

Humor In House Advertising: Positive Effects of Wordplay

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Abstract

This paper looks at advertising from an entrepreneurial and linguistic point of view, and more specifically, house advertising in agencies is analyzed. This is a kind of hyper advertising and it includes more linguistic phenomena than business to business advertising (Janoschka, 2004). Especially, the linguistic phenomenon of humor has often been found within these advertisements. In the literature, few have looked at this topic any further, which is why it makes sense to keep an eye on humor and wordplay in agency advertising, in the business to consumer context. The intention of this paper is to analyze the reason wordplay is used so frequently in agency advertising. To date, humor in advertising has been analyzed in the literature often. However, humor in agency advertising has not. Here, humor is employed in a test-in-process manner, without knowledge of the basis for it or for its ultimate effects. This indicates there may be more choices of linguistic phenomena that can be used, but that are not employed simply because they are not known. The specific effects of humor in agency advertising and the ways it can be used for more effective advertising are key findings. This work contributes insight into a subject that has heretofore been unknown.

Introduction

Advertising is used to persuade people to buy a product or a service. House advertising is used to persuade entrepreneurs to buy a complete concept. Building complexity, agencies also sell advertising through advertising—publicité pour la publicité—the offered product itself is thus at the same time the instrument of communication. Within this form of advertising, professional journals have arisen that give an overview of agencies and their services. These journals report on innovation and changes in a particular segment. In professional journals concerning public relations, advertising, and overall communications, agencies place their advertisements to be seen by entrepreneurs interested in advertising. Some of the journals have special editions in which the best agencies' advertisements are collected.

With the aid of language, advertising is able to persuade behavior. Persuasion can only happen, however, if advertising is seen. Approximately one out of five television ads, for example, contain humorous appeals (Eisend, 2010).

Eye-catching colors, unexpected combinations, social-rules-breaking pictures: Images are one of several components that help gain the consumer's attention. Though images are widely used in all advertising, they limit the ability to use words creatively, and foreign words, colloquialisms, and wordplay do not exist. In order to make everyday advertising more accessible, wordplay is a common feature, but not always suitable, and is more commonly used to support memorization within advertising of, for example, a slogan. Hyper advertising is a supercharged form of this, which means that eye-catching colors and unexpected combinations are not enough. Agency advertising goes one step further by trying to top average advertising. But the problem is they are only trying; agencies do not know which effects linguistic phenomena can create (Janoschka, 2004). It is unknown whether this is because they do not want to spend money on such research or because they don't need to spend money on this because they have enough clients and projects. Whether they are in need or not, hyper advertising is a subject that needs to be analyzed in the literature.

This paper deals with humor and wordplay and why they are beneficial for advertisers. The methodology used relied primarily on research of the existing literature, but the focus was on general procedures rather than specific uses. In this way, the outcome of the study is suitable for a larger variety of potential clients. Eisend stated that humor in general advertising enhances attention and has a positive effect (Eisend, 2008).

Obviously, this characteristic of humor is used to create a positive attitude toward the agencies that employ it in their work. Because this has an effect on incoming projects and the ultimate success of advertising agencies, and because their work needs to be distinguished from competitive advertisements (as they need to demonstrate they can do a better job), agencies use this form of communication more than other companies. Anja Janoschka has been analyzing linguistics in hyper advertising as used in web advertising. Her work contains a good overview of linguistic phenomena, but it does not focus on humor or wordplay, and is therefore not specific. However, her work does raise the subject of interactive hyper advertising as a topic for future analysis (Janoschka, 2004). Hence, as seen from these two examples, existing literature gives an overview of linguistic phenomena in advertising and hyper advertising, as well as explaining the effects of humor in general advertising. However, it does not focus on *wordplay in hyper advertising* and does not clarify the reasons why wordplay as linguistic phenomena is often employed. Consequently, this paper focuses on the development of understanding why wordplay is often used in agency advertising.

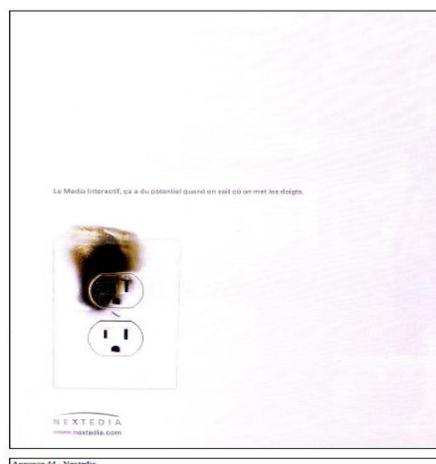
Finally, this paper generates a correlation between marketing and linguistics. Examining the use of wordplay in agency advertisements on one hand, and consideration of these advertisements in the entrepreneur's everyday business on the other hand, a linguistically deep analysis may be combined with marketing research.

