

The Cognitive Process in Advertising Communication

DIMITAR IVANOV TRENDABILOV
New Bulgarian University, Sofia (Bulgaria)

Abstract

Advertising is a kind of communication which proceeds between two sides in unequal positions. One side (the sender of the message) is tangible and evident while the other (the recipient) is a mass of different minds which is usually named «target-audience» by the marketers. The successful transfer process is based on two factors — definition and differentiation. The brand as initiator of the communication-act faces the problem of constructing the most appropriate code by means of which to transfer its message in such a way that allows it to reach the customer's mind in the way intended by the initiator. This code simultaneously combines three functions: it defines the brand as such (indicating its existence), differentiates it from the competition (from the noise of the environment) and proposes a concrete reason for purchase to be done (i.e. makes the Unique Selling Proposition). Implementing these three functions in this particular order is a necessary condition for advertising to trigger a change in the consumer's behavior. Without this implementation, advertising does not fulfill its main goal of triggering a change in the customer's behavior but becomes a piece of visual art and/or entertainment. In addition, by means of a detailed segmentation of the market, the brand predetermines to a maximum degree the chances for the audience to take up the message. In this way it lays the foundations of the decoding process (focusing attention on and understanding the information encoded) and defines the set of verbal and visual signs which a given segment is «open» for.

This paper deals with characteristics of communication between a brand and its audience, as well as the conditions of transferring the brand's message. If the level of the relations between human beings is a function of the success of their communication, then the brand can be taken as an example of an exchange on another level — between human beings (minds), phenomena and reality. The most precise characterization of the brand is that it is neither an object of the physical world, nor a subject capable of emitting messages by itself. Naturally the brand is «an idea» in the sense of Plato (see Grannell, 2004:1) and, in a purely psychological sense, it is not different from political or religious doctrines imparting order on our world. The brand is an addressor of the premise for acquisition of benefits and added value. It is no accident that it is defined as the new totem or myth of the contemporary «tribe» (Evans, 1999: 12) because it is saturated with codes and hence is a source of behaviour models and forms attitudes towards the surrounding reality.

The brand, like every idea, has to be shared and therefore its life is comprised by the communication which flows from the organization-initiator towards the audience, as well as between the addressees, i.e. in their turn the addressees become addressors; the brand exists in and by means of distributed knowledge about it, it is pure information and therefore there are no limits which could intercept the flow, but there are limitations of the perception which may leave the brand's message incomprehended. In fact, the term «branding» shouldn't be considered from the point of view of the owner merely because he/she has put his/her mark on the product, but rather the concept of the brand describes the point of view of the addressee — he/she receives the brand's message and reacts to its offers. Only in this case does the brand implement its functions which, as I mentioned, are to communicate itself.

We neither can find a place where the brand *is* or the place where it was created or from where it obtains its energy, because first and foremost it is a consumer oriented mechanism of management but it does not produce a process in the narrow sense of the word. The brand does not have its own language but it does have a body language (see Bullmore, 2001:10) which could be perceived by all of the brand's marketing activities — ads, merchandising, PR events, price policy, promotions and even by the consumer's direct experience with the brand's production. Namely in this way the audience learns about its existence and its main idea. For the audience, the brand's message takes form of impressions, feelings (i.e. emotions) and general attitude^[1]. Also, the consumers can hear the brand's «voice» from slogans, tag-lines of the advertisements and texts of the prints, as well as from comments by famous people who express their opinion about the merits of the brand or from praises by satisfied clients. I.e. the message of the brand can be transmitted by everything and everyone and very often it happens in public space out of sight of the producer-owner of the brand (ibid, 2).

The products or the services which have «physical» existence in a certain degree actually are *signifiers* in the sign-brand. *The signified*, for its part, is the promise corresponding to the arising needs or expectations in the market (Fig.1). The development of the idea — trade mark (brand) has its roots in the consumers' mind but is provoked by purely everyday necessities

[1] «The hidden part of the iceberg is a brand's 'cultural unconscious' (...) made up of associations, similarities and significant differences» (Evans, 1999: 15).

and/or personal and social needs. Once successfully transferred to the consumer, the brand transforms itself in added value which obtains its power from the imagination and human aspiration or strivings (Seguela, 2004:57). The more members of the so called «target-audience» perceive the brand's message, the stronger the brand and the deeper the trace in their memory. For that reason «the target-audience» has to be perceived as a narrower circle of consumers in comparison with the entire market which is considered as prepared to decode the signal of the brand to a great extent, as well as solvent to gain the promised benefits.

