

## **50 Years using the wrong model of TV advertising**

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University of Bath  
School of Management  
Working Paper Series

**2007.03**

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# 50 YEARS USING THE WRONG MODEL OF TV ADVERTISING<sup>1</sup>

**Robert Heath & Paul Feldwick**

## **Summary**

This paper investigates the dominance of the information processing model of TV advertising, and presents evidence to show it is over simplistic and contrary to learning from psychology. We examine why the model has never been challenged, and present an outline for a new model along with implications for research.

## **Introduction: The Information Processing Model of Advertising**

In 1999 a launch TV commercial for a snack food product aimed at teenagers was pre-tested. The commercial consisted of a pop song with meaningless gibberish lyrics, accompanying a series of surreally linked and sometimes bizarre scenes. It's best imagined as a pop video, with no actual information about the product, although in each scene someone happens to be eating it.

The research was conducted amongst teenagers using familiar 'impact and communication' type questions such as 'Did this commercial give you enough information about the product?' and 'Do you think someone would find this commercial easy to understand?' From such questions, average scores were produced for constructs including 'ease of understanding', 'believability', 'relevance', 'branding' and 'persuasion'. On all of these, scores were below norms.

The report drew the following conclusions:

“This route does not seem to have worked very well... it hampers understanding and comprehension of intended message”

“The song acts as the biggest hurdle – there is a strong element of dislike which overrides message takeout, and impressions about the product”

“...the taste, or other details about the product are hardly mentioned spontaneously”

“The ad... is seen in terms of its format rather than communication, which

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<sup>1</sup> Paper submitted to Market Research Society 50th Anniversary Conference, March 2007.

results in relevance, believability and persuasion being low. This is also supported by the low ease of understanding score”

“We feel it may not be appropriate to use this ad as a launch vehicle, given the above concerns. Probably a more simplistic route (a simple story line) which emphasises the brand name and benefits clearly would work the best”

What is unusual about this case is not the research methodology, nor the conclusions drawn – these are typical of those used and indeed mandated by many multinational corporations. What is unusual is that, for reasons of timing, the advertiser went ahead and ran the ad, and the results were exceptional. It became the most recalled and liked ad among teenagers and adults for three months in a row, in an independent survey of all advertising in its geographical market. It achieved high spontaneous recall with 93% liking the ad very much – especially the song. In fact, the campaign became ‘the talk of the town’ with many mentions in the press, TV shows, etc. Most importantly, the brand took a substantial share of the market.

It is not difficult to see why the research got it so wrong. While the research report repeatedly concerns itself with “*message takeout*”, “the taste and other *details of the product*”, “*believability and persuasion* being low”, and recommends “a simple story line which emphasises the brand name and *benefits* clearly”, all these constructs have no relevance to an ad which deliberately contains no information, is nonsensical and surreal, and evidently is meant to work by being entertaining, catchy, and talked about.

The fact that the song was heavily “disliked” in the research, though it later proved hugely popular, suggests another distortion in the research process – the difference between a teenager being played a song once or twice, alone (probably by a researcher who looks like his mother), and the effect of the same song on repeated hearing, in social situations among peers. (cf. Gladwell 2005, Ch 5)

In hindsight it seems hard to believe that intelligent and responsible people could have invested time in such a misconceived piece of research. Yet this type of research is far from atypical. This case demonstrates the extraordinary power of certain assumptions or beliefs about how advertising works, a mental model so deeply embedded in organisational practice that it routinely overrules judgement. Some assumptions made in this case are as follows:

- For any ad to be effective, it must communicate information about the product
- Respondents must be able to play back the correct, verbal ‘message’
- To be successful, any ad must be ‘believed’ and ‘understood’

These are elements in a complex of beliefs about advertising which we will call, in this paper, ‘the information processing model of advertising’ (‘the IP model’). There are other elements which make up this model:

- For any ad to be effective, it must first attract attention and the active involvement of the viewer
- The advertising process is essentially a one way, communication from the advertiser to the consumer
- The role played by creativity and emotional elements is to support this communication, either by fostering liking of the advertising which transfers to the brand, or by increasing attention

Within this model it is seen as perfectly acceptable, indeed beneficial, for advertising to be tested in an environment in which individuals are asked to give their conscious attention to the advertising stimulus.

We believe this conventional model still underpins the vast majority of practice and belief in advertising today, and has for at least fifty years. Let us briefly illustrate this.

Hall and Maclay (1991) researched beliefs about advertising among UK advertisers and agencies, qualitatively and quantitatively. Using factor and cluster analysis they described four main models of the ad process; the most common was a hierarchy of effects model, summed up in a research verbatim:

“We are concerned it has *impact*, it has the capacity to be *noticed*, to make people *know what brand* is being offered and that it is *communicating* the desired *message*” (1991: p 17 emphasis added)

They named this the *persuasion* model. There was also a *saliency* model which prioritised creating awareness, and an *involvement* model which stressed the role of advertising in creating relationships through affective means. But this last cluster also strongly endorsed the need for a “unique selling proposition to be clearly established”. This research showed that most practitioners simultaneously hold beliefs which

represent different underlying models. It is not that people in advertising don't believe there is a role for creativity, or the importance of brand relationships: but in practice these 'softer' values are regarded as less important than, and subservient to, the information processing model. 'Creativity' is fitted into the IP model using the argument that it improves levels of attention or of memorability, or in some other way makes the 'message' of the advertisement more powerful. To support this elaborate fiction, huge resources of corporate ingenuity are squandered in retro-fitting successful campaigns to spurious 'information processing' strategies. So we learn that Guinness 'Surfer' is merely a dramatisation of the 'benefit' that Guinness takes a long time to pour, or that the Lynx campaign dramatises the 'benefit' that 'you will be irresistible to girls'. It is a bit like saying that King Lear is a great play because it is about families.

The IP model is continually reflected in the language that marketers use. Duncan & Moriarty, writing in *Advertising Age* in 1999, described advertising as "... one-way communication: creating and sending messages..." (1999: 44). But these same ideas are supported by a strong academic tradition. Despite the astonishing progress in neuroscience which accompanied the arrival of the fMRI scanner in the 1990s 'decade of the brain', no one has successfully challenged or questioned the model. Thus Jones describes advertising as an activity which "...increases people's knowledge and changes people's attitudes" (1990: 237), and Myers-Levy & Malaviya, writing in *Journal of Marketing*, consider "...only theories that adopt an information-processing perspective"(1999: 45) . Even Ehrenberg and Jones, who have popularised the terms 'strong theory' for information processing and conversion and 'weak theory' for emotional reinforcement (Ehrenberg 1974; Jones 1992: 48-62), load the argument in the same way as the earlier expressions 'hard sell' and 'soft sell'. In an instrumental, modernist organizational culture, the concepts 'strong' and 'hard' will inevitably be valued, while 'weak' and 'soft' are rejected.

