

THE FORMS OF UNCONVENTIONAL ADVERTISING – A THEORETICAL APPROACH

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Abstract:

The large number of advertisements that the consumers are bombarded with every day has made them virtually immune to commercial messages. This is why advertisers are trying to find new, alternative ways to reach the customers, which are comprised by economic literature in the concept of unconventional advertising. Based on a thorough documentary research, this study identifies the existing forms of unconventional advertising by presenting them in the order of their frequency of use and it tries to group the ones with similar characteristics into somewhat larger categories. A better understanding and knowledge of these new forms of advertising can provide marketing and advertising specialists with new strategies to convey the brand message that can grab the attention of any prospect customer.

Keywords: advertising; unconventional advertising; unconventional media; ambient advertising; stealth marketing

Introduction

From the moment we wake up in the morning until we fall asleep at night we are exposed to advertising messages that try to persuade us to buy. Newspapers, magazines, television, internet, and even the streets outside, all of them are suffocated by ads that are trying to get the customer's attention. However, few of them if any, are capable of driving us to the store just to buy the product they advertised. The ads have become part of our live, influencing us in ways that we are not always aware of.

The increasing number of advertisements that the "wary and cynical" viewers (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004) are exposed to every day has forced them to create a shield that can make them virtually immune the commercial message. Moreover, many ads have turned from an incentive to buy into a turn-off for customers (S Direction, 2005). Hence the advertising industry has to find new alternative and more subtle ways to reach the customer and to create brand awareness.

In the past years, more and more companies have allocated a bigger part of their marketing budgets for the unconventional strategies. There are several factors that have contributed to the growth of the importance of the non-traditional advertising:

- the lack of credibility and the inefficiency of traditional advertising
- customer's reluctance to the advertising message
- the need to reduce the costs of promotion
- the need for differentiation of the products and brands
- consumer's better understanding of marketing and selling techniques which makes them immune to commercial messages
- the need for a better targeting of the audience which has become more and more fragmented

In nowadays world where customers are truly marketing literate, companies are developing innovative strategies that break through the clutter and grab viewers attention (Martin and Smith, 2008). All these innovative,

inventive and unconventional tactics, strategies and techniques used for promoting a product can be comprised in the term “guerrilla advertising” (Levinson, 1994). This term derives from “guerrilla marketing”, a concept introduced by Jay Conrad Levinson in 1984 which refers to an alternative form of marketing that uses unconventional tactics and strategies. Levinson’s first definition of the concept stated that guerrilla marketing was “a body of unconventional ways of pursuing conventional goals. It is a proven method of achieving profits with minimum money” (www.gmarketing.com).

Traditional vs. non-traditional

The most important distinction between the traditional or classical and non-traditional advertising comes from definitions of the two concepts. Thus, traditional advertising comprises all the characteristics identified by the American Marketing Association when defining the term “advertising”: “the placement of announcements and persuasive messages in time or space purchased in any of the mass media by business firms, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and individuals who seek to inform and/ or persuade members of a particular target market or audience about their products, services, organizations, or ideas” (www.marketingpower.com/_layouts/dictionary.aspx). The unconventional advertising, however, it’s not a concept that can be defined easily, as is strictly related to the perception of the people and the frequency of use. Thus, an image perceived as shocking or disturbing for some people can seem perfectly normal for others. It has been proven that the repeated exposure of a person to an unusual situation can make that person consider it normal, that is why a frequent usage of an unconventional medium can stop the people from perceiving it unusual and therefore will

not attract their attention. This is what happened for example to the internet. The unconventional advertising is permanently changing that is why is virtually impossible to give a comprehensive definition of it. Nevertheless, it can be stated that unconventional advertising comprises all those unusual, non-traditional, innovative and inventive means, methods and strategies of promoting a product, service or brand.

