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On the Incalculable Benefit of Not Going Backwards



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et's invent a market: an established, low-tech, low-cost, repeat-purchase market. Let's call it the greeby market.

Greebies are used in over 80% of households and are bought, on average, every three weeks. There are five competing national greeby brands, with market shares ranging from 36% to 9%. Most big retailers have their own-brand greebies. By volume, the total greeby market has been almost static for the last 10 years.

Every year, the five companies making greebies draw up their marketing plans and hold sales conferences. Every one of those companies allocates significant marketing funds and sets its annual marketing objectives. And every one of those objectives is set in terms of some measurable market gain: more sales, more share or more both. In 2012, most of their conferences will be called *Going for Gold!*

Yet, if the last 10 years are anything to go by, some of those companies are going to be disappointed. Certainly, they can't all come first; they can't all do better than each other. There's not enough room on that centre podium for all five contestants.

When concerned observers – both inside and outside marketing companies – think about the purpose and value of marketing expenditures, it is this apparent futility that strikes them most. All that effort, all that time, all that money: but to what end?



In 1975, at a market research conference, Stephen King delivered a paper called *Practical Progress from a Theory of Advertisements** and in it he challenged the common assumption that all advertising worked in a similar way. For example: one typical and much-followed model was called AIDA and it held that all advertising, irrespective of purpose, must begin by attracting Attention before arousing Interest which in turn creates the Desire that finally leads to Action. It was Stephen King's strong belief that no one model made universal sense and that different advertising campaigns worked in markedly different ways.

So he concentrated his attention not on *advertising* generally – which is no more than an available channel of communication – but on the many different roles that *advertisements* can play. And he invented a simple way of distinguishing between them that he called a Scale of Immediacy.

At the very top of this scale, the clear purpose of any advertisement is to achieve immediate action. It's long been called direct response. It sets out to get people to pick up a phone, to write out a cheque, to click on 'confirm': it's about as immediate as it gets. No intervening stage or process is required: ad leads directly to action. Transparently easy to understand and marvellously easy to evaluate, this most immediate function of advertising is seldom contentious.

But as the Scale of Immediacy progresses, the expectation of immediate action becomes more and more remote: from 'Seek information', through 'Modify Attitudes' until we reach the least immediate of them all which King calls 'Reinforce Attitudes.' And it's this last role for advertising that has always generated more than its fair share of academic squabbling, social unease, creative posturing and financial directors' bewilderment. It also possesses a couple of characteristics that make it unlike any other and to which we shall return.

Most commonly employed by brand leaders in repeat purchase categories, the purpose of advertising campaigns designed to Reinforce Attitudes is primarily one of brand protection.

To quote King: “This is one of the most common and fundamental roles for advertising; yet because it is mainly defensive and is dealing with the stability and intensity of attitude, it is always going to be very hard to measure.” It is indeed infuriatingly hard to measure; it makes the indisputable certainty of an online sale confirmed or a cheque received seem wonderfully concrete. As Henry Higgins (or indeed Lord Leverhulme) might have said: “Why can’t all advertising be like that?”

Advertising designed mainly to confirm existing users in the wisdom of their existing choice suffers from another huge disadvantage. As an objective, it doesn’t sound very manly.

Let us say you are the marketing director of the brand of greebies that already enjoys a 36% share. Your first responsibility to your board will be to continue to reinvigorate that brand’s salience – its fame, its relevance, its wantability – and thus protect its margins. In other words, you will want your advertising to be at least as positive an influence on profit as on sales volume. You will also, with such a healthy brand share, be keen to repel raiders; to fight off challenger brands and deter any ambitious newcomer from invading your territory.

These are all extremely respectable – indeed, commercially essential – objectives. If your R&D department continues to ensure that your particular greeby’s functional performance continues to be competitive, then the right advertising backed by the right amount of money will certainly help you achieve them. The trouble is, such wholly admirable objectives may not go down a storm at your national sales conference. Marketing’s favourite word is aggressive. All objectives have to be pursued aggressively. Setting out to reinforce existing attitudes (with absolutely no mention of any incremental behaviour) lacks a bit of bite.

