Understanding Advertising Effectiveness from a Psychological Perspective: The Importance of Attitudes and Attitude Strength

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"Advertising is persuasion, and persuasion is not a science, but an art. Advertising is the art of persuasion."


Like Bernbach, one of advertising's greatest pioneers, many have directly linked the study of advertising to the study of persuasion. For instance, previous volumes on advertising have included chapters that integrate work from the persuasion literature (Tellis, 1998, 2004). Indeed, one of the dominant goals of advertising is to persuade the consumer of the benefits of a product or service and to stimulate a purchase. While we are like-minded with Bernbach when it comes to the notion that advertising is tied to persuasion, we diverge markedly from Bernbach in that we believe persuasion, and therefore advertising, is better conceptualized as a science. As a science, we can adopt theoretical perspectives and examine empirical findings to understand factors that contribute to successful advertising. To this end, we draw on the vast scientific literature in psychology to understand some of the underpinnings of successful advertising.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter provides a framework for understanding the factors that contribute to advertising effectiveness by attending to two rich literatures in the domain of persuasion. First, we focus on classic and contemporary theoretical approaches to understanding attitude change. We discuss conceptualizations and findings that help understand when various
elements of advertisements will be successful in promoting favourable attitudes. Second, we focus on work on attitude strength. As will be discussed, attitude strength is important for advertising effectiveness as it determines whether attitudes resulting from exposure to advertisements will be persistent, resistant, and likely to influence behaviour.

ATTITUDES AND ATTITUDE CHANGE

The attitude construct

Advertisers are interested in outcomes such as persuasion, product-relevant thoughts and beliefs, cognitive processes, emotions, intentions to buy, and actual purchase behaviour. Attitudes play a unique and important role in relation to each of these constructs. Attitudes have typically been conceptualized as one’s overall, global evaluation of an object. That is, attitudes reflect whether individuals like or dislike specific products, brands, advertisements, or spokespersons (Petty and Cacioppo, 1981; Petty and Wegener, 1999). For example, overall, do you like or dislike Pizza Hut Meat Lover’s Pizza? You might answer anywhere from extreme liking to extreme disliking, with varying gradations in-between. Your answer would represent your attitude. To more quantitatively measure attitudes, researchers often use a series of semantic differential scales (e.g., good–bad, favourable–unfavourable), with the specific response associated with a number on the scales.¹

This overall reaction (i.e., one’s attitude) has traditionally been conceptualized as encompassing and reflecting three distinct bases; thoughts, emotions and feelings, and one’s behaviours. That is, one’s overall attitude is the result of and stems from one’s affective, cognitive, and behavioural reactions toward that pizza, for example.² As such, if an advertisement influences any one of the three components, that change will also be reflected in that individual’s overall attitude. For example, if a television commercial for a greeting card engenders warm feelings in an individual, the extent to which that warmth is transferred to the specific greeting card brand will emerge on measures of the individual’s overall attitude toward the brand. Similarly, changes in cognitions and/or behaviours associated with an attitude object will be reflected in the overall attitude.

A veritable bounty of research has demonstrated that one’s attitude influences one’s behavioural intentions, and that behavioural intentions best predict behaviour (e.g., Fishbein and Ajzen, 1981; Sheppard et al., 1988). Thus, whether people purchase a particular product will be determined, in part, by their attitudes. Studying and identifying consumers’ attitudes also has a number of important advantages over studying behaviour itself. An attitude is a global evaluation that can be used to make general predictions about a variety of specific behaviours (e.g., willingness to receive additional information about a product, word-of-mouth, willingness to pay a price premium, purchase behaviour, etc.). Rarely, if ever, is it possible to study all the various behavioural implications of an advertisement. However, by studying global attitudes it is possible to gauge how consumers are likely to act in general across a variety of attitude-relevant situations. In short, the construct of attitude not only captures the affective, behavioural, and cognitive reactions to products, services, and brands, but also predicts behavioural intentions, and ultimately, behaviour.

Historical approaches

Much contemporary work on persuasion has its roots in the empirical investigations conducted by Carl Hovland and his colleagues at Yale in the 1950s (e.g., Hovland et al., 1953). Importantly, a key emphasis of this work was on the importance of attention, learning and recall processes for message effectiveness, a theme also seen in work on advertising (e.g., Loken and Hovestad, 1985). Hovland and his colleagues also examined the role of source, message, and recipient factors in persuasion. Source factors included variables associated with the person delivering the message, such as the credibility or attractiveness of the source (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). Message factors consisted of variables such as the number of arguments (Calder et al., 1974), and whether the message presented arguments that were solely in favour of the position or also disclosed the counterevidence (Hovland et al., 1953). Recipient or audience factors included more stable individual differences in the audience such as intelligence (McGuire, 1968), but also more temporary influences such as the audience’s emotional state (Zanna et al., 1970).

