

TV Advertising: Lessons for the public relations professional

Reginald F. Moody, PhD

The goal of most public relations TV advertising is to persuade an audience to believe or do something. Two examples of this format are the “public service” spot and the corporate “image” spot. Public service spots attempt to change public attitudes on issues such as drinking and driving, and crime prevention. Corporate image commercials, on the other hand, seek to enhance the public’s image of a corporation, a government agency or business. Regardless of purpose, most TV audiences see *public relations* advertising in the same light as they view *product* advertising---just another commercial that is interesting, enjoyable, and informative, or boring, incomprehensible and annoying.

Comparisons of public relations to advertising as an integrated structure, is thoroughly entrenched in marketing, where both advertising and public relations are seen as tools of promotion in the marketing blend (Vercic, T. Vercic, D., & Laco, K. (2008). By its nature, public relations communication is about *messaging*. However, advertising agencies may value other factors, such as *creativity*, in their communications (Moffitt, 2011).

One reason audiences may fail to fully appreciate a TV commercial is due to its message complexity or its “cluttered” nature. Clutter in this instance refers to a commercial that attempts to convey too much information, is saturated with loud and

distracting music, contains rapid speech and scene transitions, and carries an abundance of super-imposed text. Are complex and cluttered spots compatible with the communication needs of a younger demographic, because this group feels comfortable with the rapid delivery of media? The answer is not clear. All the same, understanding how clutter and message complexity influences a target audience's ability to attend to, comprehend and recall messages---regardless of demographic--- is essential if public relations professionals are to effectively and consistently create positive awareness, change attitudes, and influence behavior. Such an inquiry requires public relations professionals to borrow some of the tools marketers use to make messages more believable and credible.

Background

Aside from particular messages and media, advertising and public relations each use the same processes, making it commonsense and worthy to combine the two (Haynes, 1981). Each attempts to create awareness, change attitudes, and influence behavior (Harris, 1998). When combined, these activities give an integrated marketing push that actually is greater than the sum of its parts (Moriarty, 1994). This is clearly seen in many U.S. markets where public relations and advertising professionals are already doing work that often "obscures the lines between the two disciplines" (Rose & Miller, 1993). Ries & Ries (2004) contend that public relations has reached celebrity status at the expense of advertising, making public relations a discipline of equal importance. Just the same, both are seen as mechanisms of promotion in the marketing mix (Belch & Belch, 2004).

A clear difference between public relations and advertising is *message control*. Stacks and Michaelson (2009) maintain that PR has no genuine superiority over advertising despite the so-called “third party endorsement” advantage. A recent change in the media mix and the low credibility of news media today, makes any third party endorsement advantage no longer a “universally valid concept.” When, where, and how an advertisement runs is quite manageable as it makes its way through advertising channels. A media buyer can purchase air time or space in the appropriate medium and take full control of the message communicated. In contrast, the public relations professional loses control as a result of the gatekeeping function of the mass media. This is because editors typically look for a number of “news values” in a press release: impact, proximity, prominence, timeliness, conflict, human interest, the unusual and bizarre. Such news values can be subjective from editor to editor. To counter loss of control via the gatekeeping trap, corporate entities may borrow the processes used by advertising in an effort to make commercial messages more intriguing and captivating.

Media clutter

The mass media are cluttered with all types of TV communications: messages from competing makers of consumer products, messages communicated by non-profits, and messages imparted by corporate interests, trying to establish community goodwill. The mere act of placing information onto a television commercial can be considered a gamble at best and carries no communication promise whatsoever between sender and receiver. To think otherwise presumes the target audience wants, will acquire, and having acquired, will be influenced by the message. In a message-dense environment audiences may use “filters” to see if a particular message solves a need or desire.

Messages which offer solutions are ones remembered and may encourage audiences into action (Pratkanis & Greenwald, 1993).

One example of a public relations commercial is the *public service announcement*, referred affectionately by those in the business as the PSA. While the intention of a typical advertisement is to promote a product, a PSA is designed to foster the general welfare of an audience by raising awareness of an issue, thereby affecting public attitudes, and potentially promoting action. A second kind of public relations commercial, the *corporate image* commercial, attempts to enhance the public's image of an organization. Each example may fail to achieve the desired communication objective due, in part, to the amount of clutter within the commercial.

An audience's inability to deal effectively with large amounts of information within a limited time period concerns advertisers and public relations specialists, alike. Research by Keller and Staelin (1987) found when "information *quality* was held constant, increases in information had a strong negative effect on decision accuracy. When information *quantity* was held constant, increased information quality had a positive effect to a certain point." The authors interpret these results as evidence audiences can be overloaded with information. Meyers and Johnson (1989) argue, however, that in order to properly identify overload, "a relatively precise and stable representation of underlying preferences is required, but is difficult to obtain in practice." Likewise, Russo (1974) concludes more information aids the audience in making choices.