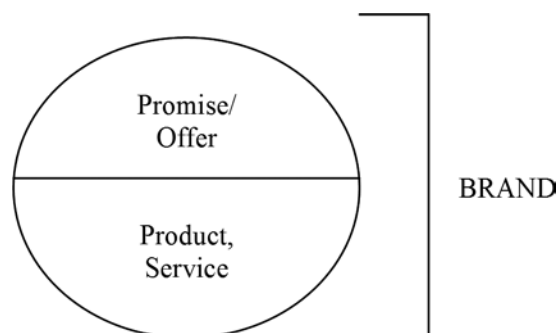


FIGURE.1: SIGN

As a question of interest for the exposition, I shall examine the main channel of communication which, as a rule, is under control of the brand — namely the advertisement. To be able to differentiate a message as an advertisement, we should account for various issues. By definition, the advertisement is an impersonal form of presentation but with a clearly discernable sender because it is paid in order to be seen in a definite time and place (Nöth, 1987: 279, 292). In accordance with the functions implemented by the general advertising message, we should bring out the two types of messages it carries — hidden and open, respectively. The open one is connected with indication of the initiator, as well as with the description of the advertised object and with its ‘framing’, i.e. separating this particular message from the other advertisements and from the other messages as a whole (ibid., 283).

As for the hidden message, we are going to focus on the following: as an information-cognition message, the advertisement introduces information with the aim of convincing the members of the audience it signals to. The last means that in view of the achieved conviction, the expected result of the advertisement is purchase, i.e. the consumer has been persuaded to carry out a certain action. Therefore one of the features of the advertising as a genre is that the message it performs in front of the audience brings a general valuation of the advertised object and this valuation is always positive (ibid., 279). Like any intentional act, the advertisement aims to provoke *reaction in the human or group behaviour by influence over their cognition and emotions* (Петрова, 2004: 77). In order to convince and to perform itself in the best possible light, the brand uses not only words but other symbols like music, colors, graphic images and even characters. It is thus clear that in their totality they are linguistic codes and during its transfer there arises an obligatory bending and/or loss of information due to insufficient or imperfect means (Доганов, Палфи, 1995: 60), though in some cases they are prepared incorrectly.

Hence, in the light of pragmatics there are two actions — the first one is an *exchange of message* which has the semiotic purpose of building persuasion and the second, which is economically grounded, is an *exchange of goods* (values) later on (Nöth, 1987: 281). The work of the advertising experts is namely to cover up or to avoid connotations which lead to the sale-custom process in the advertising spot (ibid., 279-280). It is possible by means of originality of the form under which the offer of the brand appears, or by means of the imperative forms which vary in their directness («drink», «enjoy», «take advantage», «win», etc.) or by emphasizing philanthropic and globally valid impulses for carrying out a purchase.

As we can see, Umberto Eco rightly names the advertisement as an example of *closed* text because it doesn't leave doubts about the meaning which it intends to transfer (see Eco, 1994: 8). It is important to underline that each advertising spot is part of a broader system of brand knowledge and in this logic it shouldn't be considered as a single appeal, in view of the fact that no text «is read independently of the reader's experience of other texts» (ibid., 21). This circumstance, however, suggests to us that each advertisement has a double task to implement — firstly, to build persuasion in the maximum number of members of the audience and, secondly, to increase the comprehension on behalf of that part of those consumers which are already carriers of knowledge about the brand. The consumer comprehends the message due to his/her memory which stores information about the experience from other contacts with the brand but that are not necessarily in the advertisement. We could also say that he/she «reads» the message by means of the distinction already perceived by other offers in the market and by the connection «necessity-added value which he/she has already built or builds in contact with the brand (see Grannell, 2004:2 and next). The addressees who are more experienced with the given brand, naturally, learn more from its message because, to some extent, they have acquired a bigger potential to decode the messages and have enough knowledge on the brand's style. That style some professionals define like the main tool of the brand for intercourse (Сегела, 2004: 48) and as if «the intertextual knowledge» (Eco, 1994) which we discuss here is a «training» of the audience (especially those with less experience) regarding the codes of the brand and, in this way, the brand provides more opportunities for the messages to be sifted out and to be comprehend (Fig.2). Thus the associations concerning the brand have been constructed and strengthened, which subsequently allows to them to be recalled quickly from memory and to steer the choice to be made in favour of the brand. (Keller, 1995: 105). In other words, the advertisement takes the role of the educator of the consumers and by the manner in which it packs up its messages it actually shows them how they should be read. Here we cannot detect a convention between the brand-addressor and addressee about the sign system of intercourse but the rules of intercourse are dictated by the initiator. «The reader» is familiar with the characteristic features of the advertisement, he/she is familiar with the codes of the particular product category to which the product advertised belongs, but he/she also has to discern the unique message of the particular brand. The uninitiated consumer could perceive the hidden message as «Buy because...» while the initiated could «read»: «Be loyal, buy...» or «Confirm the authenticity of the offer, buy...». The truth is, that in practice it is easier and cheaper to elaborate a message for regular client, than for the market as a whole or for this group of the market which buys sporadically.

