

*This download
comes to you from*

www.commissionedwriting.com



The IdeaMines Website



Recognizing the Power of Hidden Memories

Annabel Cameron

MBS Media discusses non-conscious memories of ads that may affect consumer purchase behaviour

For decades, researchers have been investigating people's memories of ads. It is presumed that if a person can recall or recognize an ad, it has successfully cut through the wall of advertising noise and is effective. Although a memory of an ad does not necessarily result in a purchase, several studies have identified a strong relationship between memory of ads and purchasing behaviour. Nigel Hollis found that ads that are more effective at generating awareness are also more sales effective¹. At face value it seems simple – recall or recognition of ads influences sales.

However, over the years, psychologists have made great advances in the understanding of memory. One exciting discovery is that people have non-conscious or hidden memories that they are unable to recall or recognize. Perfect and Aske², for example, illustrate that people rate ads they have previously seen as more memorable and distinctive despite being unable to recall or recognize them.

Academic research has indicated that these 'hidden' memories significantly influence our thoughts, attitudes and behaviour. By implication, non-conscious memories of advertising have a significant impact on our purchasing behaviour. The question we should be asking is: how can we access them? In order to look at this, we need to look at what memory is.

WHAT ARE MEMORIES OF ADS?

There is a common view that memory is a snapshot of the past. However, memories are not simply bits of data that we store and retrieve; they are dynamic as opposed to static and contain meaning, sense and emotion. Furthermore, they are constructed by influences operating in the past and present. When people are asked to recall an ad, they are not describing an internal video replay. They are describing a mental construction shaped by past and present experiences. If the researcher is unable to tap into this constructed memory of an ad, it can be falsely assumed that the person has no memory for it, thereby under-estimating the impact of advertising.

There is also a general view that memories are formed, consolidated and retrieved in the same way. Contrary to this, psychological and neurological research has illustrated that there are several types of memory. The ability to hold information in the short term, acquire skills, learn habits, recognise everyday objects, recall specific events and recollect conceptual information relies on different types of memory and, subsequently, different systems and processes in the brain.

By implication, ads are remembered in different ways. Those that require us to engage in a problem-solving task (for example, the Army Recruitment campaign), will be remembered differently from those that are visually engaging (Orange) or have a direct-response function (Norwich Union Direct). These ads rely on different memory types. This has important implications for awareness tracking studies, since how we remember ads will have an influence on whether we can consciously recall them or whether they are non-conscious or hidden.

HOW DO WE REMEMBER ADS?

The encoding process

The way in which we transform things that we see, hear, touch and think into a memory is referred to by psychologists as the encoding process. When we encode something superficially we do not relate the incoming information to meaningful knowledge. Conversely, when we ‘deeply’ encode something, we associate information with meaningful knowledge that already exists in memory. If I wanted you to engage in a superficial encoding task for a lager ad, I could ask you, ‘how many people can you see in this ad?’ This would be a visual task that would not require you to think about the ad or make a judgment about the product. However, if I wanted you to engage in a deep encoding task, I could ask you, ‘is it for a type of lager?’ You could not reply without thinking of the meaning of the ad.

The way in which we encode information has a significant influence on our ability to recall or recognize something. When we superficially encode information, we form a weak memory. Conversely, when we deeply encode something, we form a strong memory. However, this is only apparent when the information can be integrated with pre-existing knowledge. If I presented you with a lager ad and asked you ‘is it for a type of nail varnish?’, evidence suggests that you would later demonstrate a poor memory for the ad: it is not a meaningful question.

These findings imply that ads requiring people to think actively about the product are more likely to be recalled or recognized and hence have higher scores in awareness tracking studies. Ads that do not require people to do this, will result in poor recall or recognition. Additionally recall may not improve with subsequent exposures of the ad.

Daniel Schacter, in his book *Searching for Memory*³ gives an example to support the above argument. He cites experiments illustrating that people are surprisingly bad at remembering what is on the back and the front of a one penny piece, despite handling and seeing the coins every day. This is probably because people encode the features of a coin superficially. It seems plausible, then, that increased exposure to an ad will sometimes result in little or no improvement in recall. These academic studies can provide an interesting insight into the effective frequency debate. Increased exposure of an ad may not necessarily result in increased awareness.

It is logical that we are encoding advertising superficially most of the time. When we are sitting in front of the television we are not actively trying to remember the ads. Consequently we may fail to recall or recognize ads that we have been exposed to. This does not necessarily mean that we have no memory for them. Evidence has indicated that 'hidden' memories can be recollected more accurately than consciously recalled memories when the appropriate retrieval cues are available.

This type of research has huge implications for advertising. In a telephone or face-to-face interview you may not be able consciously to remember an ad, but while walking around the supermarket you might see, hear, or think something that triggers a conscious memory of it. It could also trigger a non-conscious memory (a memory that you cannot recall or recognize), which influences your judgments and behaviour. It is evident that these 'hidden' memories are not accounted for in awareness tracking studies.

