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Newspaper Advertising in an Arabian Gulf Country: Examples of Careless Appeals

by Secil Tuncalp

Introduction

Advertising is one of the marketing processes with which manufacturers can communicate their messages to their target markets. This process starts out with the translation of the advertiser's communication objectives into an advertising that will communicate these objectives through an appropriate message (Assael, 1990). This is also known as encoding the message. The last step of this process involves interpretation of the message by the targeted consumers. This is also known as decoding the message. Decoding involves: noticing the message (awareness); interpreting and evaluating it (comprehension); and, retaining it in memory (recall).

Two necessary conditions require satisfaction before advertising can result in effective communication. One, the medium used for transmitting the advertising's message must be able to reach the targeted consumers. Two, there should be no variation between the communication objectives carried by the encoded message and the targeted consumers' responses to the decoded message (Cundiff and Hilger, 1984). In other words, if the consumers would not become aware of the message, or if they would have no comprehension of the message, then the communication was not effective. More importantly, advertising which contained this encoded message was careless advertising.

It is against this brief background that the objectives of this article is to present some examples of careless advertising where the communication objectives transmitted to the consumers via encoded visual and verbal appeals resulted in decoding variations. Therefore, these ads could not produce the desired responses from the consumers. It is hoped that these blunders in marketing communication would provide some caveats to international marketers.

Methodology

The author has spent several years in Saudi Arabia teaching courses in the marketing discipline at a local university. Every semester his Saudi research assistant would receive instructions to scan the daily newspapers (Tuncalp, 1994; Tuncalp, 1997) and to cut out all the ads appearing in these newspapers which had areas greater than one-eighths of a normal newspaper page size. It was felt that smaller size ads were not interesting enough to be included in this study. They either contained all words and no art work, or they were personnel-wanted ads placed by companies.

Ads for the same brand which appeared with different contents at several newspapers during the same day, or those appearing in different formats during

several time periods as part of a continuous campaign, would be stapled together. To facilitate easier access later on during the analysis stage, the ads would be filed under several product categories. For example, the ads would be stored after sorting them into groupings such as: perfumes, electrical kitchen appliances, television and video equipment, automobiles, air conditioners, hi-fi equipment, airlines, beverages, and so on.

At the end of each semester, the author would put together a group of judges consisting of his Saudi colleagues from the same college. These judges would help the author to analyse the contents of the ads accumulated during the semester. The objective of the analysis done by the judges was to identify advertising that contained visual and/or verbal appeals that were in conflict with the Saudi culture, tradition, and heritage in general, and with the values, beliefs, wants, and attitudes of the Saudi people in particular (Erdem and Tuncalp, 1997; Al-Makaty et al., 1996). In short, they were to identify advertising that was not in harmony with the prevailing mentality and spirit of the market - *careless advertising*.

The Careless Advertising

The judges have identified several cases of newspaper advertising which have caused negative feelings in them. They also provided the reasons for which these negative feelings were triggered. These reasons could be classified into three categories. One category consisted of critical comments related to the contents of the ads in terms of their visual appeals. The second category contained the judges' reasons for not liking some ads based on the contents of their verbal appeals. The final category contained reasons for disliking both visual and verbal appeals in some ads.

Careless Visual Appeals

The article will first present some examples of newspaper advertising which got in trouble with the judges because of their careless visual appeals. The visual appeal refers to the art perspective or advertisements (Zikmund and d'Amico, 1993). This perspective would contain such elements as pictures, graphs and charts, layout (the arrangement of the visual elements) and even white space (places where neither pictures nor words appear).

The ad for a company that produced air conditioners showed in one corner a herd of elephants standing next to a pool of water and trying to cool themselves by squirting water from their trunks to each other. In the other corner, the ad showed another elephant who was seated in front of an air conditioner while leaning against a palm tree. This wise elephant was displayed as lamenting to his friends that "I told you, this brand of air conditioner cools better."

The judges saw several problems in the ad which made them dislike its visual appeal. One, elephants did not exist in Saudi Arabia. Other than perhaps seeing their images on television, most Saudis would have never even come close to seeing real elephants in their lives. Therefore, using elephants as symbols in an ad targeted for the Saudi market was not appropriate. As the symbols did not mean a thing to the target audience, the ad would not be able to establish empathy with the Saudi audience for the elephant symbol. Two, the overall tone of the ad lacked seriousness. It looked as if this ad was targeted toward children when the

purchase decisions for air conditioners would be made by adults in Saudi Arabia.

