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CERA – A New System for Measuring Emotion in Advertising

Many companies today face an increasingly difficult challenge in trying to maintain clear differentiation based on superior tangible product features.

The constant introduction of new and extended products and messages means there is more overlap in the benefits that products offer, there are more claims being made, and the claims are in some cases more nuanced and in other cases more complex. All of this makes tangible product distinctions more difficult for the consumer to attend to, to understand, much less to develop a conviction about.

In this climate of proliferating claims, advertising's non-rational side takes on added importance to strengthen the connection between the product and the person. Peripheral (non-central) messaging (through the use of emotion rather than information, celebrities rather than models, music rather than tunes, the ad as something to affect in addition to inform, higher level needs rather than lower), becomes an increasingly important communication objective for advertisers seeking to enhance overall advertising effect.

When the aim is to communicate at the peripheral level, there comes the need to better understand

human response to communication that works at this level.

While there is little doubt that traditional copy testing opens a door to emotional, non-verbal response (in our system, well executed



emotion-laden commercials outperform typical feature-benefit advertising), the degree of understanding to this response can be limited, especially when the purpose of the communication is foursquare on emotion.

Traditional copy testing primarily uses respondent self-reporting techniques to make its assessments. These responses are typically captured through verbal interviews or sometimes may include non-verbal means, such as knob turning or photo sorts. While these techniques provide access to our emotional selves, they may be limited in being able to capture the complexities of affective response because they require our emotions be reported through cognitive filters

(e.g., language) and may be susceptible to socially motivated inaccuracies.

Support for this viewpoint comes from recent work in neurophysiology. In studies that map how the brain works, significant message processing has been shown to take place outside of conscious awareness. Sensory inputs—such as those from television commercials—are transmitted directly to the amygdala—emotional center of the brain, and allows emotional stimuli to be reacted to before one can think about how one feels. This, of course, suggests that decision-making is not strictly a cognitive process and that affect—feelings and emotions—is an important component of memory.

The work of neurophysiologists has also shown that emotional response is not likely to be a single dimension phenomenon. Instead of choosing to like or dislike a commercial, which is the basis of most self-report systems, the viewer can both like and dislike a commercial at the same time. This possibility of emotional ambivalence, rather than simple neutrality, allows for a fuller understanding of the complexity of response to emotion-based advertising.

To get a better handle on this, Gallup & Robinson has been

working with the technique of electromyography (EMG) to record changes in facial expression during advertising exposure. Many neurophysiologists believe EMG is the most promising of the behaviors or markers that naturally accompany emotional response and experience. Studies in the past decade have shown high correlation between affect and facial muscle activity.

Facial EMG involves the placing of tiny sensors over facial muscles to measure the minutest electrical activity in these muscles. Short or low intensity electrical activity can occur without producing feature distortions on the surface of the face, enabling EMG to measure activities that are not otherwise visible.

We have incorporated this work into a new copy testing system, CERA. Using both physiological and verbal measures, CERA offers companies a unique and important opportunity to build their brand by

better understanding the positive and negative associations that their advertising makes with their audience. Advantages of CERA include:

- Direct (non-verbal, non-filtered) measurement of emotional response
- Continuous, real-time readouts of the separate positive and negative emotional responses as the commercial unfolds
- Integrated feedback with traditional advertising effectiveness measures

For companies that intend to derive a competitive advantage from their ability to link brands and audiences through emotional connections, CERA represents an important measurement and diagnostic advancement. It should lead to a richer and more complete understanding of the emotional value of a commercial, enabling

companies to learn more about making the linkage more effective over time. If you would like to see what CERA can tell you about your commercials, please contact us. 

