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Abstract

Purpose of this paper

To state a case for consideration of low attention processing when advertising in industrial markets.

Design/methodology/approach

Through a critical description of low attention processing the paper demonstrates how this framework can be applied in industrial markets. A case is made that it is relevant to consider low attention processing in industrial markets. Content analysis is subsequently applied to forty-eight advertisement for products that are deemed to invoke low attention. In the analysis, focus is on whether the advertisements employ emotional appeals in connection to brands and/or use intuitively understandable messages as would be advisable for attitude change through low attention processing.

Findings

The analysis shows that emotional appeals are used little in advertisements targeted at the selected market and that advertisements in which the brand clearly is displayed in combination with positive emotional appeals are rare. This combination was only seen in 3 out of 48 advertisements. In addition, most advertisements are not intuitively understandable and thus require that the message receiver is willing and able to allocate resources to cognitively process the advertisement contents.

What is the original/value of paper

This paper states a practical case for increased consideration of low attention processing and the necessity for an increased focus on customers' processing of B2B advertising.

Keywords: Advertising, low attention processing, advertising effect models, ELM organizational buying behavior

Article Type: Case study

Introduction

A general assumption in classic models of consumer behavior (e.g. Engel et al., 1970; Sheth 1974; Kotler, 2003) is that a consumer exposed to marketing and other stimuli will form a response based on a cognitive consideration of these stimuli. These models emphasize that attitudes and beliefs are changed through cognitive processing. The level of processing can vary from extensive problem solving involving cognitive processes to limited problem solving in which the decision is based on habit. Habit can, in turn be based on loyalty or inertia depending on the existence of a brand attitude or not (Blackwell, Miniard and Engel, 2001). Classic buying behavior models in business markets (Sheth, 1973; Webster and Wind, 1970) likewise focus on the buying process, and as an important part of this, the structure of the buying organization and the buying centre. In organizational buying behavior, Robinson, Faris and Wind's buy-grid (Hutt and Speh, 2001) with its new task, modified rebuy, and straight rebuy constitutes an analogue to extensive problem solving, limited problem solving, and routinized response behaviour in consumer behavior. However, in organizational buying behavior, even straight rebuy is assumed to be the result of a cognitive process as it happens only after a satisfactory purchase based on the full process that is run through in 'new task' and is thus based on cognitive evaluations and not affect-based behavior (Hutt and Speh, 2001).

In consumer behavior theory, some newer models (Ambler, 2000; Heath, 2001a) have removed the assumption of an always-present cognitive process. In industrial buying behavior, developments have not been along this line as focus has been on describing buyer-seller dyads, networks, and relationship marketing (Bonoma and Johnston, 1978; Wilson, 1996). All these approaches still assume cognitive processes and focus on purchases are sufficiently important to justify long-term commitments. However, it

seems fair to assume that at least some products in industrial markets are neither interesting nor expensive enough to induce cognitive processes prior to even the first purchase (Gilliland and Johnston, 1997; Lynch and de Chernatony, 2004; Ries, 1996). As the same people act in consumer and in business markets it additionally seems odd if their behavior is always purely rational on the industrial market when the same assumption is not applied when they act as consumers. Therefore, in our opinion, communication in B2B markets must take its starting point in a consideration of how the prospective buyer can be expected to learn from marketing communication about the product class. In this paper, we will, therefore, consider learning models that are not based on cognitive processing and, based on a case study of advertising in a typical industrial market (plumbing and heating pumps), evaluate whether this knowledge, in spite of lack of explicit theoretical developments, is used in creation of marketing communications.

Learning at low attention

The purpose of marketing communications is to create a response. Individuals are assumed to pass through a series of response levels seen as a hierarchy of effects. In hierarchy-of-effect models, the individual is assumed to pass through a series of stages from total lack of awareness of the brand to purchase. The most widely recognized and used hierarchy-of-effects model is AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) (Ambler, 2000). According to this kind of model, we can assume that individuals, before being interested in the product class, do not even allocate attention in its direction.