And the model underpins nearly all agency or client creative briefing forms, which generally require a statement of 'proposition' or 'message', or use language such as 'what is the one thing we want to say?', or ask for 'benefits' and 'support'. These formulas are perpetuated in corporate manuals, as well as marketing textbooks and business schools, everywhere.

The IP model is, in effect, hard wired into so many aspects of working procedures, and so much of the language used, that it has taken on the status of the scientific 'paradigm'

described by Thomas Kühn: advertising people, like “scientists...never learn concepts, laws and theories in the abstract and by themselves. Instead, these intellectual tools are from the start encountered in a historically and pedagogically prior unit that displays them with and through their applications” (Kühn 1996:46) The information processing model may appear as obvious ‘common sense’, but it is in fact a construction with deep historical roots.

It is not that advertising *never* works through giving information, or through conscious attention. In some circumstances, the IP model is appropriate. But for much of the advertising produced by mainstream brand communications agencies, the model is either irrelevant or of limited importance. Most advertising influences behaviour not through the conscious processing of verbal or factual messages, but by mediating relationships between the consumer and the brand – and it does this using types of communication that are not necessarily processed with conscious attention. Past advertising practitioners have intuitively always known this and acted accordingly, leading to a benign conspiracy in which creativity and communication are able to co-exist (Heath 2004). But today it seems to be getting worse. Advertisers, aware that their advertising is often ineffective, respond by applying more control, more analysis, and more measurement – in every case strengthening the hold that the IP model has over the outcomes. The attempted solution exacerbates the problem in a vicious circle that can only be broken by adopting some radically new assumptions.

In proposing an alternative model, we do not claim that it represents ultimate truth. But we do maintain that our model fits much more closely the observed realities of most successful advertising, and is infinitely more useful in practice. It would therefore be in the interests of any advertiser to understand and adopt it.

In this paper we set out our argument in four parts:

- Firstly we show how the IP model has derived from a practitioner tradition based on models of selling, and a supporting academic tradition based on cognitive processing. We shall see that, as Stephen King said forty years ago, its claims are “based on *a priori* assumptions not experimental research” (King, 1967:10).
- Secondly we review a wide range of evidence that highlights the inadequacy of the model, and show how it can be misleading in practice. This includes two new empirical studies and one new research study.

- Thirdly, we consider the deep cultural beliefs and structures that support the dominance of this model.
- Finally we summarise what we believe the real model should incorporate, and discuss the implication this has for the research industry.

### **Origins of the Information Processing Model**

John Maynard Keynes wrote: “Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.” (1935, Ch 24) This applies as well to advertising as to economics. The ideas and the words that continue to dominate advertising’s professional discourse – *attention, recall, proposition, benefits, message* – are taken for granted by ‘practical men and women’ who use them, as simple descriptions of an objective reality, or absolute truths beyond questioning. Yet in every case their ancestry can be traced back to influential practitioners or academics of the past. By doing this we can better understand their limitations, as well as their usefulness.

All we have space for here is to point to two major strands in the archaeology of advertising thinking. This will demonstrate how concepts we take for granted are merely particular ways of looking at the world: useful in their original contexts when they represented new insights, but today, blocks to thinking clearly. As John Stuart Mill wrote:

“Some particular body of doctrine in time rallies the majority round it, organizes social institutions and modes of action conformably to itself, education impresses this new creed upon the new generation *without the mental processes that have led to it*, and by degrees it acquires the very same power of compression, so long exercised by the creeds of which it had taken place.”  
(Feyerabend 1993:31 emphasis added)

The first influential idea we examine is the analogy of advertising to personal selling, which also provides the original genesis of the highly influential ‘hierarchy of effects’ models. The second, which also derives in part from the first, is the model of advertising as ‘message transmission’.

## Salesmanship in Print

In 1903, John E Kennedy told Albert Lasker that advertising was “salesmanship in print” – a formula which helped Lasker make Lord and Thomas the biggest agency in the world. (Gunther 1960: 58)

Equating advertising with face to face selling was a simple and powerful idea. It especially made sense – and still makes sense today – in direct response advertising, where Lord and Thomas built their reputation. The split run had been available since the 1890’s, and coupon responses were analysed and used to fine tune ‘mail order’ advertising. The learning from this, and the sense that Taylorian efficiency could be applied to advertising, must have seemed hugely impressive to clients. Claude Hopkins, Kennedy’s successor at Lord and Thomas, wrote “Advertising, once a gamble, has thus become... one of the safest of business ventures”(Hopkins 1998: 213)

What did ‘salesmanship in print’ mean in practice? For Hopkins, it meant “hail a few people only” (the prospects), give them as much information as possible, and then the opportunity to place the order (1998: 220-25). Selling through advertising was for Hopkins a rational, information based process, with no room for humour or eccentricity. Selling itself had only recently evolved into a replicable process that could be taught, the first sales manuals appearing in the 1880’s for companies selling calculating machines (Friedman 1999). E St Elmo Lewis, a salesman for the National Cash Register co, invented a four step formula for selling – get *attention*, provoke *interest*, create *desire*, and then get *action* by closing the sale. A new opera by Verdi provided a topical acronym – AIDA (Barry and Howard 1990).

From Hopkins, we derive the idea that selling is a rational, fact based process. From AIDA we get the idea that selling is a sequence, moving a prospect from ignorance to action. Both these formulas were of practical usefulness in the context in which they were developed, but later were applied in situations where they made little sense, by people who had little idea of their origins. Hopkins must take some of the blame for this. He asserted that “the purpose of advertising is to sell. It is not to keep your name before the public. It is not to help your other salesmen” (Hopkins 1998: 220). But he ignored the fact that a great deal of advertising then, and much more since, existed precisely to “help other salesmen”. Stephen King believed the task of advertising was more about “increasing saleability” than directly creating sales (1977). And the

principles inspired by ‘salesmanship in print’ are *not* the same as those that create saleability.

