

The English of Advertising: Differences in The British and American Languages of Television Advertising

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That commercial advertising is based on cultural premises and psychological needs is a given. That audiences do respond according to their needs is also a given. To be sure, since the mid-fifties because theorists have emphasized the persuadee's part in the process of persuasion, advertisers have focused on audience analysis. Random telephone polls as well as focus groups using electronic devices to choose the high point of the message are just two ways audiences are analyzed. Furthermore, through mailing list and television Neilson ratings, American advertisers attempt to determine what magazines we read, what programs we watch, what music we listen to, and what messages we respond to. They recreate our pop-cultural icons in numerous ways to appeal to our social and psychological needs. Armed with this hi-tech information they barrage us with junk mail, TV and radio ads, and personal telephone calls to solicit our custom. British advertisers use focus groups too, and if not telephone polls, certainly they use spot checks in supermarkets or on the streets to discover which ads appeal to the British public. Their low-keyed analysis of ad effectiveness is markedly different from ours. To determine effectiveness, British advertisers measure the sales of their product week by week, especially after new ads have been introduced. They do not weigh the success of the programs surrounding the ads nearly as heavily as Americans do. Two important factors account for this approach: the emphasis on drama in early British ads that developed into a fine art in the 1990s, and the high degree of risk taking in the making of ads. This paper will compare the evolution of British advertising with the American and contrast those aesthetic techniques in both markets and suggest reasons, both theoretical and practical, why American advertisers are looking to Britain for guidance in the language and art of advertising.

In 1983 David Ogilvy, creative head of Ogilvy and Mather and, according to Advertising Age, the “creative king of the advertising world,” said British Advertising was the best in the world. On the other hand, Joseph Sedelmeyer, creator of such ads as Wendy’s “Where’s the beef,” recently said that the British ads, although once the funniest, have acquired a “hard edge.” We may ask what has happened in the debate over who has the best advertising and what the factors are that contribute to its success. For purposes of time, space, and lively demonstration, I am going to focus on British and American television commercials rather than print or radio ads and discuss the reasons why Mayfair has been overshadowing Madison Avenue for the past 10 years. I contend that although American agencies are imitating many of the British techniques in advertising, especially in developing dramatic ads (Phillips Milk of Magnesia ads and Taster’s Choice ads), using the same actors/characters over and over, in on-going related episodes, British ads, despite Sedelmeyer’s observation, continue to be more memorable, more entertaining, and more effective than American ads.

First, in the late 80s, British advertising became strong enough financially to buy out some of the best American agencies and move their headquarters from Madison Avenue to Mayfair. The British WPP group bought J. Walter Thompson in 1987. In an unfriendly takeover that same WPP group swallowed Ogilvy and Mather. Today, the Saatchi and Saatchi, a British agency, is called the world’s largest communications company.

Furthermore, in recording the difference between American and British ads, a number of scholars have searched for those characteristics that contribute to the obvious success of the British agencies. Recent studies maintain that despite similarities in politics and social and business systems, there are underlying ideological, cultural, and communication differences (Nevett, Frith & Wesson). They say these differences in advertising stem from 1) the basic historic evolution of the two countries -- monarchial versus electoral (for want of a better word) -- and 2) the reflection of these systems in what appears on the T.V. screen. U. S. advertisers, scholars unanimously agree, are “hard sell”, that is, they provide high information content; the British are “soft sell” and provide low information content. Americans are more individualistic and direct; the Brits more conscious of class and more humorous. These characteristics are reflected in their advertising.

Still, Randall Rothenberg (NYT) insists that advertising owes its public allure more to its entertaining character than to business conditions, that is, whether the national economy is good or bad. In print and on TV,” he says, “ British agencies tend to go for the chuckle, if not the belly laugh, much more readily than American companies.” That’s because in the US business is money, and money is power, therefore business insists upon the “hard sell.” In the UK, Andrew Ehrenberg, Director of the Center for Marketing and Communication at the London Business School, says, “Here it is widely accepted that advertising is a very weak force and exists to reinforce existing attitudes rather than to persuade people of things they don’t believe before. That’s why it tries to be so entertaining” (NYT--April 14, ’89). Although these factors explain differences in approach and to some extent differences in percentage of positive audience response, I suggest that American advertisers regardless, of our cultural differences, could benefit from 1) a careful study of British persuasive strategies, and 2) a study of the British regulation of clutter on T.V.