The distinction between traditional and non-traditional advertising has also been made through a virtual “line” that separates the above-the-line advertising from the below-the-line advertising. During 1980’s, the bottom limit of the commission charged by the advertising agencies for the traditional media was 17.65 per cent, whereas for the rest of the media, the unconventional, they were charging a nominal fee with a lower value (Springer, 2009). This commission threshold became known in the literature as the “line”, and the distinction it created between classical and unconventional advertising is still used today. Traditional or above-the-line advertising comprises the traditional media channels (radio, television, written press, outdoor posters, cinema and lately the internet) whereas the below-the-line advertising refers to the unconventional media.

Credibility is another aspect that differentiates the two forms of advertising. Several studies (<http://experiencecurve.com/archives/any-surprise-that-advertising-has-lost-credibility-over-the-years>) have proved that nowadays customers trust less the advertisements than they used to do it a few decades ago. This is due mainly to the fact that people stopped believing that the perfect experiences and total makeovers that the ads were promising to them would ever come true. In addition, the customers don’t perceive the ads as reliable ways to learn about products because they believe that the companies are not telling the truth in the

ads. However, these facts change when the customers are exposed to promotional messages that they do not perceive as ads. A study (Dalhen, Edenius) that was undertaken in 2007, proved that when placed in a non-traditional medium, the promotional message is perceived as less persuasive. According to Dalhen and Edenius (2007) this makes the message more credible.

The ever-increasing number of products more and more similar has made it difficult for potential customers to choose between them, making the price the most important criteria. Consequently, the companies became aware of the need to differentiate, starting from the way they deliver the brand message. Therefore, the unconventional means of promotion offer a way out of the advertising clutter, creating a lasting image of the brand in the mind of the consumer.

The number of television channels, radio stations, newspapers and magazines is increasing every day, leading to a greater fragmentation of the audiences. This makes it more difficult for the marketers to reach an audience of a certain size (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004). Moreover, the consumer's lifestyle has changed in the way that they have less free time that they could spend for leisure activities such as watching TV, going to cinema or reading magazines and newspapers. This has also reduced the number of potential viewers of the ads placed in the mediums mentioned above. In addition, the prices for the traditional media keep rising, despite the diminishing returns they offer. However, none of these are considered a problem for the non-traditional advertising. This type of advertising is extremely targeted and reaches the consumers in their natural environment, in the places where they work, where they spent their time off or on their way to and from home. The difference between traditional and non-traditional

advertising, is that the last one is more direct and more individual, creating an instant contact between the brand and the consumer.

The forms of unconventional advertising

Kaikati and Kaikati (2004) identified six main types of unconventional advertising techniques: viral marketing, brand pushers, celebrity marketing, bait-and-tease marketing, marketing in video games and marketing in pop and rap music. However, they consider these strategies as part of the larger category of stealth marketing. Pavel and Cătoiu (2009) include in the unconventional advertising category the following: elevator advertising, taxi advertising, bathroom stall advertising, mirror advertising, aerial advertising, ambient advertising, body advertising, graffiti advertising. This area is changing constantly in the pursuit to find new ways to break through the advertising clutter. Consequently, more and more forms of unconventional advertising are identified by the economic literature. However, many of them have similar characteristics, and therefore can be grouped into larger categories.

Stealth marketing is an advertising technique that relies on the power of word of mouth and is being referred to as "undercover," "covert," or "hidden" marketing (Roy, Chattopadhyay, 2008). As mentioned before, there are several types of stealth marketing techniques that can be utilized for the advantage of the brand (Kaikati, Kaikati, 2004), however we would like to regroup them into somewhat larger categories: viral marketing, brand pushers, celebrity marketing, bait-and-tease marketing and product placement. What they all have in common is the fact that they all communicate the brand message in a subtle and sometimes unnoticeable way. Martin and Smith (2008) define stealth marketing as "the use of

surreptitious marketing practices that fail to disclose or reveal the true relationship with the company that produces or sponsors the marketing message". Stealth marketing techniques are intended to promote the brand to audience's subconscious. Its objective is to induce to customers the feeling that they need or want a certain brand, without actually telling them out-loud how great that brand is or that they should buy that product.