Cognitive learning requires attention and if the individual is not attentive, we thus have to turn to other models to understand how the prospective customer can learn about the

brand. A well-known theory based on learning without cognitive processing is classical behavioral learning theory (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2003; Solomon, 2004). Classical conditioning occurs when a stimulus is paired with another stimulus that on its own does not elicit a response. The classical example is the example of Pavlov's Dogs, where Pavlov paired a bell with food and after some time the bell on its own could cause salivation. In marketing communication, classical conditioning is used to associate a positive feeling towards something with a brand. Classical conditioning is applied in many daily marketing stimuli, e.g. when using German names for hardware or Japanese names for electronics. Several attempts have been made to develop more sophisticated theories based on the same assumptions as classical learning theory concerning the attention level of the consumer. Such an attempt is the 'low attention processing theory' developed by Robert Heath (2001a). In the following we shall look further into the contents of this theory.

Heath (2001a) divides learning into active, passive, and implicit learning. Active learning always includes cognitive processes, whereas passive learning only may activate cognitive processes. In contrast to this, implicit learning is fully automatic and affect based. Heath (2001a) characterizes both passive and implicit learning as low attention processes.

Heath, in his earlier works, uses the term 'low involvement processing' instead of 'low attention processing'. However, he later changed the terminology because involvement is an antecedent for attention allocated to the processing and not part of the process itself. Low attention processing is defined by the following characteristics (Heath, 2001b): 'It takes place at very low levels of attention, it happens automatically, and it makes little or no use of working memory but stores inputs as they come in'. This definition implies that implicit learning does not require attention and is, therefore, subconscious. That

implicit learning can be rather efficient is shown in Schacter (1996), in which a word-recognition-test showing fragments of words is described. In the period after the learning of the stimuli, conscious memory (recognition of full words on the basis of word stems) deteriorated, whereas subconscious memory (recognition of words on the basis of fragments) did not decline. Learning can thus take place subconsciously and implicitly without any cognitive processes. It even seems that the durability of implicit learning may exceed that of explicit learning. Relating the above to learning of positive associations connected to brands, the existence of low attention learning indicates that such associations can be learned at low levels of attention, maybe even without being aware at all that learning takes place. If learning is implicit, the processing is either purely perceptual (stored as received) or conceptual (only direct associations are stored) (Heath, 2001a). In implicit learning, the response is purely affect-based, and individuals thus are primarily under influence of feelings and emotions. Feelings, consequently, are important in communications concerning products in which the individual is not involved resulting in low attention towards the advertisement. The importance of feelings in marketing communications is also supported by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) arguing that the cognitive approach to consumer research addresses only a fraction of the experience of consumption. Holbrook and Hirschman introduce, besides a cognitive response route where affect response is in the form of attitudes and preferences, a subconscious experiential processing route resulting in affect responses in the form of feelings and emotions. Holbrook and Hirschman emphasize that neither (cognitive) information processing nor experiential processing should be ignored and that for many goods the symbolic meaning is important and hence, experiential processing is especially important to consider for these products.

Supporting the case for the importance of low attention learning in marketing communications, Heath (2001a) emphasizes the importance of the fact that implicit learning cannot be controlled by will. Shapiro et al. (1997) support this argument further in their research concerning how incidental ad exposure affects formation of the consideration set and thus learning about brand names and associations. Shapiro et al. (1997) found that even if individuals are not aware of having been exposed to an advertisement, there is a significant increase in the occurrence of the product in their consideration sets. This means that low attention processing did have a learning effect in this example. This is important if prospective customers are disinterested in learning and therefore are reluctant to allocate attention to doing so. Such disinterest is probable to be present also in industrial markets, and consequently, implicit learning achieved through low attention processing is important in marketing communications, also in industrial markets.

Research by Van Osselaer and Alba (2000) further supports that cognitive processing may not always take place. Their research into the blocking phenomenon shows that cues (stimuli) that are related to the symbolic value of the brand are valued on the expense of cues (stimuli) that are related to product attributes to such an extent that brand cues may block the processing of attribute cues. As brands are not physical attributes of products and are not related to their functionality, brand processing cannot be cognitive, and consequently, this research corroborates that cognitive processing may not always take place as assumed in classic organizational buying behavior models.

