

Ad Creativity in B2B Contexts: An Exploratory Study and Conceptual Framework

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AD CREATIVITY IN B2B CONTEXTS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Abstract

Business-to-business (B2B) advertising tends to be product- and function-oriented. It generally lacks much in terms of creativity. This is not surprising considering classic organizational behavior theory. But when might a creative ad be more appropriate and effective than an informative ad? B2B scholars have been slow to study advertising or ad creativity. This research explores ad creativity in B2B contexts and aims to determine the factors that influence buyers' perceptions of ad creativity and the relative effectiveness of ad creativity. By building on information processing theories and implementing an ongoing 4-stage research study, it seeks to offer a comprehensive overview of ad creativity from the buyer and ad agency perspectives. Initial findings suggest a conceptual framework of B2B ad creativity, and offer advertising agency and business managers guidance related to when ad creativity is likely to “break through the clutter” and impact brand and firm performance.

Keywords: Ad creativity; B2B advertising; Organizational Buying Behavior

Track: Business-to-Business Marketing & Supply Chain Management

1. Introduction

Business-to-business (B2B) marketing communications often include product images and specifications, footage of manufacturing facilities and conference rooms, or executives, employees, and customers shaking hands. Unlike consumer (B2C) marketing communications, they generally lack much in terms of creativity. “The B2B sector remains hell bent on ‘productizing’ everything in its path” (McKee, 2010, p. 31). Accordingly, “...the delivery of B2B communications ultimately focuses on functional design and descriptions instead of the creative concepts and ideas that might offer competitive differentiation” (McKee, 2010, p. 123). B2B marketers including CDW, BASF, IBM, and Salesforce.com have launched creative advertising (ad) campaigns that arguably rival their B2C counterparts’ however. The 2018 International B2B Marketing Awards winners included Cisco, KPMG, Oracle, and Embraer, the world leader in design and manufacturing of regional jets. The winning campaigns featured humorous content and an unorthodox mix of media, including video, print, out-of-home (OOH), live events, and social media. ADEY Professional Heating Solutions’ winning “Pimp Their Boiler” campaign was based on MTV’s 1990s program, Pimp My Ride (B2B Marketing, 2018).

Academics have been slow to study ad creativity phenomena (Modig and Dahlen, 2020; Rosengren, Eisend, Koslow and Dahlen, 2020). This is not surprising as dominant organizational buying behavior theory (e.g., Webster and Wind, 1972) encourages a more utilitarian, rational-oriented view of advertising. But might a more nuanced, emotional, or creative ad campaign offer competitive advantages in certain circumstances? Practitioners are taking the lead in exploring ad creativity and advertising scholars accept that the practitioner world is at the center of creativity and an inspiration for research (Modig and Dahlen, 2020; Sasser and Koslow, 2008). However, B2B scholars do acknowledge the limitations of classic organizational buying theories. Indeed, there is room for subjective and image-oriented influencers in the organizational buying process as evidenced by a growing number of studies on the role of brands and advertising in buying decisions (Brown, Zablah, Bellenger and Johnston, 2011; Ferguson and Mohan, 2020; Mudambi, 2002; Swani, Brown, and Mudambi, 2020).

There are calls to study ad creativity and its effectiveness (Rosengren, Eisend, Koslow, and Dahlen, 2020; Smith, MacKenzie, Yang, Bucholtz, and Darley, 2007), particularly in B2B

contexts (Baack Wilson and Till, 2008). Furthermore, scholars note that advertising research tends to view the marketplace from that of the client-marketer, generally overlooking the perspectives of the agency-advertising manager on the opposite side of the dyad (Koslow, Sasser and Riordan, 2006; Modig and Dahlen, 2020). Our research seeks answers to questions such as: Does ad creativity indeed capture the attention of buyers? When do advertising agency managers view ad creativity as an effective tool in the B2B marketplace? How do advertising managers define and assess effective ad creativity? And, when do advertising managers choose to apply B2B ad creativity? To explore these questions, we study the three types of creativity related to advertising (Smith and Yang, 2004) by: 1) capturing the perspectives of creative teams (the ad agency), 2) assessing the level of creativity of ads (the actual ad), and 3) evaluating the level of creativity of the target audience (the organizational buyer).

