The Use of Rhetorical Devices in Advertising

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The purpose of advertisements is not only to inform but also to persuade. Rhetorical devices, artful deviations that put a twist on the familiar, are frequently found in advertisements. This paper reports on the effectiveness of advertisements that use rhetorical devices compared to advertisements that do not. The findings indicate that advertisements that use rhetorical figures result in superior recall and superior persuasion.

RHETORIC, THE DISCIPLINE of argumentation, is concerned not only with the message but with the determination of the most effective persuasive methods of presentation and frequently incorporates the use of rhetorical figures/devices. A rhetorical device is an artful deviation (Corbett, 1990) and "occurs when an expression deviates from expectation, the expression is not rejected as nonsensical or faulty, the deviation occurs at the level of form rather than content, and the deviation conforms to a template that is invariant across a variety of content and contexts" (McQuarrie and Mick, 1996).

Recognizing that a major goal of advertising is not only to inform, but also to persuade, it is not surprising that advertising is sprinkled with rhetorical devices (Leigh, 1994). For example, the current Benson & Hedges Cigarette campaign employs the rhetorical figure, personification (Pullack, 1997), and was preceded with campaigns employing other rhetorical figures, puns, and resonance (see Figure 1). The long-running Absolute Vodka advertising campaigns are well known for their use of rhetorical figures (see Figure 2). In a foundation-laying paper, McQuarrie and Mick (1996) offer a taxonomy of rhetorical figures in advertising language to provide an integrative framework for a systematic investigation of the rhetorical structure in advertising language, which heretofore had been piecemeal and isolated (e.g., for rhetorical questions, see Swasy and Much, 1985; for puns, see McQuarrie and Mick, 1992).

Unlike argumentation presentation in other fields which must rely exclusively or heavily on the verbal component, presentations in marketing via its advertising specialty can rely more heavily on the nonverbal components: olfaction, visual, auditory, and tactile. The use of sense/smell strips allow consumers to experience the fragrance of perfumes and colognes; consumers are exposed to pictorial portions of advertisements and packages; computer chips talk and sing to consumers from the printed page; free product samples offer consumers the opportunity to touch and/or taste the product; promotional items serve as tangible reminders of the persuasive communication.

Of these nonverbal components, the visual component is the predominant nonverbal element of presentation in advertisements. The prevalent theoretical approach to the research investigating the pictorial element of advertising has been the copy theory. In copy theory, pictures are conceived as natural, realistic reflections of reality, and elements such as visual viewpoint, focus, graphics, and layout are considered as variables independent of the message. Scott (1994) has noted the shortcomings of copy theory and has suggested that a theory of visual rhetoric be based upon the key premise that "pictures are not merely analogues to visual perception, but symbolic artifacts constructed from the conventions of a particular culture." A theory of visual rhetoric would recognize that pictures are a symbol system employed for the purpose of persuasion. Pictorial

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Figure 1 Benson & Hedges Cigarette Campaign Using Rhetorical Devices. Personification, (1998), Puns (1960s), Resonance (1960s)

elements are altered, combined, arranged, adopt viewpoints, and focus to create artful deviations, characteristic of rhetorical figures. Kaplan's (1992) investigation of the use of visual metaphors in advertisements is one of very few studies representative of research that recognizes the use of rhetorical figures in the pictorial component of advertisements.

Current thinking points to the importance and criticality of taking into account the effects of rhetorical devices in both the verbal and pictorial components of advertisements. Both verbal and visual rhetorical devices employ artful deviations that provide a twist on the familiar. This inherent incongruity of rhetorical devices allows them to carry additional meaning(s)

