

Consumers Attention and Interactivity towards Online Visual Advertisements: The Graphic Designers' Peremptory Challenges.

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Abstract:

Although new media graphic design is relatively new in Nigeria, compared to advertising, their scale, scope and immediacy have increased substantially with the diffusion of new technologies like mobile network, cable television and the Internet. This rapid development of information and communication technologies has enabled easy and rapid interaction between the graphic designer, advertiser and consumer. As a result, designers and advertisers are increasingly relying on various modes of interactive technology in new media to advertise and promote their products and services in Nigeria, thus, forcing the traditional design and advertising practices into relative obsolescence. In studying new media graphic design and advertising, this paper appraises online ads in Nigeria to highlight how designers and advertisers can effectively deliver messages to targeted audience. The major new media ad formats and their peculiar advantages over the traditional media are equally highlighted in the context of current design and advertising trend in general.

Keywords: New Media, Graphics Design Formats, Advertising Trend, Online Advertising.

1.0 Introduction.

Graphic design practice has evolved from the traditional to electronic where all visual languages and symbols are created digitally for effective communication. And, the tools needed for the practice of the graphic design profession has relocated from tangible design studio within the walls of a building to virtual studio in the digital enclave of the computer; offering more facilities and consequently greater flexibility for creative output within a far shorter period than previously possible. This, in some sense aligns with Brian, (2013) assertion that, in times of turbulence and rapid change, one must constantly be re-evaluating oneself relative to the new realities.

According to Warner (2009) graphic design is principally about visual communication, information and persuasion using print and electronic media. While Flew (2002) explains that graphic design is the business of putting effective words and images on paper or air waves with the skill that can provoke and persuade a consumer to action. On the other hand, advertising is as a form of controlled communication that attempts to persuade customers, through use of a variety of strategies and appeals, to buy or use a particular product or service. This, in a way is not quite different from Aren's (2006) submission that advertising is a paid non-personal communication from an identified sponsor using mass media to persuade or influence an audience

Although the central goal of advertising has not changed – to persuade consumers to purchase a product or service – the media environment into which advertisement is placed in Nigeria has continued to change; and as a result of the trend, the nature of advertising has continued to change as well. New Media has been defined as media that are interactive and integrate computers with multimedia (Stafford, 2006). He pointed out that today new media are ubiquitous. New media types include but not limited to online commercials, floating ads, expandable ads, video ads, interactive ads, expandable banner ads, podcast, ghost ads, and video ads with blogs.

Many new channels of mass communication were developed during the later part of 20th century, exposing the public to an ever increasing number of mediated messages, Lombard, (2009). Everyday citizens are confronted with hundreds of graphic images and advertising appeals delivered via television, magazines, newspapers, billboards, e-mail spam, World Wide Web banners and pop-up boxes and more. As a result of exposure to these messages, some

argue that consumers have developed a more sophisticated understanding of mass media and of advertising Campbell,(2000). This development has challenged designers and advertisers to create more attraction through captivating visual images and response to their messages. The consumer's role has changed and until the graphic designer and advertiser acknowledges it; they might not effectively affect the consumer with their messages.

Today, more traditional advertising agencies have embraced interactive technologies and a new genre of graphic design; advertising and marketing communication agencies are emerging in Nigeria. However, the question is can the new media advertisement enhance efficiency in message delivery and consumer response, especially when the same approach to advertisement is adopted by both the ad designer and advertiser?

The Internet and other interactive technologies make it possible to create ads that are not only more targeted, but more personal. Although the Internet, and other interactive media, has been touted as more powerful, responsive and customizable than traditional media, the empirical evidence suggests that consumers respond to some of the advertisements on the Internet in the same way they respond to advertising in more traditional media. Hoffman, (2010).

2.0 Review of Concepts

2.1 The Interactive Media

Stafford, (2006) defines interactive media as media that provide the opportunity to instantaneously advertise, execute a sale, and collect payment. With the introduction of the Internet, the interaction between and among consumers and advertisers is becoming more pronounced. Consumers can collect and provide information by searching and navigating through commercial Web sites, they can post and customize their preferences and also communicate with other customers as well as product and service providers. Similarly, advertisers can use the information obtained from customers to design their advertisement messages as well as to improve future products or services.

Interactive advertising gives customers more control by giving them a range of choices, and it produces a sense that the communication is more personal than traditional media ads because it simulates a person-to-person interaction through the new media devices. Lombard, (2009) characterizes the future of consumer marketing in a way that consumers, in receiving marketing messages or doing e-business, will expect to be treated as individuals, with their preferences catered for. That future is not farfetched as (www.mypoints.com), for instance, sends personalized e-mails to targeted consumers asking them to visit a site and purchase a product. Based on click behaviour, the marketer can observe whether the consumer visited the advertised site and completed a product purchase.