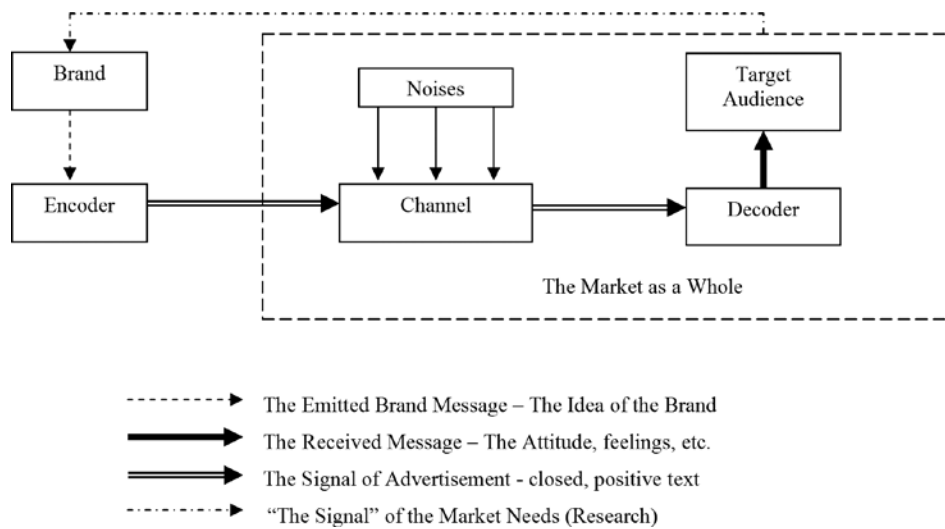


FIGURE.2: TRANSFER

Recalling to mind «the code model of communication», developed by Roman Jakobson, we can see that it includes the presence of a message which is transferred from one source (communicator, initiator) to given recipient (addressee) by means of (one by definition) channel of transmission (Sperber, Wilson, 1995: 4).

Usually the message of the brand transfers within public communication system which means that it becomes part of an oversaturated daily information stream whose addressee is the average consumer. This formulation, however, needs to be specified, in order to understand in what kind of conditions the brand's message is transferred: the brand and the target are not on the same level as the participants in the communication — while the brand is overt and with overt intentions, «the average consumer», the concept «target-audience» combines a great number of diverse minds which cannot be isolated or put under one general standard except by creating an abstract profile. Also, the potential consumers are not always open towards the brand's message, even more, as «homo economicus», the buyer is considered as a rational being and as taking the maximum of benefits obtainable with his/her budget limited and more often perceives the advertisement as a provocation and temptation than as a offer.

By the code model on the consumer's side complications occur as far as the data reaching to him/her is obligatory liable to decoding^[2]. As the Latin origin of the word «communication» indicates, («communis» – «common», «community»), for a higher level of efficiency of the message, we need the presence of «common» for both sides sign system (ibid., 62). However, Yuri Lotman underlines that only using of a same code is not a sufficient condition but both sides should have the same by volume of *memory* as well. He adduces arguments as indicating that the term «code» «presumes just now created, artificial structure lead into action in specific

[2] «Semiologists... view people as decoders of messages and carriers of cultural meanings. They analyse directly the cultural and communications frameworks that structure the market and brand under scrutiny.» (Evans, 1999: 22).

moment by reservation. (...) If the addressor and the addressee have the same code but don't have any memory they would understand each other perfectly but the value of the transferred information would be minimum while information itself — strictly limited.» (Лотман, 1998, 9-10).

Therefore the brand's language should be suitable for the abilities of the target-audience to decode which could be achieved with precise *segmentation* of the market, i.e. with determination of the model of «the ideal circle of perceivers», called «target-audience». The criteria used in marketing by tradition for elaborating of this profile are: age, social status, the audience's education level, the jargon and the chosen channels for exchanging information. Up to date, however, they are not sufficient and we should take into account the significant influence on the perception by shared values, lifestyles, models of imitation and leaders of opinion, as well as the level of openness towards the innovations. All of this gives us a hint of the big role held by, firstly, *the culture of consumption* for the comprehension of the message and for the decision for make a purchase and, secondly, *the cultural context* in which the communication between brand and consumer develops (вж. Evans, 1999:14). The brand itself elaborates its own culture which should be put close to the audience without infringing its messages and at the same time it should take into consideration the general background of codes in which the translation occurs.

