
Differences Between American and British Television Advertising: Explanations and Implications

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Despite cultural similarities between the United States and the United Kingdom, there are substantial differences between American and British television advertising. British commercials tend to contain less information, employ a soft sell rather than a hard sell approach, and attempt to entertain the viewer. British viewers' opinions of advertising are also more favorable than those of American viewers. It is important that scholars and practitioners concerned with these two markets and with international advertising generally be aware of these differences and understand why they have evolved. Possible explanations are evaluated and implications of these findings discussed, including areas for future research.

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Introduction

Americans watching British television commercials must be aware that the British approach to television advertising is different from that generally found in the United States. Recent research has drawn attention specifically to differences in the amount of information carried by commercials in the two countries, in the creative approaches employed, particularly in terms of hard or soft sell, and the use of humor (Weinberger and Spotts 1989a, 1989b). These findings are consistent with those of surveys of consumer opinions about television advertising (Winski 1990; Advertising Association 1988, 1984; Ogilvy and Mather 1986; Lannon and Cooper 1983).

These differences have not always existed. When television advertising was first permitted in Britain in 1956, many British agencies hired people with American experience. At this period, too, a number of American agencies were opening offices in London to service the needs of important clients both in Britain and in the rapidly recovering European market. Britain was also influenced by American philosophies and concepts. Rosser Reeves' *Reality in Advertising*, the formal enunciation of the USP, was published in 1960, and his agency, Ted Bates, was operating in London, having bought a stake in a local shop. Early British television advertising thus tended to be dominated by commercials made in the American style, and supported by American research methodologies imported to service the needs of major corporations such as Procter & Gamble, Colgate, and General Foods (Lannon 1986).

The question then arises as to how the differences in the character of the two countries' television advertising should have arisen. The following sections identify the differences to be considered, propose a conceptual framework for evaluating them, and discuss the implications of the findings for scholars and practitioners.

An Examination of the Differences

Differences in the two countries' television advertising can be evaluated in terms both of the content of the commercials and of the creative treatments employed. To ascertain whether and to what extent such differences exist, evidence is considered from three sources: (1) Research in which samples of commercials from the two countries were subjected to objective scrutiny and comparison. (2) Consumer opinion surveys which reflect the ways consum-

Table 1
The Information Content of U.S. and U.K.
Advertising Compared by Matrix Category

	1+ Cues (%)		Mean No. of Cues	
	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>U.K.</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>U.K.</u>
High involvement/think	75	61	1.34	1.14
High involvement/feel	50	50	.84	.65
Low involvement/think	63	55	.90	.73
Low involvement/feel	52	37	.79	.44

Sources: Weinberger and Spotts (1989a).

ers in the two countries regard the advertising to which they are exposed. This represents inferential evidence on the general character of television commercials. (3) The views of prominent practitioners about the nature of advertising in their countries, sometimes expressed in comparative terms.

Differences in Content

Weinberger and Spotts (1989a) examined the information content of commercials drawn from each of the two countries. They conducted an analysis using the FCB matrix (Vaughn 1986; 1980) in which advertisements were grouped into four cells along the two dimensions of thinking/feeling and level of involvement. As may be seen from Table 1, there were considerable differences between the cells. As might be expected, the "thinking" cells displayed higher levels of informativeness than the others. However, the mean number of informational cues was significantly higher for the U.S. sample in all four cells. Weinberger and Spotts' work on American commercials updated an analysis by Resnik and Stern (1977) which concluded that the information content of American television advertising was inadequate.

