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# THE ACTION MODEL FOR MEASURING INFLUENCE IN ADVERTISING

Andrej Kovačič<sup>1</sup>

| 90

## Abstract

Despite the abundance of different theories there is little agreement on the suitable model that would explain how influence in advertising works. Historically, theoretical models have moved from including solely rational components towards including emotional components and from focusing on sequential processing towards hierarchy free processing models. Based on the existing literature, several most representative models are presented, described and evaluated. In a quest to explain a broader view on advertising influence we introduced the ACTION<sup>2</sup> model (an acronym for Aim, Connection, Techniques, Identity, Opportunity and Numerous). Advantages, suggestions for future research and a critical discussion of using this model are further discussed.

**Keywords:** ACTION, influence, advertising, model.

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant prof. Andrej Kovačič, Ph.D. Contact: andrej.kovacic(at) ceos.si

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## **Introduction**

Never before has knowledge on communication techniques been so abundant and widely available. In 21<sup>st</sup> century there are numerous suggestions in academic literature as well as on the practitioners' side about how to influence people to purchase certain goods and services that we can easily speak of information overflow. As the old theories and models still have support of many academics we are also facing a lot of new ideas and on experiments proven theories. As a consequence it is getting extremely difficult to create a clear perspective about the antecedents of influence in advertising and in other similar areas where influence is essential (for example coaching, therapy, PR and marketing).

Advertising as a discipline has the main objective to influence consumers to take action and purchase products and services. As such we use the definition of advertising influence as "the action or process of producing effects on the actions, behaviour, opinions" (Collins dictionary, 2009). It is important to stress the connection between influence and action as only sales of goods and services lead to business success and expansion of companies (long-term perspective). Advertising suggestions thus should in a broad perspective aim to activate consumers towards purchase of products and services.

Despite the abundance of different theories (different scales in numerous articles<sup>1</sup>) there is little agreement on the suitable model that would explain how this influence actually works. We have to agree with Poels and Dewitte (2006) that to date, literature is not straightforward on what instrument provides the most valid measurement especially if it includes emotional component. A construct of how to measure effectiveness has no "perfect" solution. The emotional component in advertising is the reason that Hall (2004) recently suggested a "complete rethinking of some new and a careful reconsideration of old tools". As he explains, the new tools should bring affective measures to the forefront.

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<sup>1</sup>"Measure advertising effects" is presented in more than a million documents (Google, 2014).

## **Evolution and overview of advertising models**

To classify the models how advertising works Vakratsas and Amber (1999) reviewed more than 250 journal articles and books and found out that models fall into one of three categories:

- emotion plays no explicit role
- emotion plays an exclusive or dominant role
- emotion works in conjunction with cognition and experience
- sequential - hierarchy
- hierarchy-free models (no processing sequence)

Vakratsas and Amber (1999) present this list as an evolution of models from relatively simple cognition, where emotion plays no explicit role, to more complex integrative cognition, affect and experience, where hierarchy is not fixed. In this class of models, different hierarchies of cognition, affect and experience are assumed, depending on the context in which advertising operates. As Vakratsas and Amber (1999) note, product category and level of involvement may determine the order of effects. In some models context may also determine the strength of each effect.

The earliest and the most famous hierarchical model is the AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire and Action), developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This sequence presupposed advertising (or suggestions) working entirely in the conscious mind and was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century most often connected to the measurement instrument of instant recall of the ad. The information processing view on advertising claims that advertising works by delivering a unique persuasive informational message and thus “ads have to be persuasive to be effective” as in Meyers-Levy and Malaviya (1999). This view on advertising has been extensively used in academic and practitioner research in the last 30 years. Simplicity and popularity of recall encouraged many authors to use it without being concerned about other components that could determine the level of influence. It seems that many academics use the “easy and safe way” but not necessarily the “right” way when analyzing advertising effectiveness and emotions.

Neuroscientists today argue that emotion can operate independently of the rational brain to drive behaviour. Consequently there is a need for change in the model of influence. According to Green’s research (2006) information can in fact be processed at very low levels of attention. The attention may in fact be so low that people do not know they are receiving certain messages. If this is the case, researchers’ demand that they “play back” or recall advertising from their active memories may not be the only or the best way to explain their behaviour. Although the

knowledge how advertising works as well as the media and the contents of advertising stimuli have changed considerably, researchers like Heath (2006) argue that researchers still too often use the same measures which have been developed a century ago, by asking people for example to recall elements they have no reason to recall.