First, British persuasive strategies -- the “soft sell.” Rothenberg says two things contribute to the “soft sell” approach of the British ads. One, he says, British ads take credit for introducing cinematic production values to television commercials; indeed British Agencies nurtured such film directors as Adrian Lyne and Alan Parker before sending them to Hollywood.” Two, he states that the early 80s were a period of British creativity and that the playfulness of

British design has also influenced American Advertisers, the Benson and Hedges cigarette ads, for example (when cigarettes were allowed to be advertised on T.V.).

To understand the importance of using sophisticated film techniques in commercials we can turn to Bill Moyers' analysis of the political T.V. campaigns of the 80s. Some time ago, Moyers, in examining the Bush/Dukakis campaign strategies on T.V., pointed out that the image on the television screen is always more powerful than the words accompanying that image. Leslie Stahl described a particularly negative story she did on President Reagan using the T.V. images designed by White House image makers and sent over to CBS for use. What destroyed the intended effect of her story was a dictum from the President of CBS who was sympathetic to the politics of the T.V. friendly, swashbuckling President Reagan that any negative comments made by Stahl about the President or his policies could not be made when her face was on camera. So her derogatory comments were made over beautiful visuals of flag waving Americans smiling at and cheering for a triumphant President. The day after the story, the White House called her and congratulated her on the story. Stunned, she asked what they liked about it. They said their own images of the President were used superbly. Michael Deaver, the chief architect of the Reagan image while President Reagan was in the White House, told Moyers that the visual image is more powerful than the word every time. This is an important lesson for commercial television advertising, one that justifies investment in sophisticated film techniques.

On a more analytical level of audience response, in a study of political advertisements Annie Lang, Communications Professor at Washington State University, focused on audience reception of commercials and discovered that emotion and scene changes in ads significantly affect memory(221). She pointed out that both negative and positive emotional images stimulate right brain activity (the visual processor) and left brain activity (the verbal processor) but that visual memory was better for negative commercials (which include the bumbling hero of the comic advertisements) than for positive commercials. The understanding of the relationship between memory and emotional response is a significant factor in the success of commercials in general. This finding not

only helps explain why politicians prefer negative commercials about their opponents, but also why British advertisements which focus on comic but bumbling characters are more memorable.

Another crucial aspect of success in T.V. advertisements is audience identification. According to Kenneth Burke, arguably the discipline's most revered expert on identification, discourse (public messages) provide people with strategies for daily living (Stewart, Smith, and Johnson). The process of identification, through magnification -- in our case the viewing of T.V. commercials -- enables the viewer to share the qualities of the T.V. hero. Burke offers three basic types of stories (119) -- positive, negative, and transitional. For the purposes of this study I will focus on what Burke calls the "positive type." We must distinguish this word from the usual meaning of "positive." Here "positive" refers to categories of drama -- the epic, the comic, and the tragic. T.V. commercials easily fall into Burke's comic category. (Commercials possibly could be designed after Burke's "negative" category, again to be distinguished from the accepted meaning of the word and referring here to the dramatic types of elegy, satire, burlesque -- but not easily and not effectively for a T.V. audience who has from 15 to 60 seconds to digest the commercial..) Burke says the epic focuses on the acts of the hero rather than on his environment, thus producing an act perspective on the Burkean pentadic scheme; comedy emphasizes scene; tragedy emphasizes the hero (or, to use Burkean terms, the actor) and his tragic flaw and the punishment of that hero, allowing the audience to participate in the story's resolution.

Advertisers know that organizing ads to accommodate the pentadic focus of the audience is a strong persuasive device. According to Charles Larson, author of the most widely used text on persuasion, most people are scene-oriented in general and identify with those persuasions that magnify the setting -- whether that setting encompasses the act of a hero producing a scene-act ratio, or the hero himself (scene-actor), or simply scene alone. For the most part British ads fall into Burke's comedy category -- emphasizing scene-actor, allowing what Burke would call the equipment for living through identification" (Smith & Johnson) with the activities of the "fool" who is confounded by his or her situation. Here the hero is in the context of the setting -- so that, as in the

British Telecom ads Beaty (the eternal Jewish mother) is portrayed in a family setting. Oxo ads for twenty years portrayed the foibles of the same husband and wife in a domestic setting. The audience watches as the same actors/characters grow in their marriage with OXO. We see them as young marrieds and identify with them as they have children and become middle-aged parents of grown-up children. Theirs is a saga we don't want to miss, because through the techniques of sophisticated filming, we have made an emotional commitment to see them through their memorable turmoil. The Andrex (toilet paper) ads portray the family, mostly off-stage except for the young son or daughter often sitting on the toilet while the beloved golden retriever puppy inevitably tumbles with and unfurls the irresistible roll of toilet paper, leaving a stranded child to call for his mother and more toilet paper. Philadelphia Cream Cheese ads feature two secretaries (always the same actors) always at lunch -- one sophisticated and awesome in the eyes of the one who has a limp, thin sandwich instead of the delicate and creative sandwiches of the "Philadelphia" secretary. Consistently the setting in all of these ads, some having the same actors for twenty or more years, is the familiar, either the family or the work place, and a muddled situation becomes unmuddled through the product or the hero representing the product. The emphasis here, however, is not obviously on the product but rather on the all too familiar setting and characters.