Differences in Creative Approach

Creative differences between British and American advertising have been the subject of considerable discussion by prominent figures within the industry, among them top creative directors Arlett (1988) and

Bernstein (1986), award-winning TV producer Garrett (1986), and researchers Lannon and Cooper (1983). They are agreed that the British style of television advertising is quite different from that found in the United States, particularly in terms of the softer sell that characterizes British commercials. Their comments are discussed further in subsequent sections. Weinberger and Spotts (1989a) conclude that the lower information content of British commercials tends to support the view that American advertising is more hard sell. In an investigation of humor in commercials, Weinberger and Spotts (1989b) report a significant difference between the two countries, with 35.5 percent of British commercials being perceived by the study's judges as having humorous intent, compared with 24.4 percent of American commercials. While the high involvement/thinking cell showed equivalent levels of humor, British commercials in the other three cells employed humor to a significantly greater extent. In a related survey of American and British advertising executives, the authors report the British sample as perceiving a much wider acceptance of the range of objectives that humor can achieve, the media in which it can be used, and the markets to which it is suited. These views presumably influence the workplace decisions made by British executives.

Differences in Consumer Opinions

Consumer opinion research is generally consistent with the views of practitioners and with Weinberger and Spotts' findings. Ogilvy and Mather (1987) found

Table 2
Consumer Opinions of British and American
Television Advertising

<u>Television Advertising is:</u>	UK%	US%
	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Agree</u>
Informative	19	29
Entertaining	51	29
Boring	13	22
Irritating	17	20

Source: Ogilvy and Mather (1987).

a higher proportion of British consumers feeling they were being entertained and more American consumers feeling they were being informed.

The implication here is that a softer sell makes television advertising more acceptable to the viewer, and reduces the proportion who are bored and irritated by it. It is true that British commercials are seen as less informative, but this does not seem to be a source of boredom or irritation, as might be expected. On the contrary, significantly more respondents are bored with American commercials where the information content is higher.

Surveys commissioned in Britain by the Advertising Association show British television advertising to be generally well received by consumers. The results for 1984 and 1988, shown in Table 3, also tend to support the view that the television consumer is more interested in entertainment than in learning about new brands (Driver and Foxall 1986; Krugman 1965).

Further confirmation of the general approval of British television viewers comes from Lannon and Cooper (1983) who report that, when asked to compare present day advertising with that of the past (i.e. produced in the American style), British consumers typically respond that today's is "more entertaining, more cleverly devised, more original, less patronizing, more imaginative."

These findings contrast strongly with those of the DDB Needham Worldwide Annual Lifestyle Study in the United States. Almost 60 percent of the 4,000 adults interviewed for the study in 1989 agreed with the statement: "Advertising insults my intelligence" (Winski 1990).

Table 3
Consumer Opinions of British Commercials

<u>TV Commercials</u>	1984	1988
	<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>
Like	14	11
Quite like	39	41
Do not bother/don't know	33	33
Do not really like	8	9
Dislike	6	5

Source: Advertising Association (1988).

An Evaluation of Possible Explanations

Methodology and Conceptual Framework

A literature search was used to identify factors that might explain differences between countries in terms of their advertising. The U.S. and U.K. approaches were then placed in that framework. The historical evolution of British commercial television was also studied to isolate factors which may have caused it to deviate from the American pattern.

The factors identified were assembled into three groups:

- (1) The socio-cultural contexts of the two countries.
- (2) The advertising industry environments of the two countries.
- (3) Differences in advertising philosophy and execution between the two countries.

The relationship between these groups is conceptualized in Figure 1. Each factor within the groups was then examined individually to establish its validity and check it against other available evidence. Lastly, the relevant factors were combined to create a unified account.

The Socio-Cultural Contexts

There are compelling arguments for emphasizing the role of socio-cultural factors in determining the

Table 4
Factors Responsible for Differences in American and
British Television Advertising
Summary of Findings

