



Making Clever Ads Work: Overcoming 'Attention Deficit Disorder'

By Max Sutherland

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.

Last month we looked at [humorous ads](#). This month we move from the 'ha-ha' to the 'ahaa' and take a look at ads that are liked because they are clever rather than funny.

When ads present a token 'challenge' to the reader to discover their full meaning they are capable of delivering a mild reward akin to solving a crossword puzzle clue. When done well their effect is to reduce counter-arguing, increase recall and create more impact on brand attitudes than straight ads.¹ Holding attention long enough for people to get to the ultimate 'reward hit' that comes from discovery is a major problem in making them work. But cut-through techniques help ride to the rescue.

Consider this ad for a brand of orange juice.² Depicting the bottom half of a golden body, clad in a skimpy bikini is likely to trigger attention. The subsequent realisation that it is actually three oranges delivers an 'ahaa' reward - a hit of appreciation for a clever ad. Well, that's what happens provided everything goes to plan.

However if readers see three oranges *first*, that's boring and they may move right along without ever realising there is anything more to the ad. Such ads risk attention deficit that may thwart their effect.

Consumers can be a low involved lot. Capturing and holding attention long enough to get to the 'ahaa' reaction can be a big stretch. Even if the 'challenge' is not really hard, these types of 'clever' ads are particularly vulnerable to 'attention deficit disorder'.



Here's another ad but this time one that has been widely acclaimed. The headline reads 'Small but tough. Polo.' It challenges the reader to discover the relation of the headline to the visual, in order to make sense of it. Realisation that the police are taking cover behind the VW Polo because it is the toughest vehicle, generates an 'ahaa' reaction. [Brain scan evidence](#)³ suggests more activity is stimulated in the reward centre of the brain a) when surprise is involved and b) when a little 'work' has to be done to get the reward. Perhaps not surprisingly therefore, understanding of this type of ad is accompanied not only by a feeling of appreciation of a clever ad but also by a feeling of a mild 'high' not unlike having solved a crossword puzzle clue.



The mild 'high' from such ads registers only if people 'get it'. Here's another one - a billboard ad for Tefal cookware. The headline reads *'Non-stick surface with 3 year warranty.'* The sign appears to have slipped off the billboard presumably because of the non-stick surface. This realisation, once again generates an *'ahaa'* reaction with a feeling of mild reward and appreciation of a clever ad.



People like clever ads and IF they are well executed, the liking for them washes over onto the advertised brand. However, this falls apart if they don't get the requisite attention and people fail to 'get it'.

The Polo and the Tefal ads above don't have much of a problem in this regard but here's another example that really illustrates the point. It is another ad from VW. At first glance (and maybe even at second glance) this one doesn't seem to have much meaning. It looks like a white fluffy cotton shape sitting on a leaf.

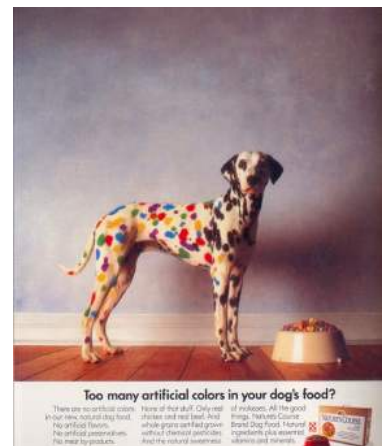
Note that there is nothing much to draw attention so it is already at risk of 'attention deficit disorder'. The headline reads, *"At \$29,700 you can now afford to be bitten by the bug."* When you work at it (if you do), you realize it is a leaf that has been partly eaten out in the shape of a VW Beetle. It requires a figure ground reversal. (That is seeing green figure on white background instead of a white figure on a green background.) The ad is clever and is likely to be appreciated – but only if the reader gets it. The danger however is that readers will flick the page and move on, not having registered anything more than *'what the heck was that ad all about?'*



Visual 'Attention-hooks':

An ad that pursues the *'ahaa'* reaction has to satisfy two requirements: a) Readers have to notice it, and b) They have to stay with it long enough to 'get it'. The longer reader attention is held, the better the chance of them getting it and having the *'ahaa'* reward kick in. These ads therefore work better when they also incorporate visual 'attention hooks' to aid in capturing and holding readers long enough for them to get to the point of understanding and receive the *'ahaa'* reward hit.

