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How the roles of advertising merely appear to have changed

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Abstract

This article is a commentary on the theme of the 2012 ICORIA Conference held in Stockholm, which was about 'the changing role of advertising'. We propose that the role of advertising has not changed. the role of advertising has always been, and will continue to be, to sell more of the branded product or service or to achieve a higher price that consumers are willing to pay than would obtain in the absence of advertising. What has changed in recent years is the notable worsening of the academic-practitioner divide, which has seen academic advertising researchers pursuing increasingly unrealistic laboratory studies, textbook writers continuing to ignore practitioners' research appearing in trade publications and practitioner-oriented journals, and practitioners peeling off into high-sounding but meaningless jargon. also evident is the tendency to regard the new electronic media as requiring a new model of how advertising communicates and persuades, which, as the authors' textbooks explain, is sheer nonsense and contrary to the goal of integrated marketing. We provide in this article a translation of practitioners' jargon into more scientifically acceptable terminology as well as a classification of the new advertising formats in terms of traditional analogs with mainstream media advertising.

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Introduction

For some time now we have noticed a tendency for advertising practitioners and academics to talk about the "changing role of advertising." Indeed, this was the theme of the 2012 ICORIA conference in Stockholm. Perhaps perceived change has always been the case, as each new generation looks at the world as different from what went before. Much of the perceived change is due to the virtual obsession among marketers with getting their messages into the so-called "new media." The reasoning seems to be that because of the incredibly rapid growth of social media and other alternative ways of delivering advertisements, the very nature of advertising must be changing.

There is no denying the wave of new and seemingly ever-changing and evolving options for delivering marketing communications. Yet the evidence that any of this is actually an *effective* way to advertise is far from certain. As Don Schultz (2010, p. 12) put it, "The question, though, is are all these heady measures of new media a sign of a gold rush of new-and-improved advertising and marketing opportunities or simply fool's gold?" And from the practitioner's side, Rance Crain (2011, p. 14), long-time editor of the major advertising trade publication *Advertising Age* has said, "It seems to me that the more prevalent social media becomes, the less we know about the power of persuasion" and "Advertisers don't even know what the primary purpose of social media is supposed to be."

We propose that the role of advertising has *not* changed. Its role is, and always has been, to sell more of the branded product or service, or to achieve a higher price that consumers are willing to pay than would obtain in the absence of advertising. Advertising achieves its purpose, as explained in the authors' textbooks (most recently Percy and Rosenbaum-Elliott 2012), by increasing the population incidence and individual-level intensity of the two universal (and joint) communication effects: brand awareness and brand attitude or preference. In certain cases, mainly where a high-involvement direct response is sought, advertising may also be called upon to increase the supplementary communication effects of category need (for brands in a new product category or a dying one), brand purchase intention (a necessary communication effect for the success of direct-response advertisements as employed by most retailers, including online retailers) and purchase facilitation (also a standard communication objective for direct-response ads). Advertising may have changed, but its purpose and the way it works have not.

The so-called "new advertising" has been marked by two divergent and disturbing trends, one among practitioners and the other among academics. And the academic-practitioner "divide" is *itself* a worsening meta-trend. Academic advertising researchers seem to have no idea what practitioners are doing and in our experience, don't seem to care either. Witness the glaring lack of citations to trade publications such as *Advertising Age* and *Admap* in journal articles and textbooks. The very few exceptions acknowledging practitioners' work are the books by Rossiter and Percy (1987, 1997) and the British author Chris Fill (2010). On the other side of the divide, practitioners fail to acknowledge the research that is pouring out of academia. Peruse any recent issues of the above two trade publications or talk with any manager and you will see. It has ever been thus, but we sense a worsening of the situation.

In this article, we first look at the main trend among practitioners, which is the descent into "jargon" when talking about advertising and its measurement. We then look at what we call the "misfocus" among academics, which is the tendency to pursue irrelevant advertising effects in the belief that the new advertising formats do not work in the conventional manner. We conclude by returning to our "no change" argument by showing that the new formats merely reflect traditional forms of advertising.

Practitioners' marketing jargon

An academic actually engaging in the rare behavior of reading an advertising or marketing trade publication would find himself or herself in a strange world in which people speak in what sounds like a new language. The marketers who share this new jargon all nod as though they were understanding each other. The language is metaphorical and vague. Words such as "branding," "engaging," and "relating" to consumers are tossed around without any of the listeners possibly having the same referent as the speaker. Table 1 provides just a sampler of this new language, along with our translations into meaningful English.