Theory: Definition and Hypothesis

Advertising exists in a wide range of communications. In politics, it takes the form of propaganda and aims to sway public opinion. Economic French advertising had its origin in the early nineteenth century (Kotler & Dubois, 2003). But known as promotion, the objective of this advertising is to sell products. Advertising even exists in religion in the form of flyers for church gatherings or requests for donations; and there is advertising for museums when there is, for example, a new exhibition. Advertising is extremely diverse and complex. Hyper advertising has the same goal as advertising: attracting someone's attention, then provoking interest, desire, and action—to make people buy things (Ostheeren, 2003). Hyper advertising seeks to do this in a more extreme way. This study examined how humor creates attention in this extreme sense, and shows that wordplay, even when exaggerated, is considered positive in most cases.

This contributes to the literature for other researchers on this and similar topics. It points to the relevant set of research focus, adding to the literature in the hopes the topic will be analyzed more often. Relevant data was collected from France to serve as a national example. As the authors are from Germany and Australia, an intercultural point of view is possible. Irony and puns vary in different nationalities: Whereas in Germany there are no puns, the UK uses wordplay extensively. Wordplay is defined by Tanaka (1994) as “The general name indicating the various textual phenomena (i.e., on the level of performance or parole) in which certain features inherent in the structure of the language used (level of competence or langue) are exploited in such a way as to establish a communicatively significant, (near-) simultaneous confrontation of at least two linguistic structures with more or less dissimilar meanings (signifies) and more or less similar forms (signifiers).”

The following advertisements are taken from offline journals in an international agency in France (Megalos), which will be explained in the Methods section (see page 3).



“Interactive Media has potential if you know where to put your fingers.”

Here, a memory of childhood is raised, regardless if one was like this or not in one's own childhood. Everyone recognizes the image of a child burning his or her fingers, and the image helps to provoke this imagery. But the memory arises because of the text; without it, the memory wouldn't come up. This hyper advertisement attracts attention.

Tanaka (1994) notes that "Puns attract attention because they frustrate initial expectations of relevance and create a sense of surprise." He also indicates that solving a pun can produce "a pleasant feeling, springing from a kind of intellectual satisfaction," which in turn would lead the reader to think of the product in congenial terms. In summary, wordplay in hyper advertising is primarily an attention-getting aid in order to overcome a possible initial lack of interest in the advertisement and the product. Based on this example, my hypothesis is that humorous advertising strengthens brand value to a greater extent than no humorous advertising.



"You know, Bob, I ask myself if our job is not changing right now...
 Oh no, Steve, you did not yet finish painting the walls with advertisements, did you?
 But you know; now Bob, they say they do it on the web...
 So what? What does that change Steve, I have done it on a ladder and my walls have always been excellent...
 But you know Bob...
 What Steve?
 No, nothing Bob..."

This hyper advertisement shows the misunderstanding between two persons. Steve knows the sense of the word web, while Bob doesn't. Bob understands the word as a tool for painting, just like a ladder. Steve knows the web means the Internet. Having a look at the image, Bob seems the one who is dominant, like a teacher or consultant. In addition to the image, the choice of the name Bob, being simple (only two hard sounding letters, which even seem to be stupidly easy), fortifies the humorous effect. In consequence, this advertisement is considered to be funny.

Methods

An important step within the process of creating a hyper advertisement is analyzing the data and the market. Which markets are relevant? Are there other relevant markets besides the past ones? Are there enough viewers to address wordplay to? Which are the relevant existing markets, target groups, and changing markets? Bühler has already asked how the message is sent to the recipient and how this message is being seen and heard (Bühler, 1933). The data collected was gained from offline journals in an international agency in France (Megalos). More than 100 hyper advertisements were looked at and a qualitative and quantitative approach was taken in the analysis. The number of adjectives or verbs, for example, has been counted and compared in each advertisement. This is appropriate because the data comes directly from an agency. The agency, Megalos, is one of the most famous agencies in France; the advertisements are taken from a good cross-section of well-known international journals and magazines.

Results and Discussion

What makes an advertisement funny? An advantage of wordplay is it can be quickly understood even if the user does not have any specific knowledge about the content. As stated in Korčák (2012), “There is no need for sectoral knowledge in order to understand the wordplay used within the analyzed house advertising.” To look more closely, the result of this work can be separated into multiple subjective results such as “The readers react with humor to the given wordplay,” “The readers react with curiosity to the given wordplay,” “The readers judge the given wordplay as successful,” and so forth. From this point, subordinate practical hypotheses can be mapped out. In the case of this study, it is possible to transfer the resulting analyses and refine the original hypothesis (“humorous advertising strengthens brand value to a greater extent than no humorous advertising,” see page 3) into the following smaller hypotheses:

1. Wordplay creates humor.
2. Wordplay makes advertisements accessible.
3. Wordplay awakens interest in and curiosity about the advertisement.
4. Wordplay provokes thought.
5. Wordplay creates respect and admiration.
6. Wordplay is judged as appropriate.
7. Wordplay is judged as successful.
8. Wordplay is judged as positive.