Interaction between customers and advertisers has become a commonplace in marketing communication. Central to the idea of interactivity is the concept of control, either of elements of the physical world or of information. In the advertising world, Belch, (2007) state that,

Whereas in traditional advertising, the presentation is linear and the consumer is passively exposed to product information, for interactive advertising, the consumer instead actively traverses the information. The pieces of information the consumer sees depends on where the consumer wants to go

He explains that interactive advertising in the advertising industry often means simply advertising using new media and on the internet (or "online advertising). The use of interactive advertising through new media such as the Internet draws attention to the visual content of any graphic presentation and also the contrast between traditional and new media advertising in the market place. Traditional approaches to advertising practice implicitly assume that advertising is something a firm does to the consumer by simply creating an appealing visual imagery intermixed with persuasive copy aimed at a behavioral response. New media interactive advertising makes it clear that this is a limited view of advertising and highlights the need to understand what consumers do to advertising. This will ultimately equip the advertising designer and advertiser in the quest to persuade the consumer to positive response.

2.2 Consumers' Role in New Media Advertising

In the traditional setting, graphic designer and advertiser control the nature of ads consumers see, when and how; while, of course, consumers always have the option of not paying attention to, becoming involved with or ignoring the ad. In the case of the Internet, however, the control has shifted (for the most part) from the designer and advertiser to the consumer Rodgers, (2008). Perhaps one way to think about how consumers process advertisements in an interactive environment is to distinguish between aspects of the Internet that are consumer-controlled.

While some researchers and practitioners argue that consumers have more control on the Internet than do the advertisers, some have gone as far as to argue that interactive advertising techniques will not work unless practitioners “step into the shoes” of and approach the Internet from the consumer’s vantage point Cross, (2010). This makes sense if we consider that most of the Internet users typically log onto the Internet with some sort of plan or goal in mind. Therefore the initiation of Internet use is completely under the consumer’s control. In addition, the user is in the driver’s seat throughout the entire online experience – interacting visual images, websites, ads, advertisers, other consumers and so on. These facts make it easier to imagine what challenges graphic designers and advertisers must consider in creating and hoisting ads in Nigeria environment.

2.2.1 In Consideration of Motives

The reasons consumers use the Internet is critical for understanding how any level of new media ad effectiveness can be achieved; especially considering the percentage availability of Internet facilities for potential customers in a developing country like Nigeria. Self-selection of sources from which motives are obtained and processed, is an increasingly important consideration for ads to be effective.

A motive is a reason for doing something; an inner desire to actively fulfil a need or want Hornby, (2008). Thus an Internet motive can be defined as an inner drive to carry out an online activity. These motives range from shopping (usually with intend for visual representation of objects of interest), information-seeking and surfing, to communicating, social interaction and relaxation. This definition highlights the importance of an active audience. Although many more web motives can be identified and listed by different people, this paper opines that the bulk of these motives fall into four primary categories, including: shopping, researching, communicating and surfing (i.e, entertaining). Therefore, because Internet use is initiated with some specific goal in mind, we expect that Internet motives influence consumer responses to Internet advertisements.

Rodgers & Sheldon, (2009) in their investigation of five primary motives of Internet use, found that Internet motives were the most significant predictor of consumer responses. They exemplified that “information seeking” and “entertainment” motives predicted whether individuals used e-mail. Likewise, they found through regression analysis that internet motives predicted how consumers respond to online ads. The authors added, surfers, for instance, were more positive toward online ads than researchers. While researchers are naturally inclined than surfers to enter cyberspace with highly goal-oriented agenda, surfers, on the other hand are more likely to demonstrate curiosity and exploration in cyberspace. These therefore suggest that individuals would more likely than researchers click on ads found along their cyber journey. It also suggests that knowing what motivates individual to use the Internet provides insight into the types of ads and ad appeals that will attract attention and prompt response. This should be of paramount interest to graphic designers and practitioners in the Nigeria advertising industry. The point here is that the advertisers should expect to find that consumer Internet motives and mode will influence processing of new media ads; a consideration that should guide graphic designer and advertisers as well as their format choice in Nigeria.

3.0 Advertising formats and Graphic Design Appraisal

According to (Arens) 2006, all advertisement can be classified into one of five basic categories, including: product/service, public service announcement, issue, corporate and political. This is a useful classification because it can apply to any medium, including the Internet. Each of these ad types represents the general structure in which an ad is seen. That is, the ad type itself provides an indicator of the types of possible consumer response. For example, a purchase response would be expected from ads that actually sell a product or service, not from a political advert.

Belch, (2007) has found that the format of an interactive ad makes a difference in terms of how people receive and process it. The format of an ad simply refers to the manner in which it appears. In traditional media, ads are generally formatted in the same, basic fashion. For example, TV commercials appear in 30- or 60-second spots, whereas magazine ads have a half- or full-page format. Although not as common, these formats are also seen online. (e.g. Zenith Bank’s 15-seconds, fully-animated commercial) see <http://www.zenithbank.com>. At the same time, the Internet has the capacity to support a number of additional format, some of which we do not find in traditional media. According to Internet Advertising Bureau, (2012), 55% of all online ads are formatted as banners, 37% are sponsorships and 8% are formatted as hyperlinks, interstitials and pop-ups.