Howard, Shay, and Green (1988) identify five measures which largely determine whether a consumer buys a given brand, product, or service: These variables are:

- 1 - Information - the amount of information about the brand from advertising, sales people, word-of-mouth referrals, and any other sources.
- 2 - Brand recognition - the extent to which consumers are able to recall the brand when they see it.
- 3 - Attitude - the consumer's belief in the brand.
- 4 - Confidence – the consumer's belief in their ability to judge the quality of the branded product.
- 5 - Intention - the potential that the consumer will buy the product.

If the influence of the above key variables can be increased with communication, audiences will be more likely to buy a given brand (Howard, Shay, & Green, 1998). However, the *information processing* process determines this likelihood.

Information Processing

Audiences depend on information to evaluate the choices they have before they make decisions to act (Blackwell, Miniard, & Engel, 2001). Such thinking has led some advertisers to believe when information is channeled to an audience, that information is automatically absorbed and processed as it was intended. Past research disputes such assessment. As a matter of fact, audiences frequently ignore much information and learn to respond only to what they see as essential elements of a communication that have relevance to their personal needs and desires (Pratkanis & Greenwald, 1993). Previous research suggests that purchase decisions depend on information that is available and the audiences' ability to sort out and process the information (Scammon, 1977).

An audience's method of processing information can either help or undercut the value of message creation via the media. This depends on the matchup between the message's format and the processing method audiences use to understand what is in the communication. According to Thompson and Hamilton (2006) "matching ad format to the consumer's processing mode can improve information processability (i.e., fluency or ease of processing) and that this enhanced processability increases message persuasiveness."

The heuristic model of persuasion (Chaiken, 1980) suggests that changing an audience's opinion can come about with very little processing of information. In other words, audiences can put forth little cognitive effort in considering a message and may accept a message based on vague, non-essential persuasion cues, such as surface or structural characteristics of the message itself. That said, purveyors of communication should not be so bold as to think their messages are always reaching the audience. Advertisers must consider the lack of sufficient processing, competing messages in an information-dense environment, and the audiences' inability to adequately attend to, comprehend and recall information, as serious problems for the advertiser.

Processing Differences

According to Bettman (1979), "when faced with a variety of situations, different individuals have been shown to exhibit different processing skills, goals, and prior experience." Audiences also differ in the way information is acquired and the way strategies are used to make judgments (Childers, Houston, & Heckler, 1985). Differences are also found in the way men and women process information. Females make detailed examinations of message content, paying particular attention to message

specifics. Males connect meaning to relevant “schema” and respond accordingly (Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 1991).

A useful theory for explaining the process by which stimuli are pooled to form an attitude or a belief (a schema) is Anderson's information-integration theory (1981). According to Anderson's theory, attitudes or beliefs are shaped and changed as people receive and interpret information. This information is combined with previous attitudes or beliefs. Schemata can affect meanings and interpretations a person attributes to events, objects, and ideas (Severin & Tankard, 1992). Accordingly, research on schemata suggests previous experiences and knowledge can impact the decision-making route an audience undertakes when deciding to act as a result of viewing a TV commercial.

According to information-processing theory, a person first *attends* to a communication and then attempts to *comprehend* it. The following elaborates on three major response variables: Message attending, comprehension, and recall and the significant roles each play in information processing.

Message Attending

Attention level refers to “the amount of conscious thinking going on when an advertisement is being processed” (Heath, 2009). Individuals must pay attention to a message as an essential step towards understanding it (Pechmann & Stewart, 1990). Without an audience’s attention, there is no communication, therefore, no change in behavior.

Research suggests that television is a medium that is rarely capable of getting high levels of attention, but *is* capable of engaging consumers and

building strong brands (Heath, 2009). Emotive creativity may benefit brand TV advertising by lowering attention and “inhibiting counter-argument,” (Heath, Nairn & Bottomley, (2009).

Comprehension

Persuasion theorists argue that message comprehension is required first before there can be a change in a person’s attitude, recall, intent, and behavior (Ratneshwar & Chaiken, 1991). Effective comprehension leads to increased persuasion, therefore a greater desire by the audience to possibly purchase a product or change an attitude. More specifically, comprehension plays a significant role in information processing because increasing message understanding helps a person process systematically (Jaffe, Jameson, & Berger, 1991). The perception that efficient comprehension leads to better persuasion began with Hovland, Janis, and Kelley’s (1953) notion that persuasion variables can impact persuasions by their impact in “causally prior processes of attention to and comprehension of message content.”