AIDA was the first of many ‘hierarchy of effects’ models concocted by practitioners or academics. Among the most influential are those of Daniel Starch in the 1920’s: “advertising must be seen – read – understood – remembered – acted upon”, and Russell Colley in 1961: “advertising moves people from unawareness, to awareness, to comprehension, to conviction, to desire, to action” (Barry & Howard 1990). The huge variety of possible formulas makes it clear that these are all assumptions without any solid empirical basis. But when presented with the authority of successful practitioners and academics, they sound intuitively appealing and commonsensical. They also provide simple templates for research, and once research methodologies are adopted to measure attention or recall, research practice and theory become mutually supportive.

The power of these models has had further implications. The sales analogy envisages the advertising task as the conversion of a prospect from non-purchase to purchase. But this image is quite inappropriate in repeat purchase situations, which most advertising is about. Ehrenberg (1974) has shown that buying behaviour is complex, and that it is often misleading to think of people as neatly divided into buyers and non buyers of a brand.

The popularity of Starch ratings from the 1930’s onward in the USA – a syndicated reading and noting study which was sold as a proxy for measuring ‘attention’ to press ads – represented a major redefinition of ‘attention’. It was no longer a case of “hailing a few people only”, as Hopkins said: to get the high Starch ratings that clients demanded involved attracting the attention of *all* readers of a publication, prospects or not. To do this, agencies started incorporating all the things Hopkins had forbidden – eye-catching pictures, funny headlines, white space, or the proverbial “gorilla in a jock strap” (Ogilvy 1983: 161). This practice earned the contempt of old mail order copywriters like John Caples (Mayer 1958), but helped develop a belief within agencies, especially in creative departments, that maximising attention at all costs is of paramount importance. Bill Bernbach said “You can’t sell a man who isn’t listening”, and in this remark we can see how the creative drive towards attention-getting advertising is legitimised for the client’s ears by linking it back to the model of advertising as face to face selling (Bernbach n.d.). The bluff, practical tone effectively obscures the big assumptions that are being made throughout this short sentence.

## **Advertising as message transmission**

Rosser Reeves, head of the successful Bates agency, published an influential book in 1961 called *Reality in Advertising* in which he forthrightly stated his own, updated version of Kennedy's definition:

“ADVERTISING IS THE ART OF GETTING A UNIQUE SELLING PROPOSITION INTO THE HEADS OF THE MOST PEOPLE AT THE LOWEST POSSIBLE COST.” (Reeves 1961: 121 author's capitals).

The word 'proposition' is another direct derivation from the selling model. But with this new emphasis, Reeves changed the underlying model of selling from a four step process to a single, reified object – the proposition. He justified this by asserting (without evidence) that “The consumer tends to remember just one thing from an advertisement – one strong claim, or one strong concept” (Reeves 1961: 34). In Reeves' metaphor, the proposition occupies the consumer's brain, where it is assumed to influence behaviour.

In practice, a proposition is a verbal construct, therefore success in advertising was measured by whether the consumer could correctly repeat the proposition when asked. The privileging of verbal communication over everything else is reflected in the language of advertising, in words such as *copy* (often meaning the entire content of an ad), and *message*. For advertisers, reducing the power of advertising to a simple, verbal, proposition, makes it appear simultaneously rational, replicable, ownable and controllable. It therefore fits the culture of most organisations more comfortably than the advertisement itself, which is a complex assemblage of visuals, sounds, patterns, and non-verbal cues. Meanwhile, the idea of the 'single minded' proposition is another, like *attention*, that has embedded itself firmly in agency creative departments, who continually demand briefs that are simple, sometimes even ideally a single word.

Reeves' basic concept of communication is 'message transmission' – success is measured by the accuracy with which what leaves the sender arrives intact at the receiver. This was an important concept in communications theory when Reeves was writing: in 1948 Claude Elwood Shannon, a mathematician working for Bell Laboratories, defined the problem of communication as “to reproduce at a given point in an exact or approximate way a *message* selected at another point” (Mattelart and Matellart 1998 :44 emphasis added). Shannon's work proved influential in many fields, including social science. But though it may have been useful for telephone engineers, this proved a blind alley in human communication. A few years after *Reality in*

*Advertising*, Paul Watzlawick's *Pragmatics of Human Communication* would turn communications theory on its head in by recognising that human communication was a matter of continual social exchange, involving a number of behavioural modes besides words, and that as well as being about content, it was perhaps more importantly about relationships (Watzlawick Bavelas & Jackson 1967). These ideas offer valuable alternatives to the message transmission model, but up to the present time have been almost entirely ignored by advertising practitioners and academics.

### **Support for the IP model from academia**

Although the academic study of advertising and the activities of practitioners often seem remote, practice is influenced by academia through the market research industry and through what is taught in business schools. It is unlikely that the IP model would dominate as strongly as it does without the support of the academic discourse, which works within the same fundamental paradigm - dominated by cognition, with emotion relegated to a secondary role. Professor John Phillip Jones, for example, speaks of “the rational idea enclosed as it were in an emotional envelope...The commercials should be likable- but the *selling message must be unmistakable*” (2001: 36, emphasis added).

Emotion was first incorporated into a formal advertising model by Lavidge and Steiner (1961), who assimilated the hierarchy of effects into contemporary psychological thinking. They posited three sequential components of advertising effectiveness – Cognitive (the realm of thought), Affective (the realm of emotions), and Conative (the realm of motives), and elaborated this into a sequence of Awareness (cognitive) → Knowledge (cognitive) → Liking (affective) → Preference (affective) → Conviction (conative) → Purchase (conative). So emotion was considered a consequence of cognition, and its realm in this model was strictly limited to the decision-making area of liking and preference.

Emotion featured again briefly in the Hedonic Experiential Model (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) but although a distinct and separate role was identified for it, it was still seen as being supplementary to information processing: “Abandoning the information processing approach is undesirable, but supplementing and enriching it with ... the experiential perspective could be extremely fruitful.” (1982:138).