The purpose of our research therefore is to: 1) explore ad creativity, particularly within the B2B context; 2) determine the factors that influence buyer's perceptions of ad creativity; and, 3) gain an understanding of ad creativity from the ad agency's perspective (e.g., the ad creativity development process, choices related to recommending a creative approach, client viewpoints of ad creativity, etc.). Ultimately, our objective is to introduce a conceptual model of ad creativity in B2B contexts, including developing a more precise definition of ad creativity, and determining the key factors that influence ad creativity, and brand and advertising outcomes.

For academics, our research contributions include uncovering insights regarding ad creativity in the B2B context from a dyadic perspective (buyers-agency representatives), by building on information processing theories, and particularly the MOA framework (MacInnis, Moorman and Jaworski, 1991). The current research employs a 4-stage research process with multiple stakeholder samples. For practitioners, we expect to offer guidance on when and how to best apply ad creativity in order to meet brand and firm objectives. Note, some data collection is ongoing, and findings and results will not be finalized until April 2021.

2. Ad Creativity

Ad creativity is “the art of establishing new and meaningful relationships between previously unrelated things in a manner that is relevant, believable, and in good taste, but which

somehow presents the product in a fresh new light.” (El-Murad and West, 2004, p. 190). Ad creativity has been conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct consisting of novelty and relevance (Till and Baack, 2005), and emotional/valence of feelings (Ang and Low, 2000). For our research, novelty refers to the degree to which an ad is unexpected and deviates from the norm; it suggests a sense of uniqueness or originality. Relevance refers to an ad’s ability to connect to its audience; it concerns whether the elements in an ad relate to the target audience or whether the advertised brand connects to potential buyers. Emotional refers to the feelings generated by an ad and the feelings evoked about the advertised product, service, experience or brand. These types of ads attempt to stir up positive and/or negative feelings. In contrast to these ad creative dimensions, B2B ads tend to be straight-forward and informative. Informative refers to the level of information in an ad and the extent that the information is clear, truthful, complete, and/or useful to the target audience.

Ad creativity has been associated with a number of key marketing and firm outcomes. Extant research suggests that ad creativity allows brand messages to “break through the clutter” of marketplace distractions (Ang and Low, 2000; Reinartz and Saffert, 2013). Importantly, research has linked ad creativity to positively impacting brand outcomes, including brand attitudes and purchase intent, and firm performance (Till and Baack, 2005; Rosengren, Eisend, Koslow, and Dahlen, 2020; Yang and Smith, 2009).

3. Theoretical Framework

Ad creativity scholars tend to build their research on the foundation of information processing theories (Rosengren, Eisend, Koslow, and Dahlen, 2020; Baack, Wilson and Till, 2008) in part because creative advertising is expected to increase engagement with their target audience. Engagement is a form of involvement and has been linked to ad creativity (Sasser and Koslow, 2008; Yang and Smith, 2009). In theory, creative stimuli “breaks through the clutter” and increases the attention of the audience. Creative ads are expected to motivate target audiences to process ad messages at a deeper level than other ads.

Information processing, and specifically involvement, is critical in the B2B context (Gilliland and Johnston, 1997; Low and Mohr, 2001). Organizational buying requires a heightened level of involvement relative to consumer buying, and buyers tend to have limited

cognitive resources with which to attend to ads because of the demands of the organizational buying process (Rosengren, et al., 2020; Wilson, Baack and Till, 2008).

Motivation, opportunity, and ability (MOA) are the three primary antecedents of message processing. Motivation is the drive, urge, or desire to process brand information. Opportunity is the extent to which conditions are favorable for message processing. And, ability is the proficiency or skill in interpreting brand information. (MacInnis, Moorman, Jaworski, 1991; Wilson Baack and Till, 2015). Advertising effectiveness is influenced by buyers' MOA to process advertising messages. Ad creativity might be enough to capture the attention of buyers under certain conditions.

4. Conceptual Framework

Smith and Yang (2004) pursued a theory of creativity in advertising in an effort to address the challenges associated with defining ad creativity and examining how ad creativity influences marketing outcomes. In order to address our related research questions in a comprehensive manner, we followed their conceptual framework. Accordingly, our research explores the three distinct types of advertising-related creativity they identify: 1) the team that develops and implements ad strategy, ad creative, and manages the agency-client relationship; 2) the level of creativity that the ad is perceived to possess by buyers; and 3) the level of creativity of B2B buyers relative to their B2C counterparts.

