a gusher of proof. It would be like sinking oil wells at random anywhere in a great underground pool. The slick, gooey evidence would drench us every time. Actually, we have done a great deal of researching on this question, and find that the flow of proof ranges from a spurt down to a dribble.

Advertising the masculinity of Marlboro smokers and their tattoos, for instance, has often been credited for the large percentage increases in the sales of Marlboro cigarettes. But at about the same time, they were also introducing the flip-top box, which packaging-minded people give much of the praise. No doubt it is a mixture of both--but how much of either we cannot prove.

The desultory results of advertising and promotion of the sack dress for women--the attempts to persuade men to accept annual obsolescence of men's clothing styles--the canny reluctance of consumers to buy highly advertised cars on today's recession market--and their obstinate insistence on buying

small foreign cars which had almost no advertising support until lately--all are cases in point. We do not yet need to run for the psychological storm cellar every time we see a new advertising campaign staring down at us.

Then, what about the sheer quantity of advertising? Our research has shown many times that total advertising often produces a high "noise level"--and consumer imperviousness to the noise reaches a corresponding "deafness level." Even with all the information available today on advertising agencies in the country has asked us to help them discover the most effective mixture of advertising in TV, magazines, newspapers and other media. We are applying the mathematical techniques of Operations Research to his problem, but we are not guaranteeing results! Not yet, at any rate.

On the favorable side of the ledger, it is equally clear that advertising does have considerable effect. One cannot specify just how much, but its existence is all about us.

Certainly it has a profound influence on the brand awareness of the very young. My five-year old daughter Laurie, for instance, kept insisting that my wife, Gail, should try "Lestoil" because the TV said it does everything. Reluctantly, my wife yielded to the pressure, bought a bottle, and found it to be such a good all-purpose detergent that she uses it regularly. In fact, not long ago, when several doctors were having trouble finding out why my wife's right ear has been aching for the past dozen years or so, Laurie said, "Why don't you put some Lestoil in it--it can do anything!" We haven't tried it in my wife's ear yet, but we are keeping it in mind as an ace up the sleeve in case the doctors fail.

Moreover, few consumers will admit that advertising influences their decisions--they just go out and buy the advertised products. In dozens of consumer research studies we have conducted, many people have said they would never buy certain brands because they were not advertised.

The greatest problem of advertising research today is how to measure fifteen or twenty key variables all at the same time in a representative sample of consumers, and under controlled testing determine the separate contribution of each factor. Success in meeting this challenge will require the use of all marketing and motivation research techniques now available, and processing the results on electronic computers so the findings can be computed and applied immediately.

2. Has Market Research Really Found Out What Motivates Consumers?

If advertising is supposed to bore into consumers' minds and plant seeds of communication there which will sprout into purchasing behavior, someone must first bore into the consumers' minds and take soil samples (I am not suggesting that a consumer necessarily has a dirty mind, however.) to determine what sort of information would be most welcome. This is the task of marketing and motivation research.

How much is actually known today about the consumer's real desires and aversions and how important are these desires and aversions relative to each other? And how much of this knowledge can be credited to marketing research, advertising research, and motivation research? The answer to both these questions is: "A great deal!"

The extent of this knowledge is only suggested in recent popular books such as The Hidden Persuaders by Vance Packard and some recent summaries by Dr. George Horsley Smith of Rutgers, Professor Joseph Newman of the Harvard Business School, Professors Hugh Wales and Robert Ferber of the University of Illinois, and Pierre Martineau of the Chicago Tribune. However, the main emphasis in all of these books has been on the dramatic new techniques, especially the projective research methods adapted from clinical psychology, and to some extent on the business applications of these findings.

Beyond what is presented as to findings about consumer motives in a somewhat haphazard fashion in these excellent books, there are literally thousands of confidential market research reports scattered through the files of hundreds of American business firms. In short, a tremendous amount is known, and it is based on actual research studies, but smidgens of the knowledge are scattered among thousands of different people. What is sorely needed is an orderly compilation of the findings, as distinct from a review of methods or success stories.

It has been my pleasure for the past three years to have engaged in making up such a compilation, and I would like to pass along to you some preliminary observations:

a. In the first place, rather than a limited number of, say, ten or twenty motives which influence consumer behavior, there appear to be at least 600 different motives. This makes the idea of any short, rigid list of motives obsolete. Moreover, each of the motives varies strikingly from one person to another, and in one person fluctuates widely in intensity from one occasion to another. Not all motives are appropriate to every product, either.

b. In the second place, all consumer motives apparently need to be measured in a number of dimensions in order to understand why they affect the people that they do to the extent that they do in connection with the products that they do. Each motive, for instance, has self-other dimensions, meaning that we must distinguish between the goals which the consumer wishes to achieve himself, the standards which he thinks a large variety of other people set for him to live up to, the standards which he sets for the behavior of others with whom he deals, and the standards he sets for the behavior of others toward others, to mention a few of the aspects.