A focal aspect of early research was the emphasis on uncovering the single effect of a variable on persuasion; that is, whether a variable, such as source credibility, increased or decreased persuasion. This early work often accompanied by a focus on a “single-process” perspective where researchers attempted to uncover the single mean by which a variable produced its effect (see Petty, 1997). For example, if source credibility increased persuasion, then researchers were interested in identifying the single, and presumably only, process by which it did so (e.g., increasing attention to the message).

Initial work that could be classified into the single effect approach was very fruitful. For instance, regarding the source of the message, credible sources were found to produce greater persuasion than less-credible sources (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). Work on the message itself revealed that more arguments, up to a point, were found to yield greater persuasion (Calder et al., 1974). Work on audience characteristics suggested that associating negative emotions with a message decreased persuasion (Zanna et al., 1970). However, the single-effect approach soon became untenable as research began to produce contradictory findings. For instance, some research indicated that credible sources could be associated with less persuasion (Sternthal et al., 1978), increasing the number of arguments did not always increase persuasion (Norman, 1976), and that negative emotions could actually enhance persuasion (Rogers, 1983).

Contemporary approach: The elaboration likelihood model

The prevalence of conflicting studies posed a serious threat to the field of attitude change and its scholars. Indeed, at one point it seemed as if the field might be destined for oblivion by the perception that there were no reliable or systematic results (e.g., Fishbein and Ajzen, 1972). In response to this pervasive threat the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981, 1986) of persuasion was developed to resolve these seemingly incompatible findings under an integrated framework. For over 25 years the ELM has guided many studies of persuasion (see Petty and Wegener, 1999) and we use it as an organizing tool here.³

The ELM approaches understanding persuasion by focusing on two routes to attitude change that serve as endpoints along an extent of thinking continuum – a relatively thoughtful route in which people scrutinize the issue-relevant information presented (the central route), and a less thoughtful route in which people rely on simple associations or heuristics to reach decisions (the peripheral route). The route that produces persuasion is determined by the amount of elaboration, or thinking, in which people engage. Furthermore, route selection has implications for the durability and impact (i.e., the strength) of attitudes. Finally, in stark contrast to the “single-effect and single-process” approaches taken in earlier research, the ELM posits that any variable (e.g., source credibility) can have multiple effects on persuasion and do so through a variety of processes in different situations. We next explore the implications of this model in greater detail.

The central route

According to the ELM, the central route to persuasion involves an effortful scrutiny of issue-relevant information in an attempt to determine the central merits of the product or service under consideration. For example, consumers engaged in the central route while receiving a car advertisement would be prone to carefully scrutinize the advertisement for
relevant information. In such a situation, consumers would evaluate each piece of information available whether it stems from the source, message, or themselves (e.g., brand, warranty, endorser, their feelings) with respect to whether the information was a relevant favourable or unfavourable piece of evidence. When this occurs, consumers’ attitudes towards the advertised product are determined primarily by their cognitive responses or thoughts to the information available (see Cacioppo and Petty, 1981; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; see also Batra and Ray, 1986 and Wright, 1973, for illustrative examples). If people generate predominantly positive thoughts as a result of scrutinizing the information, a positive attitude will result; if scrutiny leads to predominantly negative thoughts a negative attitude will follow. If people generate a mix of positive and negative thoughts a moderate attitude will result.

Importantly, the notion of cognitive responses deviates from earlier approaches that emphasized message learning and recall (e.g., Howard, 1953). According to the ELM, under high elaboration, it is not necessarily the specific information that consumers can recall about the product that determines their attitudes, but rather it is their idiosyncratic responses to this information. For example, two consumers might both recall that a new plasma television features an integrated DVD player. However, one person might evaluate the integrated DVD feature positively (e.g., “Great, I don’t have to buy a DVD player”), but another negatively (e.g., “I already have a great DVD player, and I don’t want to pay for a feature I don’t need”). Consequently, whereas theories focusing on recall would suggest including this feature would have a similar effect across consumers as long as people attend to and learn the attribute, contemporary theories such as the ELM recognize it is not recall per se, but the idiosyncratic thoughts individuals have about the advertised features. More recent research has stressed that in addition to consumers’ cognitive responses, the confidence people have in their thoughts is important. The more confident consumers are in the thoughts they generate the more these thoughts determine consumers’ attitudes (Briñol et al., 2004; Petty et al., 2002).

