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Reply to the Commentaries on "Evidence-Based Advertising"

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Abstract

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Reply to Professor Carlson

I would extend Professor Carlson’s idea on inviting research papers on given topics by suggesting that the invitations should be unconditional—and that they be given only to the best researchers on the topic.

Interaction among some of the current principles is, indeed, to be expected. Further experiments will reveal evidence about additional interactions. Such interactions can be built into the conditions for the principles. One of my favorite examples so far is the one related to the mixing of rational and emotional appeals.

I discussed journal peer review because it is the primary barrier to the publication of innovative and useful scientific research on advertising. Surely, the vast army of those doing research relevant to persuasion should be able to publish more than the total of 19 useful papers per year that I had estimated.

Reply to Professor Stewart

I remember how excited I was when reading Stewart and Furse’s (1986) book many years ago. It analyzed good data on the effectiveness of 1,059 tested TV commercials. The book supported a number of generalizations, while other commonly accepted generalizations were called into question. It led to similar research by others on other data sets. But most important, in my opinion, was that the analysis of non-experimental data, even when properly conducted—as it was by Professor Stewart and his colleagues—and even with much data, is of only limited use for drawing conclusions about complex phenomena, such as advertising. The problem has been documented in other fields, such as medicine (Kabat 2008). Although non-experimental research is currently quite popular in advertising, marketing, economics, and other fields, I have come to regard it as an inefficient and often misleading approach to discovering new knowledge.

Professor Stewart correctly identifies how the inclusion of conditions leads to many advertising principles. There are 195 now and I expect that this number will grow.

Is it practical to use many principles? It has been quite successful in medicine and forecasting (e.g., see foreprin.com), so why not in advertising? Of course, it can add much time during the creative process. Assume that 50 of the 195 principles are relevant to a given advertising situation. This means that advertisers could apply their creativity to each of these 50 principles when creating ads for a campaign. Surely that would foster more creativity as it helps one to think of an advertisement from several points of view. As with any rational decision, one would want to weigh the costs and benefits.

The advertising principles can also be used to evaluate a set of ads for a campaign to determine which ad is most effective. We are currently involved in a project in which subjects (typically undergraduate students) complete a self-training module on adprin.com. We then provide them with pairs of print ads for the same product and brand, and then ask them to rate how well the ads apply the principles. It typically took our raters less than an hour for each pair of ads. When their ratings are used to pick the most effective ad, the predictions are more accurate

than when similar subjects make unaided predictions as to which one is most effective. In addition, the rating of adherence to principles allows them to suggest improvements in the ads.

With respect to organizational learning, in the early years of advertising, agencies used direct mail experiments to learn. They also wrote about what works based on their experience and their experiments. David Ogilvy was an advocate of research and his conclusions have held up well, although, over the years, much has been learned about the conditions under which his generalizations apply and how to most effectively apply the principles.

Reply to Professor Rossiter

Professor Rossiter discusses four topics, and I respond following his headings.

Limited conception of advertising knowledge: I am guilty as charged on this count: I have confined by my research to the topic of persuasion. But the topic is broad. McCloskey and Klamer (1995) estimated that “one-quarter of the [Gross Domestic Product] is persuasion.” The principles apply to all types of advertising, including such things as websites, press releases, guarantees, and package information. They can also be used to make persuasive presentations and reports (as shown in Appendices G and H in *Persuasive Advertising*). The principles come from research in a variety of areas, such as law and mass communications, and many of them apply to these areas.

Professor Rossiter states that, contrary to my claim, marketing and advertising books contain principles that are useful even though they are not evidence-based. He provides no evidence. For some contrary evidence, consider that among marketing professionals, those who had taken university-level marketing courses did no better in their careers than those who had not (Hunt, Chonko and Wood 1986).

