

General Motors Value Expressive Advertising 1930-1960

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Based on the development of the GM segmentation strategy that was undertaken in 1921 this paper examines print advertising copy that was used after the segmentation scheme was fully developed. This advertising copy is reviewed and discussed in the context of value expressive advertising that is designed to create a positive attitude towards a product or brand by promoting a stereotypical user-image (Johar and Sirgy, 1991). Source material consisting of advertising copy from the 1930-1960 time period from print and internet sources was utilized. The time period examined begins with the time that the GM segmentation scheme was fully developed and reflects the most creative period of GM and its success in the marketplace (Pelfrey, 2006). The results indicate that GM made very specific use of value expressive advertising by product line that effectively reflected each product line's target market and self-image. A contribution to the marketing history literature is made by identifying how a historically significant marketing strategy was implemented and how it is related to marketing concepts that remain in use decades later.

General Motors was formed in 1908 as a collection of largely unrelated product lines acquired by William Crapo Durant with Buick as its initial automobile line. Additional companies including Olds Motor Works, Oakland, and Cadillac were soon added (Sears, 1971). Durant was ousted from GM in 1910 and then formed the Chevrolet Motor Company in 1908 with Louis Chevrolet (Gustin, 2008, p. 141). Chevrolet was merged with GM in 1918, putting in place the major elements of the GM product lines; Chevrolet, Oakland (Pontiac), Oldsmobile, Buick, and Cadillac. Alfred P. Sloan began to examine the overall GM product structure in 1921 and found it to be without financial and operational controls and with a conflicting product line (Greco 1999). Sloan developed a major repositioning strategy creating distinct market segments for each automobile division, thus eliminating product overlap in the GM lineup (Sloan, 1963). In 1929 the GM segmentation strategy was fully implemented with five product lines that would carry on into the latter part of the 20th century (Chevrolet, Pontiac, Oldsmobile, Buick, and Cadillac). Advertising was very important to the selling of automobiles in the 1920s (Parissien, 2014, p. 104) and was used extensively by GM to reinforce their product images. The Campbell-Ewald advertising agency was hired by General Motors in 1919 for the Chevrolet line and in 1922 was given full responsibility for all GM product lines. Henry Ewald, the president of Campbell-Ewald, even purchased a Chevrolet dealership to obtain a further understanding of the automobile business (Johnson, 2011).

Value expressive advertising is a type of advertising containing a stereotypical user-image (Johar and Sirgy, 1991). Fundamental to the use of value expressive advertising is the notions of self-image and congruity. Self-image represents a person's perceptions and feelings of himself or herself (Gonzalez-Jimenez, 2017; Rosenberg, 1979). It is considered a key construct that influences how consumers perceive brands (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012; Gonzalez-Jimenez, 2017; Hosany and Martin, 2012). Previous research has identified four self-image dimensions; an actual self-image, an ideal self-image, a social self-image, and an ideal social self-image (Johar and Sirgy, 1991; Shavitt, 1992; Sirgy, 1985). An actual self-image is an image that an individual has of himself or herself and it is either self-consistency or social consistency motive-driven (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012; Sirgy, 1985). An ideal self-image involves an image one aspires to have driven by self-enhancement motives (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012). A social self-image involves beliefs about how one is viewed by others, and an ideal social self-image is the imagined image one aspires others to have of himself or herself. The greater the self-congruity between a person's self-image and the brand image, the greater is the propensity for the consumer to prefer the brand (Sirgy, 1982).

The advertising materials that are examined were categorized into four self-image dimensions if a person is present or suggested in the ad: actual self-image, ideal self-image, social self-image, and ideal social self-image. These dimensions are determined based on the observable advertising content and were reviewed by two researchers. The advertisements that are used as illustrations are representative of the total sample that was obtained and reflect advertising in the 1930-1960 time period. The findings reveal that for most GM advertising by individual product line there are individuals in the ad that reflect the targeted demographic. Much of the advertising includes a social dimension that is also related to the target market. The use of full product line advertising was used less during the time period examined, reflecting the increased use of individually product line and self-image advertising content.

In terms of self-image, Chevrolet advertising typically featured young families, often with an infant or small child used to indicate a user image of individuals in an early stage of a family life cycle. The setting of the ads examined also reflect the target market by placing the individuals in the ad in an earlier lifestyle setting for Chevrolet and Pontiac; a more mature and successful setting for Oldsmobile and Buick, and a very elegant setting for Cadillac with an older demographic. These ads reflect in some cases an actual self-image focusing on price and value dimensions. In others there is more of an ideal self-image showing greater material possessions. Pontiac advertising often shows a family with a slightly older child that is typically seen in the Chevrolet ads. Oldsmobile and Buick advertising often depict couples without children who appear to be older and are more formally dressed than individuals in Chevrolet or Pontiac ads. Cadillac ads are quite different in terms of the demographic than the Oldsmobile and Buick ads with a decidedly older and more successful couple seen in the ads. These individuals are often formally dressed and in an elegant setting. Variations of these themes are also consistent with the targeted demographic.

Similar results were found for social self-image with numerous ads containing a social activity context. One example of this is a Pontiac ad where an individual male is seen fishing, and another where a family unit is on a driving vacation, but absent any social connections. In an Oldsmobile ad a couple is arriving at a ski resort, clearly reflecting differing lifestyles between these two segments. In some cases, there is no social context given in ads for Oldsmobile and Buick. Perhaps stimulus ambiguity was being used where the viewer of the ad created their own scenario. This is evident in ads that show some form of greeting or success that the couple in the ad is experiencing. The social context of many Cadillac ads were clearly aimed at higher income and older customers with elegant surroundings reflecting elements of success and with a high degree of social interaction. As seen in one of these ads, a couple is saying "maybe this will be the year," meaning of course the year that they will step up to a Cadillac, fulfilling their aspirations to be socially perceived in a higher class. The use of ideal self-image and ideal social self-image was determined to play a larger role in ads higher in the GM product hierarchy. Advertising at the very beginning of the period examined had a limited value expressive self-image content. This increased dramatically during the following years and may be due to the dollar amount of advertising being increased after the 1930s (Hammer, 1955; Johnson, 2011).

Sample References

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