Insert Table 1

Modern marketing jargon has seen advertising practitioners descend into the realm of nonsense. This can be seen in Table 2, which lists "brand ideals" (*nee* benefit-positioning statements) as identified in a January 16, 2012, *Advertising Age* article by Jim Stengel, the former global marketing chief at Proctor & Gamble Company, now with WPP's Millward Brown research company. In his ironically jargonistic words, these "brand ideals" were devised to bring

"analytical rigor" to "purpose-driven marketing." Young managers (and young academics) would do well to read the classic advertising books by Caples, Reeves, and Starch. Reeves' clear "unique selling propositions" (USPs) should particularly be noted and contrasted with Stengel's vacuous "brand ideals." In order for agency creative people to actually *use* these "brand ideals," they would have to regard each as a Rorschach test and project a real-world concrete benefit into the inkblot. Without this projection into the real world, creatives could not possibly come up with an effective ad campaign.

Insert Table 2

In no way is a "brand ideal" sufficient for proper *positioning* of the brand. A proper positioning statement specifies the target audience (T) to which the brand is to be aimed, the category (C) into which the brand is to be positioned, and the key benefit or unique benefit combination (B) that distinguishes the brand from other brands in the same product or service category. A good positioning statement will follow from the T-C-B brand positioning model outlined in Rossiter and Bellman (2005) and called the X-YZ model in Rossiter and Percy (1997). The T-C-B model and the earlier X-YZ model are a refinement of what the major advertising agency, Ogilvy & Mather, was doing at the time for client brand positioning. The "brand ideals" in the table variously neglect the target audience, the category, or the key benefit for the brand.

Academics' misfocus

Academic advertising researchers seem disconnected from the real world of advertising. Not only do they conduct their research with unrealistic ads, they continue to measure the ad's "effectiveness" with irrelevant concepts. In Table 3, we criticize four such irrelevant effectiveness concepts taken from studies published in recent issues of the *Journal of Marketing Communications* that deal with the "new advertising" formats. We are particularly critical of academics' continued focus on attitude toward the ad (A-ad) as an arbiter, and often the only arbiter, of advertising effectiveness. The A-ad concept was dismissed as irrelevant in our textbooks except in one quadrant of the Rossiter-Percy Grid. For low-involvement transformational brands there often is no concrete benefit, so the appeal of the ad rather than the brand becomes relevant. Elsewhere (Rossiter and Eagleson 1994) we have also reviewed evidence against the practitioners' favorite measure, Ad Liking, which is also irrelevant except in that one quadrant.

Insert Table 3

A casual look through this journal, *IJA*, and the U.S. journals the *Journal of Advertising* and *JAR* will expose other vague effectiveness measures such as "psychological ownership" and "consumer emotional engagement." More and more academic articles are also jumping on the "emotion" bandwagon, but they measure isolated and often irrelevant emotions instead of *paired emotion shift* (see our textbooks). What is missing in these academic studies? The answer is *brand communication effects*. Again may we remind you that the only meaningful role of advertising is to establish or strengthen brand communication effects and thereby to sell more of the brand or justify a premium price for it.

New formats unmasked

Further evidence for challenging the notion that "advertising has changed" is detailed in Table 4. This table shows how each of the "new" formats in the first column has an analog in a traditional advertising format. In the second column, it will be seen that the *stimulus content* of those "new" forms of advertising is certainly not new; all the "new" formats, just like the old, rely on *words* and *images* in one way or another. In the third column, we see that the *responses* targeted by the new forms of advertising – the brand communication effects and brand-relevant consumer behaviors – are not new either but are the existing ones. Since neither the content of ads nor the responses sought have changed, how can it be said that the role of advertising has changed?

Insert Table 4

Our final comment concerns the ethics of modern advertising. We deplore the blatant deceitfulness of the last three forms of "advertising" in the table: product placement (especially the recent practice of loading brand shots into television shows post-production), sponsored content (on the Internet and in traditional media), and brand advocates (especially the "shills" paid to post subtle "plugs" for products on Twitter and Facebook). These practices are deontologically unethical (Rossiter and Bellman, 2005) because the audience is not fairly forewarned that they are being advertised to.

