Psycho-Affective and Cognitive Mecanisms for the Reception of Advertising Message

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Résumé: Nous nous proposons de montrer les effets de la publicité sur la perception du public, vus les mécanismes de la vie psychique de l'individu (l'attitude de celui-ci envers le contexte, l'adaptabilité et ses réactions comportamentales face au stimuli), ainsi que les mécanismes qui se produisent dans les processus cognitifs inconscients d'une personne exposée au message publicitaire.

Mots clés: publicité, psycho-afectif, cognitif, réception, public.

Advertising has, by its complexity and polymorphism, long conquered society. Its fascination lies in the harmonic convergence of magic and science, of aesthetics and advanced technology (whose main role is that of creating a shortcut between the products / services, on the one hand, and the customers / clients, on the other). The advertising phenomenon has become an art in itself as it aims at emphasising the beautiful and the useful in as varied ways as possible by making the most of persuasion.

The psychology of advertising establishes the criteria a commercial should fulfill in order to become memorable for the public and make the public admit, due to positive psycho-affective, emotional and cognitive reactions, the beneficial effects of the product/service, and thus buy the respective product/service.

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Our paper aims at outlining the mechanisms responsible for the reaction of the public to a specific commercial, starting from the perception of the message up to the actual purchase.

Following a fundamental psychological pattern in terms of perception, "(…) the mind operates a *selection* among external impressions, choosing the ones in direct relationship with the satisfaction of tendencies". (Todoran, 2004: 44, translation mine), whereas the dynamic circuit of the psychic operations involved in this very process can occur randomly: Stimulus (the ad) ? central adjustment and the birth of desire ? purchase reaction. "Moreover, the order of the inner dynamism can be totally different: tendency ? ? updated wish ? adjustment by remembrance ? exterior reaction" (Todoran, 2004: 96-97). Attempting to decipher the way in which the individual relates to advertising by means of cognitive and psycho-affective factors, Dimitrie Todoran (*cf.* 2004: 44-46) identifies three features of the psychic life, as follows:

1 – the dynamic, continuous attitude of the individual towards his environment (as shown by moods and dispositions);

2 – the individual's adaptability (as shown by behavioural reactions: reflexes or involuntary acts, simple reactions, complex reactions), which constitues a result of the individual's unique life experience, a synthesis of the personality developed in time; any reaction is, in its turn, defined by three different aspects:

a – a cognitive ingredient (which facilitates the processes of thinking and attention);

b – an affective ingredient (an *emotive phase* which greatly contributes to orienting a response on the part of the individuals based on their own tendencies, experience and the context or given situation);

c – a conative reaction (the motion response of the individual to the given situation);

3 – the behavioral reactions of the individual to stimuli, provided the stimuli succeed in updating the tendencies, wishes and needs of the receiver.

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While associating commercials with "a situation which occurs in the varied field of the exterior phenomena, which individuals are forced to adapt to", D. Todoran classifies commercials into two main categories, as it follows:

1 – commercials aimed at appealing, warning, inviting etc.;

2 – commercials whose main role is that of triggering a reaction of purchase on the part of the receiver (*cf.* Todoran, 2004: 47).

Gerald Zaltman (*cf.* [2003] 2007: 113-124) explains the mechanisms taking place in the unconscious cognitive processes of an individual when receiving a publicity message in the following way:

1 – *Priming* represents a form of subliminal activity by means of which the individual is *prepared cognitively* to influence the reception of the message as such as well as of the purchase reaction; the attention of the receiver is drawn to a certian paradigm (visual information – text and / or image –, but also auditory, olfactory, gustatory or kinaesthetic information) which may facilitate the individual's unconscious interest in the message, according to the updated wishes at the time, such as presenting an aspect which induces the main idea of the commercial (for example, a statement about the importance of a happy life paves the way for the introduction of an important item for the individual, such as toothpaste, soap or some medicine; another important example in modern publicity has to do with a certain musical background customers may hear when entering a certain shop, which may have a stimulative, incentive influence on the buyer). As Nicolas Guéguen (*cf.* [2005] 2006: 46) pointed out, at the moment of the reception of the commercial, *the individual already possessses some things from the previous experiences, which will influence the ones to come*; the same principle applies when we answer politely just because we have been politely addressed to.

2 – *Adding extra information* (that may not actually exist): "(…) consumers record an experience related to a product or service, irrespective of it being there or not" (Zaltman [2003]

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2007: 119). The visual perception has a *deductive function*; it uses *reconstructive and creative* mechanisms: as the image projected onto the retina is bidimensional, and the environment is three dimensional, while perceiving and processing the information, the visual representation system creates an image about the respective image by appealing to the memories stored in the field of view of the individual, a (re)configuration which produces "a cohenerent vision of the world" (*cf.* John Dowling, *Creating Mind: How the Brain Works*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1998: 119-120, *apud* Zaltman [2003] 2007:116).

