

## 6.5

### THE EDITORIAL ENVIRONMENT CONTROVERSY

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Many magazine publishers and media buyers share the conviction that certain publications by virtue of their unique editorial environments will either enhance or detract from the way in which advertising appearing in the publication will be perceived. For example, a 35mm camera when advertised in the pages of *Popular Photography* will be more favourably perceived than if the same ad were placed in a more general interest magazine such as *People* or *Reader's Digest*. An expensive wrist watch will be more favourably perceived if advertised in the pages of *Smithsonian* than in the pages of *Sport* or *Family Circle*. A liquor brand will be more favourably perceived if advertised in the pages of *Gourmet* rather than in the pages of *True Story* or *The National Enquirer*, etc. The belief is widespread in the media buying community despite the fact that no one has yet been able to design and executed a study to put the editorial environment hypothesis to a rigorous test: is it true that the same ad appearing in different magazines will be viewed differently depending upon the differences in their editorial environments?

This failure has not been for lack of trying. In addition to many unpublished studies – unpublished because they have unsuccessfully attempted to demonstrate the superiority of a given title vis-à-vis its competition – I am aware of nine studies which have been published in the US. All nine studies attempted to test the editorial environment hypothesis using samples of respondents who have been exposed to the same advertising in different publications and attempted to demonstrate that the respondents' perceptions of the ad had been somehow affected by the publication in which it appeared. Beginning with a study by *Fortune* in 1959, the most recent being one by *People* in 1986, none of these studies gives strong support

to the editorial environment hypothesis, regardless of the conclusions they may have reached. Without exception, each of these studies either failed to find statistically significant differences between publications or was sufficiently flawed as to make the results of the study uninterpretable.

I myself was the author of one of these studies. The study used an experimental design in which respondents were assigned at random to be exposed to the same advertising in one of four different publications. And although consistent and statistically differences were found in ratings of advertising believability and quality of the advertised product when the advertising was exposed in one publication rather than the others, all of the differences were observed among nonreaders. Among the readers of these publications, the ratings were virtually identical regardless of the publication in which the advertising appeared.

Confronted with this long history of failure, in 1984 the Magazine Research Council of the US Advertising Research Foundation conducted a mail survey among a member sample of advertisers, publishers, advertising agencies and research companies. The questionnaire covered 26 magazine subject matter areas, and for each one the respondent was asked to rate the importance and need for additional research.

The topic area which generated the most interest was the question: 'Does the ad's performance vary due to the differing editorial environments in which it appears?' A total of 79% of respondents rated the topic of high importance, and 74% indicated that this was a subject about which there was 'very much need' for investigative research.

Undaunted by the industry's previous failures in addressing the editorial environment hypothesis and being responsive to the results of their study, three years ago the Council directed its Research Development Committee to develop a proposal for a study to test the hypothesis. The Council's charge was to develop a proposal with sufficient scientific rigour to meet the standards of the advertising research community and which would permit the ARF to secure industry funding. Since that time, the committee has produced two proposal drafts as well as a white paper, none of which have proved satisfactory to the Council.

Last November, when I suggested this topic to the Barcelona programme committee, I was the second of three committee chairmen to have been directing this project. At the time I thought that I would surely be able to discuss with the Symposium here assembled the content of an ARF published document. Unfortunately, however, that was not to be. To date, the Council has not been able to reach a unified point of view. Accordingly, what I had hoped today would be a summary of an official ARF document must now be labelled an informed personal opinion which I believe is shared by a majority of my fellow committee members.

Let me summarise what I believe to be the reasons for the lack of complete acceptance of the three research documents: the first and second research proposals as well as the white paper.

The first proposal called for a design in which random samples of subscribers to different magazines were to receive a series of test ads bound into specifically prepared issues (the test group). Following exposure to the test issues, the subscribers' awareness of the test brands and recall of their advertising was then to be compared with those of a matched sample of subscribers who also had been mailed copies of the magazines but who had not received the advertising (the control group).

The differences between the test and control groups were to be calculated for each magazine and the net difference between magazines was to provide a measure of the differential effect of editorial environment.

The basic problem with this design had to do with the interpretation of the between-magazine net difference, and the meaning to be attributed to a statistically significant net difference should any be found.

Although changes in such measures as brand awareness, advertising recall and the like have traditionally been used to assess the differential effect of alternative advertising treatments, usually these measures have been employed as part of a controlled experiment in which subjects have been assigned at random to alternative treatments. Under the conditions of a controlled experiment, most researchers have been willing to accept the assumption that *other things being equal* whichever advertising stimulus causes a more favourable change in the consumer's mind set would also be the more sales effective.