Recall

Recall is necessary if a purchase or change in behavior is to occur. However, many factors moderate recall and retention. Recall measurements test how well audiences store information from communications. High recall of a brand may lead to a purchase (Zinkhan, Locander, & Leigh, 1986).

Being aware of an advertisement and recognizing a product or service may be influenced by a number of factors: (1) the advertisement’s format (ad size and number and use of color), (2) the advertisement’s tone, (3) the ad’s positive versus negative appeals, (4) the ad’s arguments, (5) the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the

spokesperson, (6) the characteristics of the receiver (education, interest in the product, attitudes, and media preferences), (7) and the medium used for channeling the advertisement (Celsi & Olson, 1988). Hornik's study (1988) shows instantaneous recall and recognition of an ad declines across the day, and the measurements of "delayed recognition" of advertisements are appreciably higher in the late afternoon than in the early morning.

The aim of the following study, from an information processing perspective, was to determine how message complexity or clutter within the body of a commercial influences an audience's ability to process, attend to, remember, and ultimately act as a result of a TV spot. Again, clutter within a television commercial is defined in this instance as those commercials which use music, rapid speech, multiple scene transitions, super-imposed text (including graphs), and a significant amount of information contained within one advertisement. Hence, this study explores the following hypotheses:

H1: When advertising clutter *within* a commercial increases, message comprehension decreases.

H2: When advertising clutter *within* a commercial increases, message recall decreases.

H3: When advertising clutter *within* a commercial increases, message attending decreases.

Methodology

Advertising and public relations each attempt to create awareness, change attitudes, and influence behavior. Since each have similar goals and processes, an

experiment was conducted to measure the impact of advertising clutter, thus message complexity, on an audience's ability to attend to, comprehend, and recall TV commercials..

A total of 105 communication students from a medium-sized southeastern U.S. university were randomly split into two groups—a high clutter group and a low clutter group---and were shown videos appropriate for their group's category. The videos were shown in an auditorium setting, with the images projected on a large classroom screen.

The *high clutter* group ($N=54$) was exposed to 10 thirty second TV commercials which contained music, rapid speech, rapid dialog, numerous scene transitions, super-imposed text and graphs, and an elaborate amount of information (elements representing high clutter). The *low clutter* group ($N=51$) was exposed to 10 thirty second TV commercials with a simple message, with no music, slower paced speech, fewer scene transitions, no super-imposed text and graphs, and generally less information in the advertisement (elements representing low clutter). Groups were exposed to an array of commercials, including the sale of cars, food, insurance, mobile homes, household products, sporting events, and children's toys. Commercials were 30 seconds in length and were separated by at least a 10 second buffer of time.

Prior to the study, a pilot group of 20 students was selected to determine sets of commercials in which they felt were high clutter and which they determined were low clutter in order to avoid bias on the part of the researcher. To qualify as a "high clutter" commercial, the the commercial had to (1) convey an excessive amount of information; (2) be saturated with loud and distracting music; (3) contain rapid speech; (4) contain rapid scene transitions; and (5) carry an abundance of super-imposed text. To qualify as

a “low clutter” commercial, the spot had to (1) convey a moderate to low amount of information; (2) *not* be saturated with loud and distracting music; (3) *not* contain rapid speech; (4) *not* contain rapid scene transitions; and (5) *not* carry an abundance of super-imposed text. Group selections created the two stimulus videos used for the experiment (a “high clutter” version and a “low clutter” version).

After the high clutter and low clutter groups reviewed the commercials, they were instructed to fill out a 36-question, Likert-type instrument. This instrument explored to what extent comprehension, recall, and attention were affected by varying levels of advertising clutter within the commercial.

The survey measured a number of variables relating to comprehension, recall, and message attending (see Appendix B). The survey determined student demographics with questions such as “What is your gender?” Other demographic questions were asked regarding age, race, and grade point average. Media preference measurements were accomplished by asking “Rate the importance of television as a source for local news.” Similar questions were asked regarding the importance of radio and print media for local news: “Rate how important radio is to you for local news” and “Rate how important the print medium is to you for local news.” Similarly, measures were made of media preference for entertainment: “Rate how important radio is to you for entertainment.” Identical questions were asked regarding the importance of television (all delivery systems), print (magazines, tabloids, newspapers or any printed material). A Likert scale was used for these questions because it was feared some

respondents would indicate all media were equally important for news and entertainment.

