Upfront, Mystery, and False Front Advertising:  
Why Their Effects on Consumer Evaluation Depend on Exposure Duration

Millie Elsen, Rik Pieters, and Michel Wedel *

Abstract

Consumers have learned to quickly identify the gist of ads in terms of the products and brands that are being promoted. Surprisingly little is known about this rapid process of advertising identification and its influence on ad effectiveness. Three controlled studies contribute to closing this gap. They compare three fundamental identification strategies that ads can use and how these influence consumer evaluation. They show that the sheer feeling of knowing what an ad promotes improves consumer evaluation of the ad and brand, independent of the accuracy of the feeling and independent of schema-based affect due to what is being advertised. Therefore, a first type of “upfront” ads is already evaluated positively after very brief exposures, a second type of “mystery” ads is evaluated positively only after longer exposures, and a third type of “false front” ads is evaluated positively after brief exposures but negatively after longer exposures. A new Bayesian multilevel mixed-outcome path model established these effects and the processes that gave rise to them. The findings demonstrate the crucial role that exposure duration plays in advertising identification, and how this contributes to consumer evaluation. Implications for advertising research and management are offered.

* Millie Elsen is research analyst at CenterData (tel: +31 13 466 8279, e-mail: m.elsen@uvt.nl), and Rik Pieters is professor of marketing (tel: +31 13 466 3256, e-mail: pieters@uvt.nl), department of Marketing, both at Tilburg University, P.O. Box 90153, Warandelaan 2, 5000 LE Tilburg, the Netherlands. Michel Wedel is Pepsico professor of consumer science, department of Marketing, Smith School of Business, University of Maryland, 3303 Van Munching Hall, College Park MD 20742-1815 (email: mwedel@rhsmith.umd.edu).