

# 10 timeless marketing trends



By Eugene Yiga

20 Jan 2016

Every year, industry experts tout their top trends. What's the best way to keep up with it all? Since you can only waste so many hours in a day, the best approach is to learn the lessons that last. In *Testing to Destruction*, Alan Hedges offers advice that's as relevant today as it was 40 years ago.



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## Timeless Trend #1: We are not rational

*"Most people are faced with an incredibly large number of actual and potential purchasing and usage decisions every day of their adult lives... It is simply not conceivable that all these decisions could be the product of separate rational judgements, reached after dispassionate analysis of the available evidence. That way madness would certainly lie."*

Neoclassical economics says we're rational people living in a rational world. But we're not. There are too many decisions to make every single day. They demand information we don't have, take time we can't spare, and cause stress we don't want. That's why we come up with shortcuts, like choosing Japanese electronics or German cars. The more automatic our decisions become, the better we cope.

That's what I realised the first time I had to go grocery shopping for myself. The giddiness of growing up turned into dismay when I found myself paralysed in the dairy aisle, unable to pick a yoghurt tub. I spent ten minutes staring at products that all looked the same, only to choose the one my mom bought at home. Now I can shop with my eyes closed because I stick to the same brands. And with almost 50,000 different items in an average American store (five times higher than in 1975), I'm probably not the only one! It's the only way we can get in, get out, and get on with our lives.

## Timeless Trend #2: The best doesn't always win

*"Consumers are rarely interested in making serious efforts to maximise or even optimise their purchasing... Normally they are interested in what has been termed 'satisficing' - obtaining adequate performance for reasonable cost, rather than necessarily obtaining the best performance for the lowest cost. This is another way in which the decision-making load is shed."*

Crazy things happen in the short-term. Because we don't have the time or energy to find the best, we go with whatever's good enough and let that be the end of it. It's too much effort to find something better (assuming something better even exists) and too much risk to change our minds. So we stay put, even when evidence shows that our original decision was wrong. We see it in shopping just as much as we see it in our relationships and careers.

But in the long-term, everything can change. We might discover that the popular brands we chose by default don't perform as well. We might also realise that unnecessary hype blinded us from the fact that something was overblown, be it Stikeez, Ebola, or Kanye West. This is when we can make the switch to something better and wonder why we were so foolish in the first place.

### **Timeless Trend #3: Research matters**

*"In consumer marketing, we are only in a position to make sound judgements about advertising strategy if we have a good knowledge of the way people think, feel, and behave... The better our understanding of the market, the better our chance of devising and adopting an effective strategy."*

Market researchers are often seen as party-poopers, which is why many creatives aren't copy testing fans. Hedges admits that "it is not possible to make a realistic test of the effectiveness of a commercial in a laboratory situation in advance of real-life exposure". There are just too many considerations we can't control.

We as consumers aren't accurate when explaining what we do. Either we don't remember and guess or simply don't know and can't say. And even if we remember what we did and know why we did it, we might choose to remain silent when a market researcher asks. Instead, we'll give answers we think we're "supposed" to give so we'll sound responsible or smart.

Enter neuroscience, stage left. The assumption with brain scanning and other advanced tools is that the one thing that always tells the truth is the one thing we can't control. But even scanning our brains won't explain why certain reactions came up in the first place or what the effects might be in the real world.

And yet research still matters; not as a way to give finished ads the go-ahead but as a way to guide ads in the first place. The earlier researchers are involved, the better. That's because there won't be any "brilliant" ideas creatives refuse to abandon. Instead, researchers will offer an understanding of the market, the customer, the competition, and how best to position the brand.

### **Timeless Trend #4: Everything isn't for everyone**

*"Advertising is an extremely complex process, and different campaigns certainly 'work' in very different ways... It is therefore axiomatically impossible to say that advertising which does such-and-such will be effective, since effectiveness depends mainly on suitability of the advertising to the occasion and not on its own intrinsic properties."*

How many times do you find yourself debating the merits of an ad? Often, this doesn't make sense. That's because not all

ads are meant to appeal to everyone nor are all ads designed to do the same thing. (Understanding who the ad is targeting and what it's meant to do are more aspects research can uncover.)