In sum, we can say that sometimes individuals learn at low attention levels, maybe even levels so low that they do not even realize that learning has taken place. Learning at low

attention influences formation of consideration sets and brand associations. Because of the nature of low attention processing, feelings can be very important in attitude formation.

Affect as response

We have already introduced Heath's (2001a) definition of low attention processing and stated a case for the importance of affect creation as a response to marketing communication. Heath is, however, not the only scientist working with affect in processing of marketing stimuli and there are different views on the role and placement of affect and emotions in this processing. In the following we present some of these different views.

As early as 1961, Ladvidge and Steiner (1961) gave affect an important role in their model; however affect was treated as a post-cognitive process. According to their model, the process order of response states is: cognitive, affective, and conative (intention to act). This is the same order of states as assumed in the AIDA model in which interest (and evaluation) precedes desire which, in turn, precedes action. In these early models, a rational process precedes and creates positive or negative emotions. Later, for example Zajonc (1980) concludes that emotions are independent of cognition and often the very first reaction to stimuli. Zajonc (1980) further argues that before human beings developed language and the cognitive capabilities that so strongly depend on language, they relied on the affective system alone. Therefore, at the least, the affective system must have its own route to persuasion.

"take in Figure 1"

In Figure 1, the Ladvidge and Steiner (1961) model is displayed together with three newer models that all emphasize the importance of affect. The later MacInnis and Jaworski (1989) model takes its starting point in inherent need and influence from external stimuli. Inherent needs in concert with external stimuli determine the level of motivation to process brand information. The level of processing in the form of attention and capacity allocated to processing depends on the level of motivation and the strength of the needs adjusted for ability and opportunity to process information. If motivation is low, attention is not likely to be focused, and little capacity will be allocated to processing of the information received. Therefore, the response will be mood-generated affect based on feature analysis. This is what MacInnis and Jaworski (1989) refer to as 'level one processing'. At the other end of the processing scale is 'level six processing' which is the result of high motivation, focused attention, and high capacity resulting in self-generated persuasion based on constructive processes. Between these two end-points there are four levels of processing: basic categorization, meaning analysis, information integration, and role taking. Heath's low attention processing is clearly represented at level one maybe two in this framework. According to both MacInnis and Jaworski (1989) and Heath, it is thus important for marketers to consider which level of processing that can be expected in order to allow processing on the correct level.

An important newer contribution considering how the individual processes communication leading to attitude change is the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty and Cacioppo, 1983a,b). According to the ELM framework, there are two routes to persuasion: The central and the peripheral route. Which route the individual uses depends on his or her level of involvement. High involvement purchases are purchases that are complex and search oriented (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2003). In such purchases,

the central route to persuasion is relevant. Following the central route to persuasion, attitude change is the result of information processing (Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann, 1983b). If, on the other hand, the purchase is a low involvement purchase, the consumer is not willing to allocate resources to cognitive processing either because the purchase is not important, or because important product attributes are not searchable. This is for example the case for products that are not expensive or risky and/or where the symbolic value is an important part of overall value. In such low involvement decision processes, the peripheral route to persuasion is relevant. Following the peripheral route, attitude change is related to positive or negative associations with the stimulus (Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann, 1983b). The decision process in low involvement purchases is thus not a cognitive weighting of pros and cons but a simple yes or no decision based on emotions. The peripheral route to persuasion seems to be very similar to Heath's low attention learning process in which low levels of attention result in intuitive attitude change. However, in ELM, the peripheral route is considered weaker than the central route as also the connotations connected to the words 'central' and 'peripheral' indicate. In contrast to this, low attention processing in Heath's model is on level with high attention (analogue to cognitive) processing.

Heath's (2001a) low attention model also distinguishes between level of involvement and the kind of attitude change that will take place. According to Heath the primary distinction is whether low or high attention levels can be expected. Low attention results in implicit (affect) and passive (cognitive) learning and thus emotional attitude change whereas high attention results in active learning and thus attitude change based on rational reasoning. Accepting that low involvement leads to low attention, this is in accordance with the ELM model.

