

Introduction

ABOUT 20 years or so ago, someone first said that most of us see around 3,000 ads a day. A more accurate estimate (one with an actual verifiable source) puts the number at something closer to 500.¹ But however many it is, it's a pretty safe bet that behind one-third to one-half of all those ads are advertisers who optimistically think they're going to make us laugh.

It's not as though we don't appreciate the effort. The ads may be the only genuinely funny thing we see during a typical broadcast of *Saturday Night Live*. In fact, it's almost become cliché to mention that the majority of the viewers tuning into the Super Bowl say they're doing it mainly to see the commercials. It's probably no coincidence that something like 90 percent of the 30-second spots (recently selling for somewhere around \$2.5 million apiece) are obvious attempts at being funny.

Most people enjoy funny TV ads so much, in fact, that several companies have even made a profit repackaging them as videos² or, more recently, delivering them on the Web.³ Thousands of people went to TBS's Web page in 2005 to cast their votes for the year's funniest commercial, and TBS has recently gone online with a permanent Web site titled veryfunnyads.com.⁴ In addition, more than three million viewers tuned in to TBS's *Funniest Television Commercials of 2005* special and saw CareerBuilder.com's "Working with Monkeys" ad (featuring a human office worker employed with a bunch of chimpanzee coworkers) take first place. There seems little doubt the use of humor in advertising is popular, prevalent, and growing.

Why do U.S. advertisers spend what probably amounts to between \$20 and \$60 billion (yes, that's *billion!*) a year trying to make us laugh?⁵ Surveys of advertising agency executives show they generally believe, among other things, that humor positively affects awareness for new products, establishes name registration, communicates simple copy points, and encourages brand switching. But more than anything else, advertisers hope humor will attract our attention and keep us from ignoring their ads.

Discouraging our page flipping, dial turning, channel surfing, and TiVo-ing helps explain almost all the earliest uses of humor and its especially widespread use in today's cluttered media. The continuing predominance of funny ads in most of the major remaining large-audience media spectacles, such as the Super Bowl and the Academy Awards, is a good example. In fact, this is one of those topics on which the advertising professional and academic researcher are in complete agreement. Many studies have shown that humor does a great job of attracting attention.

Advertisers also like to think being funny makes them seem more friendly and likable (and who doesn't?). Consequently, they believe that making us laugh will encourage positive thoughts and feelings toward their products and brands and put us in a receptive mood for their sales messages. In fact, advertisers in the 1970s often called humorous and other emotion-based ads "mood" advertising.

As with attention, researchers have found that positive feelings and attitudes toward an ad contribute to the likelihood we'll buy the product. A major study, with more than 15,000 subjects, found that our liking of an ad is a very strong predictor of the ad's ultimate sales success.⁶ Advertisers also hope we'll see the entertainment value of their funny ads as a kind of reward for reading, watching, or listening.

But many advertisers agree there's a definite downside to the use of advertising humor. It seems to wear out quickly. It takes up time and space that could or should be devoted to selling. It can offend people. The ad can be remembered instead of the advertiser or message. But far worst of all, sometimes it simply isn't funny.

For every AFLAC, Geico, and Holiday Inn Express (successful advertising humorists all), there are many others like shoe marketer Just for Feet. Just for Feet's 1999 attempt at Super Bowl humor—in which a group of great white hunter-types drugged and then tagged a Kenyan distance runner with Nike shoes—was recognized by New York University's Department of Culture and Communication with a Schmio award for its racial insensitivity. The embarrassed company even tried to sue ad agency Saatchi & Saatchi Business Communications of Rochester, New York, for \$10 million and malpractice—as if

getting its client branded “Just for Racists” wasn’t humiliating enough. The episode represents one of only two times that well-known advertising pundit Bob Garfield actually called advertisers before an ad ran to ask if they were aware of what a huge mistake they were about to make.⁷

Problems with advertising humor happen for lots of other reasons. Gilbert Gottfried sends some people scrambling for the TV remote (at least when he’s not disguised as the AFLAC duck), and many others probably wish whoever killed Kenny would do the same thing to the people who produce the *South Park* TV show (at least actors Tom Cruise and Mel Gibson probably do). Which is just another way of recognizing that humor appreciation varies among different audiences. There’s a reason why men howl at John Belushi’s performance in *Animal House*, while most “chick flicks” have all the slapstick of a televised state funeral. Research consistently shows that men not only seem to appreciate humor more than women do but also definitely prefer different kinds of humor. Humor appreciation differs from culture to culture as well.

Advertisers have also long suspected that humor gets in the way of people remembering the information they want them to. Research supports this belief. During the 1990s, advertising researchers concluded that whether humor will work or not depends on lots of other factors, such as the type of product being advertised, the medium in which the ad appeared, program context, intensity of the humor, and whether the humor is related to the product or service in some relevant way.

