

Communications: An Overview

Advertising

Supplementary notes

Advertising needs little introduction. It is pervasive and permeates our society. Wherever we go we are inundated with advertising. Streets are littered with billboards. Shop windows are demonstration fora. Packaging decorates the aisles of the stores with colours and information to tell us something about this product or other. Practically, advertising supports every printed-paper we take up and interrupts every television programme we enjoy. We breath advertising!

One definition of advertising is “the structured and composed non-personal communication of information, paid for and usually persuasive in nature, about products, services or ideas by identified sponsors through various media”. (Arens, Schaefer & Weigold, 2009) Thus not all communication is advertising. This definition, for example, identifies advertising as a special case of communication but excludes the type of interpersonal communication among friends that one normally uses to advocate the use of some product or service.

Advertising is a purposeful communication exercise intended to deliver a message to some specific group or groups. Although advertising can offer customers an opportunity to learn new things, this type of communication is meant to go beyond information. It needs to be persuasive. (e.g. A campaign sensitising people about cruelty to animals goes beyond informing people that animals feel pain. It also encourages people to treat animals with kindness).

Society in general benefits from advertising. Through advertising expectations are built and people make an effort to improve their standard of living. NGOs and philanthropic institutions tend to benefit from advertising and sponsorships enabling activities that would otherwise not be possible. Media systems owe a large proportion of their revenue to advertising.

Needless to say advertising has an impact on the economy at large. The promotion of sales adds commerce and since advertising is mass oriented it also reduces the cost of distribution. The information about the availability of similar products induces a competitive market with resulting savings for the customer. Monopolies need no advertising because by definition they allow no choice to the customer. Where monopolies persist the customer has no choice. Where choice exists, advertising offers information for customers to make choices.

Responsible use of advertising

Although it is not unusual to read literature criticising the perception that advertising brainwashes people, a more learned approach reveals that advertising does play an important function in society. Advertising is a source of information about products or services, their features and where they are available. It informs customers about alternatives or new products. It further allows customers to compare among products drawing out differentiating features and advantageous propositions. In this way advertising builds customer preferences and loyalty for a product or service. In some instances

advertising might suggest re-use of a product/service that has already been available. Actually advertising stimulates sales and increases product usage.

There are legal and professional constraints on advertising. One cannot just buy media slots to advertise anything and in whatever manner. Professional Associations for advertisers offer a code of ethics to their members to guide proper and appropriate advertising. Advertising is meant to be truthful, without deceit and not causing harm. Professional advertising is especially careful to protect children and those who are vulnerable in our society. Furthermore legal systems stipulate different safeguards and regulations to govern all advertising.

Classifying different types of advertising.

Advertising can be classified in a number of different ways depending on the context of our discussions. We normally distinguish between consumer and business advertising. The former is intended to reach the customer (or potential customer) while latter is intended to reach the organisation that would later reach the customer.

Another way to classify advertising is to distinguish between international, national, regional and local advertising. International advertising is undertaken by global brands and intended to reach a global audience (e.g. Microsoft). In Malta, because of economies of scale, brands are largely advertised nationally (e.g. Go). In larger countries one is more likely to encounter regional advertising intended to reach people who live in a specific region. (e.g. Northern Comfort is a special type of maple syrup that is advertised in the north eastern part of the US). There is also local advertising where a particular retail outlet would advertise its products or services to the immediate community (e.g. a confectionery buying advertising space in the publication co-ordinated by the Local Council of a town/village).

We can also distinguish between product and non-product advertising. Advertising for a specific product or service (advertising of white goods or consultancy services) falls under the first heading while advertising an idea (e.g. conservation of energy, hygiene campaign) falls within the second category. This last category can also include corporate advertising (e.g.

Farsons). Another classification distinguishes between direct (e.g. requiring immediate actions) as against indirect action (e.g. reputation) advertising.

Development of advertising

A number of events have contributed to our current understanding of advertising. There have always been attempts by every person selling a product to try to describe the advantages of the product on sale. However, in our society advertising has become a huge industry benefiting from a number of other developments in society.

People have always been attracted by images as witnessed by the first recorded images in the caves of Altamira. Images have been part and parcel of our cultural interactions. But the advent of mass education has reinforced image perception with literacy worldwide. More persons can read a message and react to it. This makes the communication of messages through advertising possible. Brands can be better promoted because people know how to read both text and images.

A contemporary development contributing to advertising has been a growing understanding of human responses. Psychology provides us with both behaviouristic and also cognitive understanding of human perception, learning and reactions. This development, perhaps more than any other, has provided advertising with a fertile ground for exploration of the most effective ways to deliver persuasive messages that can impact human action. Today we have a better understanding of how different persons respond to emotional and rational advertising messages.

The advent of print has been pivotal to society as we know it today. We witnessed major developments in printed literature advertising the recruitment of personnel for the war effort. Since then, ever more efficient colour printing machines have made our printed material the perfect whiteboard for advertising campaigns. This effort was further reinforced with the introduction of desktop publishing systems starting in the late 1980s. Today advertisers can avail themselves of a variety of printing systems and a wide variety of paper types to make advertising an artform on its own.

The advent of cinema, radio and television offered advertisers a medium to reach their intended mass audiences. These traditional media moved mass advertising to a new frontier. Furthermore, today new media (Internet, electronic communication, etc.) allow advertisers to benefit from mass audiences (economies of scale) while at the same time reaching audiences of one. Data mining into the use of new media provides the opportunity for more accurate profiling and this, in turn, allows the advertiser to better target the message.

This is the current major development in advertising.