Unaided or free recall was measured by asking such questions as “Did any commercial stand out as more memorable than others?” Participants also were asked to list all of the brand names (not just products) they could remember. This question, borrowed from Jacob Hornik (1988), asks: “List all the brands you remember seeing.” Additional questions were asked such as “Do you remember seeing a commercial about cars” or “Do you remember seeing a commercial about wine?” The ability to comprehend was probed with a number of questions. For example, “What was the main benefit of the product?” Questions regarding ability to comprehend were further used to probe for the extent and ease of message understanding. To measure comprehension, the instrument used questions developed by Ratneshwar and Chaiken (1991) such as: “Did you understand all of the information?”

Prior knowledge was determined with “Did you have knowledge of the brand before seeing the commercial?” Attitude was measured with questions rating price, convenience, and performance as the most appealing features of the product. These attitude questions were based on similar questions asked in a study by Ratneshwar and Chaiken (1991).

Other questions regarding attitude consisted of questions of whether the commercial contained too much product information, and whether the participant found the commercial's spokesperson to be believable and competent as a communicator. The mention of a spokesperson's competence lends itself to the notion of credibility,

which is a known communications persuasion factor (Kumkale, Albarracín, & Seignourel, 2010).

Buying intention was measured with “what is the likelihood that you will buy the product?” Involvement was determined by asking if the product was personally relevant and whether the subject would like to have more information about the product. This last question was borrowed from a study by Jaffe, Jamieson, and Berger (1991). Brand preference was measured with “I prefer this brand over similar brands.” A yes, no, or not sure option was included.

Results

The differences in responses to television commercials under varying levels of advertising clutter within the commercial were examined using t -tests. Consistent with all three hypotheses, the t -tests showed comprehension, recall, and message attending *decreased* as advertising clutter within the commercial increased.

The mean age of the respondents was 21 years. Of the 105 respondents, 65.7% were female and 34.3% were male. The race breakdown was 78.1% white, 14.3% African-American, 1.0% Hispanic, and 6.7% representing other races. Significant differences in grade point average (GPA) were found between groups. The study's high clutter group ($M = 2.29$, $SD = .502$), $t(103) = 2.57$, $p < .001$. Survey results indicated that 34.3% of the respondents had family incomes over \$50,000. Some 26.7% of the respondents had incomes between \$20,000 to \$39,000. Incomes between \$10,000 and \$20,000 were reported by 12.4% and 15.2% showed incomes between \$40,000 and \$50,000. Table 1 shows this demographic information in more detail.

Media Preference

No significant differences in the importance of TV, radio, and print for local news were found between the groups or within the groups. On a scale of 1 to 10, and combining the figures from both groups, television was rated highest in importance for local news ($\underline{M} = 6.42$, $\underline{SD} = 2.2$), followed by print ($\underline{M} = 5.16$, $\underline{SD} = 2.37$), with radio last in importance ($\underline{M} = 5.16$, $\underline{SD} = 2.36$). The reason for radio's last place showing may have been due to the lack of extensive news coverage on radio stations in general. Again no significant differences were found in the importance of TV, radio, print and recording/playback devices for entertainment between groups. Using the same 1 to 10 scale and combining the figures from both groups, television was again rated highest in importance for entertainment ($\underline{M} = 7.61$, $\underline{SD} = 2.10$), followed by radio ($\underline{M} = 7.53$, $\underline{SD} = 2.01$), with recording/play back devices third in importance ($\underline{M} = 7.01$, $\underline{SD} = 2.38$), and print as the last in importance ($\underline{M} = 4.76$, $\underline{SD} = 2.15$). Furthermore, little difference was indicated between groups on how they ranked TV, radio, and print in terms of the amount of time they spent with them in learning about local news. Using a ranking scale from 1 to 3, television was rated highest in time spent learning about local news ($\underline{M} = 1.644$, $\underline{SD} = .787$) followed by print as second ($\underline{M} = 2.12$, $\underline{SD} = .855$), then by radio ($\underline{M} = 2.17$, $\underline{SD} = .769$). Again, radio's last place showing may be due to the lack of significant news coverage on that medium. No significant differences between groups were found in the same ranking scale for television, radio, print, and recording/playback devices in terms of the amount of time spent using them for entertainment. Generally, TV was rated highest in time spent for entertainment between the two groups ($\underline{M} = 1.68$, $\underline{SD} = .873$), followed by radio ($\underline{M} = 2.22$, $\underline{SD} = .924$), then recording/playback devices

(\underline{M} = 2.80, \underline{SD} = 1.02), followed by print (\underline{M} = 3.17, \underline{SD} = 1.16). Table 2 shows media preference information in more detail.

Comprehension

The first hypothesis concerned the relationship between high advertising clutter *within* a commercial and message comprehension.