Advertising knowledge consists of concepts, frameworks and principles: Agreed! We have much knowledge about techniques that are valuable to advertisers, such as the evidence-based techniques for improving creativity that are described in *PA*. In addition, there is much knowledge that goes beyond persuasion, such as for media analysis. Finally, there are other schemes for summarizing knowledge such as those provided over the years by Professor Rossiter. In view of his many contributions, I asked him to participate in the *Persuasive Advertising* book, but he declined.

The most important strategic principles are based on logic, not evidence: Given the complexity of the advertising principles, I do not see how this can be true. In addition, many of the principles are counter-intuitive.

Does logic lead to useful principles? Karl Marx, John Maynard Keynes, and advocates of many other failed programs, appealed to logic when providing advice. Unfortunately for many leading thinkers, experimental evidence conflicted with their logic.

If one claims that logic is sufficient, any advice is valid as long as it is logical in the mind of the advisor. Teachers could teach anything, politicians would have no need to know the evidence when they make laws, judges could base decisions on their opinions, and advertising executives could do as they like. And perhaps there is much of this in the world. But there is not so much in medicine as there used to be. If a physician harms a patient, the patient might successfully sue her if she failed to follow evidence-based principles.

All empirical evidence is not equal—and expert evaluation is required: I agree on the first part of this claim, as discussed it in my main paper. (Also see Chapter 2 of *PA*).

On the second point, I disagree. Professor Rossiter claims that expert evaluation is required when using the literature on persuasion, and suggests that I do not meet the minimum

level to be able to do such an evaluation. I admit to being baffled by what academics are trying to say on occasion. To guard against this, my final interpretations of the evidence, as presented in *PA*, were verified by replies from nearly all of the researchers I cited that I was able to contact. The replies were quite helpful.

Furthermore, the evidence should be clearly reported in specific terms, so that *managers* can act on them without having to rely on experts' interpretations. Professor Rossiter's opinion that the principles are vague does not hold up against the evidence. In our ongoing research, we have provided a self-training module that can be completed in less than two hours by non-experts in advertising. Given this training, they can make reasonably reliable and useful ratings of the extent to which ads follow the persuasion principles.

Professor Rossiter claims that "Managers and academic researchers can find all they need to know" by reading his publications. That reminded me of the statement by Charles H. Duell, Commissioner of the U.S. Office of Patents, who said in 1899: "Everything that can be invented has been invented" (Cerf and Navasky 1984). In contrast, I believe that we are only in the early stages with respect to evidence-based advertising.

Is Professor Rossiter's advice all one needs—or might use of the principles from *Persuasive Advertising* also contribute to the accurate selection of the most effective ads? To test this, I propose to send 98 pairs of print ads (for high-involvement utilitarian products) to Professor Rossiter and ask that he and his students assess which ad is most effective in each pair. I am willing to take a bet with Professor Rossiter that the use of the AdPrin Audit will result in a gain in accuracy when predicting which ad has the highest recall in each of the 98 ads mentioned above—or with a reasonably large set of ads for high-involvement utilitarian products proposed by the Professor. In other words, by also using the advertising principles, prediction accuracy will improve beyond that achieved by Rossiter's methods alone. Shall we say \$10,000 from each of us, with the proceeds to go to the charity of the winner's choice?

In addition, might the AdPrin Audit lead to recommendations for improvement of the ads beyond those provided by Rossiter? Here also, I would be willing to place a wager that additional useful suggestions would result from use of the AdPrin Audit.

Professor Rossiter stated that my work is a "misguided and dangerously misleading attempt over the last 10 years or so to come up with 'principles' for advertising." If he believes that, he should accept my proposed bets.

Conclusions

I believe that scientific findings on important topics such as advertising can only be helpful. My message is: *Rejoice! Academics have produced a large body of useful research, and here is how advertisers, students, consumers, government officials, and researchers can benefit.* Use these findings in addition to what you already know.

By rewarding useful contributions to management research rather than the mere act of publishing, universities could aid rather than retard scientific progress in advertising—as well as in other fields.

Finally, I raise the following questions: First, should people who teach, consult, or make decisions on advertising be aware of the evidence on persuasion? Second, should they use such evidence or rely only on their own logic?

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