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An investigation into the impact of the storytelling technique on advertising effectiveness in the South African media landscape

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the impact of the storytelling technique on advertising effectiveness in the South African media landscape. The researcher adopted a qualitative research approach to establish whether the storytelling technique helps make advertising more effective in the South African media landscape. The methodology used in this research study was a case study approach which incorporated perspectives from the various marketing, advertising and media industries of South Africa, in the Gauteng region. A total of 12 in depth interviews were conducted. Respondents were recruited using the purposive sampling strategy. Two of the 12 respondents participated in the pilot study while the remaining ten participated in the actual research study. The research study found that storytelling advertising is indeed more effective than other forms of advertising due to it being more emotionally engaging therefore resulting in it being more enjoyable and memorable than functional advertising. The research study revealed that stories that are based on a universal human truth and are told in a simple and honest manner tend to resonate better with consumers. The study further revealed that advertising that is built around talking stories, which stir people's emotions and pull their heartstrings, is more effective. It was also found that stories which are supported by a consistent use of distinctive brand assets such as characters, music and jingles, tend to be more memorable and therefore more effective. The results of the study led to the development of criteria marketers should employ when designing story telling advertisements.

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Introduction

The South African (SA) media landscape has become a lot more competitive in recent years. This has been driven by a growth in the number of consumer products and services coupled with the growth in media platforms. According to Ces and Treglia (2009:153), "saturation, digital media, convergence and audience fragmentation are making it increasingly difficult to reach the consumer." The implication for advertising practitioners is that they have to work harder at developing effective advertising.

In the past advertisers had very few media platforms to choose from. These included television, radio, print and outdoor. Today the options have increased in number. Consumers and advertisers alike have more media platforms to choose from. According to Sousa (2013) the introduction of digital media platforms and the explosive growth of mobile channels are some of the factors driving media fragmentation. It is not uncommon to see a consumer browsing the internet on their Apple Ipad whilst watching television and listening to the radio at the same time. There is a lot of competition for the consumer's attention. Not only do marketers have to contend with the issue of media proliferation, consumers are now able to opt out of watching advertisements on television. According to Anonymous 4 (2013) the DSTV PVR decoder allows consumers to skip watching advertisements. No longer can advertisers assume that their advertisements will be watched. The implication for advertisers is that advertisements have to be compelling and interesting for consumers to take notice of them.

Research Problem

The South African media landscape has seen a rise in the number of media platforms over the years. This growth has been witnessed across all media channels, namely: in TV, radio, print, outdoor and as well as digital. Advertisers have a lot more choice now and therefore consumers are exposed to a lot more advertising messages. The growth of TV has been driven by the introduction of pay channels such as DSTV and Top TV. The growth of radio has been driven primarily by privately-owned radio stations as well as community radio stations. The number of print titles (Magazines and Newspapers) has grown over the years and so has the number of outdoor sites in South Africa. The Internet has further exacerbated this media proliferation by creating countless advertising platforms. This media proliferation has made it more difficult for commercials to stand out and be remembered. Even where commercials are remembered, too much choice leads to confusion and indecision on the part of consumers. In an effort to produce break-through advertising, advertisers have employed several techniques such as humour, storytelling, shock value, amongst others. This study aims to examine the role of storytelling, as an advertising technique, in making advertising more effective.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to investigate the role of storytelling in improving advertising effectiveness in South Africa's media landscape. The study sought to identify commercials that used storytelling as a technique and assess whether they are more impactful as a result of this technique.

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The study further explored reasons why storytelling advertising was more effective than other forms of advertising and make recommendations accordingly.

Research Objectives

The research objectives of the study were:

- To determine the prevalence of storytelling as a technique in South African advertising.
- To establish whether South African commercials that use storytelling are more effective than those that do not use storytelling.
- To provide recommendations to South African advertisers on what makes for effective advertising.

Literature Review

This section is concerned with determining whether existing literature supports or refutes the view that storytelling helps make advertising more effective in a cluttered media landscape. The analysis includes an assessment of the level of competition in the South African media landscape, an assessment of the definition and drivers of effective advertising, an evaluation of the techniques used in advertising development and a focus on the impact of storytelling on advertising effectiveness.

The South African Media Landscape

The South African media landscape has become very competitive over the years thereby heightening the need for breakthrough advertising. Ries and Trout (2001:6) share the view that the high number of brands and brand messages has created an over-communicated society. According to Anonymous 1 (2013), a typical consumer is exposed to at least 3000 advertising messages a day. This leads consumers to be selective in what advertising they commit to memory (Percy and Rosenbaum-Elliott (2009:17). According to Arens, et al. (2009:410), media planners have a lot more media options today than before. All the media platforms have fragmented into more options. A further complication to media planning is the fact that audiences have also fragmented, making it difficult for advertisers to reach their desired target audiences. Godin (2002:188) concurs that the high level of clutter in the media has made advertising less effective. Ries and Trout (2001:19) refer to this sea of communication as a sensory overload. They argue that studies have established that the human brain is able to cope with a limited amount of stimulation and inputs. Given the high number of advertisements consumers are exposed to daily, only advertisements that stand out will be remembered. Morgan (2012:44) argues that today's society suffers from attention deficit disorder and therefore advertising has to be fascinating for it to stand out. According to Foster, as cited in *Financial Mail Ad Focus* (2011:68), advertisements that are memorable are in the minority, and the majority get lost in the crowd.

