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Viewpoint Apperceptive Ads Let You Dine On 'Psychological Smorgasbord'

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Young people influenced by alcohol ads

YOUNG PEOPLE are the most influenced by alcohol advertising, particularly if they experimented with alcohol during adolescence, according to researchers at Michigan State University, East Lansing.

Celebrity and sport figure endorsements influenced young people the most. Two-fifths of the respondents in a survey of 1,227 young people said they used ads to find out which brands famous people drank.

The seven-phase study examined the content and effects of alcohol advertising. It was funded by a \$96,000 grant from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the Federal Trade Commission, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, and the Department of Transportation.

Advertising has a moderate influence on drinking behavior during the adolescent years, concluded research directors Martin Block, advertising department chairman at MSU, and Charles Atkin, professor of communications.

National advertising for alcohol totaled \$411 million in 1977, enough to buy 5,000 beer and 600 wine spots on network television. Magazines carry-

ing the most alcohol ads were *Newsweek*, *People*, *Time*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Playboy*.

"**INDIVIDUALS NOTICE** large numbers of these ads and pay close attention to between one-fourth and three-fifths of them," the report states. "Ads on television attract greater attention than magazine ads."

There is "ample opportunity for alcohol advertising to influence the cognitions, values, and behavior of the public, especially the young people," the researchers concluded.

Advertising is a significant informal source of socialization about alcohol, although the focus of most advertisements is on brand awareness rather than general information about alcohol. Audiences receive certain favorable impressions about the characteristics of drinkers from ads, but the impact isn't strong.

People who are heavily exposed to alcohol ads typically estimate that they consume an average of about two drinks more a week than people who are lightly exposed to ads.

Individuals with a heavy exposure to liquor ads tend to perceive whisky drinkers as more friendly, happy, relaxed, fun loving, sophisticated, and

successful. Likewise, those heavily exposed to beer commercials perceive beer drinkers as more adult, fun loving, young, friendly, and happy.

Advertising may contribute to the feeling that alcohol provides escape, researchers said, and more public service advertising showing the consequences of drunk driving may help reduce the effects of advertising on adolescents. It may also be helpful to use celebrities in warnings against overindulgence.

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How to Advertise

A Handbook for Small Business
By Sandra Linville Dean. Guidebook designed for the small-business owner explains the jargon and methods of buying advertising time and space, planning an ad campaign and budget, media alternatives, and what to expect when working with an ad agency. Discusses public relations agencies and media reps. Enterprise Publishing Inc., 725 Market St., Wilmington, DE 19801, 198 pp., \$12.95.

Business Forecasting for the 1980s and Beyond

Compiled by Lorna M. Daniels. Bibliography lists and abstracts 275 books and articles published on business forecasting

in the 1980s. Organized by general forecasts, forecasts of industries and subjects, forecasting methodology, and reference sources. Entries include name of book or article, publisher, address, date of publication, number of pages, and price. Publications Office: Baker Library, Harvard Business School, Boston, MA 02163, 68 pp., \$5.

How to Create and Market a Successful Seminar or Workshop

By Howard L. Shenson. Offers guidance on marketing, pricing, promoting, and selecting seminars. Explains why some seminar presenters succeed and others fail. Features a chapter on advertising and setting up an ad agency. Describes how to select a test market and capitalize on future selling opportunities. Everest House Publishers, 33 W. 60th St., New York, NY 10023, 180 pp., \$27.

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Viewpoint

Apperceptive ads let you dine on 'psychological smorgasbord'

BY HUMAYUN AKHTER, PhD Candidate University of Oklahoma, Norman and ANEES A. SHEIKH, Department of Psychology Marquette University, Milwaukee

SUBLIMINAL STIMULI, OR STIMULI BELOW the threshold of perception, were used in 1957 in Fort Lee, N.J. by independent market-

ing researcher James M. Vicary to induce people to eat popcorn and drink Coca-Cola in a now-famous movie theater experiment. Every five seconds the messages "Eat popcorn" and "Drink Coca-Cola" alternatively were flashed for .003 seconds on the screen. Vicary claimed that sales of



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popcorn increased 57.5% as a result, and Coke sales increased 18.1%. The experiment created a considerable amount of public alarm, with people fearing such advertising would reduce them to automatons. This form of advertising variously was referred to as "the super-soft sell," the "invisible sell," and "the little ad that wasn't there."

Several studies have been conducted to either repudiate or corroborate the effectiveness of subliminal stimulation in influencing human behavior since Vicary's experiment. While a definitive conclusion hasn't been reached, advertisers have tried to inject subliminal techniques of varying degrees to influence customer's buying decisions. The result has been a new form of advertising in which ads are replete with images, symbols, colors, words, and other cues that attempt to sway consumers with vague stimuli that are subject to varied interpretations.

Such advertising is erroneously labeled as subliminal because all the stimuli are presented above the threshold of perception, not below it. The most distinctive feature of these ads is the equivocality of the message. The message lends itself to multiple interpretations by the members of the target audience. The more equivocal the message, the greater the chances the audience members will rely on previous experiences or expectations to interpret and organize their impressions of the message.

A BETTER DESCRIPTION OF SUCH MESSAGES would be "apperceptive advertising." Apperception refers to ambiguous stimuli which are interpreted based on prior individual experiences. All the projective techniques described by psychologists deal with apperception through the presentation of unstructured stimuli in the form of incomplete sentences, inkblots, ambiguous pictures, and the like. Once it is recognized that these ads are apperceptive in nature, there is a wealth of literature that can be tapped in the area of projective techniques that advertisers would find relevant and profitable to peruse.

Advertisers want ads that will appeal to a broad spectrum of people. They want advertisements that are carefully designed for a particular population and leave people outside that group unaffected or even repelled. Considerable psychological literature implies it is necessary to create different stimulus situations to attract the attention of different individuals.

Since the stimuli in apperceptive advertising are primarily pictorial and ambiguous, they serve as a "psychological smorgasbord" in which the perceivers see what they are set mentally to see. However, advertisements of this nature must be constructed with great circumspection. Care must be taken that the viewer's fancy does not run wild and enmesh him or her in unpleasant themes that cause negative feelings to become associated with the product being advertised.

We currently are exploring the possibility of developing "controlled" apperceptive advertisements. They would have the advantage of appealing to an audience of widely differing backgrounds, while being sufficiently structured to avoid eliciting unintended, unpleasant reactions.

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