The profile «target-audience» is «constructed» from the point of view of the brand management for the sake of convenience, it is a kind of interpretation of necessities of the market and their carriers — the clients, the information for them comes from the field work. As we know, often the interpretation in question causes a 'bending' in the real knowledge of an object especially when we refer to an *open text* such as «market». In reality, the members of the target-audience should be defined like a group of individuals who already have the brand knowledge or who are able to perceive it and to accept its offer, investing it with a higher level of confidence. In other words, these consumers share an identical *cognitive environment*, in this case that sort of environment which is created and inhabited by the particular brand (Sperber, Wilson, 1995: 38 and next).

If we generalize the above mentioned, there are two main moments characterizing the brand behaviour with the purpose of successfully transferring its message. The basic moment is the transfer of information about the brand's existence, underlining its presence in the market with the corresponding promise it carries. But the market could be compared with a map on which the competitive brands have their positions and each one of them is carrier of a different message which aims to distinguish the given brand from the other players and to define its exact position toward them (see Зийман, 2005: 94, 98). Hence we have to underline that the message is coded with new codes, different from the rest, and they should be selected, collected and transferred in the environment so as to be successfully decoded and comprehended by the recipients.

Further, after *the coding* and *the decoding* of the information, *the noise* is the third factor with decisive significance for the motion of the message. In practice we are speaking of a multitude of noises which pursue the communication channel and cause bending or loss of data units. It is typical that their sources, volume and intensity are out of control of the sender and receiver. The noises could be messages from other direct and indirect brands-competitors

as well as messages form the general information stream (see Рийвс, 1994: 174). The brand sends its message mainly by means of channels of mass media, thus seeking to emit a concentrated and controlled impulse to as a large number of consumers as possible, greater than the targeted group. Initially «the signal» would be received by a great number of consumers who have necessities emerged which the brand offers to satisfy, but to a decision for purchase would arrive only those of «the target» who would be convinced by the advertisement. The feedback — from the addressee to brand-initiator — i.e. the effects of the message (a purchase or only interest towards brand's production) comes later in time and is absent in space and, for that reason, it is hard to trace them. Usually the management receives data about results too late in order to react in time if the message doesn't implement its work.

One of the most famous representatives of the scientific advertising in 20th century — Rosser Reeves pays attention to the factor «over-information» and defines the human mind which is its object like «reality with strictly fixed capacity» (ibid., 186). This is particular warning towards the organization-owner of the brand that the perception of its message is bothered by many obstacles through the transmission channel but also by consumer's individual abilities to remember and to comprehend the advertising information. As an answer to this challenge Reeves constructs his thesis about The Unique Selling Proposition (USP) or «*concentrated expression of the advertising argumentation*» (ibid., 226; my italics), but the process in bringing it in the mind of the audience he calls «*inculcation*» (ibid., 193). USP in one advertising message doesn't come from the laudation and hyperbolization («new», «better», «revolutionary» and so on), because they are an available instrument to the competition as well, but it is that thing which the client as an addressee obtains from the message because it is valued for him/herself. The proposition should be a carrier of information about *specific benefit* that comes from the product in question^[3], while its uniqueness should be in relation with the exclusiveness of the commodity itself or based on arguments which are not yet being offered to the audience by the competition. It is necessary for the uniqueness to be such, that the competition does not produce a better offer or will not to be in position to produce an offer at all (ibid., 193-194). Otherwise the message becomes one of the crowd and becomes part of the general noise. It won't manage to pass through the transfer channel 100% and even if it reach to the mind of the addressee it doesn't have the potential to stay there. According to some advertising specialists, the system of keeping a simple and single content message, have the greatest chance for success. Here is what one of the famous consultants Jack Trout says on this issue: «The best way to penetrate into the human mind which by nature hates complications and confusions is to simplify your message to the extent degree (...) Concentrate yourself totally on ... strong distinguishing idea and do your best to implant it in the mind of the potential consumers of your product. By this highly imposing signal, by virtue of which by ingenious manner you will manage to penetrate and to establish “direct connection” with the human mind, will help to this very mind “to see” at once — as if it is light up by lightning — how simply could solve the particular problem by using your product.» (Траут, Ривкин, 2002: 107-108).