According to Poiesz and van Raaij (2007:22) media clutter is not a new phenomenon. The concept of information overload existed prior to the introduction of digital media. The number of media options available to marketers has been increasing for a long time. Anonymous 2 (2013) explains that until recently the television and radio industry in South African was dominated by the public broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), as well as the free-to-air commercial broadcaster ETV. Print advertising has been dominated by four media houses, namely: Caxton, Media 24, Independent Newspapers and Avusa, as well as specialist independent publishers. Since 2007, television licences have been awarded to pay-tv broadcasters such as Telkom Media, On Digital Media (ODM), e.sat and Walk on Water Television. Radio licences have been awarded to new independent radio stations as well as community radio stations. The SA Media Facts report for March

2009 found that "there were 21 daily newspapers, 27 major weeklies, 660 consumer magazines, 735 business-to-business publications, 470 community newspapers and magazines, 92 television stations, 137 radio stations, and over 65 DSTV audio channels." According to Anonymous 6 (2013), in 2013 South Africa has 234 radio stations and 192 television stations. According to Anonymous 3 (2012), the number of community radio stations in South Africa as per RAMS October 2012 data was 126, with a listenership of 8.7 million. According to Anonymous 2 (2013), there are 22 million television viewers, 25 million radio listeners and 11 million magazines readers in South Africa. This breakdown of audiences provides a "bird's eye-view" of the competitive landscape that advertisers have to contend with when competing for consumer attention.

Storytelling

Storytelling is the age-old use of a narrative to share information and knowledge which all serve to involve the audience in the story. According to Liu, Xing and Starik (2012:151), a story comprises four main elements. These are imagery, immediacy, plot and point of view. Imagery refers to the use of senses to paint a picture for the audience. Immediacy refers to the feeling that the audience is part of the story. The main part of a story, the plot, is the arrangement of related incidents and details of conflict in a story. Lastly, a point of view is the position from which the story is told. In other words, a story is either told in the first person, third person observer or the third person omniscient (watching, all knowing) approach.

According to Learned (2007) storytelling is one of the most powerful tools for connecting consumers with brands. It does this by presenting truths in a compelling and memorable way. Herskovitz and Crystal (2010:21) state that storytelling is a well-known and ancient art form. In other words, human beings have been using stories for centuries to convey information, associations, feelings, traditions and happenings to each other. Langton (2013) agrees that storytelling is an effective way of engaging customers and building bonds with them. It is also a technique that more brands are starting to adopt in their communication strategies.

Anonymous 5 (2012) states that storytelling advertising is made up of conversational language, a sequential series of events that raises a question and answers it in an unexpected manner. This it does by combining anecdote with a moment of reflection. According to Anonymous 5 (2012), advertising messages become memorable when advertisers explain the anecdotes they use and these fit into consumers' lives.

According to Kotler, Kartajavam and Setiawan (2010:60) every story has a plot, character and a metaphor. A plot provides a context for the characters and gives meaning to their role. Kotler, et al. (2010:61) list three types of plots, namely: challenge (First National Bank), connection (Facebook) and creativity (Vodacom, "yebogogo").

Metaphors are a very important part of a story. According to Kotler et al. (2010:61), human beings are exposed to metaphors from a young age. They form part of our sub-consciousness. When consumers are exposed to stories that tap into these metaphors, they find them relevant and credible. Stories that are based on an interesting plot, accessible characters and familiar metaphors, tend to resonate often positively with consumers.

According to Herskovitz and Crystal (2010:21), research has proven that storytelling is essential to brand success because it helps with memory and also helps consumers make sense of the world. Storytelling helps consumers recognise and identify with brands, thereby deepening their emotional connections with brands. Morgan (2012:39) argues that every successful brand has

a story to share and that the reason why storytelling advertising works is because target audiences are interested in brand stories. Fog, Budtz and Yakaboylou (2005:152) opine that a lot of brands are using storytelling advertising to differentiate themselves from their competition. According to Fog et al. (2005:152) storytelling advertising provides an effective vehicle for communicating brand values.

Stories are part of consumers' daily lives. According to Pace (2008:213), consumers live in a narrative world that is made up of stories. We organise our thoughts, feelings, knowledge and experiences in a narrative form. In other words, in order to make sense of facts, our memory stores them as stories. This is why advertisements that are presented as stories tend to be more memorable.

Significance of storytelling

Woodside, et al. (2008) as cited in Woodside et al. (2013:20) provide five reasons behind the significance of stories in consumer psychology:

- Firstly, consumers reason through narration rather than argumentative tools;
- Secondly, consumers store and retrieve information from memory in episodes;
- Thirdly, consumers make sense of their experiences by organising them into stories;
- Fourthly, consumers derive pleasure from reliving and retelling stories in order to experience archetypal myths; and
- Lastly, brands enable consumers to live archetypal roles that bring them pleasure and happiness.

According to Klotz-Guest (2013), consumers remember stories 22 times more than facts. This is because humans respond better to stories. It is for this reason that stories are able to cut through advertising clutter.