As mentioned before, Kaikati and Kaikati (2004) identified six types of stealth marketing techniques. Although we agree to the first four categories we believe that the last two can be comprised into a single strategy under the name of product placement, as this concept comprises the characteristics of both strategies identified by the previously-mentioned authors.

Viral marketing refers to a promotion technique that uses the existing social networks in order to increase brand awareness. Using different approaches, viral marketing encourages customers to recommend a certain brand to their acquaintances spreading the message through a viral process, similar to the proliferation of pathological viruses. Whether it's through word-of-mouth or through electronic equipments (such as mobile phones or computers) viral promotions are successful as long as the message is being resend over and over again. The message can take the form of video clips, images, text messages or even interactive games, e-books and brandable software. However, the message is not proliferated unless it's interesting, funny or unusual. Viral marketing is exploiting one of the most important factors of influence on consumer's decision which is the personal recommendation (Kaikati, Kaikati, 2004).

Brand pushers are hired actors who personally slip commercial messages to people that they approach in real-life situations in different

locations such as trendy bars, music stores or tourist hot-spots. By being approachable and attractive enough not to raise suspicion the paid actors can slide the advertised product under the prospects' nose. (Kaikati, Kaikati, 2004). An example in this category is the case of Sony Ericsson, which in 2002 in New York, hired actors to pose as tourists asking people to take pictures of them with their new camera mobile phone (Martin, Smith, 2008)

Celebrity marketing as part of the stealth marketing category, refers to the situation where a celebrity uses or talks about a product or a brand without it appearing conspicuous (Kaikati, Kaikati, 2004). The main purpose of this technique is to encourage fans of that particular celebrity to purchase the advertised product or brand. When using celebrity endorsers, however, companies must match the image of the celebrity to brand's image and to the characteristics of the target market (Belch, Belch, 2003).

Bait-and-tease marketing is the strategy of getting people interested in something that later is revealed to be something quite different (Huba, 2005).

Product placement comprises the two categories mentioned by Kaikati and Kaikati (2004) of marketing in video games and in pop and rap music to which is added the marketing in TV shows and in movies. This type of stealth marketing strategy refers to the embedding of logos and brands in TV shows, movies, video games and music videos. The origins of product placement are not yet determined, however, its frequency of use has increased after the placement of Reese's Pieces in the E.T. movie (Belch, Belch, 2003). The increased number of placements especially in movies and TV in the past decades has made this technique less effective. The growing interest of the younger generations in computer games and in pop and rap music has offered marketers new spots where they can

place the brands. These new mediums, however, are not as passive as TV and movies, as they provide the prospects an interaction with the product while playing the game or while reproducing the song that mention the brand (Kaikati, Kaikati, 2004).

Ambient advertising is one of the most important forms of unconventional advertising. It is an outdoor form of promotion that uses alternative and unconventional media, called ambient media (Pavel, Cătoi, 2009) in order to transmit the message. This type of advertising is one of the newest and the most creative, and it's expanding rapidly. The key to an effective ambient

campaign is that the ad must fit the environment it is placed in and the context where the consumer encounters the message (Reyburn, 2010; Ryan-Segger, 2007). This is why, in the process of developing an ambient campaign the creative team often starts from the environment trying to find a way the brand can become relevant for it and only in the end they create the message. The media used by ambient advertising include leisure parks, sport centers, landscape elements, bus stations and event the streets. Figure 2 offers some examples of ambient advertising.