Three, and most importantly, the ad was offensive to the Saudi beliefs and values. This product would be used to make human beings live comfortably in their home environments, and it would be improper to use elephants as role models for human beings. As a matter of fact, any advertisement that compared people to animals would run the risk of being offensive to Saudis. There is a religious teaching which states that “a beast is a beast and a man is a man - Allah says so” (Albaum et al., 1994). Any visual appeal contrary to this teaching would be taken as insult. Then, the use of animals to illustrate human behavior is careless advertising.

The ad for the manufacturer of a malt beverage from Switzerland showed its beverage, packaged in a can and a bottle, and displayed also in a wine glass which was full to the rim, against the backdrop of a mountain scene. The scene was dominated by a huge mountain with a very sharp and pointed profile reaching for the sky, and the mountain was covered with heavy snow and ice. Few Saudis who had a chance to travel to Switzerland would get to recognise this mountain as being the famous Eiger Mountain. The implicit message in the ad was that after skiing for a while on the slopes of the mountain one could quench one’s thirst with this brand of malt beverage.

The judges saw two problems with the visual appeal used in this ad. In the first place, the background scene was not in harmony with the experiences of the Saudi people. There are no snow covered mountains in Saudi Arabia because it never snows in the country. The country is mostly composed of sand dunes and hot deserts. Thus, the message implied in the ad was also irrelevant to the traditional way of life in Saudi Arabia. More importantly, the Saudi people would foster strong suspicions that any beverage made out of malt would contain alcohol. Devout followers of Islam, Saudis are strictly forbidden by their religious teaching to consume any type of alcoholic beverages (Kaikati, 1979). In order to allay their suspicions, this ad should have contained an announcement, printed in large bold letters, that this beverage contained no alcohol. The omission of this very important piece of information was careless advertising.

A local diaper manufacturer, which is a joint-venture with a French company, used a teddy bear, a stuffed toy bear cub, as the symbol in its newspaper advertisements. This teddy bear was shown as wearing a diaper manufactured by the company and cradling a fountain pen while writing a short message to the mother. The note read: “dear mummy, say you love me with this brand of diapers.”

The Saudi judges completely rejected this ad on the grounds that the visual appeal used in it violated their religious teachings. Islam, the religious beliefs of Saudi people, prohibits any duplication in three dimensions of living beings (Luqmani et al., 1989). From the point of view of this religious rule, the toy teddy bear was an attempt to duplicate in three dimensions a living being, thus it was anti-religious. As a matter of fact, a similar version of this ad was used on billboards. Most of these billboards were vandalised: some of the signs were broken down and some others had their posters torn in an attempt to remove the pictures of the teddy bears. This ad was another prime example of careless advertising that would have an adverse effect on a company’s performance in Saudi Arabia.

The full-page ad for an audio/visual products manufacturer from Japan used a beautiful blond-haired female model. The name of the company was displayed at the top of the page using two-inch bold characters. On the left side of the page, a television/monitor and a video recorder/player sets were shown situated on long and modern looking pedestals. The entire right side of the page was dominated by the very attractively dressed model. She wore a tight-fitting jumper suit made out of silvery-looking satin material. While holding the remote control unit for the video products in display, she started seductively toward the readers.

In a similar visual appeal which sought to grab readers' attention through sensuality, the ad for a manufacturer of popular calculators from Japan also used a female model. In this case, more than half of the ad was taken up by a close-shot facial photograph of the model. The focus of the scene was her attractive face in general and ostentiously painted lips in particular. She was holding a calculator in the vicinity of her lips and looking directly at the readers.

The judges felt that both of these ads were not suitable for the Saudi environment and they were in violation of Saudi norms and values. The models were artificially inserted in the ads. They served no purpose other than bringing a sensual dimension to the ads. Before woman models can be used in any ad, there has to be a clear association between her and the product being advertised. Even then, any form of sensuality built around the woman model is not approved by the Saudi values. Saudi tradition required separation of sexes from each other in both public and private places. It also required shielding of women from the views of male strangers. This is accomplished by having them shrouded in black from head to toe and their faces veiled in public places (Kaikati, 1979). Saudi values would not approve using sexually dressed women in ads and/or projecting women as sexual objects in advertising.