Characteristics of a good storytelling advertisement

According to Clancy and Lloyd (1999:55) storytelling is an effective advertising technique because of factors such as:

- Personal relevance (informative and interesting);
- Entertainment value (amusing, imaginative and lively); and
- Warmth (appealing, gentle, well done).

In Gianfagna's (2011) view, good storytelling advertising is: engaging, emotional, memorable, has a plot, has an element of surprise and the product plays a pivotal role in the story.

The effectiveness of storytelling

Adaval and Wyer (1997) as cited in Woodside, et al. (2013:20) argue that narratives are more effective than lecture-formatted messages because consumers relate better to stories. Escalas (2004) as cited in Woodside et al. (2013:20) agrees that narratives are more impactful because they result in a stronger self-connection between consumer and brand. Smith (2010:11) provides seven reasons why storytelling is effective, namely: it is simple, timeless, demographics-proof, contagious, easier to remember, inspires and appeals to all types of learners.

Herskovitz and Crystal (2010:21) argue that for storytelling advertising to be effective it has to be based on a persona or character that consumers recognise. Instantly recognisable personas or characters act as a familiar point of reference for the consumers and therefore resonate with consumers, resulting in memorable, emotional connections with brands. Other scholars such as Escalas (2004) and Holt (2004) as cited in Kretz and De Valck (2010:314) agree that consumers create identities through branded storytelling.

The impact of storytelling on advertising effectiveness

According to Fog et al. (2005:48), every brand represents a story. They argue that Nike's story is the will to win; Harley Davidson's story is one of freedom, while Lego is about

learning through creative play. Fog et al. (2005:48) argue that storytelling is effective because it creates an emotional and memorable brand concept for consumers. According to Herskovitz and Crystal (2010:25), research has proved that storytelling advertising leads to strong emotional bonds between consumers and brands, while Bedbury (2002:95) eludes that storytelling is a very effective advertising technique because it evokes and taps into emotions inside of us making the advertising more memorable.

Calder (2008:142) uses the example of a Thai Insurance company called Thai Insurance CM where transference or the opportunity for consumers to identify with the protagonist was used effectively to drive sales. According to Goldman and Papson (2003:3), Nike has successfully used storytelling advertising to tap into broadly felt human emotions. Fog et al. (2005:20) argue that branding and storytelling complement each other because they both help consumers communicate who they are. Further examples of effective storytelling advertising include Apple and Kleenex.

Learned (2007) states that "most product categories have become commoditised and for this reason advertising has to work harder to achieve brand differentiation". Storytelling, it is argued, helps achieve persuasion. In other words, advertisers no longer have the luxury of relying on product attributes to make a brand appealing. To get noticed, brands need to have a compelling story. According to Deighton, et al. (1989) as cited in Woodside, et al. (2013:21), brand stories are more effective because they involve the audience and make audience members experience the concerns and feelings of the characters. Some advertising practitioners feel that theirs is to ignite stories and let consumers take over the conversation. For example, David Droga, as cited in Verksner (2010:1), states that storytelling is no longer about a 30 second commercial but about instigating a story and letting it go so that consumers can get involved and shape the story further. Kotler et al. (2010:63) agree that one of the marks of a compelling story is its ability to generate word of mouth. Consumers have strong networks of friends, peers and colleagues and what they require from brands are stories that will help facilitate conversation.

Research Design and Methodology

The methodology used in this research study is qualitative research, namely: case study approach which incorporated perspectives from the various marketing, advertising and media individuals being interviewed. Respondents were recruited using the purposive sampling strategy. A sample size of twelve respondents was chosen from the Marketing, Advertising and Media industries of South Africa. Two of the twelve respondents participated in the pilot study while the remaining ten participated in the actual research study. Data was collected using the in-depth interview method. The interviews were conducted using a discussion guide. The discussion guide was emailed to all respondents for completion. The guide was emailed to respondents. The face to face meetings that were held at Draftfcb offices in Sandton. A pilot study was conducted among two respondents. The pilot study confirmed the appropriateness of the discussion guide in addressing the set research questions. The method of analysis used in this study was thematic analysis, using the inductive approach. The programme, Nvivo was used to identify codes based on the raw data collected. The codes were further clustered into themes and these provided a framework for the findings of the study. The quality standards, namely: validity, credibility, reliability, transferability, dependability and confirmability of the study were met.

Findings, Analysis and Discussion

The sample used in the qualitative research consisted of advertising, media and marketing professionals. The respondents are involved in the production of advertising material, its placement in media channels as well as in evaluating its effectiveness. Seventeen percent of the respondents were Marketing Managers whilst eighty three percent of the respondents worked for advertising agencies. The job titles of the advertising professionals ranged from Creative Director, Strategic Planner, Media Planner to Business Unit Director.

The findings of the research study have been segmented into 5 codes which resulted from a thorough thematic analysis of the findings. In the analysis, data was coded and clustered as follows:

The definition of storytelling

According to Learned (online), storytelling is one of the most powerful tools for connecting consumers with brands. It does this by presenting truths in a compelling and memorable way. Advertising is often viewed as dishonest and lacking authenticity. Storytelling advertising addresses this concern by making the brand authentic and accessible to the target audience. Regardless of whether a story is fictional or not, stories have an inherent realness and authenticity about them. This leads to better memorability and therefore helps brands stand out in a crowded media space.