Hedges lists the following example objectives for an ad:

1. Creating a sense of familiarity or a feeling that the brand is 'around'
2. Surrounding the brand with particular associations
3. Conveying pieces of information
4. Registering, on a more rational level, pieces of information
5. Communicating rational arguments

We can't say that an ad is good or bad unless we understand two things: what it's meant to do and who it's meant to do this for. In other words, it's fine for you to hate an ad if it wasn't meant to appeal to you in the first place. It's also fine for an ad to stop further losses (as opposed to lead to more sales) if that's all it was meant to do. Clear objectives are better than golden rules.

## **Timeless Trend #5: We notice more than we think**

*"[Noticing] and remembering advertising is not by any means a necessary prerequisite of advertising effectiveness. Advertising may and probably generally does 'work' without ever having been processed by our higher-level rational faculties."*

There's been a lot of debate about whether we need to stop and pay attention to an ad for it to work. While it's nice to dream of creating ads so compelling that people drop whatever they're doing just so they watch the ad instead, Hedges explains that this is unlikely and unnecessary. In other words, not all ads require conscious processing or conscious recall to work.

Hedges argues that because we're exposed to so much advertising every single day, most of it is just background noise (not unlike the internet banners offering you prizes for being the millionth visitor to their site). But our minds are subconsciously absorbing information all the time. We're slotting in new information and sometimes removing what's already there if the new information is impactful enough. Yet we still pay attention to peripheral stimulation (like your name being called in a crowded room) in case something significant happens and we need to 'wake up'.

So the fact that we aren't actively paying attention doesn't mean we aren't picking up a lot in the process. That means advertising impacts us even though we may claim to be immune. Why else would we remember jingles and messages even though we weren't trying, just like we somehow memorise the lyrics to a popular song? It's messy. It's disorganised. It works.

## **Timeless Trend #6: Emotion comes first**

*"Perhaps one should think less about what advertising does to people and more about what people do with advertising. Advertising is part of a two-way relationship between manufacturer and consumer."*

Most advertising in the 20th century was focused on delivering one-way functional claims about a product or service in the hope that consumers would think first and feel later. But advances in neuroscience have replaced the belief that thought comes first with the correct assertion that an emotion (whether conscious or not) is the first reaction to any stimulus (whether conscious or not) and is the driving influence of action. For example, if you ask someone what they thought of an ad, their response tends to be "I liked it because of xyz." The "I liked it" is the emotion/feeling and the "because of xyz" is the reasoning/thinking. In other words, we feel first and think later.

Of course, this doesn't give creatives permission to run wild just so they'll make ads we like. First, likability captures far

more than just entertainment and humour; it includes a range of deeper emotions as well. Second, and more importantly, the main focus of an ad should always be the consumer, not the agency. There are too many examples of arty ads that are designed for nothing but awards. And yet the objective of the ad must always come first.

## Timeless Trend #7: Tell us a story

*"[Advertising] 'adds value' to the product over time by surrounding it with a halo of images and associations. At the simplest level these provide basic reassurances about the quality and consistency of the product. They also imbue the product with a personality to which people can respond and with overtones of personal or social satisfactions."*

Advertising creates powerful and lasting ideas by engaging us in a story. This story can be new or old depending on how established the brand is. But wherever possible, the story should engage all our senses. That's because the more involved we feel (and the more we can relate to the people in the story) the better the result.

There are two more crucial elements to this story. First, it must focus on things we care about and enjoy. Neuroscience tells us that branded goods will be experienced differently from unbranded goods if they are connected to areas of the brain involving long-term memory, higher-order goals, and personal values. Consumers will also seek out brands that share and uphold values as well as those that provide connection on a deeper emotional level.

