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# **It makes me laugh but was it good for you?**

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Take a fresh look at humour in advertising and examine  
its gender specification*

THE USE of humour is more widespread in British advertising than it is in most other countries. Indeed, it has been calculated that at least one-third of uk advertising contains an element of humour. One of the reasons for this is the inherent Anglo-Saxon trait of self-deprecation, typified by comedienne like Jo Brand. The British, generally, have a natural inclination to mock themselves, because they do not want to be accused of 'taking themselves too seriously'. This is a theme to which we shall return.

The specific purposes of this article are to explore the way humour works within advertising, to develop diagnostic models for analysing the effective use of humour, to investigate the changing response to humour and assess whether humour works differently according to gender.

Humour can be one of the most effective ways to get consumers to pay attention to advertising in the first place and then to feel favourably disposed to the brand that has, in effect, sponsored the entertainment. In light-hearted magazine surveys, 'a

good sense of humour' resurfaces constantly as the most desirable attribute men and women seek in each other. This is always closely followed by seeking 'a good body' and 'an inheritance'.

Humour plays a vital role in life and, if we believe the medical research, a good belly-aching laugh can help to ward off illness. But how does humour work in the context of advertising? Upward of one hundred research studies have been conducted in the last few decades on both sides of the Atlantic, examining a range of topics relating to the use and effect of humour in advertising.

### **Four key findings**

- Humour attracts attention. Various studies comparing humorous and non-humorous ads have found that the humorous ads out-performed the non-humorous ads on various attention measures. Furthermore, academic research reinforces the belief that humour that is well integrated with the product or the message is much more likely to lodge in the mind of the audience.
- Humour can enhance communication, but there is an issue of credibility. It appears that some products are more readily accepted as suitable for a light-hearted approach and, not surprisingly, humour is less often used and is deemed less appropriate for high involvement or thinking products, such as cars and white goods, than low involvement or feeling products, such as beer. UK advertisers are increasingly challenging this pre-conception.
- Humour enhances liking. Research has shown very clearly that a positive response to humour increases both the liking of the ad and also the brand, resulting in more effective advertising.

- 1 Humour has different effects upon different audiences. What is funny to one person may not be funny to another. When it comes to looking at the response of different nationalities to humour it can be argued that their response is explained by the cultural context of those countries.

The use of humour as a brand or campaign tool is often effective, and advertising agencies know this already. It is important to find out whether the effect of humour on advertising is simply an issue of how funny the 'joke' is or if gender differences play an equally important part.

It is worth considering the broader perspective - namely how the sexes are perceived by themselves and by one another.

### **Changing roles**

Within a contemporary framework, one can think back to the late 1950s and early 1960s when there were clearly defined sexual typologies and role models. Men were assertive and action-orientated, something akin to Action Man, whereas a feminine role model was based on passivity and subservience.

These attitudes were widely held by the majority of the population because of what can be described as a mono-culture, fuelled by strictly limited communication mechanisms (for example, one tv channel). Humour in 'light entertainment' was usually derived from the rigid class system that was still in evidence and the dominant ideologies of working men and stay-at-home women. Advertising was akin to public service information and humour was rarely used.

Today we operate in the highly media-literate, post-modern world of pluralism. There is not one widely accepted set of beliefs. It is a time of incessant choosing. It is an era when no orthodoxy can be adopted without self-consciousness and irony because all traditions seem to have some validity.

The 1980s and the 1990s have witnessed an evolution in women's roles and a revolution in what might be referred to as feminism - but feminists are no longer the strident man-hating stereotype of before. While there are role models for specific age groups, there are not any universally accepted male or female role models, although rock stars and footballers are reasonably high on the agenda.

### **The role of humour**

From our experience of researching the use of humour across a number of campaigns, we believe that its function can be summarised by a simple model (Exhibit 1).

At its most basic level humour is used to aid recall and enhance the impact of a particular approach. Consumers easily understand this rationale and the use of humour as the basis of a consumer-brand dialogue is one of the reasons why advertising is a general topic for discussion in the UK.

At a secondary level, humour is used to signify to the target audience that the advertiser understands them and their particular set of values. The most effective style of humour can vary across lifestage, lifestyle, gender and, furthermore, is one of the most obvious ways of signalling the desired targeting to modern, media-literate consumers.

On the third level, humour can be used to display to the target audience that the advertiser has a relevance to their world. This could be referred to as being in touch with the Zeitgeist. In the context of today's highly media-literate, postmodern viewer, this requirement is particularly important if a brand is to be regarded as worthy of attention for any individual consumer.

Finally, club membership is a consequence of the humour operating successfully through these three levels. For instance, in group discussions one can observe respondents bonding with one another because of common advertising allegiances and distancing themselves from others who fall into different camps.

To be truly successful, advertising has to operate on all three levels rather than only one or two, although some advertisers attempt to circumvent the three levels and operate primarily at the desirability or club level by using characters with acknowledged popularity outside of the advertising, such as the uk tv comedy duo Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer.

The original 'Orange Man' advertising for Tango is an old but perfect example of how humour operates through the model. The bizarre orange man, the shock of him slapping people and the football-style commentary all create impact. The advertising provokes emotional congruence via its teenage-style humour and the validity of the 'orange taste hit' message. Its cultural relevance was its realistic portrayal of British street life that was an antidote to the generic American imagery of the time. As a consequence there is a desire to join the Tango 'club'.