There are two prerequisites for consumers to engage in the central route to persuasion. First, consumers must have the ability to scrutinize a message carefully. Consumers must be able to understand the message and have the resources to attend to the information present. Factors affecting consumers’ ability to process a message include, consumers’ knowledge (Wood and Lynch, 2002), the amount of distraction present in the environment (Petty et al., 1976), and the number of times the message is repeated (Cacioppo and Petty, 1979). Some specialized consumer persuasion theories such as the resource matching model (e.g., Anand and Sterndale, 1988; Peracchio and Meyers-Levy, 1997) have focused on the importance of matching the cognitive resources available to the consumer with the resources needed to process the message. According to this approach, persuasion is greatest when available resources match those required to process the message. According to the ELM, this would primarily be true only when the message presents evidence that is compelling when scrutinized. If the message presents weak arguments, then having sufficient resources would allow people to recognize the flaws in the arguments leading to reduced persuasion. When people have too many resources needed for the message, they may become bored and find the message tedious, leading to reduced persuasion, as is the case with excessive message repetition (see Cacioppo and Petty, 1979, 1989). Alternatively, if people have excess resources, they could generate their own unique thoughts that could augment or detract from the message depending on their valence. The latter is most likely under high elaboration conditions when variables in the situation induce a bias to the processing (see discussion of biased processing).

The central route to persuasion not only requires ability, but also motivation to process the message. Consumers’ motivation to process a message can be influenced by a number of variables, such as the personal relevance of the issue (Petty and Cacioppo, 1979b), people’s general enjoyment of thinking (Cacioppo et al., 1983), and being personally responsible for processing the message (Petty et al., 1980). When motivation and ability to process a message are present, advertisers can expect consumers to rely upon the cognitive responses in which they have confidence to determine their reaction to the message. Confidence in one’s cognitive responses can also stem from source, message, and recipient factors (see Briñol and Petty, 2004, for a review). For example, people will have more confidence in their thoughts the more easily they come to mind (Tormala et al., 2002).

This conceptualization stresses that what message recipients carry with them under high elaboration conditions: memory of the cognitive responses, rather than memory for the specific executional elements of the ad, is critical (Petty, 1977; see also Mazzocco et al., 1986). There is no role in the route that under high elaboration conditions people will necessarily have greater memory for the information in the ad. Rather, when individuals have the motivation and ability to think, it is the thoughts that they have in response to the advertisement (i.e., their cognitive responses) that determine ad effectiveness. This perspective suggests that ad recall and attention may be unrelated to whether the advertisement is effective under high rather than low elaboration. The process of cognitive responses being responsible for the formation and change of attitudes is that hallmark of the central route of persuasion. Under high elaboration, a number of properties of the thoughts themselves are important. The most studied aspects of thoughts are their valence (how favourable or unfavourable they are), their number (how many thoughts are generated), and the confidence with which people hold their thoughts (how valid people believe their thoughts are). Under the central route, the more favourable thoughts people have that seem valid, the more they will be persuaded and the more unfavourable thoughts people have that seem valid, the more they will resist persuasion.

The peripheral route

When people lack either the motivation or ability to process advertisements, the peripheral route is taken. In the peripheral route, consumers’ attitudes are determined primarily by simple decision processes such as classical conditioning (Staats and Staats, 1958), mere exposure (Zajone, 1968), and use of decision heuristics (Chaiken, 1980). Heuristics represent mental shortcuts that allow for a simple decision based on a rule of thumb. Examples of heuristics are “Experts are usually right,” and “Higher prices mean better quality.” When relying on heuristics, consumers might be more persuaded by a car advertisement that is accompanied by an attractive model than an advertisement without a model. This might occur because the attractive model creates a positive affect that becomes associated with the car. However, to the extent that the attractiveness of the model is serving as a simple cue, including an attractive model in an advertisement would be less likely to persuade consumers who are engaged in central route processing, unless as explained subsequently, attractiveness is serving in some role other than as a simple cue. Other variables that are capable of serving as peripheral cues include the expertise of the message source (Petty et al., 1981), the number of arguments presented (Petty and Cacioppo, 1984), and one’s mood (Petty et al., 1993).

To understand the type of psychological process that might be involved in the peripheral route, consider work on classical conditioning. Classical conditioning represents the process whereby an unconditioned stimulus (e.g., a novel product) becomes associated with a conditioned stimulus (e.g., music that elicits happiness). After sufficient pairing of the unconditioned stimulus with the conditioned stimulus, the novel product becomes associated with and elicits the feelings of happiness, even in the absence of the music (a.k.a., conditioned response). Mere exposure represents the process whereby one’s liking
for an attitude object can be increased by repeated, non-focal exposures. For example, the more one is exposed (albeit out of focal attention) to a melody, the more one likes that melody. Consistent with contemporary theorizing, both of these processes are more influential under conditions of low elaboration likelihood. For example, novel stimuli are easier to classically condition than familiar ones (Cacioppo et al., 1992). Similarly, the mere exposure effect emerges more when the stimuli are perceived without awareness (Bornstein and Dagoginto, 1992; Bornstein et al., 1987).