As a response to deficiencies of rationally focused models, Mehta (1994) suggests Advertising Response Modelling (ARM), which integrates two routes of persuasion: systematic or central route (cognitive) and heuristic or peripheral route to persuasion. The systematic route should produce judgement based on extensive and critical elaboration of messages. Heuristic route is based on intuitive inferences that emerge from exposure. Both routes have an effect on advertising liking and on brand attitude and lead to purchase intention. Hansen (2005) suggests Elaboration Likelihood Advertising Model (ELAM) – originally developed as Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) in 1986 by Petty and Cacioppo. These models divide consumers into those who are “involved” and those who are not. Involved consumers tend to process advertising using a higher level of thoughtfulness, which they term “central” processing. Uninvolved consumers use a lower level of thoughtfulness – called “peripheral” processing. Hansen (2005) provides evidence from his research that “emotional activities contribute significantly to the overall effectiveness of communication.” In his research, he does not, however, find peripheral communication significant.

Hall (2001) urges the practitioners in advertising to move away from explicit and implicit reliance on hierarchical models of advertising effects. He suggests a model that places affect and experience at the centre of advertising process. Thus he presents a model that includes the two routes of persuasion “hierarchy-of-processing”. His model is presented as a good example of how cognition and experience could influence consumers simultaneously (Heath, 2005). In addition it shows how advertising can influence brand choice without the need for informational persuasion or high attention. Heath (2007) also argues that the majority of ads are processed through passive and automated learning and new neuron connections are established in our brain. Emotions thus subconsciously (without conscious awareness) influence purchasing decisions (see also Heath and Hyder, 2005) and can be described as “any stimulation of the feelings, at any level, that is capable of stimulating the feelings of the viewer” (Heath, 2007).

The basic characteristics of the Heath model (2007) are:

- Attention does not need to be “focused on the ad”. It requires only inattentive, shallow and automatic processing to be processed.
- The evaluation is automatic and therefore likely to be subconscious.
- The message itself does not need to play any part in emotional processing.
- Brand attitude changes will happen automatically and mostly subconsciously.

By introducing this model Heath managed to explain why modern consumers are usually exposed to advertisements in low-attention environment, where the focus of advertisers has to be on engagement rather than attention. This model continues a logical evolution of models and is compliant with the trends of the usage of emotional advertising.

Despite the large contribution Heaths’s model may lack in two ways. First a complex communication process between marketers and consumers is difficult to be described clearly. Secondly the model may lack a wider perspective on influence and thus does not provide an adequate understanding of when and how consumers are influenced by implicit, passive or active learning. As a consequence any measurement being developed from Heath’s model is very likely to be focused on the techniques used in a certain ad (like previous models) rather than on antecedents of influence.

### **ACTION model as a Hierarchy-Free Model**

The latest evolution of models are the Hierarchy-Free Models that reject the persuasive view of advertising and provide broader and more composite perspectives of the relationship between advertising, branding and consumption (Vakratsas and Amber (1999). These models generally present a more person-centred view of advertising, which can be thought of as an extension of the basic reinforcement model. Hierarchy-Free Models include one or more components that explain the total effect of influence of a certain advertising effort. In addition to measuring advertising effect as a whole, each of the components could be measured and thus a more detailed analysis can be performed. Such analysis can provide a better understanding of what the weakest component of influence is and how it can be improved.

ACTION model is presented in a form of a hexagon (see attachment 2). Each of the 6 components of ACTION is measured as the distance from the hexagon centre (0%) to the hexagon border (100%). All components

are measured on a logarithmic scale. The total area of the whole hexagon indicates that suggestions are unconditionally accepted and the desired action is taken unconditionally. The diamond shape formed in the middle is the total influence based on the measured components. The hexagon area minus the diamond shape presents the potential for improvement. The optimal individual components (100%) in the context of advertising are:

- Aim – Clearly defined goals which (if successfully achieved) lead to measurable action.
- Connection – Advertising message connects to customer's current state.
- Techniques – Techniques for constructing and delivering marketing message through a specific media are optimised to have the best impact
- Identity – Individual customer values and beliefs are included in the advertising message.
- Opportunity – When receiving the message consumers are in a suggestible state.
- Numerous – Number and the quality of exposures to the marketing message.