<u>Factors</u>	<u>U.S. Effect</u>	<u>U.K. Effect</u>
<u>Socio-Cultural Contexts</u>		
Historical Evolution	Advertising and television evolved together	Advertising not permitted until 20 years after introduction of television
Effects of Culture	Hard sell	Soft sell, idiosyncratic
Emphasis on Entertainment	Generally less	Generally more
Influence of Opinion Leaders	—	Historical dislike of advertising Advertisers made more sensitive to criticism
<u>Advertising Industry Environments</u>		
Substantiation Requirements	Rigorous	Rigorous
Local/National Advertising	Higher Proportion of local	Higher proportion of national
Clutter	Viewer may be exposed to more than 27% non-program material	Limit of average of 6 minutes advertising/hour Restrictions on positioning of commercials in programs
<u>Philosophy and Execution</u>		
Management Views and Philosophies	Possibly greater acceptance of hierarchies-of-effects	Apparent rejection of hierarchies-of-effects
Pretesting	Largely quantitative Tends to be based on hierarchies-of-effects proposition	Largely qualitative Tends to be based on need to understand creative proposition
Commercial Length	Tends to be short	Tends to be longer

form and content of a society's advertising. Consumer goods communicate cultural meaning (Douglas and Isherwood 1978). This meaning, which is derived from a culturally-constituted world, is then transferred from the product to the consumer by means of advertising. An individual advertisement thus brings together the consumer and the culturally constituted world within a single framework (McCracken 1986).

Since there are differences between the American and British cultures, it should be expected that these differences would be reflected in the two countries' advertising. Such influences, however, are by no means direct and straightforward. Schudson (1984) believes that advertising presents an idealized picture of life in a particular society. Lears (1985) agrees that advertising does not necessarily constitute a direct expression of mainstream values. While accepting that advertisements aim to sell goods by surrounding them with cultural meaning, he argues that they represent not how a particular audience feels or thinks but what ad-makers believe will "resonate with a particular audience" (Lears 1985, p. 465). This view seems consistent with the industry standpoint expressed by Arlett (1988).

The Effects of Culture in the U.K.

As noted earlier, British television advertising originally drew heavily on the American experience. The tradition of American television, however, was of live commercials, sponsored programs, and film spot commercials that ran 60 seconds compared with 7 to 30 seconds in Britain. Many commercials screened at this time also proved unsuited to British tastes, having been produced in a different cultural idiom. One prominent London agency head characterized them as featuring "loud-mouthed salesmen who confused shouting with communicating and bullying with persuading" (Bernstein 1986, p.257).

Accordingly, during the 1960s and 1970s, a distinctively British style of television advertising evolved. As Lannon and Cooper (1983) point out, it is a style that draws on a shared cultural experience, particularly in the case of successful campaigns run by brand leaders. British advertising makes frequent use of features inherent in British culture, such as the persistence of class divisions and affection for eccentricity, and often employs understated humor and the soft sell approach described by Weinberger and Spotts (1989a, 1989b). According to Lannon and Cooper (1983), British commercials also tend to rely more heavily on visual cues. In addition, the grammar of

television production is different. Drama-type commercials as described by Wells (1988) invite viewer participation by not spelling out every detail.

Arlett (1988), a respected agency creative head and Cannes Festival judge, points out that the British advertising most admired abroad gains its edge from the strong cultural relationship it establishes with its audience. It tends to be an idiosyncratic advertising *genre* not readily intelligible to the non-Briton. In his view, the equivalent for U.S. advertisers might be the heavy use of sentimentality in a way British audiences would find excessive. As Lannon and Cooper (1983) observe, "Advertising carries its culture with it."

Emphasis on Entertainment.

In the early years of British commercial television, advertisers were faced with a situation in which advertising was branded as intrusive. Far-sighted advertisers therefore sought a formula whereby the need to sell a product could be combined with the need to entertain the viewer. As Garrett (1986) explains, the advertiser "accepted that he was an unwanted visitor in peoples' homes; if they were to let him in at all, or to let him return regularly, then he had better behave politely, quietly, and entertainingly."

The result is that British commercials now constitute "the least intrusive television advertising in the world" (Bernstein 1986), generating "the massive bonus of the highest level of consumer acceptance anywhere in the world" (Garrett 1986). In Bernstein's view, the essential difference between British and American television advertising is that the British commercials contain a "high entertainment quotient." This is consistent with the Ogilvy and Mather and Advertising Association findings in Tables 2 and 3.