H1: When advertising clutter increases within a commercial, message comprehension decreases.

The study findings supported this hypothesis. Although no significant differences were uncovered between the groups in terms of identifying the product's main benefit (referring to a commercial previously identified by the respondent as the commercial which stood out more than others), significant differences were found between groups when asked to rate the commercial on its ease of understanding. On a three-point scale --- from (1) very easy to understand (2) to moderately easy, to (3) *not* easy to understand --- the low clutter group's understanding ease was higher (\underline{M} = 1.1, \underline{SD} = .272), than the high clutter group (\underline{M} = 1.4, \underline{SD} = .489), $t(102) = 3.83$, $p < .0001$.

Participants were asked how well they understood the information found in the commercial. Again, significant differences were found between the two groups. Using "yes" and "no" boxes, the low clutter group was found to have understood the message in their commercial better (\underline{M} = 1.2, \underline{SD} = .244) than the high clutter group (\underline{M} = 1.2, \underline{SD} = .427), $t(102) = 2.10$, $p < .05$.

No significant differences existed between groups when asked to identify the main message of the commercial. As a group, 85.7% of the respondents were able to correctly identify some sort of relevant message. However, this finding was not

considered to be an absolute measurement of comprehension due to the wide parameters advertisers often allow for message understanding. If respondents listed the main message “buy our cookies” or “drive our cars,” credit was given for a correct answer.

When asked if the respondents had prior knowledge of the product, significant differences were indicated between the groups. On a “yes” or “no” scale, 81.5% of the high clutter group indicated more prior knowledge ($\underline{M} = 1.2$, $\underline{SD} = .379$) compared to the 58.8% in the low clutter group ($\underline{M} = 1.4$, $\underline{SD} = .487$), $t(102) = 2.80$, $p < .05$

Recall

The second hypothesis concerned the relationship between high advertising clutter *within* a commercial and message recall.

H2: When advertising clutter increases within a commercial, message recall decreases.

The study findings supported this hypothesis. When asked to identify the product or brand which stood out more than the others, nearly all respondents were able to identify a product or a brand name. However, when asked to list all the brands they saw (actual commercial names of products) the low clutter group was able to identify more brand names (2.7) as opposed to the high clutter group, which recalled only 1.9 brand names. This finding is important because advertisers strive for brand name awareness.

Participants were asked if they remembered seeing a wine commercial. No significant differences were indicated between the groups based on the “yes” and “no” option. The low clutter group's response ($\underline{M} = 2.0$, $\underline{SD} = .140$) differed little from the high clutter group ($\underline{M} = 1.96$, $\underline{SD} = .275$), $t(102) = 1.33$, $p < .185$. No wine commercials appeared in either test. When respondents were asked if they remembered seeing a

car commercial, significant differences resulted but were not meaningful. Car commercials were shown to the high clutter group but not to the low clutter group.

Message Attending

The third hypothesis concerned the relationship between high advertising clutter *within* a commercial and message attending.

H3: When advertising clutter increases within a commercial, message attending decreases.

The findings supported this hypothesis. According to previous research, if a message is to be attended to, the receiver must be involved. To be involved the consumer must find the commercial message personally relevant. In this study, significant differences were found between the two groups in terms of commercial relevance. The low clutter group rated their commercials significantly higher for personal relevance ($M = 6.18$, $SD = 2.63$) than did the high clutter group ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 2.23$) $t(102) = 2.07$, $p < .05$).

No significant differences were noticed between the groups in regards to product preference, nor were any significant differences found between the groups when asked if they considered price as the most appealing feature of the product. The groups, likewise, did not differ significantly in feelings about the product. However, when respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement “the most appealing feature about the product was performance,” significant differences in attitude existed between the two groups. The low clutter group tended to agree most with the idea of performance being the most appealing feature ($M = 6.96$, $SD = 2.55$) as opposed to the high clutter group ($M = 5.89$, $SD = 2.45$), $t(102) = 2.19$, $p < .05$. When

participants were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement “the most appealing feature of the product was convenience,” significant differences in attitude existed between the two groups. The low clutter group tended to agree most with the statement that convenience was the most appealing feature ($M = 6.49$, $SD = 2.43$) as opposed to the high clutter group ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 2.22$), $t(102) = 4.30$, $p < .0001$.

