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How advertising works The steak or the sizzle?

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In the January 1995 issue of *Imprints* we explored the Bagwell-Ramey model which proposed that advertising works by its sheer weight rather than by its message.

More conventional theories assume that the message matters. But how exactly is a consumer persuaded? What makes a consumer buy a product or support a course of action?

Let us assume that the purpose of most advertisements is to persuade the consumer to act-to buy a given brand or to accept a given message. Will an advertisement be acted upon? Communications experts tell us that this depends on two factors. *Source credibility* (who said it) and *message credibility* (what they said). This is widely accepted by the advertising profession which spends hundreds of millions of dollars each year on celebrity endorsements. Many celebrities earn a lot more through endorsements than through the profession in which they excel. For example, in 1991 Arnold Palmer made \$300,000 in winnings but 30 times more (\$9 million) in 'other income', which included endorsements, exhibitions etc. If we accept that both the source and the message influence a consumer, we now face the next question. Which is more important? The message or the source of the message? The steak or the sizzle? There are many models that attempt to answer this question. One recent entry into the field is the Elaboration Likelihood Model.

The ELM

What happens when a person is exposed to an advertisement? The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) attempts to answer this question. According to this model, as soon as an individual is exposed to a message s/he immediately starts processing it. But the way the message is processed depends on the involvement of the person who received the message.

Two routes to persuasion

If a consumer is highly involved with a product then s/he will take the *central route* to persuasion. If a consumer is not highly involved with a product then s/he will take the *peripheral route* to persuasion.

Central route to persuasion

Highly involved consumers are those who are interested messages about a particular topic. For instance, a gourmet cook may be highly involved in messages relating to exotic spices; a multimedia specialist may be highly involved in messages relating to highly powerful microchips; a person about to invest in an RRSP may have a high involvement in advertisements for mutual funds and GICs that offer high returns.

When a consumer takes the central route to persuasion s/he immediately starts processing the message. This tends to be an active process.

While the consumer may process the message actively, it does not follow that the message will be accepted. What really happens is that the message will provoke some *cognitive response* from the consumer. A cognitive response is an internal dialogue that results in the consumer accepting or rejecting the message.

For instance, if the message of the advertisement is that 'you deserve an expensive holiday because you work so hard', the consumer may respond 'Yes, I do deserve this holiday. I have been working so hard' or 'I do deserve a holiday because I have been working hard. But I don't see why it should be expensive. I don't see why I should throw away the money that I worked so hard to earn'.

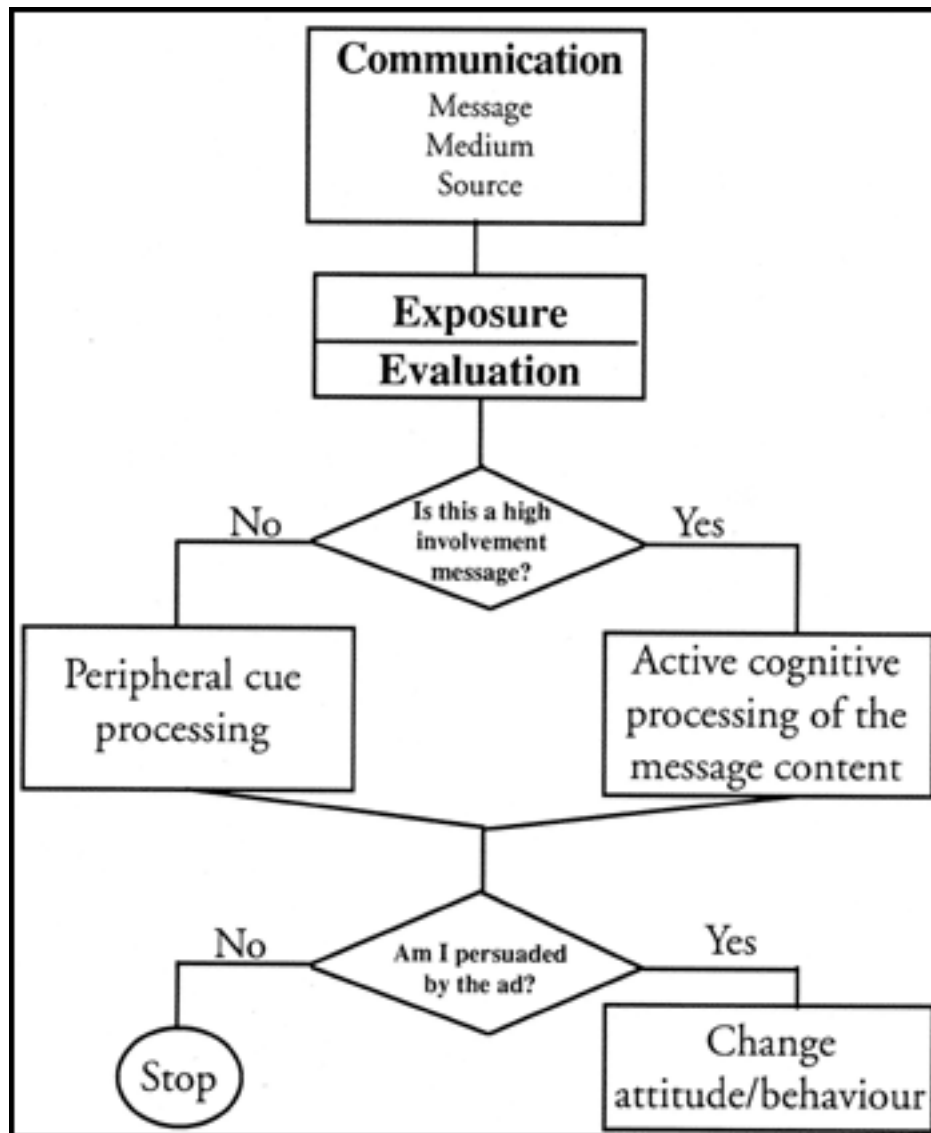
In this form of decision making, prior knowledge intensifies the cognitive response. The more a consumer knows about the arguments in question, the more s/he is likely to accept or reject the message. For the high involvement consumer the quality of message is important in arriving at a decision.