Recall that the hallmark of the central route to persuasion is the specific psychological process whereby thoughtful consideration of the information results in cognitive responses that influence attitudes. Various aspects of this thoughtful process are important such as generation of the thoughts and validation of them. The hallmark of the peripheral route is that variables affect attitudes by serving as simple cues, and there are a variety of more specific mechanisms by which this can occur. Indeed, we have outlined two such processes above, and there are likely even more simple psychological processes that can occur under conditions of low elaboration likelihood. Why this seeming lack of concern with the specific psychological process(es) associated with the peripheral route (e.g., reliance on heuristics versus classical conditioning)? Although there are different psychological processes by which peripheral route attitude change emerges, all of the peripheral processes occur under similar conditions and result in attitudes that are similar in their strength as explained in the next section on “Attitude strength” and elaboration. As such, the peripheral route processes are grouped into the same relatively non-thoughtful category.

**Attitude Strength**

Conflicting findings in early persuasion research, prior to the advent of the ELM, were not the only challenge faced by scholars of persuasion. Arguably the most fundamental reason for studying attitudes, such as those following advertisements, is that people’s evaluations were thought to be instrumental in guiding action and therefore useful in predicting behaviour (Petty and Wegener, 1999). However, as soon as the first serious investigations of attitudes had begun, challenges were raised regarding whether attitudes could predict behaviour (e.g., La Piere, 1934).

In response to this challenge, attitude researchers began to focus on the conditions under which attitudes persist over time, resist attack, and guide behaviour. For example, McGuire’s work on inoculation theory (see McGuire, 1964) demonstrated that successfully defending an attitude against a weak attack provided participants with the ability and motivation to defend the attitude against a subsequent challenge. Today, the issue of whether attitudes are consequential or not has been addressed by recognizing that attitudes can vary in their underlying strength (see Petty and Krosnick, 1995). Specifically, strong, relative to weak attitudes, are those that are more likely to influence behaviour, persist over time, and be resistant to change. In addition, objects associated with strongly held positive attitudes are more likely to be chosen over competing alternatives and more likely to be included in a consideration set relative to weakly held positive attitudes (Priester et al., 2004). Similarly, research suggests that strongly held attitudes are not only more likely to come to mind faster (Priester and Petty, 2003), which makes them more likely to guide behaviour (Fazio, 1995), but that strong attitudes can also influence basic perceptual processes more than weakly held attitudes (Fazio et al., 2000).

Attitude strength has been argued to be a multifaceted construct that has a number of unique and independent inputs (Krosnick and Petty, 1995; Krosnick et al., 1993) with a shared set of identifiable outputs (i.e., influence on behaviour and judgement, persistence, and resistance). Components of attitude strength include both operative and meta-attitudinal features of the attitudes (Bassili, 1996). Operative features refer to properties of the attitudes that are more structural in nature or observable outcomes, whereas subjective or meta-attitudinal features reflect consumers’ perceptions or thoughts about their attitudes. Operative measures include the accessibility of the attitude, the extremity of the attitude, working knowledge, extent of elaboration, and ambivalence of thoughts underlying the attitude. Meta-attitudinal features include factors such as perceived attitude importance, attitude certainty, and perceived thought (for a review of attitude strength features see Petty and Krosnick, 1995). Of course, any property of attitudes that is operative can also be examined in a meta-attitudinal form (e.g., perceived accessibility, ambivalence; see Wegener et al., 1995).

**Consequences of central versus peripheral routes**

According to the ELM, attitudes formed through the central route, relative to the peripheral route, are more inclined to persist over time, stand resistant to attempts to change them, come to mind quickly, be included in a consideration set prior to choice, and be more likely to influence and predict other judgements and behaviour (for a review see Petty et al., 1993). Thus, when attitude formation and change are the result of thoughtful elaboration, those attitudes are stronger than when attitude formation and change are the result of relatively non-thoughtful processes — regardless of what that specific non-thoughtful process is (e.g., conditioning, mere exposure).