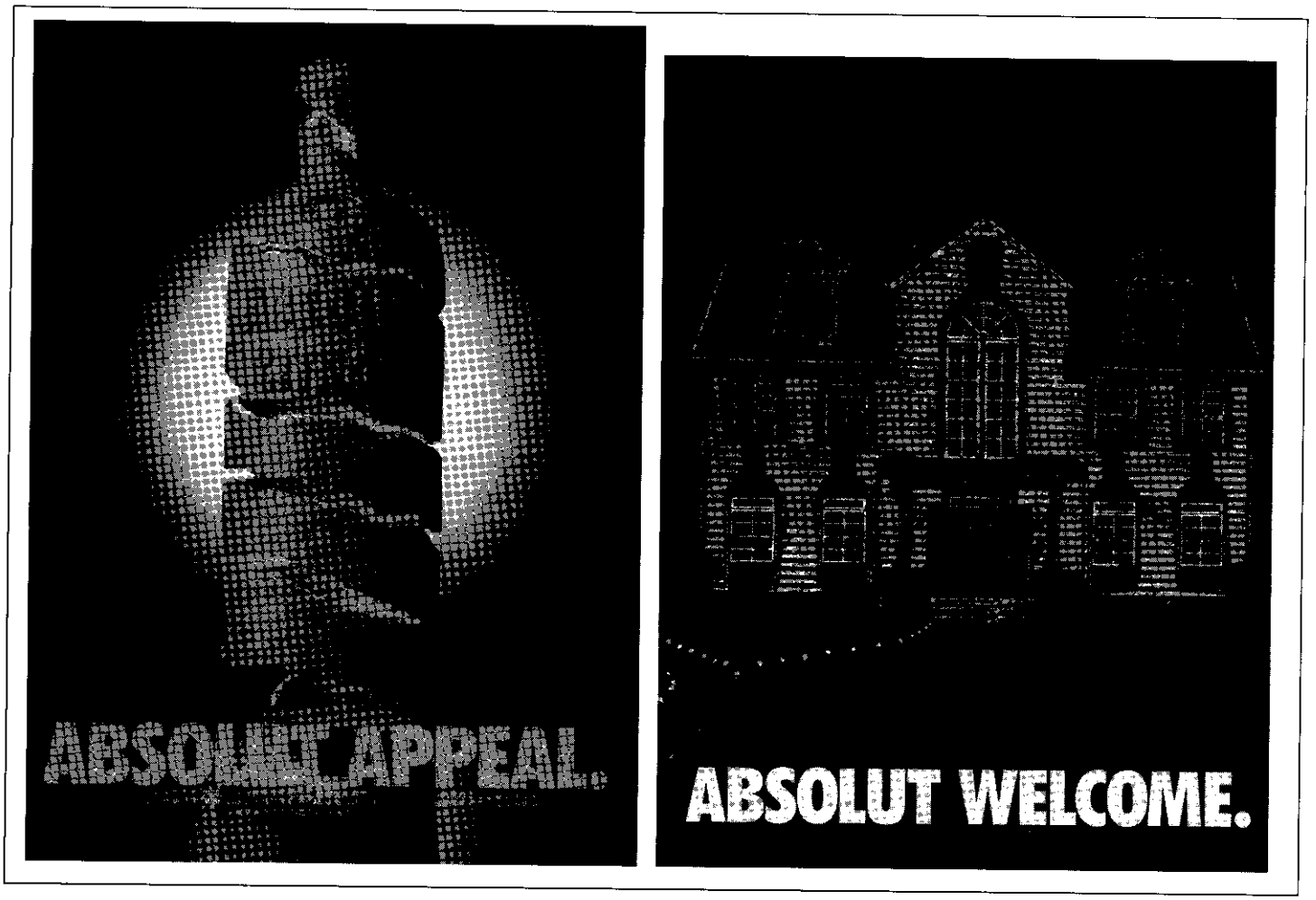

Figure 2 Absolute Vodka Advertisements' Use of Rhetorical Devices

and is the basis of their persuasive impact. It has been suggested that, compared to advertisements that do not use rhetorical figures, advertisements using rhetorical figures may more likely lead to greater attention (Berlyne, 1971), preference, and memorability (McQuarrie and Mick, 1996) and may be instrumental in the formation of brand images (King, 1989).

The principle purpose of this article is to use performance data to compare the effectiveness of advertisements that use rhetorical devices to advertisements that do not use rhetorical devices. In order to be effective, advertisements must, at a minimum, capture sufficient consumer attention to process the information. An additional, more stringent requirement for effectiveness is that advertisements must also be persuasive. A measurement of effectiveness comparing different executions of advertisements for brands within the same product category would perhaps provide a cleaner comparison and provide results less subject to noise and alternative interpretations than comparisons of advertising presentations in different product categories.

Performance data would provide more definitive evidence of advertising effectiveness than current experimental paradigms or descriptive studies. Descriptive studies are limited to information that report on the occurrence of selected variables (e.g., headline placement, frequency of the use of celebrities) in advertisements. Experimental studies have been criticized for their lack of realism. These studies typically require participants to focus attention on the advertisements. It is questionable whether participants would be that attentive to the advertisement under everyday conditions when they are not required to do so. In contrast, the strength of performance data is its grounding to everyday conditions. It reports the effectiveness of the advertisement within the context of the everyday.