The ad for a fried chicken franchise, the franchisor is based in America, used its famous founder as the central character. The colonel from Kentucky was drawn as a cartoon character in the ad. He was shown as pointing his right hand toward the readers where his fingers made a v-sign for victory. Behind him stood two fried chicken outlets side by side. In front of each outlet there was a crowd of, what looked like, customers, some of them waving their arms. The all male customers standing in front of each outlet contained a cook, a waiter, and several others who wore Western clothing and ties. There was not a customer in the picture who was dressed in the traditional attire for Saudi males.

The judges felt that this ad was inappropriate for Saudi Arabia. The character used in the ad did not mean a thing to the target audience. The caricature of a gentleman with the goatee beard and wearing a string tie would be unrecognisable by the potential customers of this franchise. On top of that, the v-sign he was making, which struck out prominently toward the readers, had no special meaning for most of the Saudi customers. Moreover, by depicting all of the customers as Westerners, the ad would not create any empathy among the Saudi people toward the services provided in this franchise. A minor but nevertheless an important criticism toward the ad was the possibility of the ad giving a wrong impression to the readers about the nature of its services. By displaying waiters standing around with napkins slung over their right arms, the ad was implying service by waiters when in fact these franchises, as with all others, is self service.

The ad for an air conditioner manufacturer from Saudi Arabia caricaturised a story of air conditioner trouble. In the first frame, the man of the house is seen cooling himself by drinking ice water while fanning himself with a piece of paper. In the second frame, he is seen making a phone call to the company. In the third frame, even before he hangs up the phone, the company's serviceman arrives. He is wearing a cap that has wings on it. In the fourth frame of the story, the man of the house is seen as relaxing in the cool atmosphere while reading a newspaper. At the bottom of these frames, the ad displayed the slogan "reliable air conditioner - reliable service" and some information about the company.

The judges objected to this ad on the grounds that a company producing and marketing air conditioners in Saudi Arabia should never imply that its products could break down and that there would be a need to call its service. Instead of persuading its customers about the dependability of its products, this ad could create doubts in their minds about the reliability of this company's products. There is nothing more disastrous in Saudi Arabia than the air conditioning system breaking down. Outside temperatures can be as high as 140 degrees Fahrenheit and the air inside of a house can climb up to be like the inside of a hot oven within several hours. The owners of air conditioners in Saudi Arabia would not want to be reminded of the fact that these machines could break down some day.

Careless Verbal Appeals

The article will now present some examples of newspaper advertising which were downgraded by the Saudi judges because of their careless verbal appeals. The verbal appeal refers to the copy dimension of advertising (Zikmund and d'Amico, 1993). The copy encompasses any words contained in an advertisement. These words can be printed in the ad as slogans or as informative passages. They can be also verbalised by a character used in a newspaper ad.

The ad for an exporter of US beef to Saudi Arabia declared that the company had arranged a taste test of its products at a local restaurant. It also showed a map of the USA which had holes cut out in the form of stars. Superimposed on this background, there was a huge cow shown on the ad. The message said: "US beef promotion. Taste the difference! Come and MEAT US."

The judges had serious misgivings about this ad. The message would not satisfy the expectations of the Saudi buyers in terms of the information it contained. The Saudi consumers would want to know two important things about the imported meat to be served in this restaurant. Is the meat imported as frozen and is this meat "halal?" Saudi people dislike frozen meat and they prefer to purchase meat from the local livestock market where it is freshly slaughtered (Yavas and Tuncalp, 1983). More importantly, Saudis are forbidden to eat meat that is not butchered according to their religious beliefs (Tuncalp, 1988). Islamic teachings provide the necessary conditions that must be present and the religious ritual that must be followed before an animal can be butchered. If these conditions are not satisfied, then the meat of that animal is not "halal" and thus it cannot be consumed.

The ad for a producer of steel buildings from Saudi Arabia showed one of its buildings under construction. At the top of the ad, the message, which used large bold letters, said: "2 farm buildings for the price of 1." The message gave the im-

pression to the readers that the company was conducting a sales promotion campaign where the buyers would get a farm building for half of its usual price or they could receive two farm buildings by paying the regular full price.

The judges objected to this ad on the grounds that the ad contained a message which would be deceiving its potential buyers. Only after reading the fine print at the bottom of the ad, could one understand the real meaning of the message as conveyed by the advertiser. The company meant that their farm buildings had dual-purpose usage possibilities. They could be used to store grain after the harvest and they can be employed as machinery storage after all the grain in storage had been sold.