The Influence of Opinion Leaders

Britain has had a long history of upper and upper-middle class opposition to advertising. In part, this was a manifestation of a deeper dislike of commercialism and of wealth derived from trade rather than land (Fullerton and Nevett 1986). Early in the 20th century, the articulate elite vented their anger on billboards. In the 1950s they attacked the idea of allowing advertising on television — something that proved so distasteful to many influential figures that it was not approved by Parliament until 1955 and then, only in the face of fierce opposition in the House of Lords (Taplin 1961). Lord Reith compared commercial television to smallpox, the Black Death and

the Bubonic Plague, while Lord Hailsham likened it to "Caliban emerging from his slimy cavern" (Henry 1986, p. 29-30; McEwan 1986). It is therefore hardly surprising that advertisers using the new commercial television channel should be more than usually sensitive to criticism, and be anxious to please and entertain.

This influence on British television advertising in its formative phase was absent in the United States, where television the medium and television advertising arrived simultaneously.

The Advertising Industry Environments

The Impact of Substantiation Requirements

Weinberger and Spotts (1989a) suggest that stricter regulation, especially with regard to substantiation requirements, may lead to a reluctance on the part of advertisers to include hard facts in commercials. Noting that their findings call into question the relationship between tight regulation and informativeness postulated by Dowling (1980), and the view of Buell (1977) that the British system of regulation is superior to that of the United States, the authors cite Huang and Hou (1987) in support of the proposition that "Tighter regulation leads to less objective information content to avoid claim substantiation issues" (Weinberger and Spotts 1989b, p. 33).

In fact, it is doubtful whether the regulation system in Britain is any more stringent than that of the United States. Both countries have television advertising codes of practice which include substantiation requirements and machinery for the prescreening of commercials. The two systems may differ somewhat in terms of the products and services permitted to be advertised. However, they are both effective in excluding unsubstantiated claims, and it is in the context of claims that informational cues occur (Miracle and Nevett 1987, Ch. 5). It seems reasonable to conclude, therefore, that regulation is not a factor responsible for any significant differences in terms of information content.

Proportions of Local and National Advertising

Local television advertising is perceived to be of low creative quality and price-oriented (Meyers 1989). In addition, the lower budgets of local advertisers

would tend to mitigate against the emotional or mood type of commercial which is more expensive to produce. If, therefore, a higher proportion of local advertising were found in the United States, this would help to explain the higher level of information and the harder sell which characterizes American commercials.

This indeed appears to be the case. The share of non-cable television advertising attributed to local advertising is about 30 percent (*Marketers Guide to Media* 1990, p. 8-11). In Britain, on the other hand, there are no local television stations; and local advertising is estimated at between 5 and 10 percent, depending on the region and the station's selling efficiency (Advertising Association 1990). This increased ratio of national to local commercials is consistent with a higher incidence of expensive creative treatments, more use of the soft sell approach (as in long-term brand building exercises) and a greater incidence of humor.

Clutter

Viewers' perceptions are inevitably affected by the volume of advertising to which they are exposed, and the extent to which it intrudes into the programs they are watching. Zeltner (1978) reported that 71 percent of U.S. agency respondents and 83 percent of clients believed lack of clutter to be important in improving advertising effectiveness.

In this respect, there is an important distinction between the United States and Britain. The standards for non-program material set by the National Association of Broadcasters Code was 10 minutes per hour in prime time and 16 minutes per hour in all other dayparts. With the code no longer in force, that standard has been increasingly exceeded, resulting in a mounting degree of advertising clutter (*Advertising Age* 1990). In Britain, on the other hand, the original limit set by the Independent Television Authority is still enforced: 10 percent of broadcast time (i.e. 6 minutes per hour) allowed for advertising, with a maximum of 7 minutes in any clock hour, regardless of daypart. Commercials are also permitted to be shown only at the beginning and end of programs and in what are termed "natural breaks" (Miracle and Nevett 1987, p. 68). The context in which British commercials are viewed thus seems more likely to produce favorable opinions about television advertising. By the same token, American viewers who may be exposed to more than 27 percent non-program material may be expected to manifest the higher levels

of boredom and irritation noted in Table 2. This problem is probably accentuated by the frequency with which the same advertisements are run on cable and non-network independent television, and the hard-sell, low-budget treatments that are often employed.