Figure 2. Ambient advertising: “Accessorize the city”; “Very, very fresh vegetarian food”; “Salzburg Zoo: More than Zebras”;
 (www.adverblog.com/archives/2006_11.htm, www.gorilla.ro)

Ambient ads are effective means to build brand awareness and to generate buzz as they are placed in central locations, in some of the most familiar places for the audience. They are unexpected and they create a direct contact between the brand and the consumer, bringing them closer together. The younger groups of people respond better to unconventional ads this is why they are the best suited target of ambient advertising. This type of ads “utilizes forms of demographic targeting which permeate consumer

consciousness through non-intrusive, continuous, periphery display of advertiser’s information” (Pavel, Cătoi, 2009, p. 144). The costs of ambient advertising are reduced compared to traditional media, however they can deliver excellent results for the paid value. (Reyburn, 2010)

An important criticism of ambient advertising is the lack of tools that can measure its effectiveness. (Ryan-Segger, 2007) This aspect can become an impediment in the developing of this type of promotion, as the marketing

departments of most of the brands request proofs of the results of the campaigns they spend the money on.

Experiential advertising, often considered a part of ambient advertising is a type of unconventional advertising that “conveys to the customer the real sensation of using the product” (www.glossaryofmarketing.com/definition/experiential-advertising.html). However, while both ambient and experiential advertising use non-traditional media formats, the second engages the audience directly by interacting with them (Ryan-Segger, 2007).

Ambush marketing is a planned effort of a company that isn't a sponsor of a particular event to give the impression that it is by associating its name indirectly to that event, in order to gain at least some of the advantages of a real sponsor (Portlock, Rose, 2009; Zyman, 2002). The main advantage of this type of unconventional advertising strategy is related to the fact that the ambushing company doesn't have to pay sponsorship rights, which can be very costly sometimes. While the main purpose of ambush marketing is to confuse the consumer about who the sponsors are, a study undertaken in UK in 2009 (Portlock, Rose), proved that consumers with high event involvement are less likely to identify ambush brands as main sponsors. Also, contrary to the opinion that ambushing can damage brand image (Skildum-Reid, 2008), the study shows that these brand actually gain awareness and recognition, even though on a lower level than the sponsoring brands. Many of the most known brands around the world at one point or another have used ambush marketing. Some of these famous brands are Nike, Adidas, Coca Cola, Visa, American Express, Lufthansa and so on.

Affiliate marketing refers to the relationship between the website of an electronic merchant and a network of partner website (affiliates), that operate

as a virtual sale force (Woods, 2008). The affiliate websites' aim is to direct traffic to the merchant's site through advertising materials and commercial messages (Woods, 2008). The affiliates receive money compensation from the merchant for the visitors directed to its website (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Affiliate_marketing). However, the affiliate are paid only when the visitors make a purchase, thus the costs of this advertising technique are one hundred percent covered by results. This is also the most important advantage if this form of non-traditional advertising.

Elevator advertising is another form of unconventional advertising that has been frequently used in the past years. The walls and even the floors of the elevator units can be used to promote products, services and brands either by placing stickers, posters or even products inside the units or by running commercial movies and ads if the elevators are equipped with screen displays (Pavel, Cătoi, 2009). Amongst the advantages this type of advertising presents there are: the physical and emotional proximity to potential customers due to the placement of the ads in the buildings where, the possibility to target the prospects by selecting the building category such as malls, hospitals or business centers (Pavel, Cătoi, 2009), it guarantees a captive audience as the elevator ads cannot be turned off (www.gaebler.com/Elevator-Advertising.htm).

Bathroom advertising has recently become an attractive form of promotion. The unusual location of this form of advertising inside the restroom area allows us to include in this category both bathroom stall advertising and mirror advertising, promotion techniques mentioned by Pavel and Cătoi (2009). Bathroom ads can take any form, from billboards placed on the walls of the stalls or close to the dryers, to adhesive stickers glued to the floors

and mirrors, and even interactive or scented displays. Although at first companies were reluctant to placing their brands in such locations, the increasing need to grab customer's attention has made them rethink their attitude. This is due mainly to the fact that research aiming to prove its efficiency has been undertaken. One of the studies (Attanasio, 2008) shows that 84% of the interviewed people remembered seeing specific ads in the washrooms and 92% were able to name specific advertisers without prompting. The results of another study (Ministreanu, 2007) undertaken in Romania show that approximately 80% of the Romanian restaurant customers recall the ads they saw in the restaurant's restroom. One of the most important advantages of the bathroom advertising is that it offers a medium that can be gender targeted perfectly (Coyler, 2006). In addition, just like the elevators, bathrooms are captive mediums where potential prospects spend enough time to allow themselves to read the information laying right in front of them.