In contrast, the PG Tips' chimps campaign is an example of the effectiveness of humour diminishing over time; this is primarily because the cultural relevance has been eroded for people under 40.

Leapfrog has conducted a range of research across the last two years, which has covered various ages, lifestages and market categories and those findings are outlined here. Additionally, we conducted a small project to build on our general hypotheses and give us the opportunity to talk about the findings. As a way of springboarding ideas between our respondents we used a range of commercials that were shown in the latter half of 1998.

### **It's a gender thing ...**

At a macro level there is a difference between the sense of humour of men and women. Men derive much of their enjoyment from humour that is at the expense of someone, irrespective of whether they have sympathy for the butt of the joke or not. Their humour is hard edged and verges on the brutal. Workplace humour in particular is all about 'taking the piss'. Archetypal advertising that taps into this vein is the 'blokeish' humour of the beer market such as the recent Foster's campaign: 'He who drinks Australian - thinks Australian'. This behaviour has its roots in the need for men to display masculine traits of assertion, lack of emotional vulnerability and self-containment.

Another characteristic of male humour, especially among young men, is a sense of the ridiculous or surreal, which is manifested in their favourite tv programmes such as Eurotrash and South Park. This is not something that has been widely used in uk tv advertising, because it takes time to set up the frameworks and can not easily be condensed into a 30 or 40-second commercial.

In contrast, women have a gentler sense of humour and derive most enjoyment from situations or characters with which they can empathise or identify (the humour of last year's Cold Feet TV series is a good example of this). This stems from the historical female psyche that is rooted in the need to nurture, be maternal, protect the weak and be protected by the strong.

In general, women feel uncomfortable with humour that is at the expense of someone, even if they do not sympathise with that character. Brands using humour out of keeping with this perspective run the risk of alienating such consumers.

Nevertheless, some young women, who can be summarised under the media tag of 'ladettes', do have a sense of humour more in line with that of men. In particular, these women like humour that is at the expense of men, but it is not the gentle humour of laughing at incompetent men, it is women being in control and puncturing male egos. One can hypothesise that this is because they have grown up in a world where they have a more equal status with men and are confident of their ability to give and take humorous barbs, especially in the workplace. Brands that recognise this outlook are more favourably regarded by the young cognoscenti than by others with a more traditional outlook.

Men can become obsessive in their repetition of catchphrases from tv programmes or advertising campaigns. This behaviour is much less evident among women and can perhaps be explained by the fact that male humour tends to be destructive, so a sharing of catchphrases among friends is one way to signal to one another that they are part of a similar 'school of appreciation'.

These differences are borne out in reactions to the long-established Boddington's campaign that is well liked by both men and women. The advertising is multi-layered in spoofing other brands' advertising, for example Pirelli and Calvin Klein, contradicting stereotypical gender roles and being based on a clear product truth (in this case, 'Cream of Manchester').

Young women regard the Melanie Sykes character as a role model for them, as she is both confident and attractive and much of her humour is at the expense of men. These women might not drink the beer but they appreciate the style of advertising.

This has a beneficial effect on the male Boddington's drinkers that they might mix with.

Older women would typically reject this kind of advertising because the subject matter is obviously 'not for them', and tend to shy away from the uncouth behaviour of the female character. Referring to our model again demonstrates that, while the ad may have attracted their attention, it did not engender emotional congruence; and although it might have struck a chord of cultural relevance it was at an experiential distance from the older consumer. The net effect is a desire not to join the club.

Batchelors Supernoodles' advertising is surprising in its ability to transcend all sub-categories. While its humour is typically masculine and hard edged, the writing, the casting and the acting enable older women to identify with the scenario as realistically exaggerated but nevertheless rooted in real behaviour, and therefore it satisfies the level of cultural relevance. This allows older women to enjoy the humour in this context, but not necessarily to feel part of the brand club.

In overall terms, there are variations by age in response to different types of humour. If you really wish to use humour to target men and women alike, across a broad age range, then it need not be of a bland, lowest-common-denominator nature. There is still the opportunity for 'clever' advertising, as the Budweiser 'frogs' execution demonstrates. Gentle humour, often based on observation, can be the most effective in this situation.

## **Conclusion: how humour helps**

Humour has a unique role to play in advertising:

- it has the power to attract attention

- it allows us to say things that would be difficult to say seriously
- it has the power to create a bond with the consumer through shared perception and understanding
- it creates pleasure that supports a desire to belong to the 'club'.

Understanding your target audience is a truism for all strands of advertising, but if one is researching advertising that uses a particular form of humour, then it is worth considering the use of tv programme viewing as a recruitment criterion. We have used this on a number of occasions and it is a useful way of excluding those for whom a certain form of humour is obviously going to be alien.

It is important to remember that there are still many women over 35 who have what can be thought of as a traditional and conservative appreciation of humour. They shy away from anything that they consider to be 'too dark'.

On the other hand, the humour of men and self-confident young women is similar. Without wanting to delve too far into the history of feminism and developments in the last ten years, it appears that if women are confident enough about themselves, then they can appreciate the dark, subversive, hardedged advertising that men are both writing and laughing at today.

## Endnotes

This is a version of a paper delivered at the MRS conference, Brighton, in March.

### EXHIBIT 1: HUMOUR MODEL