The purpose of *Humor in the Advertising Business: Theory, Practice, and Wit* is to offer readers who study, create, approve, teach, or simply like to watch advertising a concise but thorough overview of the current state of knowledge about what advertising humor is and how it’s believed to work. Humor is clearly a complicated topic, and no such summary and synthesis currently exists. In addition, if how advertising works has remained something of a mystery, adding explanations for the impact of humor suggests the problem could be next to hopeless. Fortunately, we have two places to go for help.

First, there are the collective rules of thumb and practical knowledge of the advertising professional, shared over the years in the pages of their biographies, advertising’s many trade and professional journals, a survey or two, and the occasional proprietary study that manages to make its way into general circulation. Some advertising giants (and even a fair number of contemporary rank-and-file artists) seem to have figured humor out—as the many successfully funny examples presented in this book prove. And even if these creatively funny gurus often can’t explain very well how they do it, watching an hour or so of TV on any given night shows they can consistently do it with

a lot of success. Many of these advertising humorists share their thoughts and experiences throughout this book.

Second, many of the more puzzling aspects of humor in advertising have been explored and explained by the research findings of an army of scholars and researchers. Many advertising professionals, in fact, may be surprised to discover that the findings of typically academic researchers often confirm their own practical conclusions. Why surprised? Mainly because most advertising professionals don't spend much time with the academic literature on advertising. Which, of course, is mostly not their fault. Academic research is rarely written for a practitioner audience, and somewhere among the hypotheses, experimental designs, and structural equation models, all but the most masochistic nonacademic readers will decide the dog needs a walk.

Still, one freelance advertising copywriter was probably speaking for many when he recently observed that “unfortunately, there is little research on humor in advertising.”⁸ Not exactly! While this may have been true up until the early 1970s, today there's a large and growing body of research on advertising humor—nearly 50 studies published in scientific marketing and advertising journals between 1993 and 2005 alone. And these don't include many other nonadvertising books and articles produced by researchers and theorists in the fields of psychology, sociology, linguistics, education, and general communication. Many of these scholars have produced theories that not only stand up to rigorous empirical testing but have a lot of intuitive appeal as well.

This book, however, aims to be more than a dry, theoretical, and practical exploration of what advertising humor is and how it works. Readers who have chuckled or even laughed out loud at an advertiser's wit (and, really, who hasn't?) will find an homage here to what is probably the most widely appreciated form of sponsored communication. And although the many examples of funny ads in this book, almost all of which received top creative awards, were mainly chosen to illustrate certain types or characteristics of advertising humor, they definitely include many of the funniest ads and campaigns recently created by advertising's most gifted comedians.

Humor in the Advertising Business: Theory, Practice, and Wit is organized this way. Chapter 1 presents a history of advertising humor, exploring its evolution from creative outcast at the beginning of the last century to the popular workhorse it is today. Chapter 2 introduces a model of three theories or mechanisms that explain why we think some things are funny—incongruity-resolution, disparagement, and arousal-safety. This chapter explores what humor is, how we can recognize different kinds of humor, and how the humor in an ad can be related to the advertiser or product. Chapter 3 builds on Chapter 2 with a more

thorough look at the mechanisms and the five types of funny ads they generate, with many award-winning examples of each from different advertising media.

Chapter 4 pulls together the theoretical and empirical knowledge of the academic researcher with the practical knowledge of the advertising professional, exploring in depth how and why humor in advertising is believed to work in various situations. Chapter 5 takes a slight detour by relating the topic of advertising ethics (no, not necessarily a contradiction in terms) with the long-standing question of whether or not humor is more likely to offend people than are other types of ads. Finally, Chapter 6 explores and interprets the commercial success of three funny advertising campaigns, using the concepts and principles from earlier chapters. Emphasized in this chapter are the message and media strategies that can lead to success when using humor in advertising.

So, now that you know where we're going and why, sit back, put your feet up, and let's explore the theory and practice of humor in advertising.

NOTES

1. Courtland L. Bovée and William F. Arens, *Contemporary Advertising*, 5th ed. (Homewood, IL: Irwin, 1995), 48.

2. "World's Funniest TV Commercials," 1990, 1991; "World's Funniest and Cleverest Commercials," 1989, 2004; "Leslie Nielsen's World's Funniest Commercials," 1994.

3. USATVADS.com; <http://www.funnytvads.net> (accessed March 18, 2004).

4. Find it at <http://veryfunnyads.com>.

5. Marc G. Weinberger, Harlan Spotts, Leland Campbell, and Amy L. Parsons, "The Use and Effect of Humor in Different Advertising Media," *Journal of Advertising Research* 35, no. 3 (1995): 44–56.

6. Russell Haley and Allan L. Baldinger, "The ARF Copy Research Validity Project," *Journal of Advertising Research* 31, no. 2 (1991): 11–31.

7. Bob Garfield, *And Now a Few Words from Me* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003).

8. Holger Enge, "Cockroach Farm," <http://cockroachfarm.com> (accessed March 16, 2004).