
Misplaced marketing

Imitation as the sincerest form of ignorance

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to note the imitation of apparently successful advertising as a replacement for thought by too many advertisers, misapplying the tactics of what seem to be past successes by other companies to current situations, sometimes not even attempting to find insight relevant to the current advertising situation. Imitation of what may be lucky accidents has become a tool for improper applications of old tactics to new problems.

Design/methodology/approach – Noting the frequent pronouncements by business journalists that many businesses do things because they know they “work,” the reality is that even among marketing professionals, conventional wisdom is often, at best, an oxymoron.

Findings – The pragmatic business need is to analyze new situations and consumer interests.

Originality/value – The paper shows that, since advertising decisions are often the recommendations from outside suppliers, business managers who pay for this advice must realize that past success by others does not mean that an imitative effort will enjoy similar success. Without data on how or why the other effort might have been successful means that imitation could be borrowing the worst parts of the earlier ideas.

Keywords Advertising, Marketing management, Politics

Paper type Viewpoint

Never confuse wisdom with luck (Ferengi Rules of Acquisition – *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*).

Once again, the US population is experiencing the ever-expanding quadrennial public displays of marketing profligacy, more commonly known as their presidential election. With campaigns now measured in months or years instead of weeks, absurdly bloated advertising budgets funded by tax-deductible citizen donations (or the candidates’ own deep pockets) leave no medium unused, nor is any message style overlooked. The journalistic herd covering the candidates moved away from covering the issues or campaign promises to follow the money, focusing on the marketing decisions of the campaign. Despite the journalists’ general lack of knowledge or expertise on marketing theory and practice, most news stories and political commentaries focus on the candidates’ marketing plans. Journalists uncritically report that the politicians do these things because the candidates know that “it works,” though in reality, neither candidates nor reporters have any idea what actually works, other than what might be common practice. For good or ill, in politics, business or as a legal witness, marketing expertise demands little more than a personal declaration of being an expert (McConnell and Dubas, 2004). And every adult in a free market society is a self-declared advertising expert after a lifetime of watching

commercials. While true marketing experts realize that business decisions are more complex than those portrayed in Scott Adams’ Dilbert comics, analysis of new problems is often overlooked when it is easier to just assume that wherever sales went up the advertisers did everything right. Or worse, they commit the logical error of division, treating every part of a successful campaign as itself capable of generating success if working alone.

The politicians trying to do anything or everything that might generate votes can be forgiven for not pausing to consider the actual value of some activities. Many commonly used political advertising tactics are, at best, a naive waste of money, though at worst they can be destructive or counter-productive. On a smaller scale, those seeking offices in state legislatures or even small-town city councils imitate what might be the worst of political advertising spotted on the national scene, hoping for similar success only to discover too late that they duplicated the national candidates’ errors.

Sometimes, success could be in spite of bad decisions. For my youthful decades, one could never lose betting against the Chicago Cubs winning any baseball championship. The columnist Mike Royko explained it with reference to what he described as the team’s model for success developed in 1945 when they last won their league championship. That year, all able-bodied men in the country were fighting in the second world war, so the Cubs put together the best athletes who were unfit for military service, in the extreme case including a pitcher who only had one hand. And as Royko put it:

They’ve tried to repeat the formula ever since.

In more pragmatic terms, Apple computer’s television commercial “1984” had a single paid run during the Super Bowl championship; many people then and now note it as one of the greatest commercials ever made. Endlessly repeated on both news and entertainment programs, it generated

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at www.emeraldinsight.com/0736-3761.htm



Journal of Consumer Marketing
25/4 (2008) 254–255
© Emerald Group Publishing Limited [ISSN 0736-3761]
[DOI 10.1108/07363760810882443]

immeasurable amounts of publicity for the company's then-new product of personal computers. Unfortunately, for many years thereafter the company's once-a-year commercial productions focused on generating the same type of publicity without success. Even their advertising agency must have realized at some point that they grabbed lightning the first time, but you cannot plan for lightning. To this day, many other companies put a special effort and sometimes a majority of their annual advertising budget into a single commercial for the Super Bowl, an event that has become hyped for the commercial possibilities as much as for the game being broadcast. Yet in the end, most of these companies waste money in a futile effort to duplicate Apple's early advertising success.

Toward the end of Ronald Reagan's second term as US President, a copywriter probably lamented his seemingly dead end assignment writing commercials to increase generic demand for California Raisins. In a stroke of either brilliance or luck, the writer hit upon an idea of having the human-faced product singing a pop song with a seemingly relevant title, "I heard it through the grapevine," and someone sagaciously hired a high quality stop-action "claymation" studio for the visuals. The commercials were a popular hit, the copywriter's salary soared, the animators parlayed the job into other creative contracts, and the advertiser, if nothing else, might have made money on the sale of raisin dolls modeled on those shown in the commercials. Yet other advertisers who did not understand the success of the raisins flooded the air with imitations. A company selling entryway security used stop motion animated singing doors – the commercials started by saying "Ladies and Gentlemen, presenting The Doors" – while using neither popular music nor the sound of the defunct rock group with that name. Until the end of the last century, advertising was awash with bad use of irrelevant pop music, anthropomorphic products *ad nauseam* (or just for nausea, with singing toilets) and claymation that lacked both the style and quality of the studio that handled the raisin account.

Imitation is not the sincerest form of flattery, instead indicating a lack of thought by the imitator.

These two historic examples are easy and basic illustrations as their long-range impact on pragmatic decision myopia became self-evident over time. But it could be just as easy to generate a long list of current commercials that are little more than repetitions of basic themes commonly seen used, abused or misunderstood by even the market leaders: sexual appeals for beer brands perpetuating the "get legless and orgasmic" school of alcohol advertising; yelling retail car sales appealing to car shoppers who want a low price and are deaf; local store owners preening for the camera so local shoppers know the shops are run by buffoons; and charisma challenged sports figures mumbling through messages for products totally unrelated to their sports expertise.

Today the companies try to generate buzz or simple brand awareness, failing to note the limit to what such brand awareness could do for sales (Rotfeld, 2008). In these days of viral marketing, companies are tripping all over themselves to generate publicity or product buzz, but Gladwell (1998) noted that while the companies are so obsessed with creating buzz or spin that they seldom consider whether spin works. They merely assume that because other companies are to manipulate their customers, their customers are manipulated. For most companies, publicity is an end unto itself. Just getting noticed is their goal. Many people repeat the phrase "any publicity is good publicity," but it simply is not true when you are trying to sell a product (Crain, 2007).

Many businesses imitate what they see as expensive efforts by successful companies instead of conducting an analysis of what worked or why the company might have been a success. It is probably easy for an advertising executive to sell a non-idea by pointing to similar successes by other companies while failing to note that, absent an analysis of consumer decision making, the earlier success could have been just luck, a concatenation of fortunate events. It is easy to simply credit the small part of marketing tactics for the larger sales success, since generating true knowledge requires work while using expertise by the overall example of others is instantaneous.

A lot of ineffective advertising wastes money because it is created with goal of imitating what other businesses are doing instead of first asking how or why consumers might buy a product. Companies are not doing these things because they know they work. At best, they hope that it might work, or they do it because everyone else is doing it. Too often, no one asks how or if the marketing effort could help generate sales, or if others that got sales from similar efforts might have been just lucky.

Wisdom and insight are more reliable than luck.

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