Respondents were asked if they felt the commercial's spokesperson was believable. Significant differences again were found between the two groups. The low clutter group tended to agree more with the statement ($M = 7.92$, $SD = 1.92$) than did the high clutter group ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 1.87$), $t(102) = 5.38$, $p < .0001$. Respondents were then asked to agree or disagree with the statement the commercial's spokesperson was a competent communicator. Again, significant differences existed between the two groups on this statement. The low clutter group indicated they agreed most with this statement ($M = 7.92$, $SD = 1.93$) than did the high clutter group ($M = 6.66$, $SD = 2.10$), $t(102) = 3.19$, $p < .001$. The mention of a spokesperson's competence lends itself to the notion of credibility, which is a known communications persuasion factor (Kumkale, Albarracín, & Seignourel, 2010).

When asked the likelihood that the participant would buy the product, significant differences existed between the two groups. The low clutter group tended to be more likely to buy the product mentioned in the commercial, with 37.3% of that group saying the chances of the buying the product were excellent ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 1.05$). Only 3.7% of the high clutter group indicated buying chances were excellent ($M = 2.96$, $SD = .854$), $t(102) = 4.83$, $p < .0001$. However, when asked would you buy the product today if you had the resources?” no significant differences were found between the two groups.

This question was asked to determine if information about the brand or product would lead the participant to make an immediate purchase. Apparently none of the group members felt a need to make an immediate purchase, indicating possibly a lack of urgency for the product. Each group indicated only a slight desire to buy the product if the resources were available.

When asked “do you desire more information?” no significant differences existed in the response between these two groups, As a whole, 55.2% of the respondents indicated they were only moderately interested in receiving more information about the product. Over 28% of the respondents indicated no interested in receiving additional information.

Further analysis indicated the above mentioned levels of significance held when controlling for demographic factors such as race, sex, income, and age.

Discussion

The notion individuals face limits in their ability to deal successfully with large amounts of information within a limited time period triggers concern for scholars and advertisers, alike. The purpose of this study was to determine if message comprehension, recall, and attending were impacted significantly under varying levels of advertising clutter within the commercial. Through the use of t -tests, the data showed increasing advertising clutter did, indeed, decrease comprehension, recall, and message attending to television advertising. Increasing amounts of information caused some participants (high clutter group) to divide their processing time among the pieces of information presented, causing an apparent information overload. Such findings suggest that message impact lessens in a cluttered communication format. Findings

also suggest that complex and cluttered spots are *not* necessarily compatible with the communication needs of a younger demographic, and that this group does not necessarily feel comfortable with the rapid delivery of media.

Increases in content clutter were accompanied in this study by increases in competitive clutter, which may have affected advertising effectiveness in the high clutter group's experiment in one respect. Participants in the high clutter group were treated to several automobile commercials, such as Nissan, GMC Trucks, Pontiac, Cadillac, Mitsubishi, and Ford. All were competitive commercials, which possibly harmed the effectiveness of all other automobile commercials, including non-automobile commercials. Then again, such grouping may have represented a true-to-life viewing setting.

Comprehension plays a significant role in information processing because increased message comprehension enhances the ability to process systematically (Jaffe, Jamieson, Berger, 1991). Comprehension is required before there can be a change in attitudes, memory, intentions, and behavior (Ratneshwar and Chaiken, 1991).

As for the first hypothesis --- *when advertising clutter increases within a commercial, message comprehension decreases* --- participants in the high clutter group tended to indicate this was so. Although no significant differences were found in the ability to identify the main benefit of the product they chose early in the survey as the one commercial which stood out among the others, differences *were* found in message understanding and ease of understanding. Both message understanding and ease of the understanding were more difficult for the high clutter group, compared to the low clutter group. This discovery underscores the significance of this study. Even

though the high clutter group had higher grade point averages than the low clutter group, they still had more difficulty understanding the commercials.

Another way comprehension can influence persuasion is by affecting a recipient's inferences about the communicator. When communicators do not live up to what consumers consider to be proper rules of communication (by presenting an incomprehensible description for a new product, let us say), consumers may be less persuaded. The low clutter group in this study showed greater communicator confidence than the high clutter group, suggesting a greater intention to purchase the product, according to the data. Most theorists believe comprehension is dependent not only on message content but also on information already stored in an individual's memory. In other words, prior knowledge moderates comprehension (Jaffe, Jamieson, Berger, 1991). In this study the high clutter group indicated more prior knowledge than the low clutter group. One cannot help but wonder what impact, if any, this finding had in the experiment. Comprehension leads to increased persuasion, therefore, a greater desire by the consumer to purchase a product or service. Low clutter participants in the study stated they were more likely to purchase the product than high clutter respondents.

As for the second hypothesis ---*when advertising clutter increases within the commercial, message recall decreases* --- participants in the high clutter group illustrated this point. Recall measurements are used to determine how well consumers retain information from advertisements. Recall tests have been the number one gauge of reliability for years (Zinkhan, Locander, Leigh, 1986). When respondents were asked to recall a product or brand in the survey, most responded with a correct answer.