The police crouching behind the *smallest* car in the Polo ad and the appearance that the sign has slipped in the Tefal ad are the visual devices making these two ads cut-through. Incongruity switches on the intruder alarm (see [Capturing Attention By Triggering the Mind's 'Intruder Alert'](#)) Without noticing the incongruity, readers might just flick over the page and move on. Visual incongruity is a powerful attention hook and the more visual it is, the more instantly it generates attention as illustrated by the next two arresting examples:



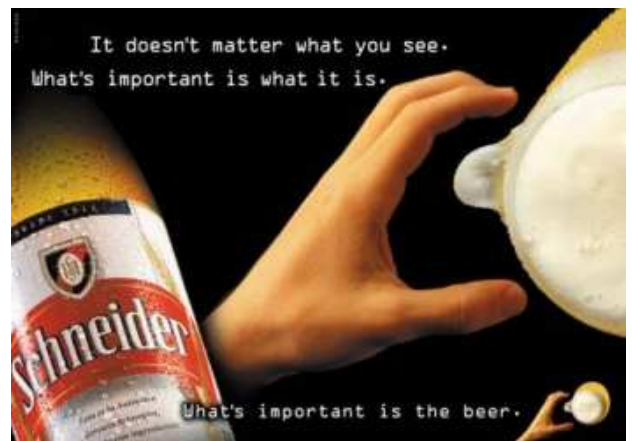
The incongruity of a dog with technicolor spots or a man having the power to hold up a leaning building⁴, triggers the alarm here and switches on attention to compel further investigation. This is the human equivalent of the 'orienting response' in animals whereby a noise or something unusual will cause a dog to prick up its ears and orient towards the stimulus for further processing of it. It promotes curiosity and involvement and draws you in.

Sex:

Sexual imagery or allusion is the other sure fire way of triggering the 'orienting response' to hold attention, hopefully long enough for the person to get to the 'ahaa' hit. The ad for orange juice at the beginning of this column is a stylistic attempt at that. Here is a more powerfully executed example.



This ad for Schneider beer certainly commands attention. The brand is prominent and the hand looks like it is reaching for a breast and bingo, your attention is arrested right there. Attention-deficit tendencies are blown away, totally replaced by an orienting response that compels closer inspection and improve the ad's chances of arriving at an 'ahaa' hit. The breast turns out to be a mug of beer and the hand is reaching for the mug. Similar to the VW leaf-ad based on altered perspective, this one reaches consummation with the aid of a powerful attention hook.



Liking and Appreciation

Provided the reader 'gets it,' clever ads (and funny ads) result in greater appreciation and liking for the ad.⁵ Their essence is the reward hit that comes from appreciation when the 'ahaa' reaction kicks in.

Liking and appreciation of an ad doesn't necessarily make it work – but it helps. Other things equal, we would prefer to have people like our ad than not like it. There are two reasons:

1. A brand's advertising, like its packaging, is part of the brand's personality wardrobe. Just as good clothes make a person more attractive so a brand's advertising can make a brand more attractive.
2. We are more inclined to argue with someone we dislike and less inclined to argue with someone we do like and our minds tend to react similarly with advertising. We are less inclined to counter-argue when we find ourselves enjoying an interesting ad.

So, if we like a brand's advertising, the chances are increased that we will like that brand - however marginal that difference may be. At the same time it is also important to keep this effect in perspective and not exaggerate it. This is a feather effect (see my book '[Advertising & the Mind of the Consumer](#)'). Nevertheless, when differences between brands are marginal or non-existent and the brands on the beam balance of choice weigh equal, it may only take a feather to swing the balance to that brand.



Notes:

¹ McQuarrie, E. F. and D. G. Mick (1996). "Figures of Rhetoric in Advertising Language." *Journal of Consumer Research* (March).

² My thanks to Lawrence Ang (Macquarie Graduate School of Business) for some of the visuals used here.

³ Berns G., McClure S., Pagnoni G, Montague P. (2001) "Predictability modulates human brain response to reward". *Journal of Neuroscience*. (April) 15:21(8):2793-8.

⁴ Anonymous image received in email. If you know the original source, please let me know so it can be acknowledged.

⁵ Funny ads additionally set off the attention getting 'false alarm' mechanism - see '[False Alarm Theory: How humorous ads work](#)' - so they don't carry the same degree of attention deficit risk.