When do we consolidate memories for ads?

When we learn something for the first time we may forget it in a day. However, when we learn it for a second time, we may forget it in a week, and so on. Psychologists call this process consolidation. The nature of this process is reflected in the way we devise effective media planning strategies. With the launch of a new brand there tends to be frequent exposure (budget allowing). As people gain

knowledge of the brand, the advertising can become less frequent; memory for the ad has been consolidated.

Consolidation and forgetting are inextricably linked. It is therefore important to look at the process of forgetting. There are some interesting theories concerning why we forget. These indicate that recall and recognition tests may be under-estimating advertising effectiveness. One school of thought proposes that experiences can be permanently lost from memory. The second proposes that we do not forget memories and that everything is permanently stored. Consequently, things that we cannot remember could in fact be recovered, with the appropriate retrieval cues. If we go along with the notion that we do not forget anything, every commercial that we have ever seen, heard or read is stored somewhere in the hundred billion neurons between our ears. Providing cues, or reinstating the physical or mental context that prevailed during the experience of the ad, could access these memories. Even if we take the other view that certain memories are lost, it is highly likely that we are over-estimating how much we forget.

Time and time again, researchers have indicated that the appropriate triggers or cues can lead to the recall of seemingly lost information. This again illustrates that awareness tracking studies are suppressing our estimates of advertising effectiveness and its subsequent influence on purchasing decisions.

HOW DO WE RETRIEVE MEMORIES

What is the sales impact?

As previously suggested, the way in which we retrieve memories is linked to the way in which we encode them. In short, if we think about the ad in great depth, and it is meaningful, we are likely to have good recall and recognition of it.

Conversely, if we paid little attention to the ad, we are unlikely to have a good recollection of it. Nevertheless, with the appropriate cues, it is sometimes possible

to elicit information thought to have been forgotten. This research gives important insight into advertising awareness studies, since it indicates that measures of recall and recognition can under-estimate people's memory of ads and subsequently their influence on purchasing decisions.

Additionally, awareness tracking studies require people deliberately to search for memories. Psychologists refer to this as effortful or strategic retrieval. However, another type of retrieval process has been identified: associative retrieval. This occurs when a cue automatically triggers a memory. It can be argued that when we are shopping, we do not deliberately try to remember ads. It seems more plausible that cues in the environment, or our own thoughts, are triggering conscious (or non-conscious) memories of advertising. These memories may be influencing our purchasing decisions. It therefore seems apparent that we should be investigating how cues in the environment might improve the effectiveness of our advertising.

Food for thought

Awareness tracking studies are a useful tool for looking at 'top of mind' awareness. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that these studies are merely tapping into the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the surface, there is a whole host of 'hidden' and non-conscious memories significantly influencing our purchasing decisions or behaviour. General recall or recognition questions will not access these memories. If tracking studies are to be the media currency of the future, these limitations should be recognized.

It is apparent that we need a change of direction. Recall and recognition are arbitrary measures of advertising effectiveness; evidence suggests that weakly remembered ads (not accounted for by awareness tracking studies) can be retrieved with the appropriate cues and can have a significant impact on our judgments and behaviour. The research therefore indicates that the issue is not how well people remember advertising, but how we can access these memories in the marketplace. We need to understand how retrieval cues in the environment can reactivate memories for ads. We need to understand which triggers are effective. We need to

look at how different cues may work for different ads, target audiences, product categories, and so on. Ultimately we need to be providing cues at the point of sale that reinstate the physical or mental context that prevailed during the experience of the ad. For example, how about placing Penguin Bars next to John Smith's Bitter?

What does this mean for media planning? First, it indicates that there is not a simplistic relationship between advertising exposure and explicit memory. High exposure may not result in high recall or recognition scores – for example, when ads have been superficially encoded. However, these ads may be having a pervasive influence on our purchasing behaviour. Second, the research implies that the effectiveness of advertising may vary not by medium, but by the effectiveness of cues at the point of purchase or within the service. These cues could trigger brand values or creative aspects of the ad, but also the media context. It seems apparent that we should be moving beyond the search for the magic number of exposures to generate awareness. Perhaps instead we should be focusing our attention on generating cues at the point of sale, or within the service, to maximize the effectiveness of our media planning.

ENDNOTES

1. N Hollis: 'The Link between TV Ad Awareness and Sales. New Evidence from Sales Response Modelling', *Journal of the Market Research Society*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 1994).
2. TJPerfect & C Askew: 'Print Ads: Not Remembered but Memorable', *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 8, 1994.
3. D LSchacter: *Searching for Memory: The Brand, the Mind, and the Past*, HarperCollins, 1996.