

Humor in Advertising: A Practitioner View

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Each year in the United States billions of dollars are spent to develop and deliver humorous advertising. Such ads represent between 15 percent (Kelly and Solomon, 1975) and 42 percent (Markiewicz, 1974) of all the advertising that is produced; yet paradoxically, our knowledge of how humor operates to achieve particular objectives for specific products in different media has received only limited attention in the advertising literature.

The objective of this research is to gain insight from successful advertising practitioners concerning their views of humor in advertising. These views should be useful to both those wishing to empirically study the issue further and for those that must develop their own decision rules concerning the use of humor in advertising.

Background

The cause(s), nature, and function(s) of humor have been the subject of debate by philosophers and psychologists for centuries. However, there is still no comprehensive understanding of the

dynamics of humor in general, let alone humor in advertising. Although the prominent humor theorists may disagree about what elicits laughter, they seem to agree that the effect of humor is pleasure. It is the origin of the pleasure that is the subject of debate, not that humor itself provides pleasure.

It is important to realize that not all humor provides pleasure to all recipients. Sexist or racist humor, for example, may provide pleasure to the "in-group," but may cause anger to the "out-group"; that is, the "out-group" is the butt of the humor. Brown and Bryant (1983) note that many advertisers have fallen into the trap of attempting to be funny but succeeding only in offending members of the public. In addition, the pleasure derived from the humor varies as a function of the congruity between the style of the humor and the idiosyncratic humorous preference of the individual which has been well documented in the psychology literature (e.g., Groch, 1974). Shama and Coughlin (1979) assert that for humor to be effective, different subcultures and social classes within the same target group may re-

quire different types of humor as well as different levels of humor.

The most frequently cited work concerning humor in advertising is Sternthal and Craig's synthesis of the literature in 1973. Based on the literature, they presented tentative conclusions about humor that they hoped would guide practitioners and serve as a framework for future research. Their conclusions were:

- (1) Humorous messages attract attention.
- (2) Humorous messages may detrimentally affect comprehension.
- (3) Humor may distract the audience, yielding a reduction in counterargumentation and an increase in persuasion.
- (4) Humorous appeals appear to be persuasive, but the persuasive effect is at best no greater than that of serious appeals.
- (5) Humor tends to enhance source credibility.
- (6) Audience characteristics may confound the effect of humor.
- (7) A humorous context may increase liking for the source and create a positive mood, which may increase

the persuasive effect of the message.

- (8) To the extent that a humorous context functions as a positive reinforcer, a persuasive communication placed in such a context may be more effective (Sternthal and Craig, 1973).

Sternthal and Craig specifically suggested future research be directed at the following issues:

- (1) Do humorous introductions of an otherwise straightforward appeal enhance its persuasibility?
- (2) Do humorous conclusions increase influence?
- (3) Is humor more effective for particular types of products than others?

The Sternthal and Craig work remains a landmark synthesis of humor in the advertising literature, but the conclusions were general and tentative. Though some individual studies have been conducted since 1973 (Shama and Coughlin, 1979; Madden and Weinberger, 1981; Whipple and Courtney, 1979; Courtney and Whipple, 1980; Cantor and Venus, 1980; Madden, 1982), none of the research efforts have attempted to deal with the range of conclusions nor the future research questions which Sternthal and Craig outlined. Furthermore, the conclusions of humor in advertising offered by Sternthal and Craig were mostly based on studies conducted in a nonadvertising setting in either the speech or psychological literature.

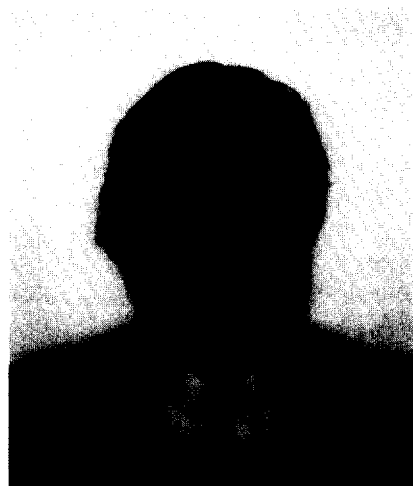
The current research surveyed senior advertising practitioners to elicit their views concerning Sternthal and Craig's conclusions and more generally the objectives best achieved through humor. In addition, the research is aimed at gaining insight about the appropriate situational uses of humor related to media, product, and audience factors.