Transit advertising is a form of out-of-home advertising (Belch, Belch, 2003) and it refers to ads placed on vehicles (on the outside or on the inside) and in transit stations (Koblinski, 2005; Belch, Belch, 2003). The advertising mediums used in transit advertising include public transportation vehicles such as buses, trams, subways or trains, floor displays, island showcases and electronic signs placed in transit stations (Belch, Belch, 2003) and also trucks, cars, scooters and taxis (Cincotta, 2005; Pavel, Cătoiu, 2009). In the past few years a new medium has emerged into this category: the airplane. Just like any other vehicle airplanes started to carry ads on the outside of the fuselage and on the inside on the overhead storage, on the tray-tables (Sharkey, 2003) and on every available surface inside the cabin. Amongst the advantages of transit advertising are the

length of exposure, the frequency of exposure (especially in the case of commuters), the geographic selectivity, the flexibility of ad size and location, the varied audience it delivers (Belch, Belch, 2003; Koblinski, 2005). Moreover, transit advertising targets pedestrians, drivers and passengers, is intrusive and demand-led as it follows the population flow throughout the entire day (Pavel, Cătoiu, 2009) and the inside the vehicle ads are delivered to a captive audience. The usage of this type of advertising is best suited for building brand awareness in major city areas, as part of integrated campaigns, but also for triggering purchase impulses (Pavel, Cătoiu, 2009). However, transit advertising also has some disadvantages related to the mood of the audience, the impossibility to control the route of the vehicle and the waste coverage (Belch, Belch, 2003).

Aerial advertising is a form of outdoor advertising, but it is not included in the above-the-line category (Pavel, Cătoiu, 2009). According to Belch and Belch (2003) this category includes airplanes pulled banners, skywriting, and blimps. Pavel and Cătoiu (2009) also mention projected advertising as part of this category, which is the projection of words or logos onto the night sky by using laser beams. These media can be used for reaching specific target markets, in certain locations or during certain events, especially sporting events. For example, Coppertone, a well known sunscreen lotions brand, has often used skywriting over beach areas in order to increase brand awareness (Belch, Belch, 2003). Aerial advertising relies on the surprise element to intrigue consumers and to grab their attention.

Graffiti advertising is perceived as an illegal form of guerrilla advertising. However, this is not always the case. Legal graffiti advertising implies leasing ad space and hiring artists and it may require significant

efforts cost wise (Pavel, Cătoiu, 2009). The effects of graffiti advertising are striking: the huge painted images attract the attention of the people that pass by them every day (Hackley, 2005) becoming an excellent way to generate brand awareness, street credibility and word-of-mouth opportunities. This technique used at first to promote new bands and local performances (Hackley, 2005) has become lately an advertising method used by many important brands such as Puma or Nike.

Similar to the above-mentioned technique, the **reverse graffiti** is an eco-friendly method of creating temporary images on walls, sidewalks or other surfaces by removing dirt from those surfaces (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reverse_graffiti). This form of art has turned into an unconventional advertising method when several companies started paying artists to put their logos in their works. One of the companies that used this type of advertising is Green Works, a producer of eco-friendly products. The high visibility of this form of advertising is similar to the one of the graffiti advertising, and the ads created this way can last several months or even years, depending on the traffic in the area.