Summary

In this article we have argued that the roles of advertising remain as they always were – to establish or strengthen brand awareness and brand attitude in *all* marketing communications and to address category need, brand purchase intention, and purchase facilitation in direct-response ads. We have pointed out that practitioners, using the "new advertising" formats as an excuse, have been attempting to redefine traditional notions of advertising by masking it in new jargon. Academics have used the new formats as an excuse to invent new response concepts that give the mere illusion of change.

While we acknowledge that there are many new *media* options to consider, what goes into the *message* that the new media deliver has *not* changed and neither has the desired response. Images and words, in one form or another, will be found in all advertising, and the way the mind processes these images and words has remained the same for all time. As Bavelier and Green wrote recently in the highly respected journal *Nature*, "History suggests that technology does not change the brain's fundamental abilities" (2011, p. 38). It may look as though advertising is changing, but the way that advertising must work most certainly isn't.

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Table 1. Practitioners' jargon with translations

Practitioners' term	Translation
Brand building	A high-sounding but vacuous term that could refer to increasing the brand's share price, adding new customers, increasing mass awareness of the brand, adding new attributes…you name it.
Rebranding	Could refer to as little as a name change (e.g., Jenny Craig weight-loss studios have recently been rebranded as "Jenny") but most often refers to a change in the in-ad emphasized key benefit (e.g., the Weight Watchers chain is now changing to a tie-in with "nutritional science"); see *Advertising Age*, January 16, 2012, pp. 3, 22.
Brand equity	A term badly stretched, following the lead of articles by academics David Aaker and Kevin Keller, to include any and all mental associations that consumers make to the brand. Brand equity should mean only the incremental contribution to brand attitude made by the brand name.
Brand values	This term simply means brand-attribute beliefs. The beliefs are either those desired to be instilled by the marketer or those actually held with some non-zero degree of strength by consumers.
Core values	The important brand-attribute beliefs...important in the manager's eyes, anyway!
Customer relationships	A poor metaphor that might mean something to customers of service providers, where the human providing the service has to be put up with continually.
Customer-centric	The "marketing concept" rediscovered.
Customer insights	Qualitative researchers' or planners' inferences stolen from customers' focus group statements about why they buy the brand.
Customer experience	What people say they think of and feel when they use the brand (again coming from open-ended questioning in qualitative research). Reported experience overlooks implicit attitudes, truly felt emotions, and subconscious

psychoanalytic reactions to the brand stimulus.

In-depth understanding	Understanding. "In-depth" is a carryover term from psychoanalysis (depth psychology) referring to the researcher's claimed understanding of the subconscious. The modern marketing manager does not have a "deep" understanding of consumer behavior.
Googling	What used to be thoughtful desk research of secondary data, now more often conducted via a non-thinking online search engine.
Bespoke research	A strictly British term borrowed from the personal tailoring trade to refer to a customized as opposed to a syndicated or standardized research project.
Consumer ethnography	The "participant observation" method of social anthropology revisited.
Netnography	Non-participant observation done online (tedious, superficial, and nonexpert content analysis of postings on blogs, Twitter, and Facebook).
Engagement	Ad processing – particularly sustained attention following initial attention to the ad.
Brand advocacy	What "opinion leaders" or more recently "market mavens" used to do – that is, deliver word-of-mouth (or nowadays "word-of-finger") recommendations of the brand to other less enlightened souls who don't subscribe to *Consumer Reports*.
Integrated marketing communications	Huh? Integrated? Related jargon: "single-minded," "one voice," and "synergy."
Multiple platforms	Placing ads in more than one medium.
Digital marketing	Shifting some of the brand's advertising budget online. (The bulk, about 70%, of online ad spending is due merely to a shift in directory and classified advertising from print to the Internet.)
Metrics	Measures. Measures of the same responses as always with some merely given new names. Calling them "metrics" makes the flaky business of advertising measurement seem substantial.

Analytics	Statistical analysis.
Brand dashboard	Useless *unrelated* summary of the brand's ad-processing and communication-effect statistics.

