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The Narrative Branding Company

## Stories, Not Facts, Engage Consumers

Impactful advertising tied around tales of all stripes, study says

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**NEW YORK** Want to market your brand better? Then tell a story. That's the top finding from an intensive three-year study, "On the Road to a New Effectiveness Model," released this month.

The New York-based Advertising Research Foundation and American Association of Advertising Agencies set out to measure consumers' emotional responses to TV advertising. What they discovered is advertisements that tell a branding story work better than ads that focus on product positioning.

### 'What worked 30 years ago doesn't work today'

—Randall Ringer, Verse Group

Thirty-three ads across 12 categories—from brands like Budweiser, Campbell's Soup and MasterCard—were analyzed by 14 leading emotional and physiological research firms. The research tools varied from testing heart rate and skin conductance of the ad viewer to brain diagnostics.

"We were trying to identify patterns that could be used," said Bill Cook, svp, research and standards, ARF. "We saw powerful pieces of evidence for the impact of advertising."

One such pattern was that a campaign like Bud's iconic "Wassup" registered more powerfully with consumers than Miller Lite low-carb ads that essentially just said, "We're better than the other guys." Why? Because Bud told a story about friends connected by a special greeting.

The report contends that in many ways advertising is stuck in the past. In the 20th century, it was dominated by a

one-way, transactional focus where ads were pushed at consumers. Today, consumers interact with ads to "co-create" meaning that is powered by emotion and rich narrative.

"Advertising has been standing on the sidelines, stuck on the language of positioning," said Randall Ringer, managing director and co-founder of Verse Group, New York. "Telling a story about the brand is more engaging, memorable and compelling than telling a bunch of facts. What worked 30 years ago with a 30-second spot doesn't work today."

Other ads that struck a chord positioned the brand in the archetypal role of hero. In Campbell's "Orphan" ad, in which a woman and her foster child are brought together, ad research firm Gallup-Robinson in Pennington, N.J., said that the spot—which showed the girl's sadness and anxiety melt away once she was given a bowl of soup—generated 80 percent purchase intent. Most viewers measured said it was believable. A similar study from Ameritest in Albuquerque, N.M., said the ad received 42 percent purchase intent compared to a category norm of 33 percent.

Another ad that scored a high emotional response was Southwest Airline's "Want to Get Away," which showed a woman accidentally destroying a man's medicine cabinet while snooping. Eighty-four percent of respondents said the humor came through loud and clear.

But for such storytelling ads to be truly effective, the plots need to tie in to a positive brand message. "When the emotional peaks align with the presence of the brand, or the impact of the brand in the story, the emotional connection with the brand is greatest," Cook said.

Not all storytelling ads work. A United Airlines spot that told the story of a businessman returning home was

## Stories, Not Facts, Engage Consumers *cont*

deemed unimaginative by 68 percent of those surveyed by TNS Ad Eval.

And a Toyota Maxima spot also failed. In it, it seems a couple is talking about sex, but in fact they are talking about the car. “Negative levels were so high for many people over the brashness of the guy and his seemingly erotic proposal that they were unable to switch over to more positive feelings once the Maxima appeared,” said the report.

The study does not discuss the ads’ return on investment for marketers. Mark Truss, director of brand intelligence at JWT, New York, said the storytelling theory is correct, but the industry still lacks a way to prove it. “Without the tools to measure and link back to business metrics, marketers and advertisers are not going to embrace [this approach],” he said.



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