Respondent 1, a Creative Director, defines storytelling as a piece of communication that commands a visceral response from a consumer or audience. In other words, it is a narrative that evokes an emotional response from the audience.

For Respondent 7, a Business Unit Director, storytelling is:

“Framing an offer or message in such a way that people are able to relate to, using everyday, social, cultural or even political context or analogies. It can be real and authentic stories or even based on fantasy.”

It is evident from the views of both Respondent 1 and Respondent 7 above that storytelling advertising engages consumers emotionally, thereby increasing its probability of being remembered.

Respondent 9, a Media Planner, and Respondent 4, a Creative Director, concur with the view that storytelling advertising delivers a product message through an entertaining narrative. This message is based on an insight the audience can relate to, which means consumers are more likely to remember the advertisement. Respondent 2, a Media Planner, likens a story to a picture.

For Respondent 3, a Business Unit Director, storytelling advertising places a story at the centre of a commercial. The story often involves characters that the audience can relate to. Consumers are more likely to enjoy and remember a commercial that features characters they can relate to.

For Respondent 5, a Strategic Planner, storytelling advertising is work that frames a brand's proposition in a discernable narrative. Both Respondent 8, a Strategic Planner, and Respondent 10, a Marketing Manager, share the view that storytelling is delivering a brand or product proposition within the context of a story, to create an emotional connection with the consumer. The probability of stand-out and brand recall is higher when there's an emotional connection between a brand and the consumer. While Respondent 6, a Marketing Manager, the power of storytelling advertising lies in its ability to involve the audience

Characteristics and examples of storytelling

Respondent 3 argues that for storytelling advertising to be effective it needs to have the following four characteristics. Firstly, it must be based on a human truth that straddles culture and age. Secondly, the story must be simply told and well executed. Thirdly, the correct use of humour can enhance memorability. Lastly, the use of relevant music can enhance enjoyment and recall.

Respondent 3 cites the following as good examples of storytelling advertising: *“The Sasol ‘ama-glug-glug’ advert due to high recall and relevance, the Vodacom ‘yebogogo’ adverts due to the high memorability of the two old men used in the campaign over a ten year period and the Castle Lager ‘new york’ commercial for its memorable music.”*

For Respondent 5, storytelling advertising has to tap into South African nuances and language for it work. Consumers are looking for stories they can relate to. The use of emotive music also enhances storytelling.

Respondent 1, opines that storytelling advertising is effective because authentic stories make brands accessible and relatable:

“Yes, I certainly feel that storytelling can make advertisements more memorable. It's easy for something to resonate when you feel an emotional attachment or strongly identify with something.”

According to Respondent 1, the following advertisements are examples of good storytelling advertising, namely: Allan Gray's "Beautiful", VW's "Road Trip", VW's "Long distance email" and Procter & Gamble's "Celebrate mothers." What these commercials have in common is their ability to engage consumers emotionally.

According to Respondent 1:

“VW has been able to produce good storytelling ads for decades. They really are able to translate their raw essence into every piece of communication. I do respond positively and emotionally to their ads.”

With regards to Allan Gray advertising, Respondent 1 says:

“One of their first storytelling ads ‘Beautiful’ was a definite break from all the clutter. It captured a real insight about what we all understand about investment and life but rarely practice, patience. A simple clear message communicated through a simple and beautiful story. As much as I celebrate their first ad, not all Allan Gray's ads have resonated well with me.”

Respondent 6 concurs that Allan Gray and the VW bus and VW beetle advertisements are good examples of effective storytelling advertising.

“Many South Africans still remember the ‘memories’ advert as if it played yesterday. And it is as true to the VW brand today as it was when it aired. That's a timeless legacy.”

It is evident from the above examples that storytelling is effective because consumers can relate to stories. According to Respondent 2, stories work even better when they are based on people's cultures, habits and attitudes. That makes it easier for consumers to relate to the stories.

“Local is lekker (nice). In my view, the most effective type of storytelling is when people can identify with cultures they know, the daily dress they wear, and cars they drive. They laugh at their own jokes and they cry over their own stories. Consumers only care about what matters to them. They have to relate to the storytelling- integrated into their everyday life.”

The more familiar the story, the better it will resonate with the audience. Some stories work well because of their alignment to the South African way of life. Respondent 2 cites the Jonny

Walker “keep walking” advertisement as an example of good storytelling advertising that is South African.

One of the challenges facing marketers in this cluttered media landscape is low brand recall. Storytelling helps with impact and standout. Fog et al. (2005:152) opine that a lot of brands are using storytelling advertising to differentiate themselves from the competition. According to Fog et al. (2005:152), “the story becomes the driving force behind their brand values, separating them from the grey masses.” Given the level of competition in the South African media landscape, it makes sense for advertisers to employ the storytelling technique to achieve stand-out.

For Respondent 7, storytelling advertising is effective because it is memorable, emotively strong and creates a great social context for brands. Respondent 7 cites the Tracker advertisement as a good example of storytelling advertising because it uses storytelling to make Tracker relevant to the consumer.

Respondent 3 concurs:

“My view is that campaigns utilising storytelling are more effective due to the fact that they are memorable to the audience and hence have a higher recall. The key is to ensure that the high recall is associated with the brand that is advertising and that not just the story is remembered.”