Differences in Philosophy and Execution

Management Views and Philosophies

This is a somewhat controversial issue. In broad terms, British writers characterize American managers as being constrained by variants of the hierarchy-of-effects model first proposed by Colley (1961). The basic assumption underlying all versions of the hierarchy is that advertising is a form of process that moves consumers towards consumption. British authors such as Lannon (1986), Driver and Foxall (1986), and Lannon and Cooper (1983) reject this concept, with Driver and Foxall describing it as discredited.

Although hierarchy-of-effects models have been a subject of dispute at least since the critical appraisal by Palda (1966), some scholars believe them still to be exercising considerable influence. "The persistent and pervasive attention given to the hierarchy of effects in advertising and marketing research and practice attest to its continuing importance as an academic and practitioner concept" (Barry 1987, p. 285). As Barry points out, the FCB matrix is derived from the concept of multiple hierarchies proposed by Ray (1982, 1974). Hierarchies are still featured in many American advertising principles textbooks such as Belch and Belch (1990); Wells, Burnett and Moriarty (1989); Patti and Fraser (1988); and Rothschild (1987). The concept is also implicit in this statement by William E. Whitney, Jr., Managing Director of Ogilvy and Mather Chicago:

"Remember that advertisers do not spend money to say something to consumers but to *do* something to them. It may be to change a long-held attitude about a product or service or brand; it may be to make them aware of a benefit; or it may be to convince them that one product attribute is more important than another in the selection of a brand or service" (Rothschild 1987, p. 164-5).

Clearly there is a need for further research to determine the validity of the British view. If justified, however, it would represent a major difference between the two countries.

Differences in Pretesting

Jobber and Kilbride (1986) examined the pretesting methods used by leading British agencies. Their findings differ considerably from those of Lipstein and Neelankavil (1984), Ostlund and Clancy (1982), and Coe and MacLachlan (1980).

Although researchers in both countries make extensive use of focus groups, the emphasis in the United States is otherwise on quantitative methods. Ostlund and Clancy (1982) found heavy use of single-exposure multiple market on-air testing, while Lipstein and Neelankavil (1984) found a majority of advertisers and agencies using mall intercept studies at both rough and finished stages, confirming Lannon and Cooper's picture of American belief in the hierarchy of effects. "The DAGMAR model appears to be applied by most companies in terms of strategy and copy research objectives. Similarly, the hierarchy-of-effects model of advertising is clearly implied by the measurement systems used" (Lipstein and Neelankavil 1984, p.25).

Seventy-one percent of American agencies use day-after-recall (DAR) of multiple finished commercials as a pretesting technique. DAR has a long history, having been developed in the early 1940s by George Gallup while he was research director of Young and Rubicam (Lipstein 1984-85). Yet it has been demonstrated by Foote, Cone and Belding that DAR results are biased against commercials that depend on mood or feeling for their effect, and in favor of those containing explicitly stated selling points. Using the "masked recognition" method, FCB showed that proven recognition for three "feeling" commercials was 68 percent higher than standard recall scores indicated (Zielske 1982; Berger 1981; Honomichl 1981).

British advertisers and agencies, on the other hand, rely much more heavily on qualitative techniques. Their concern is essentially with whether a commercial succeeds in communicating. The general belief is that, in order for a brand personality to be communicated to consumers, the audience must understand the creative proposition. Otherwise, only awareness will be affected (Jobber and Kilbride 1986).