Table 2. Stengel's "brand ideals" for some big-name brands

Brand	Brand ideal
Accenture	Help people accelerate ideas to achieve dreams.
Amazon	Enable freedom of choice, exploration and discovery.
Apple	Empower creative exploration and self-expression.
Calvin Klein	Define modern luxury.
Coca-Cola	Inspire moments of happiness.
Diesel	Inspire imagination and endless possibilities in style.
Dove	Celebrate every women's unique beauty.
Emirates	Connect people with the world through a new lens of perception.
Heineken	Help men be worldly-resourceful, competent, open-minded.
HP	Foster human capacity to innovate, progress.
IBM	Build a smarter planet.
MasterCard	Make the world of commerce simpler, more flexible.
Pampers	Help parents care for babies' and toddlers' development.
Samsung	Inspire imagination and enrich lives in a world of limitless possibilities.
Starbucks	Create connections for self-discovery and inspiration.
Visa	Provide freedom to people to follow their passions.
Zara	Democratize fashion trends.

Table 3. Irrelevant advertising response concepts in recent academic studies

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Concept label	What was actually measured

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Brand Touch Points	What was actually measured was customers' self-stated recognition of the various media – lumped-together "mass media," and separated "new media" of Web banner, Website, e-mail, and social advocacy – in which customers *thought* the brand had been advertised. Brand "touch points" are a hopeless substitute for the traditional concept of media-vehicle *claimed reach*. They fail to take into account *effective reach* based on the estimation of the required *effective frequency* in each advertising situation.
Persuasion Knowledge	What was actually measured were the audience's self-stated perceptions of the ad's attempts to persuade and to sell the product. In one study these perceptions were measured with what the authors did not realize was a "cognitive response" measure and in the other study the perceptions were measured with redundant unipolar items wrongly recorded on a bipolar Likert answer scale. Also note, per McGuire's research, that *forewarning* of intent to persuade, as someone with "high persuasion knowledge" would presumably have, has the perverse effect of *increasing* the degree of persuasion.
Advertising Skepticism	What was actually measured were three *beliefs* about the ad as to whether it was "truthful," redundantly "believable," and "informative." A 1-to-7 Likert answer scale was used with the lower-end answers (disagreement) reverse-scored to indicate "skepticism." The overall mean score for "skepticism" was 4.64, near enough to the neutral midpoint of the answer scale to not signify either believability *or* skepticism. Researchers should note that the great majority of advertising's benefit claims do *not* have any "truth value" because they are either puffery claims (obvious or humorous exaggeration) or disguised parity claims (such as "Nothing beats..." or "Best a man can get"). Accounts of "ad skepticism" mean nothing. All key-benefit claims for low-risk products, the kind most seen on TV, are most effective if they stimulate Maloney's concept of "curious *disbelief*."
Attitude Toward the Ad	What was actually measured was a strange mixture of beliefs about the ad's entertainment value, the ad's informativeness, consumers' interest in the *product* advertised, and their likely usage of the *product*. Never mind this non-valid mixture of item

content. Coefficient α for the scores on this conglomeration of items was .92, so let's go! Attitude toward the ad, by the way, is the most prevalent and most misleading ad-processing concept in all of academic advertising research (as we have pointed out many times before).

Table 4. Rossiter-Percy interpretations of new ad formats

New ad format	Stimulus content[a]	Responses targeted[b]	Traditional analog
Banner ad	P, RW	BRGN, BATT, CLICK-THROUGH	"Mobile" outdoor ad[c] (billboard)
Website	Ps, RW, AV, MU	CN, BRGN, BATT, BPI, PF, PURCHASE	Brochure
Interactive TV commercial	AV, MU	Same	Direct-response TV commercial with toll-free number or URL
SMS ad	RW, MU	BRGN, BATT, BPI, PF, STORE VISIT	Brief print ad
"Street" ad	P, RW	BRCL, BATT	"Mobile" outdoor ad[c] (billboard)
Product placement	P, HW	BRCL, BATT	Retail brand display
Sponsored content	P, RW; AV	CN, BRCL, BATT, BPI, PF, PURCHASE	Advertorial
Brand advocacy	P, HW	BRCL, BATT, BPI, PURCHASE	PR

[a] Stimulus content abbreviations: P = picture, RW = read words, AV = audio-visual, MU = music, HW = heard words.

[b] Response abbreviations: CN = category need, BRGN = brand recognition, BRCL = brand recall, BATT = brand attitude or preference, BPI = brand purchase intention, PF = purchase facilitation (all communication effects); consumer behaviors are spelled out.

[c] "Mobile" outdoor ads (a term exclusive to Rossiter and Percy's textbooks) are those in which *either* the ad is moving or the audience is. Compare "stationary" outdoor ads.