According to Respondent 6, storytelling advertising is memorable because it captures the heart or imagination. It is timeless in that it lingers in thought.

For Respondent 8, a few lessons can be learnt from brands like Nike, VW and Allan Gray. Nike’s storytelling advertising works because of their ability to consistently deliver their proposition over time. VW’s recipe for success is their brand tone and manner. They tend to tell stories that appeal to South Africa’s family values. Allan Gray consistently tells stories that are typically based on universal human truths.

For Respondent 9, VW and South African Tourism are good examples of storytelling advertising:

“I have seen the VW advert where they tell a story of an injured cheetah and that was a touching story. Those are the kind of commercials that make one fall in love with the brand.”

Respondent 10, shares the view that the most effective stories are South African stories which use experiences and humour that South Africans can relate to. She cites the Hansa and Savannah advertisements as examples of effective storytelling.

It would appear from the above findings that stories that involve and draw in the consumer are more memorable. An interesting plot often leaves the viewer wondering what is next, which means they think about the story long after seeing the advertisement. According to Respondent 10, Savannah is good at developing campaignable stories that last a long time. This ensures that Savannah advertisements are not dull and repetitive, it has dry humor.

According to Respondent 4, human beings respond better to stories than to functional information or statistical data. This is because we are emotional beings.

“As emotional beings, we don’t interface with each other and with the world in streams of dry data. When we think back to an event, we usually won’t remember the date, or how many people were there or what the temperature was (although these would be the hard facts), what we recall are the feelings, the smells, the tastes, the funny thing that happened to so and so – or the joke that someone or another told. It’s the same with ads.”

Respondent 4 cites Allan Gray’s “beautiful” advert as an example of how storytelling is better able to resonate with consumers than functional communication:

“So, for example, instead of telling us about the value of compounding interest over time, Allan Gray decided to point out the value of time through the emotionally precious context of your child’s life.”

Respondent 4, argues that humour, if used correctly, can help make storytelling advertisements more effective. Savannah, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Chicken Licken have used humour effectively. Respondent 4 indicates:

“I remember seeing an ad for Chicken Licken about an orphanage last week – and I remember it because it was funny in an offbeat way.”

Respondent 4 also agrees that the best stories are based on insights that consumers can relate to. He cites Kentucky Fried Chicken advertising:

“Kentucky ads always find a clever little insight to write stories off that are built around the product on offer. That one with the little girl who gets her dad to go get her milkshake back from the nasty boy on the playground (who turns out to have been the rightful owner) is one that comes to mind.”

It would appear from the above findings that one of the reasons storytelling advertising is effective is the fact that viewers can relate to it. In other words, the story has to be relevant.

Respondent 2, agrees:

“People relate to stories. I think storytelling advertising can be highly effective provided it takes people on a journey. Yes consumers relate to storytelling. Stories that evoke emotions make advertisements more enjoyable. Yes, I do believe that storytelling makes advertisements stand out, providing it is integrated into everyday life, informing consumers about the product and evoke memories and emotions.”

Respondent 2 argues that storytelling advertising achieves relevance by telling day to day stories. The example she provides is VW. She argues that the reason VW is good at storytelling advertisements is that they manage to draw the consumer in with warm, emotional stories. She also makes reference to the Allan Gray “forever young” television advertisement, which uses emotive themes such as love to achieve emotional engagement. Consumers are more likely to adopt a brand and champion it among their social circles if they feel emotionally connected to it.

Other examples of effective storytelling advertising, according to Respondent 2 include: Investec, Toyota and Nike. According to her, the Investec television commercial that features children and teachers drawing and colouring a zebra, is very relevant to South African viewers in that it is a story about bringing black and white people together.

Respondent 2 further explains that storytelling has to be rooted in reality because consumers only care about what matters to them. She argues that the Nike “don’t let anything stop you” commercial was a success because it tells real life stories and uses experiences that consumers can relate to.

“The ad tells real life stories and experiences: ‘Don’t let anything stop you – not the weather, not laziness, not pressure, not traffic, not space, not gravity, not failure, not your body...JUST DO IT!’ The story touches on various hindrances, barriers and difficulties that we are confronted with in our day to day lives. It is so genuine and real and inspires and motivates us to be associated with the brand.”

According to the research findings, other brands that have successfully employed storytelling advertising in South Africa

include VW (Toureg), Nike, Tracker, KFC, Koo, Chicken Licken, Wimpy, Vodacom (Orlando Pirates and Kaizer Chiefs PSL advertisements), Vodacom Double your summer campaign, Coca-Cola, Toyota, Savannah, CTM, British Airways, Standard Bank, Old Mutual, Coronation, Allan Gray, Johnny Walker, VW (60's Beetle), Coronation, Sterns, Kiwi, Hansa, Castle Lager, Sasol, Klipdrift, Adidas.

One of the VW Toureg advertisements is a romantic story of two lovers who are brought together by the car. Another one is a story of a father and son going on a road trip. The VW Beetle advertisement is a story of a man's relationship with his 1960's VW Beetle, which he eventually bequeaths to his son. Koo celebrates tales of women who inherited Koo recipes from their mothers as well as stories of family soul food moments. The Vodacom Orlando Pirates and Kaizer Chiefs commercials are based on township tales of what soccer fans do to show their passion and support for their teams. These are all examples of storytelling advertising. For many of the respondents, Nike is seen as a pioneer in the use of storytelling advertising. For this reason, the next section is dedicated to analysing Nike's use of storytelling advertising.

