

A review of:
Persuasive Advertising: Evidence-based Principles
J. Scott Armstrong (Ed.), Palgrave Macmillan, 2010

Philip Gendall

Persuasive Advertising is the result of 16 years of reading and research by Scott Armstrong and his collaborators, Gerry Lukeman and Sandep Patnaik. Their aim was to evaluate what is known about persuasion in advertising and then translate their findings into evidence-based principles that would guide development of more effective advertisements. The result is a comprehensive summary of more than 3,000 empirical studies and 50 books that is well-written and thoughtfully presented. It is hard not to be impressed by the scale of the enterprise and the clarity of its exposition.

Armstrong nails his colours to the mast in the Preface, which is headed by a quote from Bill Bernbach: “Advertising is fundamentally persuasion,” and an underlying assumption throughout the book is that advertising is a powerful force that persuades people to act. If you share this belief, you will find much evidence in the book to support your view. Personally, I am not so convinced, for reasons that I will explain.

Armstrong believes that advertising is a powerful, persuasive force, so powerful in fact that it can determine the success or failure of a product, or even a whole enterprise. Thus, Song Airlines’ failure is attributed to the fact that it “ignored the fact that their new airline was a utilitarian service and instead treated it as hedonic in their advertising”. Similarly, the demise of Digital Equipment Corporation is ascribed to its advertising, which listed features rather than benefits. There are many reasons why products and businesses fail or succeed – management competence, cash flow, timing, luck – advertising may be a contributing factor, but the assumption that advertising is primarily responsible is, in my opinion, overrated (or, at least, not substantiated in the examples provided).

Armstrong’s review of published work is very extensive; most of it is quite recent – published in the last 20 years - but some of the empirical studies are more dated and were conducted in the 1950s or 1960s. Their results may still be relevant, but advertising is a social phenomenon and, like all social phenomena, is subject to change over time. Some motivations such as fear, greed, anxiety, a need for reassurance, are probably just as relevant now as they were 50 years ago. But today’s consumers are not the same as consumers of the 19650 and 1960s; they are more sophisticated and better readers of advertising than their parents or grandparents. Consequently, the current relevance of some of the early research quoted by Armstrong is debatable. The problem is knowing which findings still apply and which do not, a point the authors could have explored further.

With some qualifications about the value of different types of evidence, the evidence of a particular type is given similar weight. Thus, the results of a laboratory study of 100 US university students’ perceptions often receive the same attention as a large, field experiment involving actual behaviour. Consequently, the narrative gives little or no sense of the quality of the different studies reported on; the reader has to assume that Armstrong’s assessment of the relative merits of the various findings accurately reflects this. More importantly, most of the evidence presented is based on recall, intentions or other cognitive measures, rather than

measures of behaviour. Armstrong argues there is good evidence that these cognitive measures are strongly correlated with actual behaviour, but this view is not universally shared, nor is there unanimous agreement on the direction of causation.

Another problem with many of the studies Armstrong reviews is how the constructs tested were executed. This is an issue for any research that involves the execution of an abstract construct such as fear or humour. Some experimental stimuli are unequivocal: if one treatment includes the price of the product and the other does not, there is no doubt about the cause of any observed effect. But if one advertisement is a 'humorous' one and another is not, what can we say if the first advertisement is less effective than the second? Can we say that humour does not work? Perhaps. But how do we know if the first advertisement was actually funnier than the first, and even if it was, how do we know that a more humorous advertisement (a better executed ad) would not have been more effective? Furthermore, if the first advertisement was more effective, how do we know what, specifically, will be effective in a different situation?

In fact, Armstrong emphasises the importance of context, or conditions, in the application of the principles he outlines. However, many of the principles require subjective judgement of the conditions ('Do not violate taste or standards'), some of the principles are tautological ('Use power words if they fit the product') and some appear contradictory ('Use high prices to connote high quality' and 'When quality is high, do not emphasise price'). Unfortunately, for those faced with the task of developing an advertising campaign, context is the enemy of advertising principles. If 'principles' are heavily context dependent, are they really principles? This is not a criticism of what Armstrong's book sets out to do, but rather a caution that likening its principles to the ubiquity of Newton's law of gravity, as Armstrong does, is drawing too long a bow.

However, these are all relatively minor issues compared to what seems to me the book's most glaring oversight. This is the complete absence of any reference to the work of Andrew Ehrenberg or, apart from one mention in an appendix, the work of John Philip Jones, or of any suggestion that there may be an alternative view of the way in which advertising works. Ehrenberg's 'weak' theory of advertising proposes that advertising 'works' by reinforcing and maintaining behaviour rather than by persuasion, the key element of the 'strong' theory of advertising. Jones challenges some of Ehrenberg's claims, but also argues that effective advertising for fast moving consumer goods is better explained by the weak theory than by the strong one, and that persuasion happens less often than many advertisers believe. These views are supported by a substantial body of empirical evidence that Armstrong does not mention.

Jones suggests that differences in the style of American and British advertising and the attitudes of practitioners in the two countries may explain why advertising works differently in the two countries. But if he is right, and advertising does work differently in the United States and Great Britain, then principles of persuasive advertising may be limited in their jurisdiction. However, this does not explain why none of Jones's single source research on advertising effectiveness is considered in Armstrong's book, particularly as Jones does not argue that persuasion is unimportant in advertising.

I accept that this is a book on persuasive advertising, aimed primarily at an American audience, but even so it is hard to imagine any serious review of advertising effects that ignores the work of Ehrenberg and Jones and the weak theory of advertising, and this seems

an odd decision for such a reflective task. Nevertheless, this is a very interesting book; wide ranging, scholarly, but nicely written, and absorbing for anyone with an interest in advertising. However, as a summary of evidence-based principles of advertising it is incomplete. Ignoring the substantial body of evidence that challenges the view of advertising as strongly persuasive does a disservice to those who have never considered the alternative. Even if you reject the views of Ehrenberg and Jones, a comprehensive review of advertising studies should at least present these alternative views and allow readers to make up their own minds.

Philip Gendall is a Professor in the Department of Communication, Journalism and Marketing, Massey University