

Does invisible mean ineffective?

Jon Howard-Spink, Mustoes, explains why the 21st-century media landscape makes reaching consensus on the role of ad awareness a business necessity

THERE IS NO reason to suppose that ... advertising which is consciously noticed and thought about is more effective than advertising which is not.'

The above quotation comes from Alan Hedges' *Testing to Destruction*. Written in 1974, it remains essential reading for anyone involved in the communications industry, not least because it was arguably the opening salvo in a debate that still rages to this day: just how important is it that people remember seeing your advertising? Is awareness a necessary condition for success, or can activity that is, in all practical senses, invisible still deliver against its objectives?

Bored already? Feel like you've heard it all before? Think this is a done-to-death argument ready for the *Admap* scrapheap? Well think again. In many ways, this (seemingly) eternal question is more important today than ever before. The advertising environment we now work within is so much more challenging than it was 30 years ago, that the awareness question cannot but take centre stage.

Looking back, the role of awareness may already have become a contentious one when *Testing to Destruction* was written. But from where we are sitting today,

'In this new advertising environment, the question of whether awareness is a necessary condition for success is not an academic one; it is arguably the only one worth answering'

advertising in the 1970s looks as easy as falling off a log: how hard can it have been to get awareness for your advertising? There were not that many brands competing for headspace (at least compared with today), big budgets were common, and the number of places to spend this money was limited. A half-decent jingle was often enough to guarantee success. And it was possible to woo consumers (who, if research is to be believed, felt advertising was more entertaining than the programmes) with engaging soft sell over extended periods, using timelengths that seem indulgent nowadays. If your advertising failed to be seen, you were probably justified in firing the agency.

How times change

In the last 20 years, we have seen the number of brands explode (lines in a typical supermarket have increased by 14 times). The difficulty of making mental connections has been compounded by a parallel increase in the media where these brands can communicate with consumers, or at least attempt to: the volume of conventional main media has increased 20-fold over the same period, fragmenting massively. And that is before we take into account the proliferation of ambient and new media.

The bottom line? It is regularly stated that we are now exposed to more than 1,500 brand messages each day. Is it any wonder, then, that the vast majority barely register? And what about the thousands more that we never even get an opportunity to see? Finally, adding insult to injury, we are charged more than ever for this promise of virtual invisibility, media costs having tripled in 20 years, with TV increasing seven-fold.

In this new advertising environment, the question of whether awareness is a necessary condition for success is not an academic one; it is arguably the only one worth answering, whichever camp you are in. If it is necessary, then we still need a big rethink about the way we do things. Time and mental capacity mean that

carrying on as if nothing has changed will result in an ever-tougher zero-sum game: there must be fewer and fewer winners. Without new models for generating consumer engagement, Niall Fitzgerald's comment of a few years ago, that 90% of Unilever's advertising budget was wasted, will become true for us all, in more ways than he probably intended.

A new mindset?

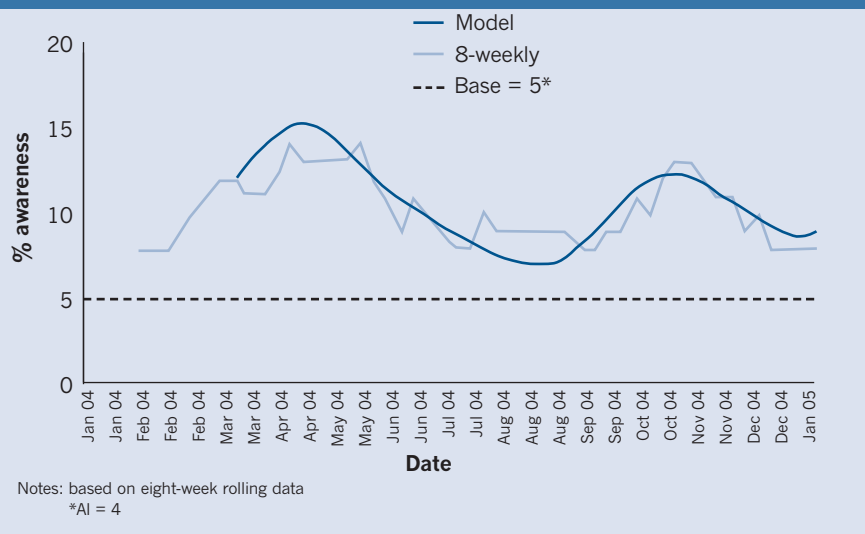
At the same time, if awareness is only nice to have and not a necessity, then we will need an even more radical sea-change in the way we work – a new mindset and approaches to the development, implementation and monitoring of consumer communications that may be as alien to most agencies as it would be to their clients.

