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The effect of advertised messages on light and heavy users' brand perceptions

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Track: Branding

Abstract
One of the key uses of brand perception tracking is to evaluate advertising. In which case we need to know what to expect in terms of perceptual responses. Considerable advances have been made with a number of empirical generalisations providing benchmarks for brand image scores. In this paper we add to this area by examining image attributes that have been recently advertised or previously advertised for a long time. We examined 10 cases of cross sectional data and found that *for a brand's advertised attributes* (a) the brand is ranked higher in terms of attribute association than would be expected given its market share and (b) users are more likely than non-users to make the brand-attribute link, but non-users still have the most profound effect on the *overall* perceptual scores. As case studies were not observed over time, it cannot be concluded whether advertising an attribute leads to a higher brand ranking for that attribute, or wether advertising tends to focus on such attributes. By demonstrating how important non-users are to overall perceptual scores this paper highlights the importance of reaching non-users in communication efforts.

Introduction/Background

Brand perceptions are attributes in consumer memory that are linked to the brand name, which are thought to make up the brand's image or schema (Keller 1993). These perceptions are built up over time with interaction with the brand and its advertising (Krishnan 1996). Many advertising campaigns focus on a central theme, a message about one or more attributes ("we offer good value for money", "we offer excellent service") with the objective of developing peoples' perceptions about a brand. Major companies worldwide undertake studies of these brand image perceptions, typically at considerable expense. The rationale is that brand perceptions affect buying behaviour, and advertising can have a substantial impact on brand perceptions (and thereby behaviour). Consequently post-campaign image studies are commonly used to assess advertising effectiveness, and sometimes pre-campaign data is also collected to see changes in image perceptions.

Over the years considerable strides have been made in identifying empirical generalizations concerning image response scores. These empirical generalizations have provided interpretive benchmarks for image studies, not only showing whether a score is high, low or as expected, but also giving considerable insight into why the brand has obtained a particular image score. In this research we draw on prior empirical generalizations about the relationship between brand perceptual responses and brand usage to examine attributes that were specifically advertised. Again the aim is to provide researchers and practitioners some idea of what to expect (benchmarks), and insight into why.

Known patterns in image response

The effect of past brand usage on a respondent's propensity to give a perceptual response for a brand has been well documented. Hence bigger market share brands, which typically have more users (as the buying rate/loyalty between brands does not vary substantively (Ehrenberg 2000)), are more commonly associated with brand attributes than smaller brands (Bird et al. 1970). It is therefore good practice to present image data with brands ranked in order of their market share. Another pattern in image data is that some attributes score higher than others, these are attributes that are more prototypical (Romaniuk and Sharp 2000). Knowledge of these two patterns allows the analyst to see if any particular image attribute is scoring unusually for the brand of interest.

The relationship between user and non-user response levels has been categorized as being either descriptive or evaluative in nature. Barwise and Ehrenberg (1985) noted that when brand user and non-user responses were compared, brand perceptions tended to follow one of two empirical patterns. There was the typical 'evaluative pattern', where users have a much higher propensity than non-users. Barwise and Ehrenberg noted that this occurred for evaluations about the brand (eg, 'tastes good'), which really can only be made after using the brand, and hence the strong usage effect in the responses. To denote these cases they used the term 'evaluative attributes'.

In contrast, there were some attributes that displayed a closer level of agreement between brand users and non-users. These appeared to be typically functional qualities for a specific brand (eg, the colour of packaging, or the country of origin), or advertised/promotional attributes, which were qualities that could be judged by the respondent regardless of whether

they had used the brand or not. These were thought to describe the brand and therefore were referred to as 'descriptive attributes' (see also Hoek et al. 2000).

In this paper, we are interested in what pattern could be expected for an attribute that has been advertised recently or previously (perhaps over many years).

Presumably brands should be known for the things they advertise. If Mercedes Benz spends millions of dollars on advertising the safety features of its cars it might expect to score highly on image attributes concerned with safety. Yet also it seems reasonable that brands mainly advertise features that they really have, particularly those that they are particularly strong on. Mercedes Benz advertises safety features because it has safety features to advertise.

This is why Barwise and Ehrenberg (1987) identified image scores that deviated (upwards) from the expected level for the brand, given its penetration, as either functional attributes or attributes that had been heavily advertised. Indeed the two often go hand-in-hand as shown by Hoek, Dunnett et al. (2000) who report on the instance 'Budget Tea bags' scoring much higher than would be expected given its penetration levels for the image attribute of "good value". Budget Tea by its very name advertises that it is cheap, and indeed it is.

Table 1 demonstrates this: for brands that advertised an attribute, the overall response scores for that attribute (in the form of brand rankings) deviate from expected levels for the brand, given its penetration.

Table 1: Correlations with Penetration level

Market	**Attribute** (heavily advertised for one brand in market)	Brand ranking (usage)	Brand ranking (advertised attribute)	Correlation with advertised attribute	Correlation with non-advertised attribute
Fast food	Healthy	3	1	-0.05	+0.96
Fast food	Fresh ingredients	3	1	-0.03	+0.96
Financial services	Highly satisfied customers	5	2	-0.43	+0.95
Telecomms	Good value	3	3	+0.80	+0.99
Telecomms	Competitive prices	3	3	+0.90	+0.99
Fast food	Introducing new products	1	1	+0.97	+0.99
Fast food	Sells hot dogs	2	1	-0.09	+0.99
Fast food	Has smoothies	2	1	-0.16	+0.99
Fast food	Offers value for money	2	1	+0.98	+0.99
Dairy treats	Sells ice cream cakes	2	2	-0.4	+0.99
Average		**3**	**2**	**0.48**	**0.98**

In all cases, the brand advertising the attribute had a higher brand ranking position compared with its competitors, for that attribute. The reason for these deviations is that such attributes follow a descriptive pattern, where non-users respond a little more like users, probably because these attributes don't require usage in order to be aware of them.