ACTION model emphasizes all six components not only techniques of constructing and delivering marketing message. Practitioners and academics that limit themselves only to testing ads in a laboratory environment will most likely not be able to explain influence potential as other five components play a vital role as well. Moreover the total influence is a product of all presented components. Missing one component will cause the total influence to be drastically reduced as half of the influence hexagon is void. As presented ACTION model suggests that opposite sides are summing up. A clearly defined aim can to some extent compensate for the lack of information about the individual's identity. Similarly this is also true for the other two pairs: numerous and techniques as well as for connection and opportunity. The interconnection also points out the fact that at least one component in each pair is needed for adds to have an influence. Finally the model shows that only when all components are optimized influence (and thus advertising effect) is maximized.

### **Possible improvement of individual components**

In a modern mass media advertising advertisers use a wide range of different methods and techniques. For the purpose of the discussion massive generalisation has been made in order to stress out the possibilities for improvement and further research.

## **Aim**

The majority of modern advertisers have a clear definition of the objective to be achieved, however not all. Sometimes the segment to target is too wide and consumers have a hierarchy of values that are too different to target. As Payne (2000) argues, “companies only bombard their customers with too many choices from which the customers cannot find the right one for their individual needs. Customers do not want more choices. They want exactly when, what, where, and how they want it”. A technology can be combined with a relationship marketing knowledge to make it possible for companies to target consumers better and deliver better services and products.

## **Connection**

Too many advertisers do not understand the importance of connection on the subconscious level. As suggested by Willis and Todorov (2006) consumers need only 100 ms for an impression. In addition, Karremans et al. (2006) stress the importance of subconscious advertising as it bypasses the critical evaluation. Evolution of mankind has caused that first impressions have become vitally important for survival and are mainly based on body language, breathing speed, face expressions and voice tonality. First impression tends (Rabin and Schrag, 1999) to manipulate consumers to (1) interpret evidence with bias, (2) distort facts as time passes and (3) influence selection of evidence. Because subconscious brain has developed a tendency to like states that are similar, advertisers should select advertising content that presents similarity to the states of consumers when they are receiving the message. For example relaxed consumers tend to subconsciously reject an excited person. Despite the general awareness of matching, mirroring and pacing techniques too many advertisers still create ads that do not reflect the current state of the consumers when receiving the message. Advertisers thus still have a chance for improvements of this component.

## **Techniques**

This is a part that has improved the most in the last 20 years as a consequence of academic as well as practitioner research. With the notion of leading into emotional states and locking the positive feelings on a product, consumers are now exposed to embedded suggestions subconsciously. A simple overview can produce evidence that advertisers increasingly avoid information based route and focus entirely on the locking the product or service on the main values (for example pro-social or reptilian emotions). Despite the general understanding that the main purpose of an ad is to lock an emotional state with a product or service this technique is for many advertisers still not understood. More



sophisticated collapsing anchors are now used frequently by some advertisers, however many never use them. In addition, advertisers too often make a mistake using negatives when locking states and thus tend to lock negative states on a product (sometimes this is happening in translating the basic concept).

### **Identity**

This is a component where future developments of one-to-one marketing have the greatest potential. Knowing the values, beliefs, capabilities, behaviour and the environment of individual consumers will give marketers enormous advantages. In a recent study we have proven that in the case of internet, consumers are already willing to share this information (Kovacic, Rek, unpublished Media Literacy Research, 2014). Using such data and using modern technology can enable customised ads targeted at specific customer. Marketers can lock their products and services subconsciously directly to consumers' values and beliefs making this component ready to improve and (ab)use.