Peripheral route to persuasion

A consumer who lacks the knowledge or interest is likely to take an entirely different approach. Such a consumer is not motivated by the arguments presented. Instead s/he may use cues that are peripheral to the main message. Such peripheral cues could include the attractiveness of the advertisement, the packaging, the attractiveness and the credibility of an endorsing celebrity and the like.

This ELM would explain why unattractive advertisements crammed with information that appear in trade magazines sell while a similar ad in a general purpose magazine is likely to fail. According to this model, a clever, attractive advertisement is likely to appeal to uninformed (in any case uninvolved) consumers. When a consumer is uninvolved, less relevant cues assume greater importance.

The chart below summarizes the Elaboration Likelihood Model.



Research support

The ELM model is a relatively recent entrant to the field of persuasion models. Although relatively new, the model has gathered considerable research support. I'll summarize one such study, conducted among University students, which lends support to this model.

1. Advertisements were created for Break, a new low alcohol beer.
2. To create a high involvement group, some respondents were told that (a) they would be given a gift of low alcohol beer and (b) the beer will be available in the stores soon.

3. To create a low involvement group, some respondents were (a) promised no gift and (b) told that the beer will not be available in the stores in the near future.
4. Several mock advertisements were created for the beer. For instance, one version of the advertisement contained strong arguments for the beer (emphasizing the low alcohol content). Another version contained weak arguments for the beer (emphasizing general comparisons with other beers).
5. These advertisements varied in terms of peripheral elements as well. For instance, one advertisement contained a photograph and description of a well-educated professional couple. Another advertisement contained a photograph and description of a less well-educated nonprofessional couple.
6. Using a technique known as *thought listing* the respondents were asked to provide their thoughts about these ads. The thoughts were later analysed by researchers.

The experimental manipulation of different variables enabled the researchers to draw specific conclusions with regard to the model.

Results

The results of the study confirmed the expectations of the Elaboration Likelihood Model. More specifically, the low involvement group placed more emphasis on the *source strength* such as the attractiveness and the status of the models used in the advertisements. On the other hand the high involvement group placed more emphasis on the *strength of the message*, confirming the hypothesis generated by the model.

The steak or the sizzle?

It appears that both the steak and the sizzle sell. But not necessarily to the same audience. Highly involved consumers are sold on the message, not so much on peripheral factors.

Not an either-or proposition

It is obviously overly simplistic to assume that there is a distinct dichotomy between the message and the peripheral factors in an advertisement. A more reasonable assumption would be that a consumer is influenced both by the message and by the source. However, the weights they assign to the message as opposed to the source will likely depend on their level of involvement.

The medium also plays a role

Then there is the medium itself. While high involvement consumers look for the message and low involvement consumers look for peripheral cues, we may hypothesize that both are influenced to varying degrees by the medium itself. The medium can potentially affect the credibility of the message as well as of the source.

Which model is 'true'?

So, according to the ELM, the message, the source, and the medium influence the attitude and behaviour of the person receiving the message. As we saw, there is some evidence to support this model. Then how do we reconcile this with the Bagwell-Ramey model which contends that it just the strength of exposure rather than factors such as message and the source that influences attitudes and behaviour? After all, some evidence is available to support the Bagwell-Ramey model as well. This points to the enormous difficulty we face in isolating the specific factors that persuade a consumer. The factors that influence a consumer are 'confounded' with other factors in such a way that the same data can be used to support theories that are extremely different in structure and implication. It would appear that many models can be used as 'working models'. But the current state of knowledge does not conclusively support any model as the 'true' model.

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