Oddly, this observed pattern in the deviations appears to be out of sync with another empirical generalization concerning response to advertising. Users are 2-3 times as likely to recall seeing advertising than non-users[1] (Sharp et al. 2001). Thus, while non-users may increase in

[1] The term 'non-user' is used as it is in common practice although it is often technically incorrect – non-users are often actually light, occasional customers.

their awareness of association with the advertised attribute, users might also be expected to increase their responses; possibly at more than twice the rate of non-users.

To examine this apparent inconsistency we calculated the respective contribution that recent users and light/non-users made to brand image scores, for advertised attributes.

Table 2: Recent and light/non-user contribution to brand image scores

				Proportion of respondents who associated the advertised attribute with the brand		Contribution to the overall response level	
Market	**Attribute** (heavily advertised for one brand in market)	**Usage** (proportion of sample who used advertised brand) (%)	**Overall response level** for advertised brand (%)	**Recent users** (%)	**Light/ non-users** (%)	**Recent users** (%)	**Light/ non-users** (%)
Fast food	Introducing new products	56	68	77	57	**63**	**37**
Fast food	Sells hot dogs	20	64	82	60	**25**	**75**
Fast food	Has smoothies	20	54	66	51	**24**	**76**
Fast food	Value for money	20	22	32	19	**29**	**71**
Dairy treats	Sells ice cream cakes	20	18	26	16	**29**	**71**
Fast food	Healthy	14	69	83	66	**17**	**83**
Fast food	Fresh ingredients	14	72	87	69	**17**	**83**
Financial services	Highly satisfied customers	7	9	38	13	**29**	**71**
Telecomm	Good value	6	12	71	8	**36**	**64**
Telecomm	Competitive prices	6	13	75	9	**35**	**65**
Average		***19***				***30***	***70***

** The *contribution of recent users to the overall response level* was calculated by taking the number of users who associated the attribute with the brand as a proportion of the total users in the sample (eg for 'new products' this is 0.77 x 56 = 43), then this contribution as a proportion of the overall response for that attribute (43/68 = 63%). The same calculation was performed for light/non-users.

Table 2 shows the response level for associating an advertised attribute with the brand is higher for recent users than light/non-users. In terms of which group is contributing more to the *overall* response level for that attribute, it can be seen that light/non-users are contributing to 70% of the overall response on average. Primarily because there are typically five times more light/non-users than recent users. Therefore even a small increase in responses from this non-user group has a significant impact.

The one exception to this was McDonalds for the advertised attribute "introducing new products", which gained a higher contribution to the overall response level from users of the brand (63%) than non-users (37%). This may be explained by the higher proportion of users of that brand in the sample (56%).

Discussion

This paper uses known empirical generalisations to further understand what results should be expected when a brand advertises an attribute. We know that when brand usage and attribute prototypicality are accounted for, a deviation is evident for the correlation between usage and the attribute (and therefore in brand ranking) for attributes that are functional and/or advertised. So an analyst would expect for an attribute that has either recently or previously been advertised, there will be a high response level for that attribute.

In terms of who contributes to this, users or non-users, our results suggest that this increase comes from both usage groups. However, although a higher proportion of users associated the attribute with the advertised brand than non-users, the responses of non-users still have the greatest effect on the overall response level for that attribute. So while users of the brand are more likely to see the advertising than its non-users, in most cases non-users of the brand far outnumber its users; so an aggregate level movement in perceptual change cannot occur without reaching non-users.

This further improves our understanding of how marketing activity influences brand perceptual responses. Which is a further step to being better able to assess image tracking results, and evaluate campaigns to change market perceptions.

Limitations and future research

The key limitations of this study are that the case studies were not examined over time, so whilst the brands advertising a particular attribute turned out to be positioned on that attribute, it is unknown whether advertising shifted perceptions about the brand or if the brand held that position *before* the advertising campaign. Share of voice (or advertising spend) were also not taken into account. These avenues are important areas of future research. We also advocate further replication by other researchers to counter any researcher bias in interpreting the results. Also our approach is limited to campaigns were there is a strong message that is also replicated in the brand attributes. This approach might be less effective if a campaign is more holistic and is targeting several features of a brand at the same time. This is something to be tested in the future. Further research should also examine what happens to non-advertised attributes for the brand in question. Do response levels for non-advertised attributes decrease, as a specific attribute is emphasised/highlighted?

Appendix: Research method

We examined ten cases where a brand has advertised a specific message and brand perceptual data has been collected afterwards to evaluate the results of this advertising. The markets ranged from fast foods to financial services, and in all cases the advertised attribute was contained within a longer list of attributes. Brand perceptions were consistently measured using a 'pick any' approach. This is commonly used in market research (Brown 1985) and has been found to provide similar results as other measures of belief such as rating and ranking (Barnard and Ehrenberg). It involves respondents choosing which brands they associate with each attribute. Respondents are free to choose as many or as few brands as they like, pertaining to each of the attributes.

In each instance, respondents were asked to record the brands being evaluated from each market. Then a randomised series of attributes were read out and respondents were asked which brands, if any, they associated with each attribute. The result is then the proportion of the sample (later split between the proportion of users and non-users of each brand) that associated each brand with each attribute.

Usage was measured in various ways, according to the product type being evaluated. Respondents were asked whether they had purchased the fast food brands within the last four weeks, or over their last three purchases of the product category, whereas for other markets such as telecommunications and financial services, respondents were asked simply whether they were customers of the institution in question.

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