The ad for a malt beverage producer from Switzerland showed a can of its beverage slightly buried in a heap of snow. In the background, there was the picture of the famous Eiger mountain. Across the top of this scene, the message read: "thirst prize for taste." A second ad for the same company showed a can of its product slightly buried in snow. In the background, there was a trough formed by two snow covered mountains. The message printed in large and bold letters read: "enough strength to move mountains." A third ad by the same producer showed a can, a bottle, and a glass full of its product lined side by side slightly buried on a mount of snow. In the background, there were the very sharp peaks of a snow covered mountain. The message printed across the top read: "the summit of satisfaction."

The inappropriate background scenes used in these ads were previously discussed when the article presented some examples of careless visual appeals. The judges also felt that the messages contained in these ads were vague and impertinent. These slogans failed to give any information or to make any claims about the possible benefits of this beverage to the potential consumers. They also failed to create an interest or a desire in the target audience so that they would be persuaded to try this malt beverage from Switzerland.

The ad for a producer of tea from England displayed a package of its product which contained one hundred tea bags. In front of the package, its contents were shown: two separate plastic trays in each of which 50 tea bags were sealed. Across the top of the ad and using large bold letters the message declared: "discover the difference air conditioning makes." Then, the message continued to state that the company had "developed a way of air conditioning the tea to keep it as fresh and full of flavour as the day it was packaged." There was some implication in the ad that each package was somehow air conditioned.

The judges felt that the message in this ad was insulting the intelligence of the potential consumers of this product. Granted that the Saudi consumers were not as sophisticated as their counterparts located in some Western markets but even they would not believe that each package contained a device which cooled its contents. There was no explanation in the fine-print section of the ad as to how this unusual feat was accomplished. An ad that made such an unusual claim owed its readers an explanation to allay their curiosity. In the absence of such an explanation, the ad would face a risk of being dismissed by the readers because of its unbelievability.

The ad for a French manufacturer of non-stick kitchen pots and pans displayed their newly introduced product, the electrical burger maker. The burger maker was shown to have several burgers and buns in it, and around the burger maker there were several delicious looking ready-to-eat burgers. The logo for this product was displayed right in the middle of this scene. The logo contained the brand name, a picture of a burger placed under the brand name, and the phrase “the real home-made hamburger” written in bold letters under the picture of the burger.

A similar incidence as above has occurred in the ad of a burger franchise which is of American origin. The ad showed a tray full of burgers, fried potatoes, and some beverages being offered to a Saudi family consisting of the father, mother, and a male child. The family was very distinctively Saudi because both the father and the mother were dressed in the proper Saudi attire. Underneath this very proper scene there was a message written in very large letters: “now at Har-dee’s - hamburger!”

The judges felt that the verbal appeal used in these ads were incongruent to the Saudi culture. They were annoyed with the use of the words “hamburger” in the ads. The word hamburger is not suitable to the Saudi culture. Hamburger has the connotation that the meat of the burger is of pork origin. The Islamic teachings strictly forbid consumption of pork meat, and Saudi people are very devout followers of Islam. These ads would do considerable damage to the advertisers’ images in Saudi Arabia.

The use of the word “hamburger” in the ad of the American burger franchise was a more serious example of careless verbal appeal. Their message could also be construed as that burgers made out of ham (meat from a specific part of pork) was now available at this franchise. When all other similar type franchises had adapted the name of this particular product to a form acceptable by the religious teachings, to insist on the use of hamburger was disrespectful to the Saudi consumers. This product was named as beefburger, steakburger, chickenburger, meatburger, lambburger or burger in Saudi Arabia, but never would it be called as a hamburger.

As a matter of fact, mostly because of the careless use of the term hamburger, the American originated franchises that sold different types of burgers have already suffered from negative image problems (Tuncalp, 1991). As these outlets imported their burger patties frozen from the USA, the rumour spread among the Saudi consumers through the word-of-mouth process that these frozen meat patties contained pork meat and/or these frozen meat patties came from animals that were not butchered according to the Islamic rituals. Consequently, the franchising industry suffered from significant drops in their Saudi customers. At present, most of their customers would come from those guest workers in Saudi Arabia who are not followers of Islam.