[3] «Each consumer buys in order to satisfy particular necessity because of that the selection of information is concentrated round those properties of the product advertised which will satisfy consumer's necessity» (Петрова, 2004: 25).

Namely the last quoted author — Trout — is the creator of the conception that indicates that the consumer and, more precisely, his/her mind should be considered like *a prospect* (Trout, Ries, 1981: 3). In fact, in this way it becomes possible for the perceiver of the message to go out of his/her role of passive object of the communication and to become an «active space» in which the brand designs its signified — its promise and offer. In the consumer's mind, the latter converts into expectations and attitude and if we are able to represent it visually, the picture would be a three-dimensional drawing in which frames are entered as spots showing where the brand is positioned in accordance with attributes, characteristic features and attitudes important for the consumer. Such attributes and attitudes could be price-quality, satisfaction of the basic necessities — respect and self-realization, personal preference-public requirements, egoism-altruism, individuality-community, etc. At the same time, by carrying this information for the brand, the consumer him/herself becomes a translator of its idea and values towards the other members of the audience by which he/she converts it into an opinion and knowledge shaper, at least in his/her closest circle where he/she shares common cultural codes.

To be constructed a perspective in the consumer's mind is of equal meaning as the brand to add volume and density to its idea and even more — it creates ground for its development. Since the brand lives by means of communication and perception of its addressees, this is but one permanent process of intercourse, then it inevitably bears changes - but the more positive an attitude it succeeds in suggesting by its actions and its language, the higher the certainty that the development will be in its favour. To conclude, we can say that a sort of inertia is set up in the consumer and if he/she has decided positively about the brand (the message is read and comprehended), this means that he/she is inclined to justify it in case of mistakes and is more open-minded towards the change in brand's messages and vice versa (Grannell, 2004: 3-4).

REFERENCES

- Bullmore, Jeremy (2001): *Posh Spice & Persil*, www.britishbrandsgroup.org.uk/library
- Eco, Umberto (1994): *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts Advances in Semiotics*, Indiana University Press.
- Evans, Malcolm (1999): *Semiotics, Culture and Communications – The Common Sense of the 21th Century*, a paper for the Australian Market Research Society Conference.
- Grannell, Chris (2004): *Brands and the Theory of Knowledge*, www.brandchannel.com
- Jacobson, Roman (1985): *Verbal Act, Verbal Sign, Verbal Time*, Basil Blackwell Publisher Ltd, Oxford, UK.
- Keller, Kevin Lane (1995): *Strategic Brand Management. Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity*, Prentice Hall, Inc, New Jersey.
- Nöth, Winfried (1987): *Advertising: The Frame Message* in Umiker-Sebeok, Jean, *Marketing and Semiotics: New Directions in the Study of Signs for Sale*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin (pp. 279-292).

- Sperber, Dan & Wilson, Deirdre (1995): *Relevance. Communication & Cognition*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Oxford, UK.
- Trout, Jack & Ries, Al (1981): *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*, McGraw-Hill, New York.
- Доганов, Д., Палфи, Ф. (Doganov, D., Palfie, Ph.) (1995 г.): *Рекламата каквато е* (The Advertising As It Is), изд. „Princers”, Варна (Varna).
- Петрова, Анелия (Petrova, Anelia) (2004 г.): *Потребителско поведение и реклама: Психологически аспекти* (Consumer's Behaviour and Advertisement: Psychological Aspects), изд. „Делова седмица консулт”, София (Sofia).
- Зийман, Серджо (Zuman, Sergio) (2005 г.): *Краят на маркетинга, какъвто го познаваме* (The End of Marketing As We Know It), изд. „Локус”, София (Sofia).
- Лотман, Юрий (Lotman, Yuri) (1998 г.): *Култура и взрив* (Culture and Explosion), изд. „Кралица Маб”, София (Sofia).
- Рийвс, Росър (Reeves, Rosser) (1994 г.): *Реализмът в рекламата* (Reality in Advertising), изд. „Princers”, Варна (Varna).
- Сегела, Жак (Seguela, Jacques) (2004 г.): *Хوليوуд пере най-добре* (Hollywood Love Plus Blanc), изд. „Panorama.bg”, София (Sofia).
- Траут, Джек, Стив Ривкин (Trout, Jack, Rivkin, Steve) (2002 г.): *Бъди различен или умри: Оцеляване в ерата на убийствена конкуренция* (Differentiate or Die: Survival in Our Era of Killer Competition), изд. „Кръгозор”, София (Sofia).