Research Method

A survey instrument was designed to examine two groups of advertising agency personnel: vice presidents/di-

rectors of research and vice presidents/directors of creative services. Historically, the views of these two groups, research and creatives, have been a source of conflict within the agency setting (Vaughn, 1982). Creatives typically represent the artistry where the researchers stand up for measures of effectiveness and a higher level of skepticism. This dichotomy is clearly an oversimplification, but it reflects the different training and perspective that research and creatives often bring to their work (Vaughn, 1982). Wells (1983) argues that the dichotomy between creatives and researchers is inevitable and is the result of the evaluative relationship between the two. The results reported herein represent a sample subdivided between creative and research executives; the expectation being that the differential training or philosophical views might surface in their beliefs about humor in advertising.

The top 150 agencies in the *Standard Directory of Advertising Agencies* (1982) were examined to find those firms that had the names of the two ex-



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ecutives in charge of creative and research activities. From the top 150, there were 134 that met this criterion. An initial mailing to all 268 with a nonrespondent follow-up resulted in a 51 percent and 54 percent response rate for the research and creative samples, respectively.

For the sample as a whole, the median period that they had been in advertising was 17 years, clearly a reflection that these executives had a great deal of experience to base their judgments on. For the creatives, a median of 20 percent of the ads they were involved with used humor.

The questionnaire was first pretested and then revised with the help of the creative staff of a major national advertising agency. All aspects of the questionnaires for the two groups were identical.

Results

Communication Objectives. Table 1 summarizes the opinions of both creative and research directors concerning which communication objectives are facilitated through the use of humor. The objectives surveyed included attention, comprehension, retention, persuasion, action, and source credibility.

Attention. Most of the sample (94 percent) agreed that humor is effective at gaining attention; that it is more effective at doing so than nonhumorous ads, and that gaining awareness for new products was a particular strength of humor. The creative sample was statistically significantly ($p < .01$) more positive about humor for the later objective than the research groups (83 percent versus 59 percent). Similarly, when asked to list which objectives are best attained by using humor, attention and awareness were the two most frequently reported responses for both samples (31 mentions for both groups). The results regarding attention are clearly supportive of the contention by Sternthal and Craig that humorous messages attract attention.

Comprehension. Comprehension of advertising has often been cited as an area where humor might be dysfunctional (Sternthal and Craig, 1973). Comprehension in general and then recall, registration, and retention were all examined here as different aspects of comprehension. Only 21 percent of the combined sample disagreed with the notion that humor more than nonhumor would be harmful to message comprehension, and 38 percent of the sample felt humor is effective at gaining comprehension (see Table 1).

In general, the initial findings about comprehension conform to what Sternthal and Craig and others have speculated; however, further probing sheds some more specific light on the issue. Most of the creative and research samples agreed that humor is an effective means of gaining name registration (65 percent), registering simple copy points (68 percent), and at gaining retention (71 percent). On the other hand, complex points were seen as more difficult to register with humor.

Although the respondents indicated that comprehension and recall are secondary to attention and awareness in terms of what humor can achieve, there are aspects of comprehension such as name and simple copy registration and retention that are well-served via humor. Thus, a blanket statement that humor harms comprehension may be misleading.

Persuasion. Sternthal and Craig speculated that humor was at best no better than nonhumor in bringing about persuasion. At the same time, they stated that working through distraction, humor may increase persuasion. Consistent with this view, none of this sample cited persuasion or attitude change as an objective best achieved via humor. When questioned about its persuasive effectiveness relative to nonhumor and its impact on yielding and intentions, the samples were largely neutral. However, the creatives were generally more positive about this use of humor than the researchers. Similar to the comprehension measures discussed earlier, a probing of the spe-

cific aspects of persuasion provides further insight.

For advertising intended to induce brand switching, humor was felt to be more useful than nonhumor by 41 percent of the sample while only 12 percent did not agree. Hence, there is an apparent inconsistency between the use of humor for general persuasion and its use for switching persuasion. Seventy-four percent of the sample agreed that mood aids persuasion, and 54 percent of the respondents agreed that humor enhances mood. This finding is congruent with Sternthal and Craig's speculation about humor increasing persuasion by creating a positive mood. Perhaps when trying to gain the compliance needed in brand switching, a potentially alienating task, humor helps bring about a positive mood to gain the desired end. As an example, recent comparative ads by Burger King aimed at loyal McDonald's customers have softened their brand-switching strategy with a



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variety of humorous commercial executions.

Source Credibility. An outcome of humor according to Sternthal and Craig is to enhance source credibility. When this sample was asked whether humor, more than nonhumor, works to enhance the advertiser's credibility, they answered a resounding no. Only 10 percent of the respondents felt that humor had this advantage over nonhumor.

Action. Along the purchase dimension, speculation about the effect of humor has been rare. This sample was decidedly split as to whether humor was more effective than nonhumor in increasing sales. When asked whether humor is effective at gaining actual purchase, 40 percent of the creatives felt that it was versus 13 percent of the researchers. The purchase objective was not cited by any of the sample as best achieved via humor.