Each of these self-other variations of a motive has, in turn, a number of quantitative dimensions. Let us take as an example the income aspirations which a man thinks his wife holds. We must take into account how desirable or undesirable he thinks each of a wide variety of incomes would be from his wife's point of view; which income is the most desirable of all to her; and whether incomes slightly below that are almost as attractive or sharply less attractive to her, in his opinion. We must also know what he thinks she thinks the present income actually is, and what he thinks she will expect it to be if he should take the kind of action which he is considering, such as accepting a position with another firm. In short, each motive has a number of self-other variations, and each of these variations has the important dimensions of desirability, present status, an aspiration level, and expectations as to what will happen if the consumer acts in a certain way.

c. A third finding is that consumers are activated by many categories of motivation, not just one. These include physiological motives, as well as political, social, religious, intellectual, economic, and general motives. A mixture of motives from several of these categories may combine in influencing

a consumer in his demand for a particular product. It would therefore be a profound error to over-emphasize in an arbitrary fashion the motives in one category to the exclusion of motives in another category. But more of this point later because it is so crucial.

d. The fourth finding about consumer motives is that a different constellation of motives influences the desire for or resistance to one product as compared with other products. This list of products, the motives for which we have indexed, is now over 100 in length. It includes such widely different items as flour, fruit juices, cigarettes, brassieres, hair colorings, houses, automatic laundry machines, power tools, burial service, automobiles, cameras, and savings accounts. Different sets of motives also influence the preferences for different retail stores and the acceptability of various advertising media such as television, magazines, and so on. The motives for any product, any type of retail store, and any type of advertising medium can be sorted out in a few minutes, using IBM punch cards. This information should be available in published form, I trust, within the next 10 or 12 months.

e. Another finding which gradually forces itself upon one's attention is that there is a "chain of motivation." There has been too much emphasis on the benefits or disadvantages which a consumer expects to undergo while he is using the product, with too little recognition that the consumer realizes he has to perform a large number of prior functions before he can use a product, and that there are some subsequent functions which also have to be performed. Moreover, there are favorable and unfavorable motives attached to each of these functions before, during and after the stage of use.

What sort of functions are these that I've mentioned? These are primarily problem-solving functions which would need to be performed in decision-making of any sort and actions to carry out those decisions. They include recognition of need, gathering information, choosing end-products, choosing retail stores and other sources of supply, making the purchase, storage, transportation, risk-bearing, and communications with other users. It also includes receipt and transfer of title to merchandise, the use of the goods, the assessment and reporting of final results, the arrangement for returns and adjustments of unsatisfactory merchandise, repairs and maintenance, disposal of used resources and probably a number of others which I have forgotten for the moment.

The really important conclusion--the conclusion which should shake the ground beneath the feet of advertisers--is that benefits in use are even farther from the total motivation story than has been recognized by the trade. The consumer must see a "clear track" ahead of him reaching all the way from the present stage in which he finds himself on through all of the functions that I have described and down to the eventual disposal of leftovers. By way of analogy, no matter how delightful a social week-end invitation in Cleveland might appear to someone living in Cincinnati, he will not be likely even to take his car out of the garage to make the trip if he thinks that one of the main bridges enroute has been washed out or he can't get back to Cincinnati after the wonderful week-end is over.

f. The sixth and last example of new knowledge about consumers involves the departments of the business firm which should be concerned with consumer motives. Up to this time, the advertising department and the firm's advertising agency have been far and away the first and most enthusiastic users of consumer motivation research. But they will not be the greatest users. When the various motives are tabulated by the business functions or departments which affect them, it will be found to the surprise, I think, of the business community, that merchandising or product planning people should be far more

concerned than they now are with customer motives and how they can be satisfied or violated by the features of the product itself.

So much for some of the information about consumer motives which has already been uncovered by marketing, advertising, and motivation research. Actually this is only the beginning, and what is already known pales into insignificance in comparison with what needs to be known.

But now we must wonder, out loud, whether research is capable of discovering all the new kinds of information--all the new dimensions--or the full quantitative structure of consumer motivation? Although research is off to a blinding start with flaming exhausts, it is in real peril of going off the deep end within the next few years. This it will do unless consumers, advertisers, or the researchers themselves successfully insist on removing a few dangerously defective parts in the research machinery which is now being driven. I would like to give some examples of some of these defects, and the sort of damage which they can go on causing.

