

Animals in advertising: Love dogs? Love the ad! [☆]

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Abstract

Advertisers frequently use animals in ads, but little academic research focuses on consumer reactions to their use. This study uses the heuristic–systematic model (HSM) to examine consumer response to animal companions in advertisements. Specifically, HSM serves as the theoretical foundation for testing the effects of animal heuristic cues on the formation of attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intention. In the current study, the presence of the dog increases heuristic processing, concurrent processing, and ultimately attitude toward the ad. The article proposes managerial implications and avenues for future research.

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1. Introduction

Animals often appear in advertisements, either in real or cartoon form. Past winners in *USA Today's* Ad Meter research include Pepsi commercials featuring flying geese and dancing bears, as well as Budweiser ads with ferrets, frogs, and lizards (Kim, Lim, and Bhargava, 1998). In the last four years, the top Ad Meter commercials feature animals, with almost one in five Super Bowl commercials in the past decade featuring an animal: Clydesdale horses, sheep, a zebra, a donkey, baboons, monkeys, a cat, and several varieties of dogs (Horovitz, 2003a,b, 2004, 2005, 2006). The use of animals in advertising implies that, by associating a brand with an attractive cue/stimulus, advertisers can favorably influence consumers' attitudes, even if the stimulus does not relate to the product and provides no product information (Kim, Lim, and Bhargava, 1998). Many advertising

executives appear to believe that animals get attention, and they do not need research to confirm this proposal (Croke, 1992).

In Super Bowl commercials, the animals generally have a leading role in the storyline; these commercials often involve humor. This article investigates whether or not animals (specifically, animal companions) are successful in print ads. The article explores the effect that animal companions have on consumers' information processing styles and on their attitudes toward the ad and the brand. The study also evaluates the impact that attitude toward pets has on ad processing and ad effects.

2. Background

2.1. The human–animal bond

Pets are found in over 69 million U.S. homes; love, companionship, company, and affection are primary benefits people derive from sharing their lives with their pets, and 92% of pet owners view their pets as family members (American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 2006). With almost two-thirds of U.S. households having at least one pet, pets represent a large and growing market (Dale, 2005). Spending by U.S. consumers on their 164 million dogs and cats has doubled in the past decade to \$36 billion in 2005 and an estimated \$38.4 billion in 2006 (American Pet Products Manufacturers

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Association, 2006). With these trends, marketers recognize the importance of animal companions in the lives and experiences of consumers (Aylesworth, Chapman, and Dobscha, 1999).

Animal companions often serve as extensions of a consumer's self (Belk, 1988), and animal companions affect the social identity of the owner, as well as the owner's self perceptions (Sanders, 1990). Hirschman's (1994) seminal article suggests that animals may also act as friends and family members. Research shows that animal companions enhance consumers' well-being through the medical and psychological benefits of pet-relating consumption experiences (American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 2006). Holbrook et al. (2001) conclude that pets provide opportunities for deeply involving experiences; for example, to appreciate nature and wildlife, for inspiration, to be playful, to be altruistic and nurturing. Using a photo-essay approach, Holbrook et al. (2001) illustrate the warm and enduring companionship pets offer and the ways in which humans love pets, treat pets as family members, and deeply mourn pets when their lives end. Advertisers often attempt to tap this human–animal bond when they use animals in persuasive messages.

2.2. Animals and advertising

Marketing promotions regularly use animals as visual symbols, ranging from the AFLAC duck to the Energizer Bunny to the Taco Bell Chihuahua (Feldhamer et al., 2002). Often, consumers' awareness of the animal link to the brand is higher than that for advertisements starring human celebrities (Hoggan, 1989). Despite their widespread use in advertising, however, little academic research is available on this topic. When it is available, such research focuses only on studies using animals as stimuli to explore hypotheses regarding classical conditioning or the effects of pictures on persuasion (Kim et al., 1998; Miniard et al., 1991).

Lerner and Kalof (1999) examine the use of animals as cultural symbols in television commercials. They study six primary themes in the portrayal of animals: as loved ones, as symbols, as tools, as allegories, as nuisances, and as part of nature. Phillips (1996) hypothesizes that animal characters proliferate in advertising because animal characters transfer meanings to the brands. If most consumers associate positive cultural meanings with specific animal characters, advertisers can exploit those meanings (Phillips, 1996).

Spears et al. (1996, p. 90) suggest that, when advertising uses animals, “consumers are influenced by both the symbolic meanings that have been culturally assigned to that animal as well as the physical attractiveness and likeability of how the animal is portrayed.” Their analysis of print advertisements featuring animals reveals that advertisers associate particular animals with particular product categories.

2.3. Heuristic–systematic model of persuasive communication (HSM)

The heuristic–systematic model (HSM) is a dual-process model that is useful for explaining how individuals process

information in persuasive messages and helps clarify the influence of animal companions in advertisements on consumer attitudes toward the ad and the brand. The HSM posits that people can process information systematically or heuristically and that these are qualitatively different modes of processing (Todorov et al., 2002). According to the HSM, individuals are cognitive misers and expend effort on a cognitive task only when they have sufficient motivation and resources to do so (Chaiken and Maheswaran, 1994). Highly motivated individuals engage in systematic processing by making an effort to analyze and understand relevant information. Less motivated individuals base their decisions on simple decision rules (heuristics). These heuristic processors use mental shortcuts in lieu of engaging in issue-relevant thinking to form a judgment. Many people process messages this way, judging their validity and making decisions through the use of superficial cues such as message length, a spokesperson, or the presentation of statistical data (Griffin et al., 2002). Such heuristics often derive from experience and have empirical validity.

HSM allows both systematic and heuristic processing to occur. Depending on the level of an individual's involvement with the message content, heuristic and systematic processing can proceed concurrently, or one mode may dominate. Additivity is the concurrent occurrence of heuristic and systematic processing. Additivity shows through the generation of both heuristic cue-related and attribute-related thoughts (Chaiken and Maheswaran, 1994).

Empirical research notes the role of both systematic and heuristic processing as a mediator of advertising's effect on brand attitudes (see MacKenzie and Spreng, 1992 for a review). Because the HSM presents two different but intertwined routes to persuasion, HSM is important for understanding the factors that determine when brand attitudes might be influenced by consumers' diligent processing of advertising information and when they might be influenced primarily by cues that trigger heuristic processing (MacKenzie and Spreng, 1992). The study here investigates the use of animal companions as advertising cues that should induce a heuristic processing strategy. Although little research is available for guiding a heuristic view of persuasion, individuals often agree or disagree with a message on the basis of their reactions to cues such as communicator credibility and mood (Chaiken, 1980).

While marketers are beginning to study the animals-and-advertising link, this area remains fertile ground for research attention. The majority of published research is qualitative in nature. Quantitative research can also add to understanding in this area. Aylesworth et al. (1999, p. 388) suggest that exploring the “effect of using animals in advertising on constructs such as attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand, and memorability are areas in which both researchers and practitioners should have a keen interest.”

3. Theoretical concepts and hypotheses

The current study extends research on the use of animals and animal companions in ads by applying the HSM model of persuasion in order to illustrate the effects of heuristic

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