The implications of the attitude strength idea are that consumers with identical attitudes may not behave in the same manner. Specifically, if two consumers held equally positive attitudes towards a product, but one formed an attitude via greater elaboration than another, it would be expected that the high elaboration attitude would be more directive of behaviour (e.g., purchasing a product), more durable over time, and more resistant to attempts to change it. Thus, advertising can have an important influence that is not detected by the attitude measures alone, in that the advertising can influence the strength by which an attitude is held without changing the already positive attitude. Because of this, advertising can sometimes work to reinforce an attitude rather than change it (see Heath, this volume). Thus, a consideration of the attitude strength continuum suggests that measures that capture aspects of attitude strength may be as, if not occasionally more, important than traditional attitude measures.

**Attitude certainty**

At present, one aspect of attitude strength received increasing research attention is attitude certainty. Attitude certainty typically refers to an individual’s subjective sense of conviction regarding one’s attitude and/or the extent to which an individual believes his or her attitude is correct (Festinger, 1954; Gross et al., 1995; see also Petrocelli et al., forthcoming). Increased certainty has been shown to enhance the attitude–behaviour relationship, such that attitudes held with certainty are more likely to predict behaviour (Berger and Mitchell, 1989; Krishnan and Smith, 1998; Rucker and Petty, 2004; Tormala and Petty, 2002) (e.g., Bassili, 1996; Krosnick and Abelson, 1992), and persist across time (Bassili, 1996).

To understand variables that influence attitude certainty, one stream of research has focused on meta-cognitive inferences (see Petty et al., 2007) consumers make about how they reached the attitude. For instance, individuals become more certain of their attitudes after they have successfully defended it against an attack perceived to be strong as opposed to weak (Tormala and Petty, 2002). In such circumstances, consumers are able to infer the validity of their attitude by their perceived ability to defend their position. That is, individuals perceive that their attitude must be valid if they are able to successfully defend it against a strong message. Additional work has shown that when individuals change their attitude, they are more certain of the new attitude when
their thinking is directed at considering both their negative and positive reactions to a message than when they focus solely on one side (Rucker and Petty, 2004). This effect is argued to occur because participants perceive that when they have considered both sides, they are better informed. Importantly, in each of these research programmes, attitudes were more likely to predict behaviours when the attitudes were held with greater certainty.

Additional work on attitude certainty has found that attitude certainty can be influenced by repeatedly expressing one's attitude (Holland et al., 2003), the subjective sense of ease associated with listing thoughts in support of one's position (Haddock et al., 1999), whether the attitude is formed in an online or memory-based fashion (Bizer et al., 2006), and whether that attitude is supported by other people (Visser and Mirabile, 2004; Petrocelli et al., 2007). Each of these findings provides initial insights into how advertisers can enhance persuasion by manipulating variables likely to increase the certainty associated with the resulting attitudes.

**Summary of attitude strength**

As one goal of advertising is not only to foster positive evaluations of a product or service, but evaluations likely to last and impact behaviour, understanding factors contributing to attitude strength is critical in understanding advertising effectiveness. Next we discuss the various roles any given variable can play in attitude change situations.

**Disentangling variables from processes**

Although the ELM highlights the two routes to persuasion, it is important to note that this does not mean that consumers always process advertisements in either just a central or a peripheral fashion. The central and peripheral routes to persuasion are placed along an elaboration likelihood continuum. Central route processes have a greater impact on attitudes as the extent of elaboration increases and peripheral route processes have a greater impact on attitudes as the extent of elaboration decreases. At most points along the continuum, however, central and peripheral processes operate jointly to influence attitudes (Petty, 1994).

For example, a consumer who receives strong arguments from an attractive model for a new MP3 player might be influenced both by the fact that the arguments are strong and by the incidental affect created by the attractive model. However, as the elaboration likelihood increases, the relative weighting and influence of central route processes (i.e., scrutiny of the arguments) increase while the influence of peripheral route processes (i.e., mood used as a cue to product attractiveness) decrease. As explained next, however, although mood and other variables are less likely to serve as simple cues when elaboration increases, they can affect attitudes in other ways when the motivation and ability to think are high.

**Multiple roles for variables**

One of the most important features of the ELM is that it recognizes that any variable (e.g., source expertise, recipient mood) can influence persuasion through a finite number of processes depending on the context and the elaboration level. Specifically, variables can influence persuasion by (a) serving as an argument, (b) serving as a simple cue, or (c) influencing aspects of consumers’ thoughts (amount, valence, confidence). The ability for any variable to play a variety of roles can explain how the same variable can have different effects and operate through different processes based on the given context and elaboration level.