The first defect is the provincial and mutually destructive espousal of one set of motives to the exclusion of others. The recent long-overdue success of projective research methods (sometimes wrongly called "motivation research" as if there were no other way to do motivation research) may be bearing the seeds of its own destruction. There has been a dangerous over-emphasis on the sociological and psychological motivations, with vast scorn for economic motives. A tremendous amount of money has been spent on research into the motivations of potential customers for different products with particular emphasis on social status and ego-identification with the items involved. In many cases, no questions are asked by the researchers about prices, cost of upkeep, cost of operation, rising insurance rates, growing difficulty in storing the products, irritation at products too large for the space allotted them, and so on.

The failure to take economic and performance considerations adequately into account is of course partly the responsibility of company management. The major cause, however, is the fact that motivation research using projective methods is an adaptation of techniques developed in the field of clinical psychology, which is dominated--and properly so--by theories explaining the abnormal personality, above all by the doctrines of Sigmund Freud. It has been said that no one can dive deeper and come up dirtier than a psychoanalyst.

Please understand me, I am not rejecting psychoanalytic concepts nor am I calling Freud a fraud! But why must the pendulum swing so far in this direction? Or why should we swing too far in the opposite direction, as we used to do, and say that all consumer behavior is a function of income, price, and inventories, with perhaps a condescending nod of the head to something called "preferences," which were obviously quite irrational and of course could not be measured--not by any self-respecting economist, anyway.

The second great defect of consumer research today is that much of it is done by specialized research houses which have built their reputations on one particular method or group of methods. They are often ready to engage in mortal and, if at all possible, public combat with the enemy to defend their research tool as the One True Method. It is a rare physician who would prescribe an appendectomy for all complaints, but it is very easy to find a market research house which will espouse projective techniques such as the Thematic Ap perception Test, incomplete sentences, and other excellent diagnostic instruments for any and all marketing problems.

It is my view that motivation research is in many cases exactly what the marketing executive needs, and at Alderson & Sessions we do not hesitate to prescribe it. But in other instances an entirely different research tool--or additional methods--would be more advisable. The firm which gathers information for a business client should not be committed to a single method or group of methods. It should be in possession of a "full kit-bag of tools," and it should know when and how to use each one of these market research techniques. A given firm may need a straight dealer attitude survey, plus sample surveys of consumers, motivation research studies of consumers, face to face discussions in consumer clinics, time and duty studies, and a variety of other projects or methods too numerous to mention. The ones I have just mentioned were selected only because they are the principal projects carried out for just one client by a research firm with a full kit-bag of tools.

Even in a motivation research study, projective methods should not be used alone. In a recent study of motivations which we conducted, the interview commenced with 36 incomplete sentences, followed by eight pictures employing a modified Thematic Apperception Test. After these questions, the interview turned to a card-sorting method in which the respondents rated the desirability of 70 different motives and activities by taking 3 x 5 cards containing brief statements and tossing them onto a scale of "desirability-undesirability." After they rated the various motives as to their desirability, the respondents were then asked to rate the motives according to how true they were of their present situations.

The latter methods come under the heading of psychometric testing, which is fully subjective, not projective, with the respondents conscious at all times that they are rating their own motivations. Experience has indicated that respondents are quite frank in their evaluation of the different motives when they are asked to rate these motives in the later stages of an interview after having been "warmed up" by the earlier projective methods. It should also be emphasized that the motives which were eligible to be mentioned and the motives which the respondents were required to rate were not in any sense limited to sociological or psychological motives to the exclusion of economic motives.

The third serious defect of consumer research, particularly of motivation research as currently practiced, is that unwarranted interpretations are frequently made of the evidence. When a person looks at the large average consumption of toilet soap by unmarried girls around 18 years of age, it is certainly tempting to say--and it is possibly true--that the reason for the high consumption of toilet soap is because of guilt feelings associated with awakening sexual desires. But this is not a finding based on the evidence. It is an interpretation based on psychological doctrine and should not be advanced as somehow proved by the data which it was supposed to explain.

The fourth defect in much of the market research now being conducted and on which a great deal of advertising is based, is that it is not quantitative--or it reports dubious quantities. In so-called "qualitative interviewing" it is the fad to scorn mere "nose-counting" and offer generalizations about consumers' motives which may be based and sometimes are based on the comments of only one respondent out of a staggering sample of 25. This, of course, is the sort of criticism which the high priests of straight opinion polling are leveling at the motivation researchers.