Second, the story must have the brand at its core. We've all seen ads that are great at stirring emotion but can't be tied to a specific brand. That's why the brand needs to be central to the story (and mentioned as early as possible, even if it's only through logos or jingles). In other words, it shouldn't be possible to describe the ad without mentioning the brand. Ensuring that key connection points occur during brand moments is how to strengthen emotional ties.

## Timeless Trend #8: Keep it simple

*"Advertising may be at its most effective when it is reinforcing and clarifying the thoughts which people already hold, rather than when it is trying to change things more fundamentally. This is not to say that attitudes cannot be changed, but that changing them will often be a very long-term and uphill job. If your advertising is going to fly in the face of everything people currently believe then you had better have a good story and you had better have something to support it."*

While many believe in "new consumers" emerging after the recession and "new media" changing the rules forever, this isn't true. We're still the same basic people with the same basic needs. Brands that understand this and connect to what matters most are those that do well.

In performing a text analysis on over 100,000 verbatim responses for over 150 brands for my whitepaper on creating successful ads, that the most common theme was 'Family/Friends'. (The word 'family' ranked first, even ahead of the word 'good'!) My research colleagues and I also found that ads connecting to 'Family/Friends' scored better than those that didn't.

Even though this isn't surprising, we still see ads that try to reinvent the human condition every other month (much like ever-changing ab workouts that seem to assume the human body evolves in quantum leaps that just happen to coincide with a magazine's monthly print run). It's not necessary.

## Timeless Trend #9: Aim for the long-term

*"[Advertising] works over a period of time as a part of the gradual evolution of the individual's perceptions of a brand and its relations to other brands. The effect of a single isolated advertising exposure is likely to be minimal in most markets."*

Research shows that it takes up to six months for the brain to create a hardwired association between things it sees

together and puts together. But once that connection is made, it can take two years to erase. In other words, brands need to be consistent in their marketing. Constantly changing things like logos or slogans makes it harder for us to form these associations. Of course, this doesn't mean that all a brand's ads should be the same; it just means that the changes should be variations on an overall theme. It's about being stable without becoming staid.

One of the best brands achieving this is Coca-Cola. The Open Happiness campaign started as simple and emotive story with the brand at the core (see trends 6, 7, and 8). That message has been repeated over the long-term by maintaining the focus on family, friends, and fun. It's also quite remarkable that they tweak the jingle just enough for it to sound a little different but not so much that it's no longer the same. Listen to a few of their ads (especially the [2010 World Cup](#) and [Christmas Globe](#) ones) and you'll hear! They're telling the same story over and over again. They keep it consistent but they also keep it fresh.

## Timeless Trend #10: Everything matters

*"Advertising does not work in a vacuum. Not only does it combine for its effect with other elements of the advertiser's own marketing mix, it also interacts with competitive campaigns in a way which is often overlooked... Advertising must, in order to be effective, work in harmony with the product itself, with its packaging and with all the other tools of consumer marketing activity."*

Advertising encompasses everything. This was confirmed by Sally Ford-Hutchinson and Annie Rothwell in the findings from their 2002 qualitative study for the Advertising Standards Authority: "The first interesting finding was the extent to which the term advertising encompassed for consumers every piece of brand, product or service communication. It obviously included the key media of television, posters (surprisingly high in a strong second place), press, cinema and radio. It also included other aspects of selling, such as direct mail, door drops, the internet, branding in-store, branded clothing, sponsorship, commercial text messages and even telephone sales. Advertising is simply everything that has a name on it."

Consumers are fickle and often unforgiving, which is why all the advertising in the world won't matter if one staff member at a store is rude. For example, all it took for me to change my cell phone network and vow to never come back was one disputed bill at the end of my contract (as if I wouldn't notice an extra zero on the end of the amount due). That's why brands must maintain their stance across all interactions and why all touchpoints need to work together well. Once you understand that you're only as strong as your weakest link, you can go on to build a whole that is far greater than the sum of its parts.

## ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit [www.eugeneyiga.com](http://www.eugeneyiga.com), follow @eugeneyiga on Twitter, or email [hello@eugeneyiga.com](mailto:hello@eugeneyiga.com) to say, um, hello.

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