Body advertising is another form of unconventional advertising. According to Pavel and Cătoiu (2009) this strategy refers to the promotional clothing elements worn by people. In this category, the teenagers are the most willing to buy and wear clothing that is advertising for different companies. However, there is another meaning for body advertising, and it refers to placing promotional messages directly on human skin (www.tatad.com). Also known as tattoo advertising, this technique is not new. The people who sell parts of their bodies to tattoo brand logos can receive from a few hundred dollars to hundred of thousands of dollars, depending on the body part, the size of the tattoo ([advertising-for-money\). The bearers of these ad tattoos are usually regular people, who are looking for some extra money or free products, or who are loyal customers of a certain brand. However, this strategy has become increasingly popular lately among sports people who reveal more skin while competing, such as boxers \(Sims, 2002\). However, no matter if the ad tattoos are temporary or permanent they do catch the attention of the viewer and generate buzz, and more so if they are placed on the skin of someone famous.](http://news.upickreviews.com/tattoo-</p>
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A typology of unconventional advertising

As mentioned before, unconventional advertising is permanently changing. This makes it hard to create a comprehensive classification of all the forms of non-traditional advertising that exist. However, we believe that there can be taken into consideration several criteria that can categorize the types of unconventional advertising.

The first of these criteria can be the unconventional element of the advertising. Thus, there can be identified:

- ads that send an unconventional message. In this category can be included all the advertisements that use traditional media to send an unusual message. This type of advertising is mostly used in campaigns that send a social message.
- ads that use unconventional media. This category comprises all the advertisements that use media channels other than TV, radio, cinema, press, outdoor and internet, such as: elevators, toilets, elements of the surrounding environment, and even human bodies.
- ads that use traditional media in an unconventional way. This category refers to ads that send a conventional message, through a conventional

medium by altering the use of the medium.

Some examples of these categories of unconventional advertising

can be seen in the following image (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Examples of unconventional ads
(www.gorilla.ro)

Another criterion that can be used in the classification of unconventional advertising is the medium where the ad is placed, just like in the case of traditional ads. Thus, there are:

- online campaigns, a category that refers mainly to the viral marketing campaigns and the affiliate marketing.
- offline campaigns, that can also be divided into indoor and outdoor unconventional campaigns. The first of these categories includes elevator advertising, bathroom advertising and any other type of advertisement that is placed indoors. The unconventional outdoor advertising includes ambient advertising, aerial advertising, graffiti advertising, and many other.

However, none of these classifications are nor they intend to be comprehensive, because the large number of identified forms of non-traditional advertising and the ... of new ones makes it virtually impossible to categorize them.

Conclusions

In a world where consumer is suffocated by commercials that all sound and look alike, unconventional advertising is the breath of fresh air, delivering messages in unexpected forms that most of the time entertain the viewers. Unconventional advertising is

able to pass the protective shield that marketing literate consumers nowadays have built as a protection against the commercial messages that bombard them every day. This happens because unconventional advertising is unexpected and it catches them in locations and situations where they aren't expecting to be advertised at and where they are off guarded. Also, unlike traditional advertising, the unconventional ads don't use persuasive messages trying to convince the audience to buy, but rather they address to customer's subconscious creating memorable images of the promoted brands which last in the mind of the consumer.

There isn't a perfect solution to advertise a product, however one must take into consideration all the possibilities and choose the one that are better suited for that particular situation. While traditional advertising can reach large numbers of people, unconventional advertising can better target smaller groups. It is impossible to say that one or the other is better. However, a combination of the two can deliver excellent results.

Unconventional advertising forms are numerous and different, but what they all have in common is the fact that they allow companies to break through

the advertising clutter that prevents the commercial message to reach the consumer. They offer possibilities to convey the brand message in such ways that it becomes virtually impossible even for marketing literate customers to block it. The power of non-traditional advertising lays in the

creativity and innovation that characterize this field. The tactics used more frequently may lose some of their strength, but there still remain infinite possibilities available to be explored and used in the battle to conquer the consumer's attention.

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