Although the assumption seems reasonable when test and control groups are assigned at random to receive different treatments, there is reason to question the assumption when the subjects themselves decide which advertising treatments they are to receive – as when one group elects to read magazine A and the other B.

To illustrate with a hypothetical example: the meaning and per capita sales volume consequences of a given percentage point increase awareness of a particular brand of photographic film among the readers of *Popular Photography* is quite different from the consequences of an identical increase among the readers of *People*. The reason that a given percentage point change in, say, brand awareness will not mean the same thing as would the same change among the readers of *People* is the fact

that *Popular Photography* readers are better prospects for the photographic equipment. That is the reason why so many photographic equipment manufacturers advertise in the magazine.

Because of these differences in audience composition between the two publications, our ability to interpret the value in change in mind set between the readers of these two publications is severely limited.

The second proposal was prepared in an effort to overcome this limitation. It involved the use of duplicate subscribers to a series of magazine pairs, A and B. Basically, and without going into detail, the design was as follows: for each pair of magazines, half the sample was to receive the test brand advertising inserted into magazine A, and the other half was to receive it inserted into magazine B.

After receiving a series of such insertions, the two half samples were to be contacted by telephone and interviewed to establish levels of brand and advertising awareness, advertising recall, and brand attitude. By comparing the levels of these psychometric criteria for those receiving the advertising in magazines A and in B, we would then be able to infer which of the two editorial environments, if either, produced the more favourable advertising effects.

The major limitation of this second design had to do with the fact that the findings would have been projectable only to the population of duplicate subscribers. The vast majority of subscribers, who would be unduplicated with the other title, would be unrepresented. Hence the design was deemed unacceptable by the Council.

Following the two unsuccessful attempts at preparing a proposal for possible funding by the advertising community, the Council directed the Committee to prepare a white paper sum-

marising the result of its efforts to date and the reasons underlying its inability to produce a satisfactory proposal. It had been hoped that the publication of such a document would represent a contribution to the industry in that it would point out the serious difficulties of conducting research in this area, and that it would provide useful background for anyone else who would attempt to do so.

The committee prepared such a white paper, and that too was rejected by the Council which, despite its charge, was reluctant to publish a paper concluding that the ARF was incapable of designing a definitive study on a subject about which so much interest had been expressed.

What accounts for this 30 year history of failure to resolve what is obviously an important question: 'Is it true that the same ad appearing in magazine A will, because of the difference in editorial environment of that magazine, be perceived differently than will the same ad appearing in magazine B?'

Obviously, obtaining the answer is much more complicated than the apparent simplicity of the question would suggest. At the heart of this difficulty are two conflicting requirements which I think we have all accepted:

- (1) The study must be based on a controlled experiment, which means that the experimental subjects must be *randomly* assigned to be exposed to identical advertising in different publications.
- (2) Those exposed to the advertising must be sampled from the total population of natural readers of the publication in which the advertising appears.

A violation of the requirement of random assignment will necessarily result in a situation in which it is impossible to identify the cause of

any differences observed between those exposed in one magazine rather than another. And a violation of the requirement of sampling from the total population of readers makes questionable the projection of the study results to the population of interest.

The stumbling block is the impossibility of satisfying both requirements at the same time; and for 30 years the advertising research community has been trying to do just that!

A third committee has now been formed by the leadership of the Council with instructions to try again. Although the Committee has not yet produced anything resembling a proposal or report, my sense is that we have finally reached a consensus that it is not possible to measure the pure effect of editorial environment among different magazines' readers except among samples of readers of both. We also recognise, however, that such samples of duplicate readers are not necessarily representative of the total reader population. The reason is that other uncontrolled variables caused by differences in the audience composition would make the result of such a study uninterpretable.

I believe that the third committee is also coming to the conclusion that neither is it possible to design a scientifically sound experiment to measure the total effects of advertising placed in different publications using such psychometric criteria as brand attitudes, etc applied to the readers of these publications. The reason that such measures are uninterpretable is again attributable to differences in audience composition.

Confronted with this reality, the committee seems to be modifying the objective of testing the editorial environment hypothesis. The committee appears instead to have turned to the design of a study to measure the relative ability

of advertising in different publications to affect sales, regardless of whether such differences can be explained by different editorial environments, different audience composition, or whatever.

Hopefully there will be another Readership Research Symposium in 1991, at which time there will be more progress to report.

Incidentally, since this paper was prepared, Bob Schreiber – one of the committee members – has undertaken the task of preparing a second white paper for presentation to the full Council later this month.

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