But the overwhelming majority of opinion pollsters in the consumer research field are themselves gathering information today which only looks quantitative. They present to their business clients lengthy tabulations

showing the number and percent of all respondents who mention a particular reason for or against buying. This has its value, of course, but makes no allowance for the difference between tepid and enthusiastic mentions. We really do need to know how many people mention a particular motive, but also how intensely each individual feels that motivation. Motivation research needs to be both qualitative and quantitative--not one or the other.

The fifth and last of the principal defects of marketing, advertising, and motivation research as now made available to the firms which produce America's goods is really a summary of all of the previous flaws just mentioned. The researchers are still very much in need of an adequate theoretical framework to describe and explain consumer behavior. Such a framework would prevent their completely overlooking certain types of motives, failing to take measurements of certain dimensions which are necessary, and arriving at unjustified conclusions. This is not their fault, really. It is the fault, I believe, of our present college and university system which compartmentalizes the various disciplines in the behavioral sciences. This makes it difficult to bring psychological concepts to bear on economic behavior, or economic concepts to bear on problems of personal adjustment.

A further serious defect of the present university training is that the research tools which are highly developed in one field are scorned or perhaps completely unknown in other fields which should be employing them. This was very much the case with projective techniques in the field of consumer research until about ten years ago. If it were not for the tremendous sales promotional efforts of Dr. Ernest Dichter in this respect, many of us would not even be doing motivation research today. There would be no customers. It was the business community which first showed strong interest in his research tools as applied to consumer behavior, and the universities followed somewhat grudgingly behind.

In reviewing what is already known about consumers through research, and the improvements in research which will be essential if the vast uncharted regions are to be explored, one powerful impression has spread through all my thinking. This wondrously confusing, God-created, man-embroidered being--the consumer--is complex beyond the wildest imagination of the old-time advertising copywriter. He was the man who used to say, "Write to them as you would to morons--their average mentality is twelve years of age." Since the advent of what is now called "motivation research," advertising people are just beginning to realize the tremendous complexity and intelligence of the consumer. The advertisers already have a wealth of information at their disposal, and the creative man is beginning to recognize that he must soak up information-- in addition to Scotch on the rocks--before he can get creative inspiration.

3. Is Advertising Really Making Proper Use of Market Research?

We have just taken note of the tremendous amount of information about consumers which market research has uncovered, and the excellent new tools, imperfect though they are, which can be used to gather more information. But our third question must now be asked, "Do advertisers really make full and proper use of the tools and findings which market research offers?"

The primary use of "motivation research" so far has been for purposes of advertising, although other applications are on the increase. Several motivation research studies of smokers a few years ago indicated that men regarded filter cigarettes as feminine, but the men were very much disturbed by the stories they had been reading about regular cigarettes and cancer. The solution to this problem adopted by Marlboro and Viceroy was to identify their brands with muscle-flexing masculinity. The Marlboro man is a success-

ful fellow with a glamorous past, operating his own sailboat with a tattooed hand. The television commercials for Viceroy have been delivered for the past year or so by rugged male quartets, dressed for outdoor sports, and dominated by a vigorous bass. Vance Packard's marvelous little book on The Hidden Persuaders lists dozens of other applications.

But a few applications do not constitute full and effective use. Consumer groups should realize why it is that laboriously gathered information about consumers' needs and wants does not always result in improved products or more effective advertising. I have two explanations to offer. There are several difficulties in this respect. The first reason is perhaps a little on the trival side, but I cannot resist mentioning it.

a. The business clients of the motivation researchers sometimes double-cross them and refuse to live up to the "product image" which they have developed or should develop. For instance, a recent issue of a news bulletin put out by a motivation research firm described the results of a study for Esther Williams and her International Swimming Pool Company. The researchers found, it said, that there is a movement away from the idealization of sheer glamour and the gradual substitution, in its place, of more bourgeois values. The majority of respondents regard Esther, they said, as an attractive person worthy of their admiration, not because she is a Hollywood star and an internationally famous athlete, but (and I quote) "because she was seen as a family-oriented and natural person who spends a great deal of time with her husband and children, seldom books engagements away from home, and almost never goes out nightclubbing and dancing." The only trouble was that a couple weeks later all of the newspapers carried the announcement that Esther Williams had filed suit for a divorce from her husband.

b. The second explanation is considerably more serious. Of all the difficult steps which motivation research must take, the hardest step of all involves turning motivation research findings into a set of useful recommendations for the client. On this score a great number of motivation research studies have proven to be wasteful--to the advertiser, to the research firm, and eventually to the consumer. The client cannot speak the technical language of the researcher, and grows frustrated and sullen over the researcher's inability to tell him what to do about the findings.