However, when asked to recall as many brand names they could remember, the high clutter group was not able to recall as many of these brand names as the low clutter group, further showing a possible impact of content clutter.

As for the third hypothesis --- *when advertising clutter increases within the commercial, message attending decreases* --- respondents in the high clutter group agreed. Theorists are in agreement that a consumer must first attend to a commercial message in hopes of understanding it. One way to get consumers to attend to an advertisement is to make the ad personally relevant. Significant differences were found between the two groups regarding relevance, with the low clutter group indicating they found their most remembered commercial to be more personal relevant than did the high clutter group.

A consumer's level of involvement also depends on how they perceive the product to satisfy personal needs, goals, and values. In this survey, the low clutter group indicated a greater involvement with the brand or product. Consumer involvement results in increased attention and elaboration of a persuasive message. However, in a message-dense environment, advertisers face stiff competition for the attention of consumers. In such cases, consumers may screen the message to see if it fills a particular need or desire. Messages providing these solutions are the ones more likely to persist.

Consumers also attend to information as a result of the perceptions they have of various product attributes. In this study, questions were asked about performance and convenience. The low clutter group indicated these attributes to be more appealing than did the high clutter group. Again, this may be attributed to a number of factors,

including the level of personal relevance (involvement) members of the low clutter group felt for the products in their experiment. Perhaps this group felt pre-bagged, freshly baked pizzas, or pre-cooked chicken were convenience items and satisfied a craving. Further conclusions are based on the low clutter group's perception of the communicator than was indicated by the high clutter group. The low clutter group felt the commercial's communicator was a more competent and believable communicator than was indicated by the high clutter group.

Limitations and Recommendations

Participants in this study were composed of college students ranging from 19 to 24 years of age and over. Different findings may have resulted had this study been expanded to include a much broader and non-academic age group. Nevertheless, after the experiment was conducted and an analysis made, a design flaw was discovered which made the age variable uninterpretable. In future studies respondents should simply be asked to write in their age. This will allow for a finer cut of data instead of forced age categories.

Also, one cannot help but wonder if similar levels of recall, comprehension, and message attending would likely be obtained in more natural viewing conditions. The procedures employed in this study to tap cognitive responses and to assess their retrieval were chosen for their relevance to comprehension, recall, and message attending situations. They were not representative of the conditions which characterize true-to-life exposure to TV commercials. In this study, exposure to the commercials took place in an auditorium classroom. The commercials were not embedded in program material, nor were they spaced by time. Quite possibly, attention to these

commercials was considerably greater than they would have been in real life circumstances. Further studies should consider placing test commercials within actual programming content to allow for a more realistic testing situation. It may also be interesting to combine this type of experimental advertising research with qualitative interviews of advertising professionals in future work. Such triangulation could provide additional insight for the public relations professional.

Implications

The primary conclusion from this data is advertising clutter within a TV commercial--- defined by this study as commercials with music, rapid speech, numerous scene transitions, super-imposed text, and an elaborate amount of information--- impedes message comprehension, recall, and attending in ways warranting advertiser attention. As such, this study reinforces the importance of message clarity and repetition—things of which a well-schooled PR practitioner must follow day after day. Perhaps advertisers should look at ways of increasing message understanding and recall by exploring simpler methods to reach the audience. As such, this study stresses the need for advertisers and public relations professionals to better craft messages to audiences, to make messages more comprehensible, more easily recalled, and more attention-getting. Although this may be difficult to achieve at times, the actual attempt may enhance the consumer's intention to buy or change an attitude.

The results of this research also suggest a variety of strategies may be needed to improve cognitive processing and improve motivation to process information. If advertisers and public relations professionals can find ways to increase message

involvement, they may be able to induce the desired state of cognitive activity which, in the end, may lead to the intention to buy or change opinion and attitude.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE 1

Demographics

Age Distribution (GROUPS COMBINED)

	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
19	30	28.6
20	18	17.1
21	15	14.3
22	10	9.5
23	8	7.6
24 AND OVER	24	22.9

Gender Distribution (GROUPS COMBINED)

	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Male	36	34.3
Female	69	65.7

Grade Point Average Distribution

	<u>Low Clutter</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>High Clutter</u>	<u>%</u>
Below 2.0	1	2.0	1	1.8
2.0 - 2.9	34	66.7	22	40.8
3.0 - 4.0	16	31.3	31	57.4

Income (GROUPS COMBINED)

