

The History of the 'Appeal' in Advertising

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The commonplace term 'advertising appeal' is not well defined in the literature even though it was introduced to advertising about a century ago. This paper will trace the etymology and typology of the advertising appeal in order to lay the foundation for a suitable definition. Early in the 20th Century, the appeal was considered to be the attention-getting device in an advertisement. Over fifty years, the meaning evolved to become the message-conveying device.

The notion of an 'appeal' in advertising has been established for about a century among practitioners and academics. However, while the term is in common usage there is little agreement about how to define the appeal. It is as if the notion is sufficiently self-evident to not warrant careful definition.

This paper will trace the etymology and typology of 'appeal' as used by practitioners and academics. I have relied heavily on textbooks even though advertising is generally practitioner-led. This is because the lag between contemporary practice and its inclusion in textbooks is negligible when studying trends spanning one hundred years. The purpose of the study is to lay the foundation for a definition of advertising appeal by understanding its history.

APPEALS FOR ATTENTION

Although they were not known as such at the time, 'emotional appeals' appeared in advertising first and were common by 1895 (Frederick 1925). Early textbooks of advertising (Scott 1903, Calkins and Holden 1905) emphasized the central importance of attracting attention in an advertisement and the use of emotion was seen to be very effective.

RATIONAL APPEALS

What are now generally referred to as 'rational appeals' were introduced over the period 1906-1915 as a conscious effort by a group of advertisers to introduce 'better copy ideas'. The expression 'reason why copy' was coined by A. D. Lasker, head of the then Lord & Thomas Agency and referred to copy that 'appealed to reason and intelligence rather than the time honored assumption that the public was a mass of dumb, driven sheep, who could be swayed with mere picture-and-catch-word' (Frederick 1925).

THE STUDY OF APPEALS

Shryer (1912) was one of the first to conduct experiments to determine factors that made for the most effective advertisements. Based on his experiments, he strongly recommended 'appeals to the imagination'.

A major advance in the understanding of appeals occurred with the classification of appeals into three types: Instinctive, short circuit and long circuit (Hollingworth 1913). According to Hollingworth (1913), instinctive appeals rely on unconscious reflex reactions like the way a flashing light instinctively draws attention. Short circuit appeals require more brain processing but nonetheless tap deeply ingrained and largely unconscious responses such as responses to frightening pictures or copy. Finally, long circuit appeals 'correspond to a well known type of selling talk, the reason why copy which invites and presents careful comparisons'. Hollingworth (1913) viewed the concept of appeal holistically as comprising the advertisement in its entirety and acting as a stimulus for attracting attention, analogous to the notion of stimulus-response which had been developed in the then new science of psychology.

Hollingworth was often cited over the next decade. Adams (1916) and Hall (1921) in particular built on Hollingworth's approach and provide a broader taxonomy of appeals. During this time, the role of the copywriter was considered to be to select an appropriate appeal from provided lists. Some authors, however, ignored the concept of appeals entirely. Kleppner (1925), for instance referred only to 'approaches to copy' when discussing what Hollingworth defined as 'appeals'.

APPEALS AS MESSAGES

By mid century, the emphasis in describing advertising appeals had moved from an attention-getting stimulus to a means of conveying the advertising message. Bridge (1949) provides a long list of appeals and demonstrates by usage that an appeal can be considered to be an argument for why a particular product should be purchased. In this approach, claims and facts can be used to support an appeal.

The change in meaning of appeal was well established by the 1970s with the introduction of the term 'message appeal'. This term is now commonplace in advertising texts (eg. Belch 1999) and is often synonymous with 'message

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strategy' (Laskey, Day and Crask 1989). Many authors, however, avoid using the word 'appeal' in comprehensive textbooks of advertising (Whittier 1955, Rossiter and Percy 1997). Rossiter and Percy (1997) emphasize instead the 'motivations' of the target audience that can be tapped by an advertisement.

The typology of appeals devised by Hollingworth (1913) is still used, albeit with modern equivalents of the names: short circuit appeals are emotional appeals and long circuit appeals are rational appeals. In fact, this dichotomy of rational/emotional is one of the most common classification schemes (Clow, Roy et al. 2002). There are, however, other typologies. Davies (1993) suggests seven categories: Informative; Reason why; Evidence; Brand Familiarity; Curiosity/exploration; Emotive; and Incentive and emphasizes that creativity is required to devise message appeals.

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