Thereafter emotion reverted to being an adjunct to information processing. For some it became synonymous with ‘ad liking’ (Shimp 1981, Srull 1983), the territory of agency

creatives. “Copywriters believe the connection with advertising is always emotional” wrote Kover et al. (1995: 34) and “Positive affect is elicited by the advertising (and) is then transferred to the brand or product advertised” (1995: 37). But the most influential school saw emotion as a means of facilitating information processing by increasing attention. The idea that emotion increases attention was formalised by Kroeber-Riel in his Activation Theory (1979). Later, Ray & Batra state that emotional advertising is more effective because “...it is attended to more, processed more, evaluated more favourably, and remembered more”(1983: 544). This has now become something of a tablet of stone, appearing in the writing of Alex Biel (1990), Peter Doyle (1994), and most recently heralded as a new discovery by Erik Du Plessis (2005).

Meanwhile Cognition thrived, as witnessed by the popularity of Brock & Shavitt’s Cognitive Response Model (1983). The CRM held that for advertising messages to be effective they needed not just to be received, but to be reinterpreted into the individual’s own thoughts and rehearsed before being stored (i.e. analysed). This rehearsal of one’s own thoughts was seen as “... a more important determinant of persistence of persuasion than ... rehearsal of message arguments” (1983:91). These ideas led directly to advertising academia’s “most influential theoretical contribution” (Beard 2002: 72), Petty & Cacioppo’s Elaboration Likelihood Model. In the ELM there are two routes for persuasion – Central and Peripheral – which differ according to “the extent to which the attitude change that results ... is due to active thinking.” (Petty & Cacioppo 1996: 256). The Central Processing route is

“controlled, deep, systematic, and effortful...When conditions foster people’s motivation and ability to engage in issue-relevant thinking, the “elaboration likelihood” is said to be high. This means that people are likely to attend to the appeal; attempt to access relevant associations, images, and experiences from memory...” (1986: 128)

In other words, Central Processing is attentive, and it is evident from the word ‘systematic’ that this is what psychologists term goal-driven, or top-down, processing. Peripheral Processing, on the other hand, is “automatic, shallow, heuristic, and mindless” and “based on affective associations or simple inferences tied to peripheral cues...” (1986: 191). It is clear from the use of the word ‘automatic’ that Peripheral Processing *is* a low attention activity, corresponding to what psychologists call stimulus-driven, or bottom-up, processing. And although the ELM does not use emotion

as a primary construct, the statement "... based on affective associations..." (1986: 191) shows that emotion is at work within peripheral processing. This is confirmed later when they propose "...when motivation or ability to process issue-relevant arguments is low, attitudes may be changed by associating an issue position with various affective cues" (1986:130).

But Petty & Cacioppo make it clear that they see Peripheral Processing as a weak advertising route, only effective if tied in to high levels of repetition. The high involvement 'Active Thinking' Central route is favoured, because "Attitude changes via the Central Route appear to be more persistent, resistant, and predictive of behaviour than changes induced via the peripheral route" (1986: 191). In other words, this dominant academic model articulates the same belief system as we have seen amongst practitioners: that emotions and unconscious process may have a part to play, but they are always subsidiary in importance to information processing and rational argument.

### **Challenges to information processing**

Meanwhile academic challenges to the IP paradigm have had little significant influence. Herb Krugman in 1965 pointed out that much of the content of TV advertising was "trivial and sometimes silly" and did not fit the traditional persuasion models prevalent at the time.

"Does this suggest that if television bombards us with enough trivia about a product we may be persuaded to believe it? On the contrary, it suggests that persuasion as such ... is not involved at all and it is a mistake to look for it... as a test of advertising's impact" (1965: 353).

Working with Norman Mackworth in 1968, Krugman noted the "...relatively motionless, focused, or passive eye characteristics of TV viewing" (1977: 8), and went on to test the brainwaves of a subject watching TV and read press advertisements (1971). But his conclusion, that television is a medium of 'low involvement' compared to print, encouraged advertisers to expend even more energy on getting viewers to pay attention.

A second attack by Andrew Ehrenberg proposed that advertising "is not as powerful as is sometimes thought, nor is there any evidence that it actually works by any strong form of persuasion or manipulation" (1974: 25). His 'reinforcement' model advanced a theory that "Advertising's main role is to reinforce feelings of satisfaction with brands

already being used” (1974:33). Ehrenberg saw reinforcement advertising working by taking “... an emotional instead of an informative tone...” (1974: 27), but his most controversial assertion was that attitude change was not a mandatory precursor to purchase: In this respect he was constructing a model similar to Peripheral Processing in Petty & Cacioppo’s ELM. The difference of course was that Ehrenberg saw this type of advertising as being highly effective, and Petty & Cacioppo regard it as being relatively ineffective.

## **Summary**

The ‘balance of power’ amongst marketing academics supports the IP model, and asserts that:

- Advertising works more effectively through top-down goal driven processing
- Attention facilitates processing by improving comprehension and recall
- Emotion facilitates processing by increasing attention
- Advertising based on emotional cues, and advertising which does not get high attention, is weak and ineffective, working only when repeated frequently
- Prior exposure to advertising eventually leads to a fall in attention

However, as we will show in the next section, another branch of academia – psychology – has been developing strong empirical evidence that these assertions are substantially wrong.

## **Evidence that the Information Processing Model is flawed**

In the past there has been little hard evidence to support the idea that advertising can work without persuasion. Partly this is because advertising evaluation has historically been dominated by metrics which measure cognitive thinking rather than feeling (Wiles and Cornwell 1990). Nor has the situation changed in the 15 years since Haley & Baldinger predicted that “Persuasion and recall ... are likely to remain primary evaluative measures in the foreseeable future” (1991 p.30). The problem is compounded by the difficulty of isolating and measuring the impact of non-cognitive elements on the feelings and behaviour of the target market. As Vakratsas & Ambler

observe, "...cognition usually intervenes in measurement. Asking about feelings brings cognitive processes into play and induces cognitive bias" (1999: 32).

But empirical evidence that advertising works without needing a rational persuasive message does exist. Recent experimental work by Kathryn Braun confirmed Ehrenberg's claim that advertising can operate as post-purchase reinforcement. Braun (1999) created samples of orange juice of varying quality and gave it to subjects to taste, claiming it was a trial for a new brand. Following a distraction task, half the subjects were exposed to advertising for the brand. It was found that the advertising confounded the subject's ability to judge accurately the quality of the juice, leading to substandard product being highly rated. She concluded:

"...advertising received after a direct product experience altered consumers' recollection of both objective sensory and affective components of that experience" (1999:332).

