



Capturing Attention by Triggering the Mind's 'Intruder Alert'

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.

Reading newspaper and magazines we mostly scan the ads with our minds on autopilot. The visual or the headline has to take our mind out of autopilot and cause us to devote more attention to processing the ad. Back in April, last year I wrote about this under the title of 'Two-second Hookers' (Adnews April 2002). People only look at a print ad for an average of 2 seconds, so the visual (or the headline) has no more than two seconds to jolt readers into attention and motivate them to read further.

One way to jolt the mind into attention is to trigger its 'intruder' alarm. Let me explain.

Our mind can ID millions of familiar things on autopilot and almost instantly. With no effort at all, our mind will register a cat, a dog or Britney Spears. Because this happens with our mind on auto-pilot, it makes sense that the mind's eye might also have some sort of protection device - an 'intruder' alarm - to alert us if the ID of something is not quite right. And indeed it seems to.

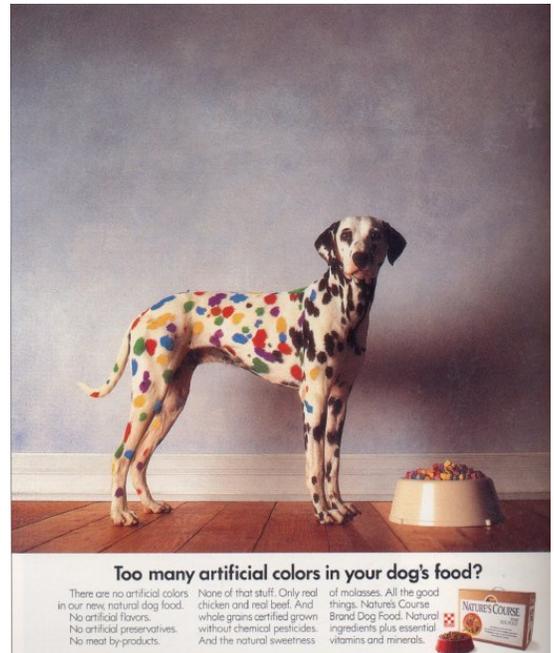
Check out some of the ads here and see if these don't jerk you to attention. If they do, that's your 'intruder' alarm going off and forcing your mind out of autopilot. It compels the mind to investigate.

That makes the basis for some great ads. The formula is simple. Take any familiar object and change it somehow so that the ID scanner in the mind's eye instantly identifies it but at the same time says '*hang on a second....something's wrong*'.

Let's see how we can apply the formula using a dog. First, let's try changing the dog's spots to technicolour (see the first ad). If the brain is on autopilot, this is sure to wake it up when we are scanning through a magazine. Hang on! A dog with technicolour spots? Involuntarily we have to know more about this. How can it have technicolour spots? Technicolour spots are not a known property of dog. A clown yes. A dog, no. So our minds do a double take and switch on attention.

In other words, when a mismatch is encountered the 'intruder' alert is triggered: '*alert.. check out possible imposter*'. This is how the mind gets a degree of protection from lots of recognition mistakes that it would otherwise make while under autopilot. When something doesn't quite fit, it ceases the automatic processing and the bell is rung to recruit additional attention and processing.

Research by Dahlia Zaidel at the University of California Los Angeles indicates that the automatic identification of familiar objects as well as the triggering of this alarm by mismatch is carried out in the right



half of the brain.¹ Zaidel's work suggests that the right brain alarm (the comparator) calls in security (the left brain) when a mismatch indicates it needs help.

Zaidel suggests there are two full-blown meaning systems, one in the left and one in the right that can operate separately and simultaneously. On autopilot, the right hemisphere, applies conventional concepts and schemas to incoming stimuli. It works with fixed templates and can process familiar objects and their interactions, whilst ever these are typical. However, when it encounters something that is not typical the mismatch alarm goes off and the left brain is called in because Zaidel says that is the only side of the brain capable of dealing with incongruity (and unorganized, collections of objects).

So not just an inconsistent *property* like technicolour spots will trigger the mismatch alarm but it can also be triggered by any *action* that is not typical. For example, let's design an ad for running shoes and put our dog in the ad. That won't trigger the mismatch alarm – but it will if the dog is wearing the running shoes. Dogs don't wear running shoes. Dogs typically bark, eat, sniff, run etc but when we see one wearing Reeboks obviously something doesn't fit. So screeeeeeech, on goes the alarm and the mind comes out of autopilot.



There are any number of ways to take a familiar entity and give it a twist so as to trigger the mismatch alert. Don't forget to include a bridge that will direct some of that extra attention to the brand. Otherwise it risks the reader registering *'the ad showing a dog in running shoes...err who was it for? Nike?'* Remember that getting attention is one thing. Registering the brand is quite another. Too many ads go for attention but fail to register the brand.

Let's try a final example using our overworked pooch. Put a gasmask in the ad. The alarm won't be triggered. But if the dog is wearing the gasmask, the alarm will be triggered, as is illustrated in this third ad. A dog wearing a gas mask, not only jolts you to attention but the headline provides an effective bridge. The headline *"Too many pesticides in your dog's food?"* points the reader directly to the brand that provides the consumer solution - *'Nature's Course'* natural dog food.



So in our final dogged attempt, we can observe these desirable ingredients:

- It triggers the 'intruder' alarm - to take the mind out of autopilot.
- It directs some of that resultant attention to the brand.
- It makes the visual do double duty i.e. reinforce the main message as well as get attention.

Hot-dog! I think we cracked it for a 'pooch perfect' example!

References

¹ Zaidel, D. W. (2000). "Different organization of concepts and meaning systems in the two cerebral hemispheres." *The Psychology of Learning and Motivation* **40**: 1-21.