After all (and lest we forget), most of the research tools we use currently to gauge the effectiveness of advertising (whether pre-testing or tracking) were born out of advertising's 1970s heyday, when awareness was king. And though the terms change, these methodologies themselves are rooted in earlier eras still: as far back in fact as 1898 and St Elmo Lewis's AIDA model (awareness-interest-desire-action). Look at most advertising research today (and the advertising it is researching), and it still starts from the same premise: your advertising has to have been consciously attended to if it is to be effective, and the awareness score has always been deemed as good a guide as any to whether you have achieved this.

But despite this hegemony of ad awareness, the alternative point of view has not gone away. Indeed, it has gained impetus in recent years, thanks to some much-needed scientific credibility. Advances in neuroscience now suggest that the earlier hypotheses of people like Alan Hedges were not as hare-brained as some have argued – at least under laboratory conditions. To quote Daniel Schacter, professor of psychology at Harvard: 'You may ►

FIGURE 1

Amoy: TV ad awareness model



think that because you pay little attention to commercials ... your judgments about products are unaffected ... But a recent experiment showed that people tend to prefer products featured in ads they barely glanced at several minutes earlier ... even when they have no explicit memory of having seen the ad.'

Outside the halls of academe, this new learning has been most directly applied to consumer communications in the theory of Low Attention Processing (LAP), an idea first suggested by Robert Heath and myself in 2000. Thanks to further work by Heath, LAP has gone on to become among the most important new thinking

in the world of advertising for many years. Nonetheless, and despite being firmly rooted in the commercial realm, LAP does remain something of a theoretical topic. Compared to the more established, awareness-based models, it has yet to reach critical mass, lacking the body of case histories required to convince the sceptic. Mainstream acceptance has not been helped by the sometimes combative stance adopted by both sides of this particular argument, the implication of right vs wrong, good vs bad undoubtedly contributing to ever-more-entrenched opinions in the broader marketing community.

FIGURE 2

Comparative base-level and AI scores

	Base level	Efficiency (AI) score
Predicted ad awareness	-	4
Ad awareness (tracking)	5	4
Spontaneous brand awareness (tracking)	25	6
Brand image: 'authentic' tracking	30	9

Awareness fixation

As a consequence, we remain in an ad awareness-dominated world, where that awareness is becoming harder to deliver, and where it still remains unclear whether our awareness fixation is appropriate in the first place. So, if only because of the media landscape in which we now operate, and its business implications, the role of ad awareness must become a topic that rises above the academic musing of planners and researchers. It is imperative that we nail the truth once and for all: truth that (as usual) will undoubtedly have a foot in both camps.

And where do I stand on this particular issue? Given my previous work with LAP, it should come as no surprise that I think advertising can have an effect without being consciously recalled. In support of this I will finish by offering up some recent personal experience: a case history, in a debate rather bereft of data on this particular side of the fence, which gives concrete proof that advertising can have a significant business effect even with only limited recall.

Case study: an invisible ad

The commercial I want to discuss is for Amoy's 'Straight to Wok' (STW) noodles. At 20 seconds long, it shows (in close-up) a stir-fry being cooked in a wok, to which (in slow motion) STW noodles are added: the thought being that, because a stir-fry is so quick to cook with STW noodles, things had to be slowed down.