The need for attention to be paid for advertising to work has also been challenged empirically. D'Sousa & Rao (1995) exposed subjects to repeated radio advertising for a mature market in a divided attention situation. Small but significant increases in top-of-mind brand awareness, predicted brand share, and brand choice, resulted from increased repetition, showing that advertising can influence choice when repeatedly exposed at low attention.

Shapiro Macinnis & Heckler (1997) provided evidence that advertising can work when processed without *any* attention. They used a computer-controlled magazine in which previously unexposed test advertising was placed in a column to one side whilst attention was constrained on the centre column via the performance of two tasks. A test group worked on material where the ads were present and a control group on material where the ads were absent. The results showed that consideration of the advertised product increased, despite subjects being unable to fixate the advertising. They concluded:

"Advertising has the potential to affect future buying decisions even when subjects ... do not process the ad attentively and ... do not recollect ever having seen the ad" (1997: 102).

### **Recent research in Attention towards TV and Newspaper Ads**

Krugman's assertion that TV advertising is low involvement compared to press has recently been verified by Stuart Corke and Robert Heath (2004). Corke & Heath used a head mounted gaze-tracking camera, which tracks and measures minute eye movements. The use of eye movement as an indication of visual attention is well established, and goes back at least 75 years (Gragg 1930). Gaze tracking measures only visual attention, but visual and auditory attention are well linked unless distraction occurs (Schmitt et al 2000). So provided that subjects are reading newspapers or watching TV in a normal comfortable environment without external distraction, the two systems will be well linked. However, attention is very sensitive to influence. If you are told that you are going to be looking at some advertising, you will automatically pay more attention to it. For this reason, Corke & Heath's research was carefully designed to give no indication that advertising was the main focus. Instead, subjects were told they were taking part in a pharmacological study to test the effect of TV watching on the eyes. The newspaper reading was introduced before the TV watching, ostensibly as a way of allowing the subject to get used to the equipment, and current editions of the *Times* and the *Sun* newspaper made available. After 10 -12 minutes, respondents were asked to watch an episode of *Frasier* containing 3 ad breaks, each with 5 ads. So during neither TV watching or newspaper reading were subjects aware that advertising was the focus of the research.

The results, shown in table 1, were very revealing.

**Table 1: Results of Corke & Heath 2004**

	TV Ads	Newspaper Ads	Ratio
Maximum advertising attention	1.72 fps	3.75 fps	0.46
Minimum advertising attention	0.55 fps	1.45 fps	0.38

This suggests that the average attention paid towards TV advertising is between one third and one half that paid towards newspaper advertising. In other words, Krugman's findings were right, and TV advertising is indeed low attention compared with press advertising.

But what was even more revealing was the *nature* of processing observed by Corke &

Heath. With newspaper reading the processing was clearly goal-driven, with subjects either starting at the front and turning from page to page, or selecting destinations within the paper like the sport or the business news. In all cases the pages were scanned carefully and systematically, with ads sometimes briefly fixated, sometimes carefully read. Rarely did the eyes wander over the paper aimlessly, and subjects did not look away from the newspaper except when they changed to read another newspaper.

With TV, processing was completely different. A few subjects started by watching the screen carefully and followed the action, but most watched in a 'lazy' way, exactly matching Krugman's description of "motionless, passive eye characteristics". Some looked directly at the screen, but others continuously scanned from side to side across it, never looked directly at the screen at all,. Within a few minutes all subjects would look away from the screen, and this continued throughout the 30 minute programme, sometimes for lengthy periods. At least one subject fell asleep just before the centre ad break, despite it being 11 o'clock in the morning. When challenged she stoutly denied having fallen asleep and claimed she enjoyed the programme. She only accepted the accusation when she was shown the ads at the start of the centre break and agreed she couldn't remember any of them.

What this suggests is that TV and newspaper processing are quite different. Newspaper processing appears to conform to the systematic goal-driven 'top-down' processing of the Information Processing Model. But TV processing is predominantly automatic, stimulus driven 'bottom-up' processing. This flatly contradicts the core assumptions made in all conventional information processing advertising models.

### **Recent research on Drivers of Attention towards TV Ads**

Corke & Heath's experiment has been extended by Heath (2006) to examine this hypothesis further. The information processing model postulates four key assumptions about how attention is driven by advertising:

- High levels of emotion in advertising encourage increased levels of attention (Kroeber-Riel 1979, Ray & Batra 1983, Biel 1990, Du Plessis 2005).
- We pay more attention to things that we like, and try to ignore things we don't like. (Biel 1990, Doyle 1994, Du Plessis 2005).
- Usage of products or brands results in higher levels of involvement and motivation, and the deployment of higher levels of attention, and non-usage

leads to lower levels of attention (Petty & Cacioppo 1986, Peracchio & Meyers-Levy 1997)

- Prior exposure of advertising means some learning has already taken place, which lessens the cognitive task required, and means that less attention will be paid to advertising on subsequent exposure. (Krugman 1972)

If these assumptions are true, then emotional content, ad liking, usage of brands or products, and prior exposure, should all turn out to be powerful drivers of attention. To test this, Heath measured a set of TV advertisements to ascertain the level of emotion in each, then incorporated a group of six ads with high emotional content and six with low emotional content into a TV programme at random positions. The programme was then exposed, as in Corke & Heath, to subjects who were not aware that advertising was the focus of the study. After the programme had been watched and the subject's attention levels measured via the gaze tracking equipment, Heath then ascertained how much the ads were liked, whether they had been seen before, and whether the products and brands advertised were used or not. The results are shown below in table 2.

**Table 2: Results of Heath 2006**

<u>Hypothesis</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>'t'</u>	<u>Significance</u> (> 95%)
H <sub>1</sub>	Emotional Content of ad vs. Attention	-6.231	99.9%
H <sub>2</sub>	Liking of ad vs. Attention	-2.561	98.8%
H <sub>3</sub>	Prior exposure to ad vs. Attention	-1.185	NS
H <sub>4</sub>	Prior usage of product in ad vs. Attention	-1.707	NS
H <sub>5</sub>	Prior usage of brand in ad vs. Attention	-0.223	NS

The results totally contradict all four of the assumptions in the information processing model. No significant drop in attention results from prior exposure. No significant increase in attention results from product or brand usage. Most important of all, emotional content in advertising is significantly correlated with *lower*, not higher, levels of attention. And liking of advertising is also significantly correlated with lower levels

of attention, mainly because ads with high emotional content are generally liked more.

