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Strategic ambiguity in minority targeting

By Stefano Puntoni, Joelle Vanhamme and Ruben Visscher

Ambiguous cues in advertising offer companies the chance to reach multiple consumer segments with the one economical campaign. 'Purposeful polysemy' can indeed be an effective strategy – but it may not always deliver what it promises.

In the mid-nineties, UK grocery chain Tesco launched a targeted brand marketing campaign, a key part of which was a loyalty card – the Tesco Clubcard. The card offered customers a one per cent discount and the chance to accrue points towards benefits. However, its real value lay in the wealth of consumer information it made available to Tesco.

This data was used by Tesco to refine stock selection, display and staffing levels in different stores to reflect different consumer segments. One year after Clubcard, the company launched its *Clubcard* magazine in five different versions reflecting its consumers' lifestyle segments and, at the beginning of the decade, further segmented its loyalty cards with Baby Club, Wine Club, Healthy Living Club, and Kids Club cards. Membership boomed as consumers readily connecting with the targeted information presented to them in magazines, websites, and club-specific discounts. The Clubcard scheme has been credited with enabling Tesco to overtake Sainsbury's as the number one retailer in the UK.

Elaborate and highly targeted marketing campaigns like this say a lot about the climate in which today's companies operate. Fifty years ago advertisers could expect to target large groups of homogenous consumers with the one execution (white, middle class, Christian, Dutch-speaking, heterosexual men, for instance). Now advertisers must aim to attract multiple narrow segments reflective of a vastly more diverse society and against ferocious competition – and they have the sophisticated media tools and consumer information to do so.

For most companies, campaigns such as that of Tesco's are not feasible. Mass media continues to be the medium of choice, presenting advertisers with just one problem: how to reach numerous narrow target audiences without the cost of explicitly targeting each segment – and, in the case of a target market that is also a stigmatised minority, without alienating non-target consumer groups.

Enter strategic ambiguity: ads that use ambiguous cues to target a heterogeneous group of consumers. Ambiguous ad cues are open to interpretation and can thus lead to what we call 'purposeful polysemy': the creation of multiple meanings to the same message. In theory, because the cues are covert, stigmatised minorities can also be targeted without alienating non-target groups. Yet, according to our findings, this is not always how things work out in practice.

Ambiguous cues

One minority group in society both stigmatised and a popular target market for advertisers are gay consumers. Companies targeting the gay consumer market can choose to do so using either explicit appeals, implicit approaches that include readily recognisable and unambiguous gay symbolism such as a rainbow, or ambiguous so-called 'gay window' advertisements.

'Gay window advertising' is the term used in literature for the covert targeting of gay consumers through ambiguous cues. Covert targeting in mass media uses subtle elements to reach their audience – either to appeal to both gay consumers and other consumer groups, or to avoid negative repercussions among heterosexual men who do not perceive these subtle elements as a reference to gay culture.

Strategic ambiguity in minority targeting (continued)

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Even for gay men, these cues are intended to remain ambiguous.

A common example is an advert that does not include a female and includes a partially dressed, muscular male with sexually ambiguous appeal. Because adverts today are overflowing with heterosexual sex cues, a gay window ad need only have an absence of heterosexual cues to look different and ambiguous cues that could be construed as depicting gay culture.

Our research focused on the response of the gay consumer target and the heterosexual male non-target market to subtle and ambiguous visual cues in the form of ambiguous portrayals of models. Because heterosexual men show more bias towards gay men than heterosexual women, this sub-culture presented a strong test of the effectiveness of covert minority targeting as a means of avoiding negative repercussions.

We know from studies of unambiguous advertising that viewers who perceive themselves as belonging to an advert's target market – and particularly a minority target market – display favourable attitudes towards the ad. We also know that when people perceive that they do not belong to the target audience, they respond negatively – and this response is stronger when the target group is a controversial minority.

Negative repercussions for non-target groups are considered one of the major impediments to overt minority targeting – and one of the main arguments supporting ambiguous or covert minority targeting. Explicit cues are likely to be perceived and responded to negatively by the culturally dominant group, while ambiguous cues often go unnoticed – a fact that can be explained by their frequent lack of detailed knowledge of the sub-culture. Indeed, studies on gay window advertising confirm that heterosexual men frequently don't spot ambiguous gay cues.

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While these perspectives are what give ambiguous advertising its lustre – the promise of positive target market effects without inducing negative responses in the non-target market – our findings painted a slightly more complex picture.

Studies from social cognitive psychology explain our interpretations of ambiguous social information as stemming from the applicability of features of pre-existing knowledge to the features of incoming information, combined with how accessible this pre-existing knowledge is. Importantly for our study, these interpretations of ambiguous cues often occur unconsciously.

Our sense of self has a high degree of accessibility and often drives how we make sense of social information. A key part of this sense of self is shaped by our sexual identity. When our sexual identity is distinctive and places us in a minority group, its influence on our sense of self even greater.

For gay consumers then, their sexual identity and associated sub-cultural schemas play important roles in how they interpret information. Ambiguous cues in gay window advertising could thus resonate more with consumers from the gay sub-culture than other groups – and create more positive responses to the ads. This is indeed what we found.

Gay window ads elicited strong positive attitudes and emotional responses from the target group – despite gay consumers not being

aware of the ambiguous cues – and a stronger reaction than the mainstream versions of the ads in which they were not the primary target audience.

One could thus conclude that if the alternative to an ambiguous ad campaign were a mainstream ad campaign and the primary target audience the gay minority, advertisers would do better to choose the ambiguous campaign. However, unfortunately this success comes at a price.

Heterosexual participants experienced more negative attitudes and emotional responses to the gay window ads than the mainstream versions of the ads – even while not being aware of the ad's target audience.

It could be that these negative effects are a result of the fact that most ads are designed to appeal to consumers who identify with mainstream culture and that absence of these cues alone would induce less positive ad evaluations – but this hypothesis would need further research.

Conclusions

The results demonstrate that 'purposeful polysemy' as a communication strategy can be very effective in targeting consumers who belong to a minority group. The target audience responded positively and nobody identified gay people as the target of the ad – a key objective of an ambiguous approach.

Despite the negative response from heterosexual consumers, it could be hypothesised that an explicit ad would have induced a stronger negative reaction. If avoiding a backlash for the brand from homophobic or heterosexual males was the goal, this was achieved to some extent – few people observing the ad spotted the intended target.

However, if the objective of the strategy was to catch two birds with one stone: to make the ads appeal to both gay and heterosexual audiences – gay window advertising was not successful. A trade-off could be seen, where the ads most liked by gay consumers were the ads liked least by the heterosexual non-target group. If purposeful polysemy thus delivers positive results among a small minority target market but negative results among a larger non-target market, managers should be careful before choosing this strategy.

Of course – in some contexts, purposeful polysemy may be less likely to produce negative non-target market effects than in others. However, purposeful polysemy per se cannot always deliver the "win-win" effect for companies we sometimes assume it can. Advertisers should conduct pretesting before engaging in it. ■

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