### **Opportunity**

Opportunity applies to suggestibility of the consumers when receiving the advertising message and it is increased with consumers being deeper in a state of trance. Trance can be induced and deepened within an ad and within the program of the media. It is not easy to create an add that includes an induction, deepening and embedded suggestions in 30 seconds or less, but this may be the best choice, if an advertiser cannot influence the selection of the media and timing. Although some techniques allow quick induction of trance, too much confusion (when entering a trance so quickly) can result in suggestions not being accepted correctly. This is the case especially in short ads where there is not enough time to create a clear separation between the trance induction and the suggestions of the marketing message. In addition with the repetition of the same add the induction is less and less efficient as consumers subconsciously begin to filter out the induction.

The second way is to make use of the trance induced and deepened by the media programme itself. The media has the incentive to put consumers in a deep state of trance (as trance is a pleasant passive state ideal for media consumption). Media itself needs to embed suggestions and lock pleasant emotional states in order to "sell their own programme" and so increase. Usually this is achieved with the programme highlight using specific sound and visual effects. Primary emotions that are locked are: happiness, uncertainty, fear, excitement and tension (for example soap operas).

In addition to the ratings media is primarily concerned with advertisers being successful in selling their products and services. If this goal is achieved advertisers will be profitable. As a consequence in a constant market struggle some media use extreme measures to put consumers into deep states of trance. One of these measures is a high frequency of negative news reporting. The goal of serving such news is to make consumers as depressed as possible because when consumers are in a negative emotional mood they tend to spend more (Lerner, 2004). Negative mood is also very useful to create a contrast between the program and advertising as the majority of advertisers want to anchor positive emotions on their products. News reporting is especially useful as the negative states are not locked to the programme and media itself (as such media is not blamed that bad things happened). It seems that the combination of negative programme, especially negative news, (as in Kovacic, 2011a and Kovacic, 2011b) and positive advertising, will bring the best results in sales of goods and services. This may, however, be devastating for consumers. As the media market competition increases we can expect a further abuse of techniques to put people in a state of trance.

## **Numerous**

The simple logic, the more exposure the more effect, is confirmed in many academic as well as practitioners research (for example in Like more, look more. Look more, like more: The evidence from eye-tracking: Maughan, 2007). Despite the clear correlation this relation is not linear but logarithmic. This means that increasing exposure increases influence less and less. This could be explained by the reducing effect of surprise as a component of attention and inductions.

This may be the only component that has been decreasing over time for marketers. Advertising overload (e.g. facing more than 500 ads every day) causes consumers to filter information drastically already at the subconscious level. In addition in some segments, consumers are getting more media literate and start to recognise embedded suggestions or start to avoid media exposure. On the other hand new technologies (for example 3D) may improve the quality of exposures causing the value of this component to increase again.

## **Research suggestions and discussion**

The presented model offers in-depth analysis of all aspects of advertising influence. Despite the fact that marketing techniques have improved substantially in the last two decades there is still enormous potential in increasing other components. The ACTION based theoretical model is thus a beginning of the complete rethinking of the measurement tools used to optimize advertising. When measuring individual components we should develop tools that move away from merely optimizing the marketing message based on laboratory testing. This may prove not to be easy as it means that existing measuring scales like recall and likeability simply do not work any more. Regardless of the question whether we can use some of the existing measurement techniques or not introducing a new model of influence opens a new perspective on advertising research. As suggested by the ACTION model each of the components includes separate techniques which, if applied, can improve the influence. As the model has 6 components and each component has several techniques research is needed. All these techniques need to be tested individually as well as integrated in an individual component and in the whole system. In a wider perspective the presented model based on ACTION formula of influence may serve as a foundation for measuring influence in all forms of communication (business, non-profit and personal).

## **Conclusion**

Since the beginning of advertising, marketers have been interested in developing models that would explain how advertising works as best as possible. Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century after thousands of academic articles it seems that the notion of how to influence people has never been so confusing. This could be due to the fact that we have only recently begun to understand the complexity of advertising in a wider perspective. Namely, in the quest to create the perfect add a vast majority of academics and practitioners often ignore the importance of other components. This ad-focused approach may have been a good method in the past, when other components were out of advertisers' control. However with the onset of information overflow understanding new models may become crucial in the future. ACTION model may provide a fresh view on advertising influence that can benefit academics as well as practitioners. In addition, by understanding this simple structure, consumers themselves can get a good insight into how they are being influenced subconsciously. The full extent to which the ACTION model will increase research and understanding in the field of advertising will however remain to be seen in the future.