Situational Humor Use. It is probably naive to expect that humor is capable of working equally well under all circumstances. Sternthal and Craig suggested this when they asserted that audience effects should mediate humor effects. In the current study, the advertising executives were questioned about the use of humor with different media, audiences, and products.

Media. The clear belief among the respondents was that media does make a difference. Radio and television were perceived as the media vehicles best suited to humor. The next most effective media, outdoor and magazines, received less than half the support of the top two vehicles. On the negative side, direct mail and newspaper were seen as the media least suited to humor usage (see Table 2).

Overall, though, the strong support of humor for TV is not surprising. The magnitude of support for radio and the notable disparity between radio and TV and the other media are insightful. Apparently, the belief is that to bring humor "alive," the ability to use sound is a key ingredient distinguishing radio and TV from the nonbroadcast media.

Products. This sample of executives

Table 1
Opinions about the Communication Objectives for Humor

<i>Communication objective</i> ²	<i>Combined sample</i>	<i>Research executives (%)</i>	<i>Creative executives (%)</i>
Attention			
Better at gaining attention than nonhumor	55% agree 12% disagree	55 8	54 16
Gains attention	95% effective 29% not effective	92 2	96 2
Helps gain awareness of new products	72% agree 7% disagree	59 ¹ 9	83 ¹ 5
Comprehension			
Harms comprehension more than nonhumor	50% agree 21% disagree	64 ¹ 11	39 ¹ 31
Effective at gaining comprehension	38% effective 27% not effective	27 ¹ 38	49 ¹ 22
Harms recall more than nonhumor	33% agree 41% disagree	37 29	29 53
Effective as nonhumor for name registration	65% agree 12% disagree	61 8	68 15
Effective as nonhumor for simple points	68% agree 10% disagree	64 13	71 9
Effective as nonhumor for complex points	28% agree 50% disagree	22 57	33 44
Effective at gaining retention	71% effective 11% not effective	64 ¹ 13	78 28
Persuasion			
Increases more than nonhumor	26% agree 24% disagree	25 20	27 28
To gain yielding	37% effective 23% not effective	34 22	40 23
To gain intention	29% effective 30% not effective	15 ¹ 36	43 ¹ 24
In persuading to switch brands	41% agree 12% disagree	30 13	52 12
Enhances mood	54% agree 15% disagree	63 12	44 18
Mood aids persuasion	74% agree 8% disagree	66 ¹ 9	80 6
Action			
Creates greater sales effect than nonhumor	25% agree 24% disagree	23 25	28 25
At gaining purchase	34% effective 33% not effective	13 ¹ 42	40 27
Source credibility			
Helps enhance	10% agree 44% disagree	9 51	11 41

¹ Comparisons between mean scores of research and creative executives statistically different $p \leq .05$.

² Open-ended questions found the following objectives listed most as best achieved with humor: attention (31 mentions), awareness (31 mentions), recall/recognition (29 mentions), positive attitude (16 mentions).

Table 2
Media Best and Least Suited to Humor

	<i>Best suited (%)</i>	<i>Least suited (%)</i>
Magazines	39	33
Newspaper	29	45
Radio	88	2
TV	84	3
Outdoor	40	30
Direct mail	22	64

Table 3
Types of Products Best and Least Suited to Humor

<i>General product categories</i>	<i>% Mentioned</i>	
	<i>Least suited</i>	<i>Best suited</i>
Consumer nondurables	8	70
Durables	30	37
Industrial and business products	48	24
Business services	22	47
Corporate advertising	65	13
Retail advertising	32	36
<i>Specific products (Open ended)</i>	<i>Number mentioned best suited</i>	
Soft drinks and food	47 mentions	
Alcohol	40 mentions	
Snacks and candy	21 mentions	
Restaurants	17 mentions	
Health and beauty aids	15 mentions	
Toys and games	12 mentions	

Table 4
Views on Humor with Products

Humor works best when related to a product: 88% Agree 4% Disagree	
<i>Open ended</i>	<i>Mentions</i>
Do not use humor with serious good, service, or issue:	87
Do not use humor unrelated or degrading to product:	18
Do not use humor for intimate products or sensitive issues:	18

felt very clearly that humor is more appropriate for some products. In general, consumer nondurables and business services were seen as most congruent with the use of humor, whereas corporate advertising and industrial business products were viewed as least suited (see Table 3) to the use of humor.

Consistent with these scaled responses were the open-ended questions in which the most frequently mentioned products best suited for humor were soft drinks, food, alcohol, snacks, candy, restaurants, health, beauty, toys, and games in that order. Notable is that no matter what product is used, 88 percent of the sample felt (see Table 4) that the humor should be related to the product being advertised.