That high levels of emotion in advertising *encourage* low attention processing will surprise Du Plessis, who asserts “All the evidence about emotional appeals in advertising shows that their main role is to attract attention, therefore it is unlikely that, the more emotional an advertisement is, the more it will become low involvement processed” (2005: 141). But it will not surprise anyone fully familiar with the work of Antonio Damasio, who has established that feelings are formed subconsciously and autonomically (i.e. independent of will), and therefore require *no* attention in order to be successfully processed (Damasio 2000). And, after all, why should the goal driven information processing model apply to TV advertising? Why should ordinary people, sitting at home in the evening after a hard day at work, be expected to apply systematic thoughtful goals to their TV watching? As Tellis observes, people “.. do not yearn for ads” (1998: 121), and when bombarded by advertising they use selective attention to “...simply ignore most messages that reach them...” (1998: 120).

### **Recent research supporting the power of Emotional Content over Information**

The information processing model is, not surprisingly, based upon an assumption that brand choice is driven largely by information, and that recall of information is therefore a critical factor in determining whether advertising has been successful. This has been shown to contradict human psychology, where decision making is driven as much by emotions as by knowledge and reasoning (Damasio 2003). Research has also shown that advertising with high levels of emotion is discriminated against by recall metrics (Heath & Hyder 2005, Heath & Nairn 2005).

But even more compelling evidence for the power of emotion in driving brand choice is presented by Heath, Brandt & Nairn (2006). This study started by testing online a total of 43 currently on-air TV ads (23 in the USA and 20 in the UK) for their emotional content and rational content using a research technique called the CEP™Test (Cognitive Emotive Power Test). This quantifies two constructs: Cognitive Power™, which measures the potency of the message and rational information in the advertisement, and Emotive Power™, which measures the potency of the emotional content or creativity in the advertisement.

A second independent sample was then recruited to evaluate the effect that the ads had had. Respondents were asked their favourability towards each brand using a 10 point

scale, and were then shown selected video sections of each of the advertisements to ascertain whether they had seen them before. The brand favorability scores were then split between those who did and did not recognize the advertisement. The difference in favorability indicates how much the advertising has influenced perceptions of the brand whilst on air.

With these two data sets it was possible to examine the correlation between the three different constructs: Emotional Content (Emotive Power™), Rational Content (Cognitive Power™) and Shift in Brand Favorability. Despite differences in advertising styles across the two countries, the results, shown in table 3, are consistent. Emotive Power™ showed a significant linear relationship with the shift in favorability, but Cognitive Power™ showed no significant relationship at all.

**Table 3: Results of Heath, Brandt & Nairn 2006**

<b>US DATA</b>	<b>Correlation against Favourability Shift</b>	
<b>N = 23</b>	<b>Cognitive Power™</b>	<b>Emotive Power™</b>
<b>Pearson Correlation</b>	0.291	0.532
<b>Significance (2 tailed)</b>	0.178	0.009**

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

<b>UK DATA</b>	<b>Correlation against Favourability Shift</b>	
<b>N = 20</b>	<b>Cognitive Power™</b>	<b>Emotive Power™</b>
<b>Pearson Correlation</b>	- 0.275	0.587
<b>Significance (2 tailed)</b>	0.240	0.006**

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

So the experimental results show clearly that it is the emotional ‘creative’ content in advertising that builds strong brand relationships, not the rational message. This again contradicts the idea in the information processing model that it is the communication of the factual message that gives advertising its power.

## Summary

The results of these various studies leave no doubt that the assumptions made in the information processing model – that advertising is a mechanism for the transmission of factual information, best processed at high attention, and facilitated by emotional creativity – are flawed. How, then, is it that this model has survived for nearly a century?

### **Why is the IP Model so resistant to change?**

Much of the evidence above is recent, but this paper is by no means the first time the IP model has been heavily criticised.<sup>2</sup> A substantial body of work in the 1950's (e.g. Dichter 1964, Martineau 1957, Gardner and Levy 1955) argued for the importance of emotions, symbolic and non-verbal communication under the banner of the 'motivation' or 'depth' school of advertising research. Critics forty years ago were pointing to the lack of evidence for recall (Haskins 1964), and the potential importance of low attention (Krugman 1965). Creative practitioners such as Bill Bernbach made the case that advertising should be considered as "warm, human persuasion" (Bernbach n.d.) although Bernbach, whether consciously or unconsciously, continued to use the language of propositions and sales to legitimise his position.

In the 1960's the UK account planning movement articulated a coherent model of advertising which challenged the conventional model on several key points – the dominance of the verbal proposition, the idea that advertising was solely about sales or conversion, the privileging of rational content-based communication models over the symbolic or emotional mediating of relationships. These were repeatedly argued by King (1967, 1977), Joyce (1967), Pollitt (Feldwick 2002), Hedges (1974/1998) and others, all of whom successfully put their ideas into practice in their agencies (Feldwick 2007). And yet at a fundamental level the belief systems embodied in client organizations and research protocols never shifted away from the conventional IP model. The MRS Conference itself has seen many papers challenging aspects of the IP model, and yet nothing much seems to change.

It becomes apparent that this is not simply a disinterested and transparent debate about the best way to create effective brand communications. It seems as if the IP model must

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is worth mentioning that alternative models of advertising existed before the hegemony of the information processing model, such as Walter Dill Scott's theory of associations: these however largely vanished from sight as the pre-Socratic philosophers did after Plato, or the humanist enlightenment after Descartes.

be satisfying unrecognised needs which in practice outweigh its failings as a means to its ostensible end. These are not instrumental needs, because the IP model clearly doesn't work very well. This fact is frequently obscured by the lack of valid market metrics in many organizations to evaluate advertising, with the result that success is defined very often in terms of intermediate measures based on constructs from the IP model –a self fulfilling and self sustaining situation which renders the IP model itself outside the possibility of criticism. Indeed the IP model has historically been supported by claims that it is impossible to measure the effect of advertising on sales! (Reeves 1961:4, Lucas and Britt 1963:16, Colley 1961:10-12) This however does not fully answer why the model has been so appealing. We hypothesise here that the IP model at a deeper level answers social or cultural needs: firstly, within the organizations that are involved in creating advertising (advertisers, agencies, and researchers); and secondly, in society as a whole and the relationships that it has with advertising. These are of course complex matters and our ideas here must be considered as speculative.