3 – *Excluding the information which* are *present* takes place when the individual leaves aside the information he finds irrelevant for the situation, depending on the context in which the information appears. This mechanism explains why some people remember easily a certain commercial, of any kind, but cannot recall the product the commercial was about.

The marketing and advertising specialists' effort to create persuasive messages is aimed at a series of effects that are taken into account from the very beginning, that is of the conception of the commercial and establishing prices.

1 – *The Effect of the Mere Exposure* (refers to the major importance of exposing the customer / client to the product / service; recurrent exposure creates long-term preferences, as demonstrated in a 1968 experiment by R.A. Zajonc (*"Atitudinal Effects of Mere Exposure"* in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, no. 9 – 2, 1968: 1-27, *apud* Guéguen [2005] 2006: 48-49)).

2 – *The Striptease effect* (was demonstrated by Sundar and Wagner in 1998 and envisages the subtle control of the receiver's expectation by paying as much attention to the way in which the message is presented as to the message itself).

3 – *The effect of mailers or leaflets on purchasing behaviour* (is based on the effect of the mere exposure by which, as shown above, the individual gets used to the product / service, which will subsequently lead, to a great extent, to the purchasing behaviour).

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4 – *The memorability effect* (emphasises the importance of the context: space, time, people, events that are involved the very moment the message is conveyed).

5 – *The* low-ball *technique* – "It is difficult to say *no* once you said *yes*, even if the situation has changed in the meantime. Nothing is more difficult than giving up on a decision, even if it was not made in a very commendable way [*e.g.* a manipulation mechanism – author's note]. As a matter of fact, in some circumstances, the force of the decision can be so great that, even if there is proof that you have been lied to about a product, it is highly unlikely you would give up on your decision (to buy)" (Guéguen [2005] 2006: 175).

6 – *The effect of pysical attractiveness* was demonstrated on mant occasions by many researchers (Reingen and Kernan, in 1993, then Guéguen, Jacob and Legohérel, in 2003 a.s.o., *apud* Guéguen [2005] 2006: 210-217), who reached the conclusion that *beautiful people are positively assessed*, which enhances the stereotype according to which *whatever is beautiful is automatically good*. The result of this positive assessment influences greatly the behaviour of the potential buyer because "a beautiful person who communicates something has greater chances of attracting attention and is considered a more convincing source" (Guéguen [2005] 2006: 216, translation mine), if not extraordinarily well-endowed as compared to others. Starting from here, we may deduce that beauty and love are inextricably related (see the pleasure and satisfaction in the case of publicity), as well as harmony, balance, competence, therefore the quality of life (product, service, person, social group etc.), connotations which represent fundamental values of human life and which canalize, on an unconscious level, the attitude of the target public to actions aimed to poise its existence.

7 – *The effect of the model* is put into effect due to the neurological structures (scientifically termed *mirror neurons*) which trigger similar reactions in the interlocutor as in the locutor. The latest discoveries in neurosciences, psychiatry and behavioural sciences demonstrate the fact that mirror neurons are

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cortical neurons which are enabled whenever a certain action is fulfilled and whenever we watch the same action being done by someone else (*cf.* Keysers; Gazzola, 2010: R353-R354). As a result, we can deduce that this social, mimetic-neurological mechanism materialised on the attitudinal level, is fairly well exploited in publicity when the receiver is "invited" to use the perfume a star uses in a commercial, to drink the same champagne or wine or get dressed with the same articles of clothing as presented in the commercial. Specialists also noticed that the attractiveness of products or services increases when there is a mention of *a lot of people* using them, a fact which, in its turn, increases or even creates a reputation for the product or service that is being advertised (*cf.* Alan Ching Biu Tse, 2002, *apud* Guéguen [2005] 2006: 229).

To paraphrase Dr. Andrew Weil (*apud* Robbins, [1986] 2001: 55), who said that "the magic of drugs lies in the mind of the user, and not in the medicine as such", we will admit that advertising will be successful as long as people have ideals they embody in the need for products and services, in a blind faith that, by enjoying fabulous words and images, might enter a fascinating world where they, in fact, find their own selves. There is, therefore, a (fake?!) appeal to recompose one's own being, a process publicity will continue to foster as long as consumption goes on fluctuating, as long as technology goes on developing new forms of expression, and as long as man goes on searching for happiness in the outer world, as if in an effort to justify an existential *obligation*. Nevertheless, we still need publicity because we need to be aware of the spectacular settings of the latest mobile, of the best detergent able to wash off any kind of spot, of the best vehicle, the tastiest cheese, that's also the easiest to smear on bread (for your child's sandwhich, not necessarily yours!), of the most recommendable toothpaste (according to most dentists), able to wipe off all the germs in your mouth and ensure *the most perfect teeth* for you, of the kind of beer that instantly brings your friends near(er).

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