Careless Visual and Verbal Appeals

A manufacturer of audio/video components from the USA ran a series of ads based on the “tradition of great American ideas” theme. Each ad in the series described the same story while also presenting a different technological innovation that originated in America. The story, which appeared in each ad, described how

an American named Avery had invented in 1937 the world's first high fidelity sound system. The story also told how the company he founded continued to score more than 30 other innovations in the same field including the first complete AM/FM stereo receiver, the first application of linear motor direct drive turntable, the first porous metal cone 3-way speaker system, and so on.

In one ad, this story was accompanied by a large photograph showing the first powered flight of the Wright Brothers during December 17th, 1903. A second ad showed a large photograph of the first flight of the space shuttle Columbia during April 12, 1981 while describing the same story about Avery's invention. In a third ad, the same story was repeated while showing a large photograph of man's first steps on the moon during July 21, 1969. A final ad showed a photograph of the skyline of New York and implicitly gave the message that America played a leadership role in the construction of high-rise building technology. This ad then repeated the same story about Avery, as it did in every other ad, and stressed how this company had lead its field in technological innovation.

The judges dismissed these ads for not being in harmony with the experiences of the target audience. The ads contained visual and verbal appeals that were not relevant to the Saudi buyers' needs and wants. As a matter of fact, the buyers would be confused about the intention of these ads. It would be possible to get the impression that these ads were public relations efforts for America, the country. The less sophisticated buyers would fail to understand the relationship between promoting a country's virtues in technological development and promoting the products of a company that came from that country, both promotions taking place in the same ads at the same times. More importantly, technological developments accomplished in a country may not be relevant to the purchase decisions of the Saudi buyers.

The ad for an American exporter of household furniture to Saudi Arabia displayed a beautiful looking eagle which carried a rose flower between its beak. The message in the ad declared that "your best chance in a lifetime has come..." and continued to announce that "the Golden Eagle has landed." The implication in the ad was that this American-made furniture was now available in the market.

The judges had a serious misgiving about this ad. They felt that the message would not be understood in the way intended by the advertiser. The effectiveness of the ad depended on the target audiences' knowledge that the Golden Eagle was the symbol of the USA. Not very many Saudi people would have this information. As nowhere in the ad was it mentioned that the furniture was made in the USA, then the implicit message would not reach most of the target audience. Then, the readers would wonder why an eagle was used in the ad, and not a falcon. The bird was was revered in Saudi Arabia and is a symbol for the country was the falcon.

Conclusion

This article presented several examples of newspaper advertising which contained careless visual and verbal appeals. These ads will receive several types of responses from the target audience who were exposed to the careless appeals. For example, the ads could receive no cognitive responses from the potential buyers. This situation would occur when the ads had not drawn the attention of the read-

ers. They would not become aware of the fact that these advertisers have products that they are advertising. In this case, the ads would be total failures as a means of communicating with the target markets and the expenditures on these ads would be wasted.

However, another possibility is a situation where these ads would receive cognitive responses from the potential buyers. They would become aware of these ads because the careless visual and verbal appeals contained in these ads have gained their attention. When this situation occurs, the potential buyers can follow one of two courses of action. One, they could form no effective responses to the products advertised in these ads. When they do not develop any feelings toward the products advertised, then they would also show no connotive response, namely they would not be willing to purchase these products. In this case too, the money spent on these careless ads would be wasted.

Two, the readers who were exposed to these careless ads could develop effective responses, but these responses would be negative in character. The readers would dislike the products advertised in these ads and form negative feelings toward the companies that placed these careless ads in the newspapers. When potential buyers get into this frame of mind they would also show negative connotive responses, namely they would avoid these products and perhaps bad-mouth them to their relatives and friends. In this case, not only the initial expenditures on the careless ads were wasted but the advertisers would have to incur additional expenditures on advertising in order to correct the bad images they had created for their products and for themselves by the initial careless ads.

Advertisers can avoid the potential damaging effects of careless advertising by being caring advertisers. One necessary condition for being a caring advertiser is that they would have to pay particular attention to the cultural peculiarities of the foreign markets they are targeting. They need to put themselves in the shoes of their target audiences and establish empathy with their experiences and beliefs. Adaptation of advertising prepared for their home-markets by simple translation of the verbal appeals into the languages of their host markets will eventually get them in trouble and this would not be a sign for caring advertising.

Another necessary condition for being a caring advertiser is to use pre-testing of visual and verbal contents of advertising prepared for foreign markets (Boone & Kurtz, 1992). Only these pre-tests can insure that the messages communicated in these ads are effective; the message is understood in the way intended by the advertiser, and the message induces the target recipients to take the action desired by the advertiser.

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