First, under low elaboration conditions (i.e., when motivation or ability to process is lacking) variables, when they have an impact, are likely to influence attitudes by serving as simple cues. Variables are used as cues under low elaboration because people are not motivated or able to scrutinize the message-relevant information for it relevance and strength. As a result, attitudes are a result of simple associations or inference processes that require little cognitive effort. For example, as noted earlier, consumers' emotional states might influence whether they like an advertised product in a mood-congruent fashion because the emotional state simply becomes associated with or attached to the attitude object (i.e., "I'm happy right now, so this product must be great!"); see Forgas, 1995; Schwarz and Clore, 1983). Similarly, source expertise might be used to determine the quality of a message (i.e., "This movie is endorsed by Roger Ebert, I guess the movie must be good"); e.g., Petty et al., 1981). Second, under high elaboration conditions, consumers are inclined to carefully scrutinize all information available and evaluate each piece of information with respect to whether it is a reasonable argument. Because each piece of information is being scrutinized, variables such as a source's expertise or a person's mood are unlikely to influence attitudes as simple cues. Instead, people are likely to consider whether their experienced emotions or the source's expertise provide relevant evidence for the judgement at hand. Thus, when elaboration is high, an advertisement for new tires would be more effective if accompanied by a mechanical expert as opposed to a professional NASCAR sports car.

In addition to serving as issue-relevant information, when elaboration is high, a variable can also bias the direction of consumers' thoughts. For example, consumers might be more argumentative towards a message delivered by a non-expert source but more open-minded if the same message is delivered from an expert source (see Chaiken and Maheswaran, 1994). Bias can come from various places. When people think a message is explicitly designed to persuade them, they tend to be motivated to counterargue (Petty and Cacioppo, 1979a). In addition, when a persuasive attempt is masked as simply a question of interest, people may fail to raise defences against it and thus more likely to generate thoughts in favour of the message and thus be more persuaded (e.g., see work on mere-measurement, Williams et al., 2004). Likewise, when elaboration is high, consumers' mood state can colour people's thoughts such that people generate more positive thoughts when in a good mood (e.g., Petty et al., 1993). Similarly, work by Fitzsimmons and Shiv (2001) has found that asking hypothetical questions can lead to a bias or contamination of people's attitudes under high levels of thought. For example, simply asking people how they would feel about a political candidate if they were to hypothetically be convicted of fraud, led to more negative opinions of the candidate even though the negative behaviour itself was hypothetical. Presumably, simply thinking about the possibility of how a politician might commit a nefarious behaviour could bias how people think about the politician (for other biasing effects of accusations see Wegener et al., 1988; Rucker and Petty, 2003).

Another process by which variables can influence persuasion under high elaboration is by affecting the confidence associated with thoughts (Petty et al., 2002). As confidence in one's positive thoughts increases, attitudes become more positive, whereas increasing confidence in negative thoughts reduces persuasion. Recent work examining thought confidence has found that informing participants about the expertise of a source after message processing can influence confidence in the thoughts that were generated (Briñol et al., 2004). Specifically, consumers became more confident in their thoughts if they learned a message was presented from a high-credible as opposed to a low-credible source. Emotions following a message have been shown to produce similar effects with positive moods following thought generation enhancing confidence in thoughts and negative moods decreasing confidence (Briñol et al., in press).

Finally, under moderate elaboration conditions (elaboration is not constrained to be high or low by other factors), variables can determine the amount of elaboration in which people engage. Variables can prompt additional processing leading to a reliance on the central route or may discourage additional processing leading to a reliance on the peripheral route. For example, Priester and Petty (1995) found that an untrustworthy expert
source solicited more processing than a trustworthy expert source. Similarly, consumers’ emotional states can influence whether people engage in extensive or superficial processing of a message (Wegener and Petty, 1994; Wegener et al., 1995).

One example of how the same variable can influence persuasion differently comes from work on imagery. This research has found that imagery accompanying advertisements can have either a positive or negative effect on persuasion and can operate through various processes. Muniard and colleagues (1991), for example, found that the attractiveness of a picture that accompanied a product, but was not directly relevant to the product, served as a simple cue for persuasion when individuals were not highly motivated to process the message carefully. That is, when people were not motivated to process carefully, the positivity of the picture alone served as a simple cue and led to more liking of the product. However, when people were more highly motivated to process the ad, image positivity was not enough — relevance also mattered. Thus, a picture that was positive and relevant for the product (e.g., a picture of fresh oranges for orange juice) was more effective than an equally positive picture that was irrelevant (e.g., a pretty sunset). Additional work by Smith and Shaffer (2000) showed that message imagery can also influence the amount of message processing. Specifically, imagery that was congruent with the focus of the message elicited greater message processing (i.e., stronger differentiation between weak and strong arguments) than low-image messages or high-image messages that were incongruent. Finally, recent work has found that the ease with which images can be generated can influence whether imagery has a positive or a negative effect on persuasion (Petrova and Cialdini, 2005). Specifically, when imagery is positive, those who have a natural tendency to struggle generating the mental imagery of the product are more negative towards the product relative to those who can generate the mental imagery more easily.

