



A Pun Is Its Own Reword

By Max Sutherland

(Republished March 2006. Originally published in Adnews October 2002)

Dr. Max Sutherland's column is published monthly and posted on the web at www.sutherlandsurvey.com. Receive an advance copy by email - [free subscription](#). Max Sutherland is author of the book '[Advertising & the Mind of the Consumer](#)' (published in 8 languages) and is a registered psychologist. He works as an independent marketing consultant in Australia and USA and is also Adjunct Professor at Bond University. Contact msutherland@adandmind.com.

What Aristotle called rhetoric, advertising calls creativity. The impact comes not just from what you communicate but *how* you communicate it.

As Leo Burnett once said: *"Make it simple. Make it memorable. Make it inviting to look at. Make it fun to read."*

Just as we appreciate a public speaker for a clever delivery, so ads that endear themselves to us have the potential to wash-over onto our feelings about the brand advertiser.

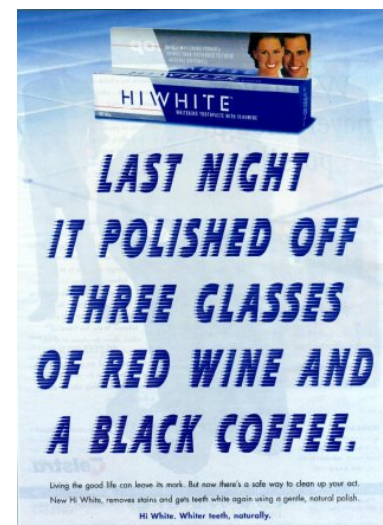
Look at the ad on this page for Prince - a spaghetti sauce. It utilizes a visual pun on the Mona Lisa to reinforce that Prince has two formulations – original and chunky. There is a cleverness in wrapping up an old message in a fresh way resulting in a colourful ad that consumers like, instead of a boring one they will ignore.

Such ads often use humorous word-play that can have the subtle effect of helping focus consumer attention. Consider straight print ads. We usually don't have to stop and think about them. We understand them with no effort, little attention - and often less *retention*. They elicit a meaning in our mind and having comprehended it, we have no reason to hesitate; we continue our scanning and move right along.

In contrast, look at the USA ad on this page, featuring the headline: *"Last night it polished off three glasses of red wine and a black coffee"*. When we see it is an ad for Hi White toothpaste, the play on words stops us momentarily, because the meaning of the headline instantly changes.

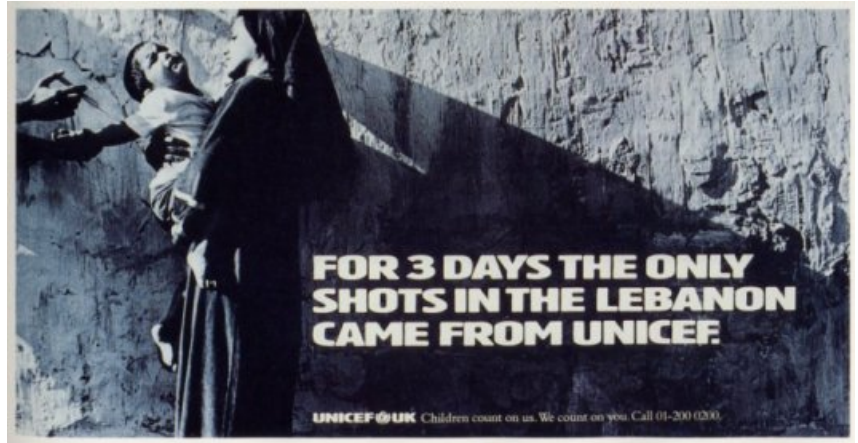
This brief 'interrupt' in the flow of our normal mental processing, has the effect of momentarily focusing our attention. It registers the ad just that little bit more. More than if it said: *'Hi White gets rid of red wine and coffee stains from teeth'*. (Yes the branding might be improved but that's another story.)

Take another example. The ad for UNICEF (next page) uses the headline: *'For 3 days the only shots in the Lebanon came from UNICEF'*. It is not until we notice in the picture that the child is being given an injection, that we make sense of it. A child being vaccinated forces our reinterpretation, to clarify that UNICEF was not firing weapons but vaccinating children.



Clever word-play leads us up the garden path. Only for a split-second but in that split-second we can almost sense ourselves searching for the other meaning and coming up with the right answer. Similarly the ad for Range Rover on this page stops us with its pithy headline: *'It's like a china shop in a bull'*. We have to pause to construct an appropriate meaning - with connotations of a precious/luxurious interior in a vehicle tough as a bull and capable of taking on all comers.

When we get the right meaning, we have a feeling not unlike having solved a clue in a crossword. In other words, it registers a mild degree of reward in the pleasure center of our brain.



The latest technology for brain scanning (functional magnetic resonance imaging - fMRI) is aiding scientists to close in on this reward center in the brain. Researching the neuroscience of humour, scientists recently examined people's reactions to puns and jokes while one of these machines was scanning their brains. It turns out, the part of the brain that is triggered when we get a reward for something (the medial ventral prefrontal cortex) is the same part that is triggered when we appreciate puns and jokes.¹ Who can resist drawing the conclusion that *a pun is its own reward?*

Beware though, ambiguity is only a source of reward if it is successfully resolved. The biggest trap in designing this type of advertising is that consumers, in the process of reading, aren't inclined to expend much effort in extracting meaning from ads. Make the ambiguity a fraction too difficult and the reader just doesn't bother but simply flips the page.

Other things being equal then, we want to be liked and we want our advertising to be liked. There is an exception to every rule however and disliked campaigns *can* work though they are notably the exceptions - albeit sometimes spectacular ones.

Ads don't necessarily have to be liked but generally it is an advantage for two reasons:

1. **Brand personality.** A brand's advertising (as well as its packaging) is part of the brand's personality wardrobe. Just as good clothes make a person more attractive, so a brand's advertising attire can make a brand more attractive. When we like a brand's advertising, the chances are increased that we will like that brand.
2. **Less counter-arguing.** Just as we are more inclined to argue with someone we dislike and less inclined to argue with someone we like, our minds react similarly with advertising. We are less inclined to counter-argue when we find ourselves enjoying an ad.



Conclusion

A brand's advertising is an intrinsic part of the brand personality and if we like the ads, all other things being equal, we have a greater chance of liking the brand.

The more that brands weigh equal, the more important is liking of a brand's advertising. Even a feather can tip the balance of brand choice when the alternative brands weigh equal.

"Properly practiced creativity can make one ad do the work of ten." William Bernbach.

References

¹ Goel V. and Dolan R. J. (2001) The functional anatomy of humor: segregating cognitive and affective components. *Nature Neuroscience*. 4.