Responses to Nike's storytelling advertising

The majority of respondents in the study perceive Nike advertising as effective storytelling advertising. According to Respondent 2, Nike uses storytelling advertisements to tap into human truths.

"The Nike 'don't let anything stop you' advertisement on You Tube takes storytelling to a new level. The advertisement tells real life stories and experiences: 'don't let anything stop you, not the weather, not laziness, not pressure, not traffic, not space, not gravity, not failure, not your body, just do it.' The story touches on various hindrances, barriers and difficulties that we are confronted with in our day-to-day lives. It is so genuine and real and inspires and motivates you to be associated with the brand."

Respondent 3 concurs that Nike uses storytelling advertising effectively. In her view, Nike is known for spending a lot of money on advertising production to ensure that their storytelling advertisements are impactful. Respondent 3 explains:

"Nike's advertising (although not some of my favorites) is known to be effectiveness advertising. In the instance of Nike, I do believe that extensive production spend does add value to their communication and this has an effect on effectiveness. Consumers do appreciate the 'magnitude' of their storytelling."

Respondent 7 disagrees. In her view, Nike's storytelling advertising is effective because it inspires the average man out there. Respondent 7 explains:

"Nike's use of storytelling advertising is a great demonstration of what the brand stands for. It is bold and powerful and inspiring. It focuses on demonstrating what Nike 'enables' rather than specs in their products, as some of their competitors do. Their range of stories touch and inspire both ordinary people and athletes alike, hence the adoption of their brand as a fashion brand by most people who are not even athletes."

Respondent 4 agrees that Nike advertising captures the essence of what the Nike brand is about:

"I love the brand. They don't sell shoes, they sell the philosophy of 'just do it' – a philosophy which they have been building through years of solid work that always positions their products and their endorsed celebrities at the heart of the stories they tell. One of my personal favourites was Nike Y2K, which was the ultimate 'just do it' (even in the face of end of the world) story."

Respondent 9, a Media Planner with more than six years experience, agrees Nike's storytelling advertising is effective because it puts the brand at the centre. He points out that the brand remains the hero even in the face of popular sports personalities that appear in Nike commercials.

Despite all the above-mentioned evidence that Nike's storytelling advertising is effective, some respondents felt that that Nike advertising is neither based on stories nor is it memorable. Respondent 6 finds Nike advertising cheeky and edgy but not memorable. Respondent 1 disagrees with the suggestion that Nike advertising is storytelling advertising:

Respondent 1 argues:

"I have always identified with Nike's ads as high impact, energetic communication pieces that amplify sport celebrity support and endorsements. Would not refer to Nike's advertising style as storytelling."

The majority of the respondents in the research study agree that Nike's storytelling advertising is effective because Nike makes epic commercials that are emotionally engaging and memorable. This helps Nike stand out and be the commercial success that it is. This is one of the benefits of storytelling advertising.

Advantages unique to storytelling

According to the research findings, storytelling advertising is preferred because it is engaging, emotionally captivating and memorable. According to Learned (online), storytelling is one of the most powerful tools for connecting consumers with brands. This, it does, by presenting truths in a compelling and memorable way.

Respondent 1, explains some of the advantages of storytelling advertising:

"Yes, I certainly feel that storytelling can make advertisements more memorable. It's easy for something to resonate when you feel an emotional attachment or strongly identify with something."

The main advantage of storytelling is that, because it is memorable and impactful, it requires less media flying money. Effective advertising drives word of mouth, which means consumers become brand ambassadors. The net result is that advertisers are able to achieve high impact with less spend behind the advertising campaign.

Respondent 3 agrees that storytelling advertising is more effective. In her view, storytelling is more memorable and therefore results in higher brand benefit recall. She mentions five factors that drive high recall. Firstly, the more relevant the story, the higher the recall. Secondly, the use of distinctive brand assets such as the Vodacom "yebogogo" characters can assist in driving high brand recall. Thirdly, the music often results in distinctiveness and therefore higher recall. An example given here is the Toto "Africa" track in the Castle Lager "New York" television commercial. Fourthly, the use of a universal human truth that consumers can relate to helps with effectiveness. Lastly, the story has to be simply told and well executed.

Respondent 5 agrees that storytelling advertising is more effective. He argues that human beings are neurologically wired to be drawn to storytelling and therefore stories are more emotionally engaging and memorable:

"Good storytelling advertising does make ads more enjoyable. As a species, we're drawn to stories; it's been the predominant means of transferring knowledge and learning. We enjoy stories because we subconsciously know we're getting something from the story, over and above the brand message."

For this reason, it is felt that storytelling advertising has higher stand-out value. According to Respondent 9, one of the advantages of storytelling is that it can help advertisements stand out in a crowded media space.

Respondent 9 explains:

“Generally combined with emotional music and powerful imagery, storytelling is a less obvious form of persuasion that engages an audience rather than plainly telling a consumer to buy a product.”