It therefore appears that most American advertisers are using pretesting methods which favor informational advertising, while the approaches to pretesting favored in Britain would favor the adoption of more commercials in the "entertaining," "soft-sell," or "feeling" categories. This is consistent with the greater

acceptance of humor among British executives found by Weinberger and Spotts (1989b).

Length of Commercials

Huang and Hou (1987) draw attention to a further possible determinant of information content that appears not to have been considered in previous empirical work. This is the length of the commercial. Put simply, the longer the commercial, the greater its opportunity to include informational cues. It may therefore be hypothesized that the proportion of longer commercials would be greater in the United States.

This is not borne out by the data. There was, in fact, a higher proportion of short commercials shown on American network television in 1989 than was the case in Britain. Commercials of 20 seconds or less comprised 39.4 percent of the American total compared with 30.7 percent of the British, while those of 30 seconds or less represented 96.5 percent of the total in the United States and only 76.5 percent in Britain (*Marketers' Guide to Media* 1990, p. 14; AGB Research 1990, p. 21). It appears, therefore, that there is no association between length and information content in the U.S. - U.K. context.

Synthesis and Implications

The findings of the preceding sections are summarized in Table 4. It seems clear that the distinctive character of British television advertising is the result of a confluence of circumstances. What is important for both scholars and practitioners is that they should understand the relative importance of the various factors influencing television advertising's development. This insight can be of considerable help when planning and executing international advertising, not only between the U.S. and the U.K. but also on a general level.

The analysis of socio-cultural factors shows considerable differences between the U.S. and the U.K. in terms of consumer attitudes and expectations about advertising generally. These differences appear to be reflected in the creative treatments that characterize each country's advertising.

Important and respected members of British society influenced not only the form in which television advertising eventually appeared, but also the attitudes and expectations of both consumers and advertisers. Their initial hostility edged creative treatments in the direction of a heavier emphasis on entertainment and away from the hard-selling American style of the

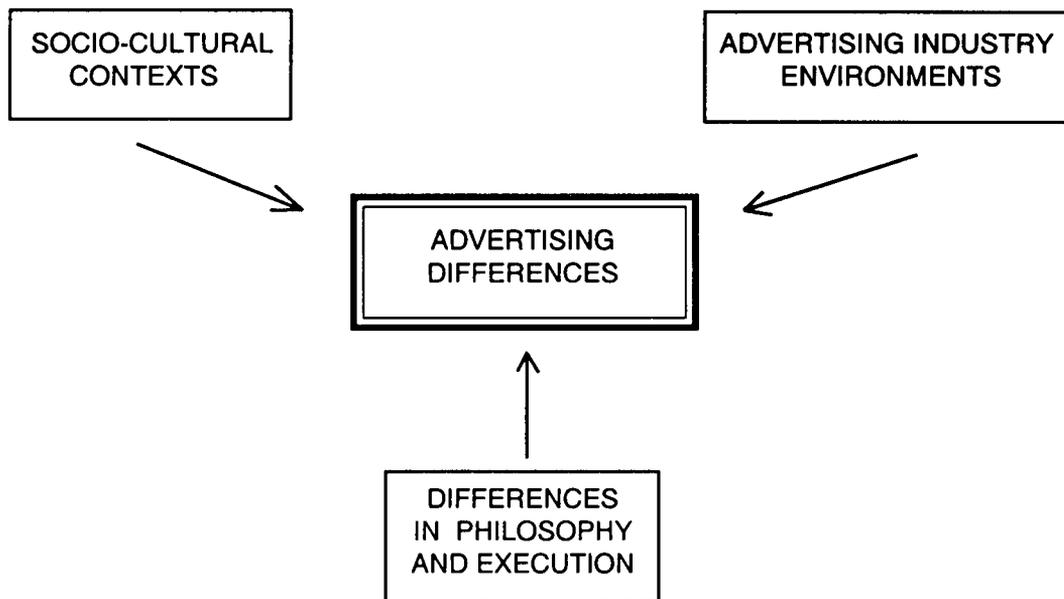
1950s. In this context it should be remembered that British consumers were still feeling the effects of World War II and that food rationing was not ended until 1954 (Nevett 1982). Many advertisers responded by producing campaigns that entertained consumers as well as informing or reminding them. In adopting an entertainment mode, television advertisers were actually returning to the country's creative mainstream which was very much in harmony with the national culture and conditions at the time.