A second example of how the same variable can influence persuasion by multiple roles is that of positive feelings. For example, suppose that an advertisement evokes positive feelings. From the perspective of the ELM, the crucial question becomes not whether positive feelings influenced attitudes, but by what process (i.e., how) these feelings influenced attitudes. Petty et al. (1993) found that when individuals are motivated and able to elaborate, their mood influenced their cognitive responses, such that those in a positive mood had more positive cognitive responses than those in a neutral mood, and that these positive cognitive responses led to more positive attitudes. For those individuals who lacked motivation to elaborate, positive mood also influenced attitudes in the same direction. However, under the conditions of low elaboration, the positive mood did not influence cognitive responses, but instead had a direct, non-thoughtful influence on attitudes. Other research demonstrates that under conditions of moderate elaboration-likelihood (viz., when individuals possess the ability but do not possess the motivation), mood can influence the amount of thinking that takes place (Wegener et al., 1995).

In summary, rather than attempt to tie a particular variable to a particular effect or process, the multiple roles logic of the ELM emphasizes that the effectiveness of any given variable cannot be tied to just one particular effect or to one particular process (Petty, 1997). Rather, to understand the role of a given variable in advertising effectiveness, it is important to be aware of both the level of elaboration and the potential roles a variable can play at that level. Importantly, the ELM confines all variables (source expertise, mood, etc.) to a finite set of processes and thus provides a simplifying framework to understand attitude change and from which to analyse new persuasion variables.

Using the ELM to inform other theories and approaches in advertising

Research in the field of advertising has advanced a multitude of theories and approaches to better understand advertising effectiveness. For example, whether advertisements are presented as dramas or arguments (e.g., Deighton et al., 1989), invoke inferences versus passive processing (e.g., Krugman, 1965), rely on explicit versus implicit memory (e.g., Braun, 1999; Heath, 1999), and/or appeal to switching versus reinforcement (e.g., Barnard and Ehrenberg, 1997) have all been advanced as approaches by which to better understand advertising.

We think a key utility of the ELM is that it can be used to further understand or explain upon each of these existing approaches. For example, Deighton and colleagues (1989) discuss how advertisements can be presented along a continuum ranging from "Drama" at one end to "Arguments" at the other. At the extreme end of the "Drama" side of the continuum, advertisements feature a plot and character with no narration. That is, the audience is literally watching a story unfold. At the extreme side of the "Argument" side of the continuum, advertisements are narrated without a character or plot of any sort. Here, the audience is essentially reading arguments about the product from a narrator.

Deighton and colleagues further suggest arguments are more likely to lead to persuasion by evoking positive thoughts or beliefs and failing to lead to strong counterarguments. Dramas, however, are argued to automatically evoke less counterarguments and are more likely to influence persuasion by evoking feelings and verisimilitude of the depicted events.

The ELM can be used to further understand and elaborate upon the "Argument" versus "Drama" distinction. As but one example, the ELM holds that both arguments and dramas can be evaluated via either the central or the peripheral route. Thus, when consumers are engaged in a high amount of thinking about a drama (i.e., the central route), they will evaluate whether the drama convincingly demonstrates the product’s function. However, when engaged in relatively little thinking about the merits of the drama with respect to the product (i.e., the peripheral route), they are more likely to use simple cues to determine their attitudes such as how cute or funny the drama was rather than scrutinizing whether the drama is a compelling demonstration of the product benefit. Similarly, when an advertisement takes the form of an argument, people might carefully assess the merits of the message arguments when elaboration is high, but simply count the number of arguments when elaboration is low (i.e., Petty and Cacioppo, 1984). Thus, the drama-argument continuum raised by Deighton and colleagues can be examined from an elaboration perspective to advance the theory in new and interesting directions.