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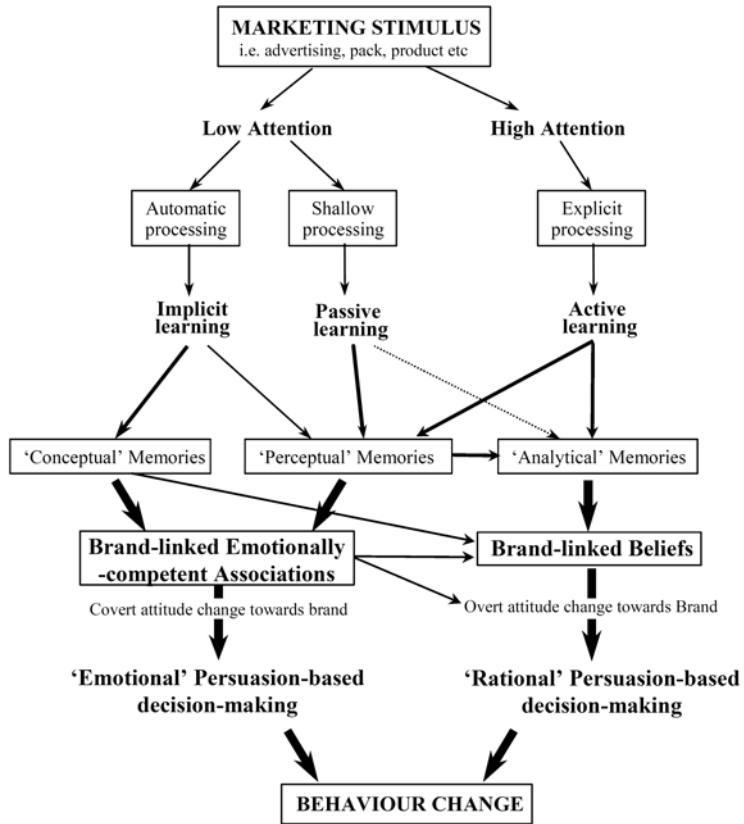
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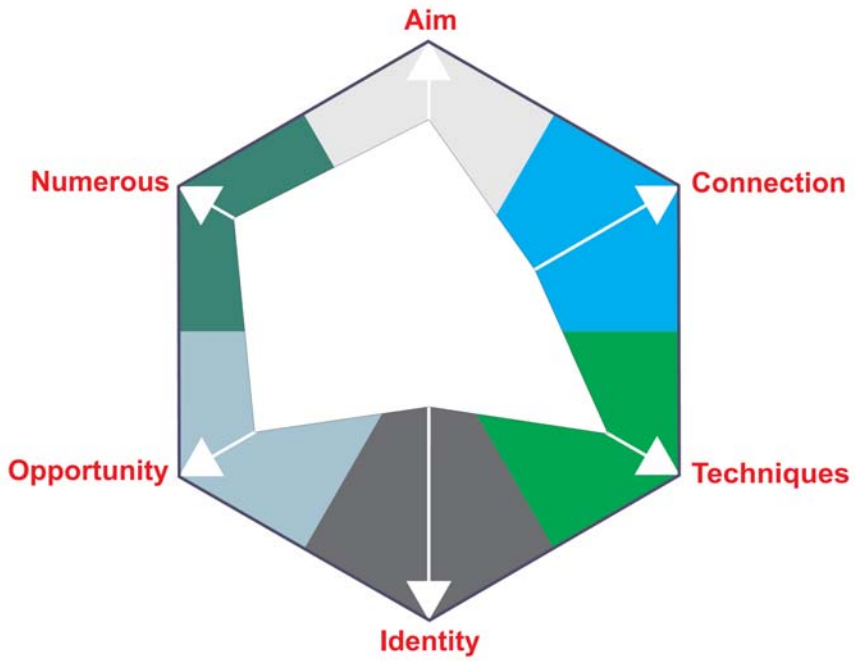
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Attachment 1: Heath model



Source: Heath (2007)

Attachment 2: ACTION model



Source: Suggested model (2014)