Also considering advertising processing, Ambler (2000) claims that cognitive and affective processing run simultaneously. In the MAC model (Memory-Affect-Cognition) which is also displayed in figure 1, a purely cognitive process is not possible. Affect however, is always in play. This is interesting in comparison with the Ladvidge and Steiner (1961) model, since cognition was the always-present element in their model.

The above shows that affect is not necessarily controlled or preceded by a cognitive evaluation and that decisions may even in some situations be entirely affect-based. Further, affect will most likely always be in play, and should therefore always to some extent be addressed in marketing communications.

Low attention communications

According to ELM and the other theories describing the relation between involvement, attention, and attitude change, it is very important for marketers to consider the level of involvement that can be expected in relation to their product. In the present context, it is particularly important to notice that it seems improbable that all purchases in industrial markets can be classified as complex and/or searchable.

It seems fair to assume that quite a number of products marketed in B2B markets can be categorized as low involvement products and that persuasion then will follow the peripheral route. Following the peripheral route, attitude change is related to positive or negative associations with the stimulus (Petty, Cacioppo and Schmann, 1983b). The decision process is not a cognitive weighting of pros and cons but a simple yes or no decision based on emotions. Emotional appeals are aimed at creating feelings. Feelings

are, consequently, important in communications aimed at marketing low involvement products.

Returning to MacInnis and Jaworski (1989), we found that low attention processing would be placed on level one, maybe two in their framework. On these levels, information processing involves feature analysis and basic categorization resulting in purely affect-based attitudes. This is in line with Heath (2001a) stating that implicit learning is either perceptual or conceptual, and not analytic. Effective marketing communications in markets where motivation can be assumed to be low, should, accordingly, allow a purely affective response based on feature analysis and basic categorization. This again points to use of emotional appeals and, in addition, that associations should be intuitively deductible. According to ELM this requires communication that is treated in the right hemisphere of the brain. Such communication should be non-content visual or symbolic material that provides the individual with pleasant, indirect associations with the product and favorable inferences about its merits (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004).

Accepting the existence of implicit learning does not mean that attitude change can be induced without obstacles as the level of attention can shift within nanoseconds, and often does so (Heath, 2001a). In addition, due to perceptual filtering not all stimuli are actually perceived by the senses (Rose, 1992). Perceptual distortions can happen because the distinction between figure and ground is unclear or because the elements in the advertisements do not support learning of positive associations. Relating this to brand communications, this means that showing a big photograph of a famous model (maybe even scarcely dressed) and limiting the focus on the brand might trigger good recall and

attention, but no brand linkage and association because the perceptual filter takes in the model and leaves the brand out.

B2B low attention processing

As we have stated in the above, the use of low involvement marketing communication based on low attention learning seems to be very relevant also in industrial markets. The following case study is an attempt to illustrate that the possibilities for use of communication aimed at low attention processing is large in such markets. The chosen case is the European plumbing and heating pump (PHP) market, a typical industrial market.

The Plumbing and Heating Pump Market

Domestic heating pumps are usually installed in single or twin family houses in order to facilitate circulation of hot water for radiant heating. The European market is dominated by two large players (Wilco and Grundfos). In addition, a number of smaller players are also present in the market (e.g. DAB, Biral, Smedegaard, Myson). Related to this market is further a number of companies (e.g. Jung, Vortex, KSB, Flygt/ITT) manufacturing pumps for related building services applications.

In the PHP market, products are sold from the manufacturer to an installer through a wholesaler, and then again to the end user. Typically, end users do not have any brand preferences but just ask the installer to fix the heating system. Therefore, brand choice decisions tend to take place at the installer level. To reach installers, manufacturers have to go through a wholesaler and wholesalers are, accordingly, an important constituent of

the marketing channel in this industry. Still, direct communication towards the installer to create positive attitudes is important especially when the manufacturer pursues a pull strategy. In the following, only communication from manufacturer to installer is studied.

Level of involvement in the B2B plumbing market

As discussed above, high involvement purchases are complex and search oriented, whereas low involvement purchases are purchases that are of minimal personal importance. Relating this to the B2B plumbing market, we have to consider whether the purchase of PHP can be regarded as involving because it is complex, and the pumps are so different on physical attributes that a choice between brands can be made on the basis of an evaluation of these physical attributes. We also have to consider whether the purchase of PHP can be expected to be of personal importance to the individual purchaser or of importance in relation to achieving organizational goals.