### **The IP model in the organization**

Post modern theories of management point out that organisational cultures are substantially based on modernist principles of order, control and rationality, with a strongly realist ontology and a positivist epistemology (Alvesson and Deetz 2005:61) . In other words, organizations tend to work on the basis of argument, analysis, measurement and factual proof (however illusory the practice of these may be). Within certain limits, such cultures can be highly effective in making the right decisions and efficient in implementing them. However, they can be very badly adapted to rapid change, to innovating, and to dealing with creative processes, with analog forms of communication, with emotional decisions, or in general with anything that cannot be explicitly verbalised and/or measured. This has always created a basic tension in the creation and judgement of advertising, familiar to anyone who ever been involved in the process, between intuitive judgement and the organizational need for measurement and logic.

In this context the powerful attraction of the information processing model is that it appears to translate a chaotic, intuitive process into one that can be pinned down in words, analysed with logic, and measured. In order to do this it projects on to the consumer's choice behaviour the same rational, fact based approach that is recognised and valued in the organization.

As we have already observed, most practitioners believe they have incorporated the importance of emotions and of creativity into their mental models, but it is the underlying framework of the IP model that gives them permission to do this without having to challenge a fundamentally rational organizational world view. The information processing model persists precisely because it keeps creativity firmly in its place, as the servant of a process that can be presented as fundamentally subject to rational analysis and control. 'Creativity' comes to assume the same role in the corporate worldview as the spiritual world does in Cartesian dualism: it is allowed to exist and be talked of as if it were important, but because it has no measurable reality and cannot be subject to analysis and control it is for all 'scientific' purposes non-existent (Midgley 2001). 'Creativity' itself then becomes a field in which nothing is rational, nothing can be articulated, no authority allowed except that of the creative genius, just as the spiritual realm is imagined as a space in which science has no sway. All this creates an alternative power base for the creative priesthood, comfortably separate from the rationalist corporate culture, with its own criteria for success embodied in peer approval and the all-important creative awards.

For the marketing organization, then, the IP model fulfils a need to remain consistent with the organizational myths of rational decision making, replicability and control. It does this by reducing the essence of the creative content to a single proposition or idea which can be owned, replicated, and controlled; by envisaging the communication process as a mechanistic transfer of this unit of information whose efficiency can be measured; and by projecting on to the consumer's choices the same myth of rational decision making that the organization values internally.

### **The IP model in society**

The IP model, and its origin in the idea of 'salesmanship', also plays an important role in the way advertising is viewed by society at large, and in its licence to operate within society. As long as advertising presents itself as offering essentially factual information, to consumers who make conscious and rational decisions, it is seen to play the role of the 'honest advocate' and will therefore be allowed a considerable amount of freedom to exist. If, however, advertising is seen as operating on the emotions, or on a non-conscious or non-rational consumer, it may be criticised as manipulative, or brainwashing. Note, for instance, the hysterical responses to the story of 'subliminal advertising' which took place in 1957 (Robinson 1998) Such anxieties are founded on

the belief that human beings are essentially rational, *homo economicus*, and yet at the same time at the mercy of their ‘lower nature’, whether this is named as ‘the passions’ or the Freudian ‘unconscious’: part of a long cultural history stretching through the Enlightenment and back to the ancient Greeks that ‘reason’ is a sound and virtuous guide, while the ‘passions’, or emotions, are dangerous, foolish and evil.

In the 1950’s the so-called ‘motivational researchers’ attempted to make sense of consumer behaviour in terms of emotional needs, symbol and metaphor, and the Freudian unconscious. This approach enjoyed considerable success, and is well represented in Martineau’s (1957) book *Motivation in Advertising*. Just as this appeared, however, so did *The Hidden Persuaders* (Packard 1957) which presented much of the same material to the general public as sinister brainwashing. The title of Rosser Reeves’ book, *Reality in Advertising*, was clearly chosen as a riposte to Martineau. As he anchors the advertising process firmly back in the realms of the ‘selling proposition’, Reeves includes a chapter called ‘The Freudian Hoax’, in which he makes his position very clear:

“...there are no hidden persuaders. Advertising works openly, in the bare and pitiless sunlight.” (1961:70)

So it is in part the fear of being seen as manipulators of the unconscious that keeps advertisers and agencies from admitting even to themselves the power of low attention processing, or the emotional effects of advertising. *The Hidden Persuaders* shows that their fears are not groundless. But the idea that low attention processing and the emotional effects of advertising equate to something sinister, irresistible, and evil, is a social construction based on a myth about how human beings communicate and choose. We are all continually influenced by subconscious perception, and we cannot as human beings function any other way. It is because of this that the decisions we make are *always* influenced and sometimes *entirely* driven by emotion (Damasio 1994, 2003). These truths are not sinister new techniques dreamt up by evil scientists, but the way we are, and they apply to our buying behaviour just as to anything else. This does not mean that we lack free will, or the ability to look after our own interests. The fallacy that people are powerless putty in the hands of professional manipulators is dangerous, because it encourages people to take no responsibility for their choices. Even the most successful advertising, after all, rarely does anything other than encourage people to buy one brand rather than another (Broadbent 1997). Effects on total category size, and on

overall patterns of consumption, are extremely limited – though it must be recognised that many critics of advertising persistently refuse to believe this.

There is legitimate scope for debate about the ethics of advertising, but the debate is not well served by a pretence that humans are other than they are. A better understanding of how advertising can influence people would only help us make better choices, as individuals and as society, about how we deal with it.

### **Summary**

We hypothesise that the IP model has retained its dominance not because it works, but because it appears to make the advertising process verbal, rational, measurable, and subject to conscious control. It fits both our organizational value systems and the fiction of a rational consumer, as part of an Enlightenment worldview. Any other model is regarded as dissonant with these deeply held values, and is therefore either rejected as ‘soft’ and ineffectual, or as excessively powerful in a sinister way. The fact that these two positions are mutually contradictory should perhaps warn us that we are here dealing with deeply entrenched mythologies rather than logic.

### **The Way Forward**

Our alternative to the IP model is neither ineffectual nor sinister. It is founded on two main sources. The first is a rich development of psychology and neuroscience in the past two decades (a development which advertisers and researchers have on occasions both ignored and perversely misinterpreted). This work is easily accessible in the excellent books by Damasio, Dennett, Le Doux, Schacter, Wilson and others. What it shows with increasing clarity is that all decision making is founded in the emotions, that most of what is stored in our brains and influences our behaviour is not easily accessible to consciousness, and that our ‘adaptive unconscious’ (Wilson 2002) is continually responsive to signals of which we remain consciously unaware.