5. Methods

Consistent with extant ad creativity research (e.g., Baack, Wilson, and Till, 2008), we implement a 4-stage, multi-method approach. Stage 1 seeks to better define and measure ad creativity. Stages 2 and 3 seeks to understand respondents' perceptions of ad creativity and other relevant ad metrics. Stage 4 seeks to assess the level of creativity of advertising practitioners and organizational buyers.

The purpose of Stage 1 is to identify one-word descriptors that identify each of the four ad creativity dimensions (i.e., novelty, relevance, emotional, and informative) in order to improve ad creativity measurement and create an "ad creativity index". Forty-seven advertising experts were tasked with sorting an extensive list of creativity descriptors, based on extant

literature, into one of the four creativity categories. Respondents categorized the list of descriptors into groups of the 10 that best fit the four ad creativity dimensions. For example, the novelty category included descriptors such as innovative, entertaining, and original, while the relevance category included descriptors such as motivating, insightful, and relatable. The 40 descriptors were further reduced to 20 based on input from 10 academic and 10 industry experts who rated the overall fit of each descriptor within the four categories. The result of the exercise was a more manageable and focused list of descriptors for each dimension, allowing for better definition and measurement of ad creativity, and the development of a 20-item, four-dimension ad creativity index.

Table 1: Ad Creativity Index: Categories and Descriptors

NOVELTY	RELEVANCE	EMOTIONAL	INFORMATIVE
Creative	Motivating	Emotive	Detailed
Different	Engaging	Fearful	Practical
Innovative	Meaningful	Warmhearted	Insightful
Original	Relatable	Excited	Useful
Unique	Relevant	Happy	Credible

The purpose of Stage 2 is to explore existing ad creativity effectiveness in B2B contexts. This survey captured the views of 110 business buyers. Each respondent was presented with the same realistic business scenario. Specifically, they were asked to imagine themselves on a business flight about to land (e.g., Baack, Wilson and Till, 2008). They were then asked to select a digital general-audience business magazine (i.e., *Forbes, Inc.*, and *Entrepreneur*) and browse through it for a limited amount of time. After reviewing the magazine, respondents were asked to recall the most memorable ads, rate attitudes towards the ads they recalled, and respond to other attitudinal and behavior measures. (Note: The data analysis and findings of this study are underway. The results will be shared in the conference presentation.)

The purpose of Stage 3 is to classify ads using the ad creativity index developed in Stage 1. This stage included identifying current practices as they relate to the four ad creativity dimensions (i.e., novelty, relevance, emotional, and informative). The research sample will consist of 150 advertising experts and 150 buyers. Each respondent will be randomly presented with 5 print ads used in stage 2. For each ad, respondents will be then asked to classify the ads

using the dimension descriptors generated in Stage 1. The results will offer insights regarding: 1) the creativity of the print ad campaigns in practice, and 2) how agency experts and buyers evaluate ads in terms of ad creativity. (Note: The data collection of this study is underway. The results will be shared in the conference presentation.)

Figure 1. Examples of Ads for Stage 2 and 3



The purpose of Stage 4 is to assess the creativity of business managers. Consistent with Smith and Yang (2004), we sought to assess the level of creativity of the audience members who are exposed to ads. Specifically, we conducted a survey of 80 business managers who represent both B2B and B2C organizations. They were asked to self-rate their individual creativity levels based on Tierney and Farmer's (2002) creative self-efficacy measure. (Note: Data collection is complete. Final results will be shared in the conference presentation.)

6. Discussion

Some B2B marketers are investing in and developing creative advertising on par with their B2C counterparts. Yet, B2B scholars have been slow to study ad creativity in general, and particularly its appropriateness and effectiveness. The current research contributes to B2B marketing and organizational buying literature by investigating the influence of ad creativity from various vantage points (Smith and Yang, 2004) in order to better understand ad creativity in the B2B context. It introduces a multi-dimensional creativity index that can be used as a measurement tool for advertising strategy development and evaluation. Preliminary results reveal that ad creativity is evident in B2B advertising, albeit at a lesser extent than in the B2C arena. Ongoing analysis will offer insights related to how ad agency teams assess ad creativity, as well as whether organizational buyers share comparable levels of creativity compared to B2C

managers. Ultimately, this research will result in the development of a conceptual framework of ad creativity in B2B contexts. Its findings have the potential to guide academics as well as advertising teams and business practitioners as they navigate decisions related to deploying ad creativity, measuring ad creativity, and the impact of ad creativity on brand and firm performance.

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