MacInnis and Jaworski (1989) emphasize the influence of ability and opportunity to process brand information on the processing levels that are described in their theory. . Ability is, among other things, based upon education and product interest/knowledge. As regards installers, the educational level is low and we therefore find it safe to assume that willingness to read and process complicated information is rather small. Opportunity to process the information is also expected to be at a low level. This is because trade publications in which advertisements are typically placed often are studied while doing several other tasks at the same time like for example eating lunch and communicating with colleagues. In addition, the amount of money involved in buying pumps is small and the financial risk, accordingly, limited. The professional risk of choosing the wrong pump also seems to be limited as the end user is not able to evaluate whether another pump

could have been a better choice. Therefore, the personal and organizational importance of the purchase is low. It further can be argued that the ability and willingness to process information regarding PHP on a level that enables the installer to distinguish between pumps on the basis of physical attributes may be rather low even though one could argue that PHPs are search and not experience goods. Accordingly, purchase of PHPs by installers in many cases can be classified as low involvement purchases and marketing communication should, therefore be targeted at the right hemisphere and involve emotional appeals that can be learned through low attention processing.

Methodology

To test whether advertising for PHPs target low attention processing a content analysis of advertisements for PHP was carried out. The methodology is based on recommendations in Neuman (2003). Based on numbers of PHP installers, one larger, one medium size, and one smaller European market were chosen to control for geographical differences. Markets with well-established traditions within PHP applications, in which the largest manufactures were known to have awareness close to 100%, were chosen. This criterion was based on the hypothesis that markets with established traditions, high competition, and well established brands would emphasize affect-based advertising, or at least “better” advertising. The three selected markets were: Germany (approx. 40,000 PHP installer firms), Great Britain (approx. PHP 20,000 installer firms), and Denmark (approx. 5.000 installer firms).

In all three markets, one trade publication with large circulation was selected for review.

In Germany the magazine ‘SBZ’ with an average publication number of 30,500 and 22 yearly issues was chosen. In Great Britain ‘PHAM News’ with 28,000 copies and 10

yearly issues was chosen. In Denmark 'HVAC magasinet' with approx 8,000 copies and 13 issues a year was chosen. A period from January 2004 to October 2004 was reviewed, and only full-page or double-spread ads were reviewed.

Unfortunately PHAM news had no relevant advertisements within the market segment, and the review was therefore limited to 'SBZ' and 'HVAC magasinet'. As the number of pump advertisements (11) was considered too small, also advertisements for related products and PHP accessories were included. The products covered in extension to pumps were: radiator thermostats, pipes, piping isolation, valves, valve-motors, heating controls, meters and filters. These products were selected because we find it safe to assume that the purchasing behavior regarding these products is similar to the purchasing behavior for PHPs. Also advertising with no specific product reference, but from companies known to be within the above-specified business was included in the study. Fully redundant advertisements were only taken into consideration once. In total, 48 ads were found (33 from 'SBZ' and 15 from 'HVAC magasinet'). The 48 ads represented 21 different brands.

The advertisements were evaluated independently by the two authors. The advertisements were evaluated in terms of their ability to induce low attention processing. In advertisements targeted at low attention processing, an important goal is the learning of associations between the brand and a positive feeling. It is thus important that such advertisements display the brand and (positive) emotional appeals. As perceptions are stored more or less "as is", it is further important, that the distinction between figure and ground is clear. The evaluation of the advertisements accordingly consisted of an evaluation of the visibility of the brand and the use of (positive) emotional content. The

