

MANIPULATING CONSUMERS THROUGH ADVERTISING

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ABSTRACT.

Marketing communication has evolved steadily in the direction of increasing complexity and increasing volume of funds needed to run their own actions. More than ever, consumers are exposed to an overwhelming variety of sources and communication techniques, the information received being numerous, diverse and polyvalent. The desire to make more efficient the marketing communication activity urges the broadcasters to encode messages, to use effective means of propagation in order to obtain a high degree of control on receptors and to influence the consumption attitudes. Between the means used for this purpose, manipulation techniques are well known. This paper highlights the main conclusions drawn as a result of a quantitative marketing research on the adult population from Brașov in order to identify the attitudes and opinions of consumers from Brașov regarding the manipulation techniques used by commercial practices and advertising. The results of the research have shown that 82% of the respondents buy products in promotional offers, and 18% choose not to buy these products and 61% of the respondents consider that they have not been manipulated not even once, while only 39% believe that they have been manipulated at least once through advertising or commercial practices. Advertisements on TV have a strong influence on consumers, 81% of the respondents considering that at least once they have bought a product because of a TV commercial.

KEY WORDS: advertising, manipulation techniques, subliminal messages, mental orders, commercial practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

We can notice lately increasingly more ads that seduce us by their originality more than the product itself. There are many forms of advertising today and in some cases we can talk about consumer manipulation through advertising.

The beginnings of advertising meant to inform the public about the market presence of a particular product or service and their features, the buyer taking decisions depending on these features. Nowadays, even if the functions have been multiplied, the advertising has not lost its importance or value. On the contrary, it is not exclusively commercial, therefore certain campaigns are made strictly to inform population regarding different important issues. The fact that advertising has developed and expanded in various ways has contributed to the increase of awareness.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

At present, the entities which are continuously involved in the process of improving the quality and raising the effectiveness must also face a strong competition. [1] Competitiveness is a relative indicator because the competition is a relation with others, the competitors. Naturally, the competitiveness cannot exist in a vacuum so we need to check results against the performance of others. [4]

Marketing communications specialists use a variety of appeals to accomplish their objectives. Sometimes advertisers are successful in achieving their intended objectives with a particular advertisement and sometimes they are not. Indeed, research has documented that there are no guarantees that the viewing audience actually feels the intended emotion associated with the appeal. [3]

There is a long-lasting debate on whether subliminal advertising actually works. There are studies showing that percepts' passivity or relaxation favors effects of subliminal stimuli and that strong needs have an 'alerting' effect such that all stimuli are better ingested, not just specific need-related ones. Subjects' choice of a specific product is influenced by subliminally presented information only if they are in a motivational state congruent with the subliminally presented stimulus. [2]

Manipulation uses various techniques, from very simple to extremely sophisticated, from those with immediate results to those whose effects are seen after years, from those used to influence certain persons to those focused on remodelling the entire society. According to these techniques, manipulation can have various forms, the most well known being persuasion, misinformation and intoxication. [5]

In the Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language (2009), manipulation is defined as the action of „to handle, “to determine”, by mental means, a group, a community to actions with targets belonging to a will outside their interests, to influence the public opinion through media or other persuasive methods.

The same concept, from a psychosocial perspective means a technique or a system of techniques determining a person to do something which would not be done naturally. Manipulation means, in general, that an influence agent, individual or group, to try, by using different strategies to influence the social representations of a so called target. This process is based, generally, on a mental link between those.

According to the Encyclopedic Dictionary (2008), "manipulation is an action of influencing, by a set of means (press, radio, television) through which, without using constraints, are imposed to persons (groups) certain behaviours, cultivating the impression that the action is in accordance with own interests”.

The subliminal messages are one of the best well known manipulation techniques of consumers. When we hear this word we link it with the idea of manipulation. When we say subliminal messages we think about those messages received unconscious by the receiver and creating a further reaction.

Subliminal messages target to determine persons, groups to do a certain thing, to buy a certain product, to go to a certain store, to believe or not a certain thing. In fact these are mental orders received by the human unconscious and his effect is measured by the degree in which the individual who received them reacted to them. These mental orders are simple words inserted separately in a speech or advertisement with the expected effect to determine the brain to trigger an action. These must be always formulated positively in order to be effective. For example: Think, Buy, Work with us, Trust me, Rebel yourself! [6]

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A marketing research was conducted for the adult population of Braşov, with the aim to know their attitudes and opinions regarding the manipulation techniques used through commercial practices and advertising.

The researched population represent the target audience for the merchants. It is formed by the people residing in Braşov, from the urban area, of both genders, who are more than 18 years old. The stable population of Brasov county in the urban area at 1st of January 2011 was 440.319 persons, of which 211.384 males and 228.935 females.