To provide a further illustration of the applicability of the ELM to existing advertising theory, consider work on advertising to brand-loyal consumers versus consumers prone to switching. Barnard and Ehrenberg (1997) argue that the consumer population seems to consist of neither completely loyal consumers nor complete brand switchers. Rather, they propose consumers have a number of brands they are favourably predisposed towards that form a general consideration set. As such, they argue advertising should be used to nudge consumers towards a particular brand in the consideration set rather than attempting to create a consumer who is loyal to a single brand. An important question, in this research, would seem to be how to increase the use of one brand over another. The ELM and work on attitude strength can be used as guidance. In particular, the work we have reviewed suggests that in situations where attitudes toward several brands are equally favourable, the brand attitude that is held most confidently (or has other strength features such as accessibility) will be more likely to lead to purchases. The ELM suggests that attitudes can be made stronger by increasing the amount of thought behind them, or using other methods described in the section on attitude certainty. As discussed earlier in this chapter, even if advertising does not appear to further enhance the positivity of an evaluation, it may have the desired impact of leading to attitudes that are stronger and thus more likely to influence behaviour. Thus, the ELM, and
the work on attitude strength more generally, could provide an interesting approach with regard to how to "nudge" consumers towards one of many desired brands (see also Priester et al., 2004).

In summary, the ELM is not only a model of persuasion, but it can be used as a framework to build upon and inform other approaches in advertising. We have touched upon two examples, but the potential applicability of the ELM to other theories and approaches in advertising is nearly limitless.

SUMMARY

- This chapter has contributed to understanding factors leading to advertising effectiveness by highlighting past and present advancements in the field of attitude change and attitude strength.
- The study of attitude change and the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) in particular, show that source, message, recipient, and context variables can produce either positive or negative effects on persuasion depending on the role the variable serves in persuasion (e.g., cue, argument, or affecting amount, direction or confidence in thoughts).
- The attitude strength literature shows that some attitudes (e.g., those held with certainty) are more consequential than others. Taken together, the literatures on attitude change and strength can be used by scholars and practitioners of advertising as a roadmap for creating more effective advertisements.
- This chapter focused on the contribution of persuasion to advertising effectiveness. This is not meant to suggest that effective advertising should be equated solely with successful persuasion. In fact, we acknowledge that advertising may be effective even in situations where no persuasion occurs. For example, as reviewed in the work on attitude strength, advertising might be used to reinforce one’s attitudes without changing the nature of those evaluations. This is consistent with the general notion of reinforcement discussed in Robert Heath (2007, Chapter 2.2). Thus, while we view persuasion as one component of effective advertising, we also clearly recognize, and endorse the perspective that successful persuasion is not the sole measure of effective advertising.

- The many unanswered questions for researchers include broadening the current subset of the variables that can influence persuasion. In particular, future research could profitably examine the various processes that operate under low levels of elaboration and possible non-thoughtful mechanisms that could increase attitude strength.

In closing, we return to Bernbach’s quote a final time. Again, it seems fair to characterize advertising as persuasion, albeit with the caveats above. However, to characterize persuasion as an art suggests there are no verifiable rules or means to anticipate what types of persuasive efforts or techniques will be successful versus unsuccessful – an unsettling thought for practitioners at best. Fortunately, we think it more appropriate to character persuasion, and thus advertising, as a science. As a science, we can develop rules and formulas for predicting what types of persuasive efforts will be effective and are capable of explaining why they are effective. Of course, it would be misleading to say that psychological perspectives on persuasion have produced a single formula for producing successful advertisements. However, we think it is fair to say that, compared to 50 years ago, we have a much better idea of some of the key factors involved.

NOTES

1 Some researchers have also suggested that attitudes can be comprised of deliberate (explicit) reactions to objects as well as more automatic (implicit) associations (for a review see Petty et al., in press). For instance, although former smokers might have negative explicit evaluations towards smoking (e.g., “I think smoking is bad and disgusting”), at an implicit level smoking may be associated with positive evaluations based on past experiences (see Petty et al., 2006).

2 Of course, there are special circumstances when various bases can be in conflict (e.g., Fabrigar and Petty, 1999), or the attitude itself can be composed of both positive and negative reactions (Priester and Petty, 1996; Priester et al., forthcoming).

3 Other dual process models of persuasion and judgement have also been proposed, such as the Heuristic-Systematic Model (e.g., Chaiken et al., 1989). However, these models are in the same spirit as the ELM and points of divergence have relatively minor implications for the issues addressed here.

For additional information on other dual process models the reader is referred to Chaiken and Trope (1999).

4 Consumers’ memory is more likely to matter when they do not form an attitude as they are processing a message, but instead are required to do so at some later point in time based upon their memory of the message (Hastie and Park, 1986; Tormala and Petty, 2001). However, even if consumers are retrieving information from memory, their idiosyncratic responses to the retrieved information would still be important in determining attitudes.

5 There are a variety of reasons why high amounts of elaboration are predicted to produce stronger attitudes. These include both operative factors (e.g., thoughtful attitudes are more accessible and likely to come to mind when needed) and meta-cognitive factors (e.g., attitudes about which we have thought a great deal are held with greater certainty and are thus more likely to be viewed as useful guides to action).

REFERENCES