True, the findings of motivation research have often been used as remarkably effective idea generators for copywriters in the advertising agencies. But it is doubtful whether they are adequate in themselves to help the marketing manager of the firm and his department heads to develop a coordinated, effective marketing program, meshed with but not limited to the new copy theme.

Motivation research, and for that matter, time and duty studies, attitude surveys, customer clinics, operations research, and other tools should undoubtedly be selected and designed under the guidance of people who have had both practical experience and academic training in business, economics, marketing, advertising, or similar fields closely related to the functions or departments of the client firms they are serving. If these people have also had training in psychology, sociology, and the research techniques developed by these disciplines, this is all to the good. If they do not, they should not hesitate to hire psychologists and other people specialized in the employment of appropriate research methods.

Many of the disappointments of business executives who have attempted to use motivation research are thus traceable to the unrecognized existence of what we call at Alderson & Session the "marketing pyramid."

This pyramid consists of three layers. The fundamental layer, consists of facts which have been gathered in some way or another--by motivation research methods, by consumer clinics, by distribution cost analysis, and so on. Fact gathering and the possession of facts are not enough, however.

The next level of the pyramid is that of problem-solving. The questions which should be asked need to be specified in advance with the problem in mind, and they need to be analyzed and interpreted with a view to recommending marketing strategies that will solve the problems which started the research in the first place.

But this is not the end of the process. It is not always enough to have the facts interpreted and recommendations made as to the sort of marketing program which should be carried out. The top level in the pyramid is the level of programming. This reaches back to the previous level and picks up the recommendations which were made as to what should be done, then develops a coordinated plan as to how the new marketing plan may be carried out in terms of internal operations, departmental organization, incentives, budgets, and so on.

Only when all of these layers have been stacked properly by executives within the firm, with appropriate help when desired from outside research firms, consulting organizations, or advertising agencies, can a marketing program go forward with the greatest likelihood of success.

Therefore, it is at least one man's belief that motivation research is one, but only one new, powerful, and very valuable block which may be inserted into the "fact finding" level of the pyramid. It does not in itself show what the marketing program should be, nor how it can be put into operation.

4. How Really Good or Bad Are Current Developments in Advertising and Market Research?

We now come to the fourth and last of our questions. What does this all add up to, from the standpoint of the consumer? And from the standpoint of the business firm?

First, I believe that the information which we already have, plus the market research tools for gathering still more information, point to the potentiality of greatly improved products for the American market. Merchandise can be better suited to the real desires and needs of consumers. This also means greater efficiency for business, which is enabled by research to eliminate expensive frills and furbelows.

In the second place, these developments foretell the possibility of a tremendous burst in the effectiveness and usefulness of advertising. Research not only determines what products are most marketable, but helps to guide the advertising, selling, and publicity messages which the business firms send out to consumers. If consumers really need to know detailed information about product features and performance, market research will help make this point clear. If consumers are more anxious to know about the intangible benefits--romance, approval, leadership--which are no less valid motivations than the tangible ones--then market research will point this out, also.

We cannot guarantee that these happy results will be achieved, but the facts are that business firms are ordering more and more marketing research

studies from us and other organizations, and they seem to be making more and better use of the information than they used to. Organizations devoted to supplying unbiased and scientific information to business firms are not too far removed from organizations whose purpose is to supply unbiased and scientific information to consumers.

On the unfavorable implications, there is always some danger that the market information will not be collected scientifically, will not be used at all, or will be misinterpreted. To the extent that such things happen, it means economic waste and higher prices.

Finally, I suppose it is normal for people to worry about the possible misuse of powerful new tools by rascals. Narcotics sometimes fall into the hands of dope-peddlers, automobiles can be driven by gangsters, and armies can be misused by dictators. But there are fairly compelling reasons why we have not abolished all these things. We have simply been careful to control them.

Similarly, motivation research can be used by charlatans as well as by sincere and dedicated researchers and business firms. But I refuse to tremble in terror or hide beneath my desk after reading the ominous passages in Vance Packard's book, which would seem to suggest that the day of complete thought-control by Big Business, politicians, or even more sinister groups is just around the corner. Standards will be set and standards will be imposed--sometimes from the outside, more often from the inside of the professions utilizing these methods.

To summarize my answer to the omnibus question which was assigned to me by your chairman, I can therefore say: First, advertising does influence people, but it certainly does not dominate them; second, market research has bored at least one or two levels deep into the consumer's mind; third, advertising had only begun to make full use of the market and motivation research available to it, and what it does use it could use much more effectively; fourth, the recent developments in advertising and marketing research are neither pure white, pure black, nor dead center at neutral gray. They are moving rather definitely in the direction of the white end of the scale of virtue, I think, but I hesitate to name the precise date of arrival!

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