The second major influence is Watzlawick (1967), who reframes human communication as a continuing process of maintaining or modifying relationships through all aspects of our behaviour. In this process, what appears to be content (in the sense of verbal message) is frequently of very secondary importance. It is the ‘metacommunication’ – the signals that are responded to without conscious attention – that influence feelings and relationships.

These two strands of thought support each other. Together they offer a more plausible theory of how thirty seconds of apparent nonsense, watched through half closed eyes, can affect brand preference and buying behaviour, than the old myth of the 'selling proposition'. It is true that informational content and conscious processing have important roles to play in *certain* types of advertising, but in the bigger communication picture they are always secondary to the context in which they occur. What Petty and Cacioppo dubbed as 'peripheral' is in fact the main story, because in most cases *what* you say is less important than *how* you say it (or show it, or sing it, or imply it, etc).

### **Implication for Advertisers**

Advertisers may therefore all have to abandon some comfortable beliefs, and find new language and new working methods adapted to the following ideas.

1. All aspects of what a brand does are communication, and have the power to modify people's relationship with the brand. Visuals, sounds, symbols, music, gestures, context, and many other things are all central elements in communication.
2. People can be powerfully influenced by communication that is processed with low attention and of which they have no conscious recall.
3. Decision-making is always rooted in the emotions and is often influenced by associations below the level of consciousness.
4. Human communication is always about relationships, and this is often more important than the apparent content.
5. Communication needs to be planned and executed, and the outcomes evaluated, with regard to the full spectrum of what is taking place: considering not just the significance of the explicit content, but the implicit communication and the desired/actual effects on the relationship.
6. In summary, traditional advertising thinking has been dominated by the twin concepts of 'message' and 'attention'. We propose that these are only partially useful ideas, and that the concepts we should keep in view at all times are 'associations' and 'relationships'

These principles have major implications for advertisers and agencies. For example, clients and agencies must take on board the obvious but oft-denied truth that much

effective advertising contains no ‘message’, ‘proposition’, or ‘benefits’, and that attempts to impose these or post rationalise them generally reduce effectiveness. Creative departments will have to abandon their obsession with simple, functional briefs, and creating ‘impact’, in favour of creativity that builds relationships with the audience – which in truth is what the best creative work has always done, normally in spite of prevailing theory rather than because of it.

There are also important implications for media planners. TV, far from being the supremely powerful medium we have all supposed it to be, emerges as an automatically-processed medium where viewers respond not in accordance with their goals and motivations but in line with the nature of the stimulus presented. TV needs therefore to be recognised as being very good at some things but much less good at others. For example, when communicating information is the priority, systematically processed media like print and the internet are likely to be of greater value.<sup>3</sup> Where traditional TV advertising *is* really powerful is in creating and maintaining relationships through ‘metacommunication’.

TV is not, however, the only medium that can do this. Following Watzlawick’s axiom that “one cannot not communicate” (1967: 51), *all* brand activity starts to be seen as communication which can influence relationships and create associations. And by discarding the IP model it becomes much easier to see how media like event marketing, sponsorship, and product placement are able to work without needing any sort of ‘propositional’ message. So media planners should stop asking themselves ‘How do we get attention at all costs?’ and start asking ‘How can we create the relationship we want?’ (Feldwick 2003)

### **Implication for Market Research**

Just as advertisers must consider that ‘what you say is less important than how you say it’, market research must do the same. Measuring responses to advertising cannot be a matter of asking people what they remember, or what they think about the advertising, because overtly conscious responses like these are likely to be misleading. Research interpretations must be based less on what people say, and more on how they behave, ranging from whether they smile, laugh, or chat animatedly about the ad, to whether they show an increased preference for the brand. The end result of advertising on the

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<sup>3</sup> We should acknowledge the success of infomercials and shopping channels which use TV in quite a different, and high attention, way. We refer here to the traditional commercial break.

brand needs always to be the key metric, and dependence on intermediate effects like ad awareness, detailed recall, and message credibility must come to an end. What sense does it make to measure 'ad awareness and recall' when invisible advertising, like the press campaigns for Boddingtons and Stella Artois (Heath 1993) can build phenomenal brands? What sense is there in measuring 'message credibility', when gibberish snack food campaigns can be a resounding success?

So research also needs to become aware that situations which create bias towards conscious attention are bound to misrepresent real life exposure to advertising. Researchers must design practical and effective ways of disguising their intention if they are to get any useful data.

Research in advertising must also become more intelligent and sensitive, remembering that human communication is not simple stimulus-response message transmission, but is a complex system. Advertising, especially TV advertising, has become adept at exploiting emotion: O2, for example, has emerged at the top of the mobile phone market with totally forgettable blue bubbly TV ads containing no message (Cox et al, 2004). Research has to be clever enough to judge emotional campaigns like this. It has to be clever enough to evaluate campaigns like the Marlboro Cowboy, which never had a propositional message, yet still dominates the minds of almost every young person in the UK. It has to be clever enough to tell that policemen wiggling their feet and surfers waiting for a wave might give birth to two of the most famous beer campaigns of all time, and that an urchin freewheeling down a hill to the strains of Dvorak's New World symphony might create an extraordinarily potent food campaign; that a princess Diana look-alike jettisoning her furs, and two idiotic oversexed French aristocrats, might decide the two brand leaders in the small car market for over a decade. Not to mention the Andrex Puppy! (Baker 1993: 75-99, 234-253, 53-74)

To do this, research needs to embrace and understand psychology, and develop techniques that are grounded in a proper understanding of how human beings conceptualise and make decisions. It must ensure that any research technique is fully consonant with the assumptions made about how that particular campaign will work, and it must also make sure those assumptions are soundly based.

Researchers have a choice. They can continue to serve up what the market wants, continuing to sell traditional remedies which they must recognise are inadequate. Or they can take the responsibility for challenging traditional thinking in clients and

agencies, and work with them to develop new methodologies that will offer advertisers a real competitive advantage. We hope that instead of continuing to defend the status quo, enough researchers will take the latter route. Otherwise the next fifty years may well continue to perpetuate the errors of the last.

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