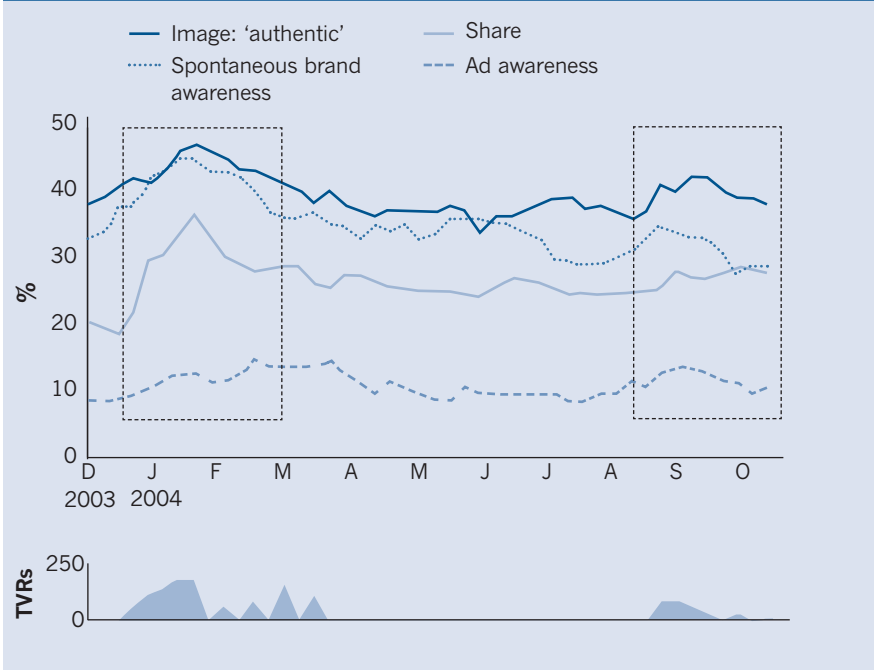
What is striking about this film is its virtual invisibility. Despite receiving nearly 700 TVRs when first aired, brand-prompted ad awareness remained under 15% (see Figure 1), equating to an efficiency (AI) score of 4 – exactly what had been predicted by a previous Link Test, and well below the levels normally achieved by HP Foods with its advertising. Even when prompted by stills, recognition barely got above 20%. If ever there was a commercial that had failed to register with its audience, here it was.

Despite this, spontaneous brand awareness and key image dimensions (such as 'Authentic') increased significant-

Jon Howard-Spink is planning director of Mustoes. Over the past 17 years he has worked with a wide variety of tracking studies and quantitative pre-tests, and joined in the vocal debates that concern them.

FIGURE 3

Amoy: key measure performance vs adspend



ly over the advertised period, in line with media spend. When these measures are modelled using the same technique as for ad awareness, the scale of this rather counter-intuitive performance seems starker still: despite significantly higher base levels (which depress the modelled AI score), both enjoyed proportionally greater uplifts than was the case for ad awareness (see Figure 2). Indeed, in pure numbers, twice as many people became both aware of Amoy over the advertised period, and considered it authentic, as were aware of the advertising.

And the icing on the cake? Sales of STW noodles increased to an even greater extent, mirroring the uplift in intermediary measures (see Figure 3), peaking some 15 share points higher. This performance has been broadly replicated with each subsequent burst of activity.

All of which, for completeness, does beg a couple of questions.

First, why was the film on air if, assuming an ad-awareness-based model, pre-testing had so successfully predicted a poor performance? Happenstance, pure

and simple. At the time that HP Foods decided to adopt the Link Test as a company-wide pre-test methodology, the Amoy film was about to go on test in Scotland: it was simply too late to cancel the airtime, so the film ran north of the border and was tested via Link elsewhere. When sales exceeded expectations, a judgement call was required: the advertising worked in practice if not in theory, so it was decided to run it anyway. Without the Scottish activity, I doubt if this article would be appearing.

Second, if awareness was not a driving force, how was the advertising really working? Although the film was not executionally memorable, maybe even eminently forgettable (it is just a stir-fry in a wok), it was well branded (something improved further post-Link), with a clear, compelling message. Again, this was well demonstrated by both the tracking and the pre-test, with Link predicting very clear key message communication, and confirming that this information was considered believable, relevant and newsworthy, far more so than the aver-

age test commercial. At the end of the day, people were aware of exciting new news from Amoy – just not where they had heard it.

In a spirit of cooperative discussion, I am happy to accept that this may be the exception that proves the rule; that with a unique product and a compelling consumer proposition you do not need memorable advertising. And there is no denying greater cut-through would have been preferable: it can only have improved performance. After all, it would be a brave client (and agency) that claimed not to be interested in generating awareness for its advertising. But this case history does demonstrate that invisible need not mean ineffective. And in a media world where invisibility seems destined to be the norm for most, we can no longer dismiss this possibility.

The challenge for researchers

The challenge to all of us is to prove the point once and for all, to grapple with the issue intelligently, creatively and, above all, cooperatively. The research community must stop viewing awareness as the battle ground for vested interests, an opportunity for intellectual point-scoring and evidence of whose methodology is best. And agencies must put aside the hypocrisy that sees them embrace ad awareness and milk it for all it's worth when it is good, and reject it as a blunt instrument of little value when bad. Maybe a joint industry research study is called for. I would be happy to play my part.

One way or another, though, we need either to redefine the parameters of advertising interaction or agree that the old parameters were right all along. But whatever the answer, it will mean different approaches to what we do; it will mean finding new ways to deliver awareness in a world that militates against this; or a recognition that communications do not have to be seen to be believed, with all the implications this has for advertising development and tracking.

jon.h@mustoes.co.uk