In other words, consumers prefer to be engaged and entertained, and not just told about a product or service. The former approach drives emotional engagement, which makes the advertisement more effective, whilst the latter merely imparts product information. Respondent 4 concurs that storytelling can help advertisers stand out and have impact. Respondent 4 explains:

“The more insightful, interesting and engaging the work, the more likely it will be to stand out from the proverbial clutter. And the more your advertising stands out, the more likely it is to be seen, noticed and responded to.”

Respondent 5 argues that it is important for stories to reflect the cultural nuances of the target audience, in order to be relevant. Culture is a very broad term in that it refers to the way people relate to one another, the music they consume and the humour they respond to.

According to Respondent 6, storytelling advertising is more than just product benefit communication. It captures the heart or imagination of the consumer, resulting in an emotional connection. It also carries the soul of the brand because it is value based and reflects the personality of the brand. Respondent 6 explains:

“It is the age-old phenomena of sitting on grandfather’s lap to listen to a story. The story might reveal nothing new, not expand your knowledge in any way (as you may have heard it before) but you sit for the enjoyment of the delivery. It is not always the message but how it is told, and the engagement score that stimulates the enjoyment. VW “memories” advertisement tells a human truth based on life stages and realities. It is a story that reveals nothing new but the delivery and engagement of the story told provides for great enjoyment.”

Respondent 6 further argues that storytelling advertising helps brands stand out in a crowded media landscape by being emotionally engaging. Its ability to pull at the consumer’s heartstrings makes it more memorable.

According to Respondent 7, storytelling advertising is more effective because it provides a context for a product offering. It is also a medium that society already knows and accepts as a way of sharing information. Respondent 7 cites the Tracker television commercial as an example of good storytelling in that it managed to stand out in a product category which is not well differentiated.

“It was surprising and delightful to see such emotive (positive) advertising coming out of that industry sector, where normal advertising speaks about capability (size of operation, number of recoveries) and speed. It was well executed and stood out as the benchmark to beat in that category.”

Respondent 8 agrees that storytelling advertising is inherently more effective than functional communication in that it is able to connect emotionally with the viewer. As a result storytelling advertising is more persuasive and more memorable. Respondent 8 explains, the human brain responds better to emotional messaging:

“Neuroscience thought leaders such as Le Doux and Dimasio consider emotional storytelling to be far more effective

than functional communication as the neurocortex is far more likely to engage with emotive messages.”

Respondent 8 lists VW and Allan Gray as good examples of effective storytelling advertising. In his view, VW uses the tone and manner of a ‘family brand’ to draw in the audience whilst Allan Gray uses universal human truths to demonstrate the value of time.

According to Respondent 9, storytelling advertising is effective because it is attention grabbing and engaging. It also uses engaging narrative to explain concepts to the target audience. Respondent 9 further explains that storytelling draws in the target audience by using engaging content which consumers can relate to:

“Storytelling helps to foster a brand’s voice and personality. It involves the audience in the process by engaging their brains at multiple levels and, often requiring them to take a stance. Storytelling also speaks to an audience that may not otherwise show interest in a product.”

Respondent 9 cites millennials as an example of a target audience that responds to storytelling advertising because it is both interactive and participatory.

“Yes, it does stand out. The new generations of consumers - specifically millennials - respond better to advertisements and marketing efforts that are interactive and participatory, and they also like to feel more in control. Combined with emotional music and powerful imagery, storytelling is generally a less obvious form of persuasion that engages an audience rather than plainly telling a consumer to buy a product.”

According to Respondent 9, storytelling advertising is more memorable because it is entertaining and therefore invokes an emotional reaction. Consumers look forward to stories and this is seen in the way they engage with storytelling advertising.

“Generally, stories are more memorable than communicating a list of benefits. Stories inspire an emotional reaction in an audience and as a result the messages are more memorable. Stories also cause a certain level of anticipation where audiences anticipate hearing/seeing the next phase of the story (an example is the Hansa and Vuyo series of stories where audiences are keen to see what Vuyo gets up to this time).”

According to Respondent 9, the Allan Gray commercial is a good example of effective storytelling advertising:

“I’ve already mentioned the Allan Gray ad with the mom who stops her little girl from wishing her life away – and I’m willing to bet there isn’t a South African with a TV who doesn’t remember the previous ad with the little boy who “invests” his time into his relationship with a little girl who he knows will grow up to look like her beautiful mom one day. And yet I can’t think of one actual example of a straight retail ad to even make my comparison with. That sort of proves the point.”

Another example referenced by Respondent 9 is VW advertising. In his view, VW storytelling advertising resonates with the target audience because it is based on human truths.

In summary, the main benefit of storytelling advertising is that it is more impactful and therefore more media efficient than other forms of advertising. It has stand-out value, high recall and high emotional engagement. This means advertisers are able to achieve more impact in a competitive media landscape using less resources.

When storytelling is not effective

Even though storytelling advertising is widely accepted as being effective, there are instances when it fails to deliver advertising effectiveness. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, storytelling is an art. It is not easy to get right. Some advertisers fail to produce effective storytelling commercials.

For example some respondents in this research study felt that Nike advertising is not storytelling advertising, despite its big budget, epic productions.

Respondent 1 explains:

“There is an art to storytelling, not everyone can do it well, no matter how many visual aids you have at your disposal.”