The consideration of these hypotheses can lead to an overall statement that in the future could, for example, be proven or disproven through use of a questionnaire. There is a great need for analysis of advertising, and the results will have high value and contributory input for the overall literature and future research on the subject.

As can be seen from the above section, wordplay creates humor, and humor creates attention. Attention is responsible for readers taking a look at the product, which can then in return be sold more easily because of the humor, which is because of the use of wordplay. The theory of Weinberger, Gulas, and Weinberger (1992) is thus proved: Wordplay creates happiness, and once understood, makes the reader feel included. This is why the advertisement is linked to a positive feeling. The establishment of long-term use of advertisements using wordplay is thus one key argument no one has looked at thus far, which is why the idea is put forward in this paper. Analysis of the data shows that advertising agencies use super advertising, with more wordplay and language-based elements in them, than they do in other kinds of advertising.

In practice, humor is used because it gives the viewer a positive feeling. This gives a lot of information about what kind of humor could be integrated in advertising. Causing feelings means evoking emotions in the viewer. And if viewers' emotions are provoked, the advertisement stays with them longer than other types of communication. The key is therefore to catch viewers' attention through positive emotion, through humor, smiling, and laughing. Given the number of advertisements, this effect is hard to create. Referring to the advertisement seen on page 3, viewers may find that Bob and Steve stay in mind, maybe with a smile. However, the result achieved depends on viewer characteristics as well, so there is no guarantee a given wordplay will evoke the same thoughts or emotions within every target group.

The findings can contribute to redefining humor or provide motivation for more research in this field. This relies again on humor's use in practice, because to know more about the phenomenon allows humor to be used in a different in practice. Agencies can use results to optimize their advertisements, gain competitive advantages, win customers, and earn money. New markets and target groups can be discovered. For example, by employing a certain kind of humor, a special target group can be addressed, or a market which might have seemed irrelevant in the past can be approached. Instead of excluding such markets, agencies can take a fresh look at these markets and consider addressing them in a different way. With the aid of wordplay, new options and approaches toward winning customers can be revealed. Furthermore, agencies can create marketing for new projects and customers, boosting their reputation. Although the topic of humor in advertising has been investigated extensively, for example, in Eisend (2010), house advertising is lacking further research.

Therefore, the innovative approach of this analysis can be found in the combinatorial study of house advertisement. Eisend concludes that humor has a positive effect and reduces negative impressions. He further declares that humor can help overcome the weaknesses of a brand (Eisend, 2010). In agency advertising, this might be the case as well. However, since it is not a product but a service, there are people involved.

These people need to work with each other to, at some stage, discover the weaknesses of competitive companies or brands, and while humor can overcome this weakness, it nevertheless does not take it away. There are differences between agencies and selling a product. The service of an agency is not tangible; this can be seen as an advantage for a product because it can more easily be imagined and is concrete.

Nevertheless, humor is often used in agency advertising. Perhaps this is because agencies want to implant a positive suggestion in the viewer's mind; that because of their disadvantage compared to a product, humor is used more often as a tool to divert from that weakness inherent in advertising a service.

Is wordplay therefore a dangerous linguistic game to play?

Conclusion

As noted above, new markets can be uncovered due to wordplay in agency advertising. A whole new view can be taken as agencies joke about certain things, products, people, or even competitors. This means different markets can be in the relevant set because there is a new way of approaching them.

But are there enough viewers to address wordplay to? The target group for agencies is probably quite large, because it often consists of big companies. How and when wordplay can be employed depends a lot on who a particular advertisement is addressing. If, for example, advertising is aimed at huge companies that are experienced with agencies and wanting something new and innovative, a particular agency can dare to take a more confident approach using wordplay. However, this also depends, of course, on cultural norms. This means that future research will have to determine whether there are any differences in advertising today with respect to the reception of puns by the target audiences of different nationalities in hyper advertisements.

Wordplay does create humor, but not in every situation and often not without an accompanying image. But humor creates contentedness, and the services of an agency can have a positive reputation because of its use.

Humor can also have a positive effect on a company's brand. More money can be earned because people are persuaded by their positive feelings and emotions. Agency advertising can use language in a completely new way and discover new markets or target groups; they can use wordplay more often and in different ways than other advertising. Further, agencies can use not only wordplay, but also more innovative words and more creative arrangements of words. Modern agencies are more mysterious. They change rules and conventions. They play with their clients, and in doing so, they become a mystery and seem to have a secret for advertising.

Playing with their clients, aggressively and provocatively, how much space is left for manipulation?

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