With the exception of sponsorships, all of these formats are certainly unique to the Internet. Even in the case if sponsorships, it has been argued that the manner in which they are formatted online is often unique compared to the format found in traditional media Rodgers, (2008). Knowing how Internet ads differ from traditional ads in terms

of formatting should add understanding to the manner in which graphic designers and advertisers create and place ads with the aim to effectively attract and elicit positive response.

3.1 Premium Internet Formats

3.1.1 Banners. Banner ads are those rectangular-shaped graphics, usually located at the top and bottom of a web page Rodgers, (2008). Although banners generally appear in horizontal position, advertisers have also experimented with vertical banners, which appear in the left- or right-hand side of the screen. Larger banners are about 18cm wide by 3cm deep (height), and smaller banners are about half as wide by 3cm deep. Banner ads have been shown to increase awareness even without click-through, and when banners are clicked on, however, attitudes appear to become more positive and purchase intention stronger Cross, (2010) than ‘unclicked’ banners.

3.1.2 Interstitials and Pop-ups. The terms “interstitial” and “pop-up” are often used interchangeably in some quarters, yet each represents different formats. Interstitials are usually full-screen ads that run in their entirety between two content pages. Pop-ups, on the other hand, appear in a separate window on top of content that is already on the user’s screen. A variation of the pop-up window is the pop-under advertisement, which opens browser window hidden under the active window. Pop-unders do not interrupt the user immediately and are not seen until the covering window is closed, making it more difficult to determine which web site opened them. This distinction is important for a number of reasons. First, unlike pop-ups, pop-unders and interstitials do not interrupt the user’s interactive experience because both tend to run while the user is on the active window. However, only interstitials appear while the user waits for a page to download. Users have less control over interstitials because there is no “exit” option to stop or delete an interstitial, which is common among pop-ups and pop-unders. In other words, with interstitials, users have to wait until the entire ad has run.

3.1.3 Sponsorships. Although no common definition of sponsorship in a traditional medium has been accepted up to this point Cross, (2010), a sponsorship in an online context can be defined as an indirect form of persuasion that allows companies to carry out marketing objectives by associating with key content Rodgers, (2008). In conventional mass media, most sponsorship tends to be simple and limited to brand name identification or, in some cases, the brand name and a brief slogan. Online sponsorships do appear in the same way (e.g., “Jumia.Com” and “Zenith Bank: In Your Best Interest”) respectively. In addition, they can appear as part of the content of a web page, or as part of a list of sponsors Rodgers, (2008).

3.1.4 Hyperlinks. A hyperlink, also sometimes referred to as a “hypertext link” is simply a highlighted word, phrase or sometimes graphic, that allows users to link to another website by simply clicking on the hyperlink. They are similar to sponsorship in that they generally take up less space than other ad formats, such as banner or pop-ups, and are generally embedded in the content itself. Of note is a particular observation that too many clickable surfaces decrease the attractiveness, friendliness and usefulness of a website or webpage Stafford, (2006). Too many hyperlinks might yield similar results.

3.1.5 Websites. Until recently, a website has been considered a “carrier” of ad formats, such as the ones highlighted above. Chen, (2003) recent conceptualization of the website as ad, and his recent measure for attitude towards website, demonstrate the importance of placing a website in a category with other ad formats. This seems logical when we consider many institutions and corporations in Nigeria are still creating websites using “shovel ware” Brill, (1999). (i.e., “shovelling” brochures and promotional pieces onto the website). This results in the corporate homepage serving the function of communicating the message, much like the function of any online ad. The graphic designer and advertiser should therefore exploit the fact that the website has a greater number of options than any other online ad format. For example, unlike the banner ads, the length of a persuasive appeal located on a webpage has no bounds Brills, (1999). Websites also afford greater opportunities to create an emotional experience. Perhaps the most significant advantage an advertiser should utilize is the manner in which websites are visited and used. For instance, users almost always seek out a website of their choice, presumably to fulfil a motive. In contrast, other interactive ad formats are often stumbled upon accidentally as in the case of “trick” banners or received unsolicited, as in the case of pop-ups. In essence, it is important for online ad designers and advertisers to articulate the format in which an interactive ad is seen because; different ad formats result in different processing and outcomes.

4.0 Conclusion:

New media graphic design and interactive advertising poses new and difficult challenges for the designer and advertiser in Nigeria. The role of the consumer in selecting advertisement, in choosing when and how to interact (if at all) will be especially important as factors in conceptualizing visuals for new media ads that will be effective in delivering its’ message. Here lies the bulk of peremptory challenges for graphic designers..

It is therefore suggested here that the graphic design concept and media format chosen to reach any target audience be considered proactively because new media and interactive advertising require that consumers not only pay attention but also respond by participation.

Finally it should be noted that advertising, conventional or interactive, does not work alone. It is only a part of a total marketing effort, such that, a product or service that is poorly positioned, overpriced, inadequately distributed, badly packaged, or inferior to competition may suffer sales decline though ineffective graphic design advertisement concepts are well conceived and professionally executed.

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