Audiences. When queried about audience factors and humor, besides agreeing that the humor should not be offensive to the group, the segments best suited were seen as youthful, better educated, upscale, and male. The groups least suited for humor are not as clear but include older, less educated, and downscale audiences (see Table 5). These results lend credence to the speculation by Sternthal and Craig that audience factors should play a mediating role in determining the impact of humor.

General Views. Sternthal and Craig speculated that the structure of otherwise nonhumorous messages with humorous endings or beginnings would enhance the message impact. This view was not supported by the results nor was the thesis that humor works best in either a humorous or nonhumorous context (see Table 6).

Most of the sample believe that humor is more difficult to create (73 percent), that there are greater risks of a negative effect (42 percent), and humor wears out more quickly than nonhumor (50 percent). Despite these views only a surprisingly small group felt that pretesting humorous advertising was more important than for nonhumorous ads (27 percent). Finally, and somewhat surprisingly, 46 percent felt that humor can be as strong as a

unique selling proposition in contributing to the success of a product.

Summary and Conclusion

With so much time and money being devoted to humor, it is important to share as much collective understanding about the phenomenon as possible. This survey was designed to create a knowledge base composed of expert opinion from the executives at the leading advertising agencies in the United States. In general, the results showed that humor would work better to serve some objectives than others and that the executives surveyed have definite ideas about media, audiences, and products appropriate to humor.

The sample concurred with Freud that humor provides pleasure and that this results in either direct laughter and/or an affect transfer or a giving of human dimension to products (Table 7). The following statements capsulize the insight gained from the survey:

- (1) Humor does aid awareness and attention which are the objectives best achieved via humor.
- (2) Humor may harm recall and comprehension in general.
 - a. Humor may aid name and simple copy registration.
 - b. Humor may harm complex copy registration.
 - c. Humor may aid retention.
- (3) Persuasion in general is not aided by humor.
 - a. Humor may aid persuasion to switch brands.
 - b. Humor creates a positive mood that enhances persuasion.
- (4) Source credibility is not aided by humor.
- (5) Humor is generally not very effective in bringing about action/sales.
- (6) Creatives are more positive on the use of humor to fulfill all of the above objectives than the research sample.
- (7) Radio and TV are the best media to use humor while direct mail and newspaper are least suited.
- (8) Consumer nondurables and busi-

Table 5
Audiences Best and Least Suited for Humor

Audience	Least suited % mentions	Best suited % mentions
Male	7.5	52.2
Female	30.0	30.0
Upscale	10.4	58.2
Downscale	36.6	23.1
Younger	0.7	70.9
Older	49.3	12.7
Better educated	6.7	61.2
Less educated	38.8	21.6
Professional	18.7	47.8
Nonprofessional	24.6	32.8

Table 6
Views about How Humor Should Be Used

View	% Agreement/disagreement
Humor works best in serious context	14% agree 42% disagree
Humor works best in a humorous context	16% agree 33% disagree
Humor can be as powerful as a U.S.P. (Unique Selling Proposition)	46% agree 36% disagree
Humor is harder to create	73% agree 14% disagree
Greater risk of negative effect	42% agree 27% disagree
Wears out more quickly	50% agree 25% disagree
More important to pretest	27% agree 44% disagree
Humorous start of serious commercial helps	15% agree 29% disagree
Humorous end of serious commercial helps	17% agree 32% disagree

Table 7
Views about Why Humor Creates a Good Feeling

Does humor create a good feeling?	98% Agree
Why does humor create a good feeling?	% Mentions
People like to laugh and respond to humor	26
Transmits feelings to products	14
Gives product humanity less foreign	13
Puts audience in better mood	9

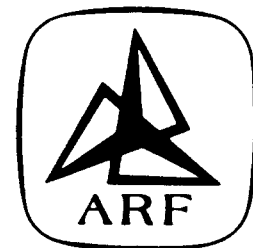
ness services are best suited to humor, while corporate advertising and industrial products are least suited.

- (9) Humor should be related to the product.
- (10) Humor should not be used with sensitive goods or services.
- (11) Audiences that are younger, better educated, upscale, male, and professional are best suited to humor. Older, less educated, and downscale groups are least suited to humor appeals.

In general the study conducted here provides an update and further insight into many of the issues raised by Sternthal and Craig. This work fills a void between earlier speculation from humor research in speech and psychology and the realities of how humor works in an advertising context. By documenting here the collective wisdom of leaders of the advertising community, it is hoped that other practitioners will gain some insight and that researchers will have a base against which they can submit this collective wisdom to critical experimental testing.

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