

# A Fundamental Error

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Find out what consumers think about your product, not your messaging.

Marketers and researchers make a fundamental error almost universally when developing and testing marketing communications. This error is particularly common and particularly serious when inflicted upon advertising and packaging. We all do it. And we all do it almost all the time. The error isn't to believe that the medium is the message. The error is to believe the message is the product.

The primary role of any marketing communication is generally to sell products (ditto for services). There are, of course, exceptions but usually what we want to do when we communicate with our customers is to persuade them to buy our product. So what our advertising and our packages need to do is somehow motivate our customers to get off the couch, run to the store, go straight to the aisle we're sitting in, grab us (not the other guy) and then rush to the checkout.

It is not necessary that our advertising have high proven awareness (an axe murder filmed live would get great awareness scores), that it be entertaining (how many funny ads have you tried to recall for your friends and you couldn't remember what was being advertised?), or that it win CLIOs for the agency (awards and sales are obviously and sometimes fatally different objectives). It's not necessary that customers think our packages are pretty or attractive ("Oh, that package is so cute! That's the rat poison I want."). Strictly speaking, none of that is relevant. But these are usually what we strive to create. These are usually the standards by which we evaluate.

All or some of these attributes may play a role in selling products. But they are not the ultimate goal. We need to keep our eye on the prize and seek to create ads and packages that sell products. To do that, we need to understand that all marketing communications are opportunities to tell the customer something that will motivate them to buy our product. What should we tell them? I know, let's tell them something about the product! Spending any time telling them anything else is a wasted opportunity. They aren't going to buy the TV ad or the cardboard box. They are going to buy the product. What they think of the ad or the box is only relevant to the degree that the ad or box says something about the product being bought. The ad or package doesn't have to communicate verbally or even consciously but it does need to convince the customer that your product gives him more of what he is looking for than anybody else's. When that happens, your sales are going to go up. Guaranteed.

## Ask the Right Questions

One of the first package tests I ever conducted involved a candy bar. The manufacturer had changed the package ever so slightly. It added a rich yellow drop shadow to the brand name. Nothing else changed. They wanted to test this new design to see if it would sell more candy bars than the old design. The firm I was employed by understood that the impact of that new design was not based on how much consumers liked the design. It was based on how much the new design changed their opinion of the candy bar inside. Instead of asking questions such as “do you like this candy bar wrapper (and why/why not)?” or “which candy bar wrapper do you find most appealing?”, we asked consumers which candy bar had a more chocolatey taste. Which candy bar had a more buttery flavor. Which candy bar cost more. Even though we only showed them the two candy bar wrappers, we didn’t ask any questions about the wrappers because those questions are irrelevant. We literally didn’t care what they thought about the wrappers.

We showed them a candy bar in the old wrapper and a candy bar in the new (but very similar to the old) wrapper. Even though they couldn’t taste the candy bars inside those wrappers, we asked them to pick one as most chocolatey tasting, most buttery tasting, etc. Respondents and interviewers alike complained. We were asking a nonsensical question. Both candy bars were the same brand. Those two candy bars would taste exactly the same. “Guess” we said. We don’t care which candy bar you pick. Just pick one, already. So they all scratched their heads, “guessed” and went home thinking we were crazy and that they had answered the survey with random responses.

Well, guess what? On the attribute “buttery tasting” responses split 70/30 in favor of the candy bar in the new wrapper (the one with the buttery colored drop shadow). That 70/30 split was statistically significant to four nines. Random answers? Not possible. Respondents either weren’t willing or weren’t aware that the new package was saying something about the candy bar. But it was. We had the data to prove it.

“Buttery tasting” was also a key driver of product preference. Respondents, either consciously or subconsciously, felt that the candy bar in the new wrapper tasted more buttery than the one in the old wrapper. When we asked them which candy bar they wanted if they won a random drawing, most respondents wanted that “buttery tasting” candy bar. The new design was more motivating because it said something relevant about the product inside.

## Focus on the Product

Yes, we must break through the clutter and get noticed or else saying the right message will be like singing in an empty auditorium. Fun, perhaps, but not profitable. So recall scores have their place; eye tracking can be useful. But only as a first step. The second and most important step is to say something relevant. And relevant means something about the product, not the message.

Diagnostic Copy Tests (DCT) are famous for consistently getting this wrong time after time. The basic elements of a traditional DCT will include ad exposure, then open-ended “what did the ad say” questions, followed by “was the ad message believable” and “was the ad message meaningful.” And just to make it interesting, it might ask a purchase intent question such as “Based on the ad you just saw, how likely are you to buy X?”

It’s not surprising that so many poorly performing ads make it to market. It simply doesn’t matter if that consumer can parrot back some ad’s message. It doesn’t matter if the consumer thinks the

ad was believable and/or meaningful. And it certainly doesn't matter if the consumer, in his psycho-omniscience, thinks the ad caused him to go out and buy the product. The only thing that matters is what the consumer thinks of the product because the product is what he will ultimately decide to buy (or not). DCTs are blind dogs barking up the wrong tree.

There is an ancient Buddhist saying: "The finger pointing at the moon is not the moon." Much too often we make the mistake of meticulously studying the finger and ignoring the moon entirely.

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