Two lessons may be drawn here. First, if consumer attitudes toward advertising are more favorable in another country than in the U.S., and if they have developed in response to a particular creative approach, then American advertisers operating in that country should be wary of introducing different styles that may strike a discordant note. The unfavorable reaction in Britain to early commercials couched in the American idiom has an interesting historical precedent. At the end of the nineteenth century, advertising copy and headlines written in the contemporary American style proved unsuited to British tastes and had to be modified accordingly (Presbrey 1929, p.106). Second, there is a warning here for followers of fashionable paradigms; the current preoccupation with standardized global campaigns might lead to superficial consideration being given to subtle but important cultural differences.

Academicians might contribute by investigating the relationship between what Bernstein (1986) calls "a high entertainment quotient" and the ability of an individual commercial to communicate. For example, in what material way do U.S. commercials that fail in the U.K. differ from the American television programs that are so successful? Further, if a positive correlation could indeed be shown between entertainment and effective communication in the case of the U.K., would the same also hold true in the U.S.?

Consideration of factors related to the industry environment revealed a considerably higher proportion of local advertising shown on U.S. network television. Given its characteristic low creative standard, this probably means that American audiences are exposed to too much low-level advertising. This would certainly help explain the level of consumer disapproval of commercials generally. It may also affect perceptions of individual campaigns in the two countries, since an audience accustomed to seeing only 5 percent of local advertising could be expected to respond differently from one normally exposed to 30 percent local advertising. This again would seem to be an area with research potential.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework for the Evaluation of Possible Causal Factors



In addition, the amount of clutter seems to contribute to the high levels of boredom and irritation displayed by U.S. viewers. With major network shares of television viewing eroding, the industry might consider following the British example by reducing viewing levels and making more entertaining commercials.

The third group of factors considered was differences in philosophy and execution. Lannon and Cooper (1983) observe that creating advertising is not a logical or mechanical process but is mystical and intuitive. To the extent that advertising also draws on a nation's culture, there will almost certainly be aspects of it that can only be appreciated by someone steeped in that culture. A manager or student on one side of the Atlantic may well not be able to comprehend fully the subtleties and nuances of advertising on the other side. This in itself need not be an insuperable problem *provided it is recognized that such differences do exist*; the fact that they may not be perceptible to outsiders is not a valid reason for ignoring them.

This is particularly relevant with regard to the enduring problem of the NIH (not invented here) factor. Manifestations of local opposition are often attributed to local prejudice and an instinctive dislike of anything emanating from outside the national market.

However, local managers often have different attitudes and values, and insofar as they are products of their culture, their objections may show an understanding of local conditions that corporate and expatriate personnel can never enjoy. The warning for international advertisers should be clear.

There is some evidence to suggest that hierarchy-of-effects models may be more popular among American advertisers. However, this evidence is incomplete, partly inferential, and stands in need of updating. In particular, we need to know the extent to which the recent attention devoted in American academic journals to affect, emotion and texture reflects changes in research practice. According to Jones (1990), American universities tend to follow, rather than lead, advances by advertising practitioners.

Conclusion

This discussion has focused on differences that have arisen between the U.S. and the U.K. These differences are considerable and, in the early years of British commercial television, were sometimes sufficient to prevent the successful use of American-style campaigns. Since the two countries share an ostensibly common culture, it seems likely that such differences

would assume still greater importance in cases where the two cultures involved are less similar.

Areas have been suggested where practitioners should tread warily and where academic research could help increase advertising effectiveness. The author hopes that scholars and practitioners alike will direct their attention to these and related problems, and so increase our understanding not only of British and American television advertising but of international advertising generally.

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