

the last word by Andrew D. Cutler

Is Your Company Pushing Too Hard?

When it comes to advertising, more is not always better.

Advertising, as any Marketing 101 instructor will tell you, is all about influencing behavior. The fundamental method of inducing voluntary behavioral change is persuasion, whether through rational or emotional means. Persuasion, however, is only possible if those exposed to advertising undergo some sort of change in their perceptions of the product or service being advertised.

To create effective advertising, it's essential to understand how to maximize the odds that a given execution will change the attitudes and beliefs of those being targeted. Once these attitudes and beliefs have changed, behavior will (at least in theory) follow suit.

But how can healthcare and pharmaceutical advertisers ensure that their marketing efforts will indeed lead to attitude change? While there are no sure-fire formulas for effective advertising, some familiarity with behavioral research findings can serve as a solid foundation for developing advertising that is more likely to succeed. The research that social psychologists have conducted, in particular, offers a veritable gold mine of data that helps explain how attitudes and beliefs change.

Over the years, social psychologists have identified a number of factors that determine the responses individuals have when faced with attempts to influence their attitudes and beliefs about themselves and the world. One psychologist in particular, Jack Brehm, developed a groundbreaking theory in 1966 known as psychological reactance. According to this theory, the primary driving factor in human attitude change is a need for freedom, and threats to this freedom can lead to such changes.

Scientific research confirms that, when confronted with blatant attempts to change their attitudes, individuals will often respond by changing them, but in the direction opposite to what the influencer intended. In 1979, two researchers (J.W. Reich and J.L. Robertson) studied the relative impact of various messages designed to prevent individuals from littering. Specifically, these researchers compared two types of messages: an explicit command prohibiting litter ("Don't Litter") and a normative appeal ("Help Keep Your Pool Clean"). Reich and Robertson found that the normative appeal reduced littering significantly more than the explicit command. More surprisingly, however, the explicit command actually led to more littering.

These findings clearly have implications for healthcare and pharmaceutical advertising in particular. Advertising, as indicated above, is usually an attempt to persuade a target about the value of a particular product or service. During a successful attempt at persuasion, the target individual surrenders one perception of the product or service in exchange for another that is more favorable. However, according

to the principles of psychological reactance, individuals want to preserve their freedom to hold a particular opinion or point of view. A blatant attempt to change this opinion can easily be construed as coercion or a threat to freedom and may thereby elicit an opinion shift in the direction opposite from that intended by the source, as in the littering study.

Reactance may also play a role in determining the extent to which pharmaceutical companies should advertise their products. The results of a 2001 study by R.L. Miller suggest too much advertising can produce psychological reactance and thereby have a detrimental effect. Specifically, Miller studied the relative impact of different levels of exposure to a poster containing the message "Reduce Foreign Aid: Help Stop the Outflow of U.S. Dollars—Equalize Our Balance of Payments." The students who saw the poster in the "moderate exposure" condition expressed significantly increased positive attitudes toward the idea of reducing foreign aid.

However, students in the "overexposure" condition (who saw the poster on numerous occasions) expressed

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markedly reduced interest in reducing foreign aid. The results of this study suggest that, when it comes to advertising, more is not always better. In some cases, the opposite is true. For this reason, pharmaceutical companies and other marketers may want to place certain limits on how heavily they advertise their products or services.

Research findings pertaining to psychological reactance can offer valuable insight into the mechanisms of attitude change. By incorporating these principles into future advertising, savvy marketers can gain a solid advantage over less informed competitors. **MHS**



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