“By the end of this year, guys and girls, thanks to your own quite extraordinary efforts and after the expenditure of a record-breaking marketing budget, I am utterly confident that we shall be able to report that we haven’t gone backwards.”

All around you, your competitors are inspiring their workers into Going for Gold; and you’re attempting to whip your own team into a frenzy of enthusiasm for going nowhere. No wonder one of the most valuable roles for advertising goes relatively unhonoured.



But, however unhonoured, this role for advertising offers creative challenges, creative opportunities and creative rewards unlike any other: and they stem from its very nature. Much advertising (though not as much as some have claimed) very properly sets out to convert: from non-user to user or from occasional user to regular user. And advertisements aiming for a conversion effect naturally tend towards the rational; competitive verbal claims often play a major part.

When setting out to reinforce existing attitudes, however – when the aim is to raise a brand’s profile, differentiate through style rather than function and inspire irrational affection in the hearts of millions – then emotional factors should always be predominant. (Seventy years ago James Webb Young** called this function “adding a value not in the product.”) When putting a definitive rational argument for a brand, the conventional, paid-for advertisement faces little competition from other forms of marketing communication. But when the goal is the bestowing of an almost indefinable personality onto an inanimate object, then today’s marketing director has a vast and colourful box of toys from which to choose.

Attitudes are affected more by simple association than by argument. Brand values are absorbed unconsciously rather than noted and remembered. It's not so much persuasion as anthropomorphism. Great packaging, almost certainly under-rated as a contributor to brand equity, has always worked this way.

Today, and particularly for this specific marketing need, marketing companies and their agencies are faced with a range of choices both exhilarating and deeply daunting.

The traditional, paid-for advertising campaign is probably still the standard-bearer; but it needs an inspired creative approach. Moreover, its commercial logic may not be immediately apparent and almost by definition it will be formidably difficult to pretest and prejustify.

But sponsorship – the right sponsorship – can do this job as well; and so can branded content; and so can product placement; and so can stunts and events; and so can thoughtfully designed PR; and so can a precisely tailored presence on social media. (As always, a brand's choice of medium will itself say something important about that brand's personality and its attitude to life.)

Reinforcing and reinvigorating attitudes, over a great many years, may provide a marketing company's most profitable return on its communications investment; but that return may never be totally measurable. And because of this harsh fact – and because it's not overtly aggressive, because it deals more with the emotions than with the reason, and because much of it is designed to protect rather than conquer – it is this category of brand communication that provides the fiercest test of marketing talent. In no other aspect of marketing is personal judgement both so critical and at the same time so exposed. ☀

Acknowledgments

- * *Practical Progress from a Theory of Advertisements*, Market Research Society Conference, 1975. The resulting paper can be found in full, with an introduction by Simon Clemmow, in *A Master Class in Brand Planning: The Timeless Works of Stephen King*, edited by Judie Lannon and Merry Baskin, John Wiley, 2007.
- ** *How to Become an Advertising Man*, James Webb Young, 1963.

Jeremy Bullmore

Jeremy Bullmore was born in 1929. His first job, in 1954, was as a trainee copywriter with J. Walter Thompson in London, where he stayed until retirement in 1987. He became successively writer/producer, creative group head and head of television; from 1964 to 1975, head of the creative department; from 1976 to 1987, chairman. From 1981 to 1987 he was a member of the JWT worldwide board and chairman of the Advertising Association.

From 1988 to 2001 he was non-executive director of the Guardian Media Group and, from 1988 to 2004, a non-executive director of WPP. He is past president of Nabs and past president of the Market Research Society. He is currently a member of the WPP Advisory Board and a columnist for *Campaign*, *Management Today*, *Market Leader* and *The Guardian*. He was awarded a CBE in 1985 and the Advertising Association's Mackintosh Medal in 2011.

His publications include: *Another Bad Day at the Office?*, Penguin, 2001; *Behind the Scenes in Advertising Mark III (More Bull More)*, WARC, 2003; *Ask Jeremy*, Haymarket, 2004; *Apples, Insights & Mad Inventors*, Wiley, 2006.

He has three grown-up children and lives with his wife Pamela in London and Wiltshire.

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