objective of the analysis was to identify the level of low attention processing capabilities available in the ads. Such processing takes place in the right hemisphere of the brain where imagery is also processed. Therefore, mainly the imagery used in the advertisements was taken into consideration. The ads were analyzed in two steps. First, general associations that the individual ad represents were listed. The purpose of this exercise was to estimate whether the message in the ad was intuitively understandable. Amount of cognitive processing necessary for understanding the message was assessed using an adaptation of the MacInnis and Jaworski (1989) framework. Level of cognitive processing was, accordingly, assigned into one of three categories: Mainly affect-based (A), immediately understandable message (B), and cognitive processing necessary (C). After this, the advertisements were checked for the amount of positive or negative emotional content, comparing with Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) list of 18 feelings (love, hate, fear, joy, boredom, anxiety, pride, anger, disgust, sadness, sympathy, lust, ecstasy, greed, guilt, elation, shame, and awe) to assure that a sufficient range of feelings were considered. Only associations that were relatively obvious were listed, e.g. the associations or meaning of individual colors, typography, shapes etc. was not taken into consideration.

Advertising appeals in the plumbing market

The two authors mainly agreed on the judgments of clarity in figure and ground, amount and direction of emotional content, and amount of cognitive capacity required to understand the connection between appeal and brand. Disagreements were regarding the exact type of emotional content. These disagreements were not considered important in the overall analysis of the advertisements.

In the analysis concerning clarity of figure and ground and emotional appeals used, only eight of the advertisements analyzed displayed the corporate brand and not a specific product as the primary message. 24 ads used the specific product as the main image. Positive emotional appeals were used in 18 advertisements whereas negative emotional appeals were used in 8 advertisements mainly in the form of frightening animals. Only in five of the eight advertisements displaying the brand as the primary message, a positive emotional appeal was also present. In one advertisement there seemed to be no emotional appeal and in two advertisements, the emotional appeal used was negative (boredom).

These results show that in the PHP market, low attention learning of positive associations with the brand is not supported by a clear distinction of figure and ground combined with a positive appeal. And it is surprising that in two advertisements, the emotional appeal seems to work against the probable goal of the advertisement.

Considering the amount of cognitive processing needed, we found that 28 ads could be categorized as needing a high level of motivation and cognitive capacity and thus attention focused on the ad (level C). 12 ads were considered to have so much emotional content that they would be well processed even with moderate attention and capacity (level B). Only eight ads were evaluated to fit into level A needing very little or no attention to store a correct message. In addition, from these eight advertisements, three had a strong risk of communicating negative feelings and two other ads had a high degree of product focus. These results indicate that advertisements in this market do not consider that their receiving audience may not be motivated to process information regarding this type of product. At least advertisements are not intuitively understandable.

The results of this analysis are quite clear: There is a very large difference between the appeals that should be used in this kind of advertising and the way that these advertisements use imagery and appeals. Only three out of 48 advertisements used positive emotional appeals with a clear display of the brand enabling the customer to learn a positive association between the two.

Conclusion and Managerial Implications

In this paper, we have stated a case that it is relevant for marketing managers in industrial markets to consider that their marketing communications may not always be processed cognitively but rather at low attention. Low attention processing is based on affective cues and learning mainly in the form of associations or storage of the stimuli received.

Therefore, emotional appeals and a clear distinction between figure and ground are important in industrial marketing communications for products in which the buyer is not involved. It seems evident that associations with the brand can only be created if the brand is clearly visible and, consequently, such visibility is important in advertisements for low involvement products also in industrial markets.

In the study presented in this paper, we looked into print advertising targeted at the plumbing and heating pump market. Even though the analysis was subjective and limited to a narrow product range in a limited number of countries, the picture was so clear that we find it safe to say that marketing communications in this market certainly does not take low attention processing into consideration in advertisement creation. We base this statement on the fact that in the majority of the ads, the product and not the brand was in focus, positive emotional appeals were used only to a limited extent, and often, the

message was not immediately understandable but required reading and comprehension of text in the ad.

Consequently, we must conclude that marketing communications in B2B markets could be more efficient if firms considered whether communication for the specific product is likely to be processed at high or low attention and to use this knowledge in design of marketing communications. This means that marketing communications related to low involvement products should be tailored for low attention processing which means that the stimuli are stored directly as perceived or as associations. Therefore, marketing communications for low involvement products should be easily perceptible and affect-based. This again entails that marketing communications in industrial markets should considered far more focus on the brand rather than technical features of the products and use of imagery that creates positive associations than seems to be the case today.

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Figure 1: Models of affect in Advertising