	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Under 10,000	3	2.9
\$10,999 to \$19,999	13	12.4
\$20,000 to \$39,000	28	26.7
\$40,000 to \$49,999	16	15.3
\$50,000 and OVER	36	34.3
Not Sure	1	1.0
Missing	8	7.6

TABLE 2

Media Preference

Media importance for local news (MEAN)

	<u>LOW CLUTTER</u>	<u>HIGH CLUTTER</u>	<u>COMBINED</u>
Television	6.7	6.2	6.4
Print	6.1	5.4	5.9
Radio	5.4	4.9	5.2

Media importance for entertainment (MEAN)

	<u>LOW CLUTTER</u>	<u>HIGH CLUTTER</u>	<u>COMBINED</u>
Television	7.7	7.5	7.6
Radio	7.6	7.4	7.5
Recording/Playback	6.8	7.2	7.0
Print	4.5	4.9	4.8

TABLE 3

Attitudes

Feelings about the product

Scale: (“1” Did not like...”10” Liked Extremely)

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard</u>
<u>Deviation</u>			
Low Clutter Group	51	6.9	2.5
High Clutter Group	54	6.2	2.1
Mean Difference:	.7		

Most appealing feature was price

Scale: (“1” Strongly disagree...”10” Strongly agree)

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
Low Clutter Group	51	4.4	3.3
High Clutter Group	54	5.0	2.2
Mean difference:	.6		

Most appealing feature was performance

Scale: (“1” Strongly disagree...”10” Strongly Agree)

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
Low Clutter Group	51	7.0	2.6
High Clutter Group	54	5.9	2.4
Mean Difference:	1.1		

Table 3, cont

Most appealing feature was convenience

Scale: ("1" Strongly disagree..."10" Strongly Agree)

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
Low Clutter Group	51	6.5	2.4
High Clutter Group	54	4.5	2.2
Mean Difference:	2.0		

Too much information

Scale: ("1" Strongly disagree..."10" Strongly Agree)

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
Low Clutter Group	51	2.4	1.8
High Clutter Group	54	3.8	2.3
Mean Difference:	1.4		

Spokesperson was believable

Scale: ("1" Strongly disagree..."10" Strongly Agree)

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
Low Clutter Group	51	7.9	1.9
High Clutter Group	54	5.9	1.9
Mean Difference:	2.0		

Table 3, cont

Spokesperson was a competent communicator

Scale: ("1" Strongly disagree..."10" Strongly Agree)

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
Low Clutter Group	51	7.9	1.9
High Clutter Group	54	6.7	2.1
Mean Difference:	1.2		

Interested in getting more product information

	<u>Low Clutter</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>High Clutter</u>	<u>%</u>
Very interested	9	17.6	7	13.0
Moderate interest	28	54.9	30	55.5
No interest	14	27.4	16	29.7

Prefer brand over others

Scale: ("1" Strongly disagree..."10" Strongly Agree)

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
Low Clutter Group	51	5.8	2.8
High Clutter Group	54	5.5	2.5
Mean Difference:	.3		

Table 3, cont

Commercial was relevant

Scale: ("1" Strongly disagree..."10" Strongly Agree)

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
Low Clutter Group	51	6.1	2.7
High Clutter Group	53	5.1	2.2

Mean Difference: 1.0

TABLE 4

Comprehension

Message understanding

	<u>Low Clutter</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>High Clutter</u>	<u>%</u>
Yes	49	96.1	42	77.8
No	2	3.9	11	20.4

Understanding ease

	<u>Low Clutter</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>High Clutter</u>	<u>%</u>
Very Easy	47	92.2	33	61.2
Moderately	4	7.8	20	37.0
Not Easy	0	0	0	.0

Missing 1 case

Could identify product's main benefit

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Low clutter group	51	81%
High clutter group	53	72%

TABLE 5

Intention to buy

Will buy product

	<u>Low Clutter</u>	%	<u>High Clutter</u>	%
Excellent	9	37.3	2	3.7
Good	19	37.3	14	25.9
Not Sure	5	9.8	21	38.9
Will Not Buy	8	15.7	16	1.8
			1 missing case	1.8

Would buy if had resources

(Scale "1" agree to "10" disagree)

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
Low clutter group	51	6.4	3.1
High clutter group	53	6.6	2.7

Mean difference: .2

TABLE 6

Prior Knowledge

Had prior knowledge

	<u>Low Clutter</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>High Clutter</u>	<u>%</u>
Yes	30	58.8	44	81.5
No	21	41.2	9	16.7
			1 case missing	1.8

Knowledge depth

(Scale "1" very knowledgeable to "10" no knowledge)

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
Low clutter group	51	4.7	3.7
High clutter group	54	5.7	2.4
Mean difference:	1.0		