Secondly, it is important for the brand story to be aligned to what the product can deliver. Dissonance between these two elements will result in lack of credibility for the brand and ultimately consumer rejection. Respondent 9 argues that one of the reasons behind the success of Nike’s storytelling advertising, is that the brand is central to the story and is not obscured by the use of celebrities. This is a fine balance that advertisers need to strike to ensure that storytelling advertising is effective.

Respondent 2 agrees:

“Provided that the story stays true to what the product is capable of delivering. There has to be a link between the story, the product and the matching brand experience.”

Thirdly, for storytelling to be effective it has to be rooted in everyday stories that consumers can relate to. Failure to do so will result in lack of relevance.

Respondent 2 explains:

“Yes, I do believe that storytelling makes advertisements stand out, providing it is integrated into everyday life, informing consumers about the product and evoke memories and emotions.”

Respondent 6 agrees that marketers need to ensure that they tell relevant stories. She also cautions that there has to be a strong alignment between the message of the story and brand promise, resulting in high memorability and high brand linkage. Very often consumers remember enjoyable advertisements but struggle to remember which brand the advert belongs to. This is due to poor brand linkage.

Fourthly, for storytelling to be effective, the story has to be simply told and well executed. Complicated and convoluted commercials run the risk of confusing and alienating consumers.

Respondent 3 explains:

“Stories that are simple and well executed in the production are stories that stand out. Stories that are multi-layered or complex cannot be captured in short space of time and hence lose the audience, as they cannot be delivered well.”

This view is supported by Respondent 7 below:

“Consumers do not have time to try and work out what we have to say – we need to be simple in our messaging and execution. There is a lot of brand recall out there but not enough “message take-out” and that’s simply because brands, although they are active, are cramming too many messages into a piece of communication that at the end of it all, the consumer doesn’t remember a thing except that they saw your brand somewhere.”

Lastly, for storytelling advertising to be effective, it must have a call to action. This is to ensure that it converts emotional engagement with a viewer to brand adoption, otherwise the advertisement is mere entertainment.

Respondent 7 had this to say about the Allan Gray “beautiful” commercial:

“One could also argue that the advert is too soft, in that it doesn’t then close the loop with the ‘so what’ or ‘what steps should I take’ for a consumer – i.e. it doesn’t incite action strongly enough in consumers.”

This advertisement is an example of a missed opportunity to convert emotional affinity for a brand into a sale. Earlier in this chapter it was explained that effective advertising results into both emotional engagement and a sale. The Allan Gray commercial fails to do so.

Given the level of investment that goes into storytelling, advertisers need to ensure that these pitfalls are avoided so that storytelling can successfully endear brands to consumers.

Conclusions from the Study

In conclusion, it is evident from the literature review and the research findings that the South African media landscape is indeed very crowded, resulting in low noting and low brand recall. Advertisers are constantly competing for the consumer’s attention and as a result many product messages fall on deaf ears. Through the research study, it has been established that the storytelling technique helps advertisers achieve standout and impact. Despite some factors that detract from the effectiveness of storytelling, the majority of respondents in the research study concur that storytelling advertising does result in advertising effectiveness and that it helps brands stand out in a competitive media environment.

The research found that there is a high prevalence of storytelling advertising in South Africa and this has been the case for a number of years. Examples of storytelling advertising were cited from many product categories including the automotive industry (Toyota, VW), beverages (Coca-Cola, Castle Lager), sports apparel (Nike), telecommunications (Vodacom), deodorants (Axe), financial services (Allan Gray, Old Mutual), fast moving consumer goods (Procter & Gamble), fast foods (KFC) and energy (Sasol).

The research concluded that storytelling advertising is more effective than other forms of advertising. It was found to be more memorable and enjoyable mainly because it is emotionally engaging. The respondents attributed this emotional engagement to the ability of stories to tap into relevant human truths that draw in the viewer. It was also felt that human beings relate better to stories than to functional information because of their psychological make-up.

Recommendations

- According to the research, the characteristics of effective advertising include simplicity of the idea, simplicity of the story and simplicity of the execution. Advertisers are therefore advised to keep their commercials simple.
- According to the research, effective advertising is built around talking points which stir people’s emotions, capture their imaginations and pull their heartstrings. Storyteller advertisers are therefore advised to look for ideas that involve or provoke consumers’ emotions.
- One of the recommendations from the research is to keep stories honest, authentic, human, relatable and emotionally distinctive.
- To ensure high brand benefit recall it is recommended that the delivery of storytelling should be consistent over time and framed within the context of a brand proposition.
- The development of distinctive, easily recognisable brand assets such as jingles is recommended. This is because they engage the consumer in a way that helps them remember the commercial.
- Advertisers are advised to look for deep human insights around which simple brand stories are told. This is because tapping into human insights help make advertisements more relevant to consumers and therefore more memorable.
- Advertisers are cautioned to ensure that the brand stories used are matched to relevant human stories. This is to ensure that there is proper brand benefit recall, and not just enjoyment of the commercial.
- The use of social media in delivering storytelling advertising is recommended. This is because social media provides an opportunity for the consumer to be part of the story.

- Other advertising techniques, apart from storytelling, that help achieve stand out are disruptive advertising, product placement and sponsorships.

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