In a very subtle way, British advertisers are directly appealing to our basic needs -- needs to be a part of a group, needs to be loved, and even our self-gratification needs. Beaty moans because none of her children has remembered her wedding anniversary only to find a surprise party waiting for her after the movie. Our little Andrex hero delights in the antics of his beloved puppy and is confident that mother will be there to help him out of his predicament. Our Philadelphia secretary achieves recognition, even veneration, from her office mate because she is knowledgeable. In combining Kenneth Burke's identification through comedy with Maslow's triangle of needs, the British produce a "soft sell" program that is both entertaining and very appealing. Few American ads combine these qualities and few have the appeal and effectiveness of the British.

Two characteristics of American advertisements damage effectiveness -- extensive scene changes and clutter. More and more frequently American ads

have been imitating the production strategies of MTV -- pop and rock music videos which focus on two-second shots and angled and asymmetrical visual perspectives only loosely unified by the beat of the music and the lyrics of the song. Advertisers, recognizing the success of the musical videos, have applied the same two-second shots and angled camera techniques to the selling of their product. Unfortunately, studies have shown (Lang 231) that scene changes and “commercial onset” damage memory. Instead of minimizing scene changes as do the British, American ads have increased them. Note the Kellogg’s ad. In its effort to show multi-culturalism with snaps of almost every different ethnic type in the U.S., the Kellogg ad has both universal appeal (i.e., so many different Americans eat Kellogg’s) and financial appeal (only 25 cents a bowl) in contrast to the British single 30-second shot on the product which simply states that the cereal is wonderful in the evening. Other American ads that directly appeal to a younger audience, like jeans, coke, and beer ads, flip from shot to shot on the order of the music video. If the visual variety works in music videos why isn’t it as successful in advertisements, you might ask. Lang has shown that “there is more interference from scene changes and commercial onset with visual memory than there is with audio memory”(232). Music videos depend -- surprisingly because they are so visual -- not on the visual but on the audio -- the repetition of the beat of the music and the repetition of the lyrics. Ads, by contrast, depend on the visual -- on recognition of the product in the “story,” or on those heroes associated with the product.

The second major problem for both American and British television is clutter. Its increase weakens memory and thus the effectiveness of the ad.. Terrence Nevette, Professor of Marketing at Central Michigan University, points out that advertisers and clients believe lack of clutter to be important in improving advertising effectiveness”(66). In the U.S. the standards for non-program material was set by the National Association of Broadcaster’s code to be 10 minutes per hour in prime time and 16 minutes per hour in all other day parts. However, the *New York Times* recently (Jan ’94) reported that an increase in non-programming material reached an all time high in 1993, with the day time remaining the most cluttered. British Television codes, in contrast, allow six minutes per hour of non-programming time with a maximum of seven minutes

of non-programming time, including public announcements regardless of the time of day. In Britain commercials are only permitted at the beginning and end of programs and during natural breaks (66). These two characteristics -- scene changes and clutter -- may very well account for the higher levels of boredom and irritation in the American audience, and a corresponding reduced capacity to recall or remember commercials.

British ads, then, seek to reinforce feelings the audience already holds -- feelings responding to the basic needs to be loved, to belong to a group, to achieve. And, furthermore, since the British commercials are more apt to be popcorn breaks because they come at the end of programming, agencies put forth a concerted effort to be more entertaining and more sophisticated in their composition. Comedy especially lends itself well to memory retention because the focus is frequently on the fumbling and befuddlement of the hero (better for memory retention) while the product, the overriding constant, is ever so subtly hand corner of the final frame or inconspicuously being used by the main characters.

British agencies have spent more money on filming and British tongue-in-cheek ads have influenced creative American advertisers such as the wonderfully funny Joseph Sedelmeyer.

All in all, appeal to basic needs, to pentadic perspective, and to memory capacity, and the decision to soft-sell through low-key 15 second ads or longer sophisticated comedy has enriched the British advertising agencies, confirming Ogilvy's contention that the "British Ads are the best in the world."

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