In order to obtain accurate results for the research theme it was chosen as a sampling method the random sampling (probabilistic). From the random sampling it was chosen the random steps.

- The primary sampling units - neighborhoods of Braşov county (14) - Centrul Vechi, Centrul Civic, Schei, Valea Cetăţii, Tractorul, Noua, Triaj, Astra, Rulmentul, Bartolomeu, Florilor, Scriitorilor, Uzina 2 and Stupini. From the listed neighborhoods, three were selected randomly: Răcădău, Astra and Centrul Vechi.
- Secondary units - 2 streets from each neighborhood. The selected streets are:
 - Cartierul Răcădău: Strada Mureşului şi Strada Jepilor
 - Cartierul Astra: Strada Jupiter şi Strada Cometei
 - Cartierul Centrul Vechi: Strada Republicii and Strada Nicolae Bălcescu
- Tertiary units- households from these streets. Two households will be chosen from each street.

4. RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

Following the results of the research, 81% of the respondents consider that at least once they have bought a product because of a TV commercial (Table 1).

Table 1. Have you ever bought products due to a TV commercial?

			%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	No	18	18,0	18,2	18,2
	yes	81	81,0	81,8	100,0
	Total	99	99,0	100,0	
Missing	99,00	1	1,0		
Total		100	100,0		

Although there are many products which benefit from an unethical advertising and which determines the consumers not to trust the products advertised, on the romanian market there are many products/services which are

intensely promoted with the help of a public person or a celebrity. It can be noticed (table 2) that most of the respondents have answered that the presence of celebrities in a TV commercial does not influence the decision of purchasing that good (34%).

Table 2. The influence on consumers of celebrities' presence in advertisements

	Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	2	2,0	2,0	2,0
1- none	34	34,0	34,0	36,0
2,00	27	27,0	27,0	63,0
3,00	30	30,0	30,0	93,0
4,00	7	7,0	7,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

After analyzing responses it was noticed that 32.2% of respondents put quality first in choosing products, 28.3% think that price is more important, 19.3% are interested in the brand of the product, 11.3% take into account the promotional offers and only for 9% of the respondents the packaging is important (Table 3).

Table 3. Issues that influence the purchase of goods and services

	Answers	
	Frequency	%
Price	88	28.3%
Quality	100	32.2%
Package	28	9.0%
Brand	60	19.3%
Promotional offer	35	11.3%
TOTAL	311	100.0%

It can be noticed that at the level of the sample 67.3% of women consider that they can be manipulated through advertising or commercial techniques, while only 35.6% of the men consider they can be manipulated (Table 4).

Table 4. Manipulation through advertising and commercial techniques by gender

		Women	Men	Total
Do you consider that you have been manipulated?	YES	67,3%	35,6%	56,5%
	NO	32,7%	64,4%	43,5%
Total		100%	100%	100%

In table 5 it can be noticed that 77% of the interviewed persons consider that the products marked on shelves in stores attract their attention and only 23% have answered that they do not attract their attention.

Table 5. Attracting attention by the products marked on shelves

	Frequency	%
NO	23	23%
YES	77	77%
Total	100	100%

The products in promotional offers influence the consumers very much, from table 6 resulting the fact that 82% of them buy such products, and 18% of the respondents choose not to buy the products in offer.

Table 6. Attracting attention by the products marked at shelves

	Frequency	%
NO	18	18%
YES	82	82%
Total	100	100%

5. CONCLUSIONS

Communication itself is manipulation. In the absence of a rational approach but which admits the existence of several points of view simultaneously correct on the same fact, in conditions of ambiguous mix between emotional and rational, in conditions where the impression of an apparently correct logic(for example based on prejudices) but false after all is induced, communication (verbal and non-verbal) can be a good tool of manipulation. Therefore, it is a good thing to be conscious of this, especially in a world where information, that bombards us all the time from different directions, has a more important role.

The present commercial practices hide the most various methods of manipulation, even from the moment when we made the first steps in the world we were bombarded by such practices. Either we go to school, job, store, out with friends, it will always be a person that consciously or unconsciously will try to manipulate us to do something.

The objective of the marketing research was those to identify the attitudes and opinions of people from Braşov regarding the manipulation techniques used through commercial practices and advertising. The results of the research have revealed the fact that 38% of the respondents do not consider themselves as being shopping addict, while 62% consider to be shopping addict. 77% of the interviewed persons mentioned that the products marked at shelves attract their attention, and only 23% have answered no. 82% of the respondents buy products in promotional offers, and 18% choose not to buy these products.

Another interesting aspect is the fact that only 25% of the respondents were influenced by the store promoters while 75% declare that they were not influenced. 65% of the interviewed persons know manipulation means of consumers, while 35% do not know about those. 61% of the respondents consider that they have not been manipulated not even once, while only 39% believe that they have been manipulated at least once through advertising or commercial practices.

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