The source of the data selected for this study was the sixth, seventh, and eighth editions of *Which Ad Pulled Best* (Burton

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and Purvis, 1997, 1993, 1991). In each edition, Gallup & Robinson performance scores are provided for each of 40[1] pairs of advertisements. Each pair of advertisements represent brands within the same product category. Gallup & Robinson provides two performance measurements: (1) recall—proved name registration and (2) persuasion—favorable buying attitude. The 40 advertisements selected for each edition of *Which Ad Pulled Best* clearly were not for the purpose of this study. However, this lack of intention can be viewed as a strength of the procurement of an unbiased data set.

METHOD

Each pair of advertisements was classified as using or not using a rhetorical figure. For those pairs of advertisements in which at least one of the advertisements used a rhetorical figure, the advertisement that received the higher performance score for recall and/or persuasion was recorded. The data set provided a total of 120 pairs of (240) advertisements.

An advertisement was classified as using rhetorical figures if either the verbal and/or pictorial elements used rhetorical devices. McQuarrie and Mick's taxonomy for rhetorical figures in advertising language (1996) was used to determine whether or not the verbal component of the advertisement incorporated the use of rhetorical figures. The pictorial component of the advertisement was classified as using rhetorical figure(s) if the picture was not a copy of reality. This included distortions, hyperboles, unrealistic context, or juxtaposition of objects (Kapalan, 1992). Two researchers classified each ad independently. The results indicated 96 percent agreement. Discrepancies were resolved with discussions.

Table 1 presents the results for all 120 pairs of advertisements for all three editions of *Which Ad Pulled Best*. Table 2 presents the data for each of the three editions separately.

RESULTS

The results revealed that 45 percent (54 of the 120) of the advertisements in this data set use rhetorical figures. The findings for the total data set indicate that advertisements that incorporate rhetorical devices perform better than advertisements that do not for both measurements of recall and persuasion[2]. However, as shown in Table 2, when the data set is considered separately for each of the three editions of *Which Ad Pulled Best*, the results are not as strong.

An examination of the results by product type (e.g., high involvement/low involvement; service/goods) did not suggest that the use of rhetorical devices was more effective for any particular product category or that the frequency of usage of rhetorical devices differed by product category.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest the superior performance effectiveness of advertisements that contain rhetorical figures. Even though the results of this study are clear, given the source of the data set, these findings, although promising, must be taken only as preliminary and suggestive. Future research must be undertaken with different data sets and with different performance measurements (e.g., Starch scores). The exploratory nature of the present study and the data set precluded

[1] *Each edition of* Which Ad Pulled Best *provides 50 pairs of advertisements, 40 targeted for consumers and 10 targeted for business. Only consumer-targeted advertisements were included in this study.*

[2] *In cases where insufficient data precluded the reporting of a persuasion score for an advertisement, the advertisement for which there was sufficient data was classified as superior.*

TABLE 1
A Comparison of All Pairs of Advertisements

	Advertisements	
Performance Measurements	**Use Rhetorical Figures**	**Do Not Use Rhetorical Figures**
Recall	48	21*
Persuasion	40	24**

*chi square = 10.56; df = 1; p = .001.

**chi square = 4.00; df = 1; p = .046.

TABLE 2

A Separate Comparison of the Pairs of Advertisements from Each Edition

	Advertisements—Edition 6	
Performance Measurements	**Use Rhetorical Figures**	**Do Not Use Rhetorical Figures**
Recall	15	7*
Persuasion	13	9

**chi square = 2.909; df = 1; p = .088*

	Advertisements—Edition 7	
Performance Measurements	**Use Rhetorical Figures**	**Do Not Use Rhetorical Figures**
Recall	16	7*
Persuasion	15	8

**chi square = 3.52, df = 1, p = .061*

	Advertisements—Edition 8	
Performance Measurements	**Use Rhetorical Figures**	**Do Not Use Rhetorical Figures**
Recall	17	7*
Persuasion	12	7

**chi square = 4.17; df = 1; p = .041.*

the value of a formal inquiry for particular product categories and/or particular rhetorical figures. Research that compares the effectiveness of selected rhetorical figures for selected product categories may provide practical benefits and guidelines for practitioners.

The results of this study revealed that in some cases literal presentations were more effective than presentations incorporating rhetorical figures and, in those instances where rhetorical devices were used in both advertisements, the superiority of some rhetorical devices over others. Future research efforts can be directed to determine the theoretical underpinnings for these greater performance effectiveness. JAR

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