

Use of Pets to Produce Engagement in Digital Advertising: How to use them to capture the attention of consumers?

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Introduction

If someone from 50 years ago travels to the future towards our time, (s)he would be surprised that a small device that fits in our pocket, has almost all the information that we produced in the world. But what would surprise him/her the most, is that we use this device just to gossip about what our friends do and share photos of kittens.

Thanks to technology and interconnectivity, users have access to endless amounts of information. The new generations (e.g., generation Z) are much more impatient and the information has to draw a lot of attention so that they can devote a click or a few minutes of their time (Regueira, 2012). In that sense, it is curious that something as simple as a pet can generate a higher interest and commitment to users on the internet.

Advertising with pets has been carried out for many years in offline advertising. From 1994 to 2004 the frequency of use of pets in magazine advertising shows a slight increase, but also shows that many brands in the USA started to use pets without having a direct relationship with the advertised product (Mayo et al, 2009).

Animals cause positive feelings about a product, because they can transfer desirable cultural meanings such as loyalty, pampering, and caring to products and although their meanings are not standardized across cultures, animals are standard symbols of human qualities (Phillips, 1996).

So advertisers can use animals to catch the attention of consumers and start to create engagement with the brand. The purpose would capture the attention of consumers on social networks or websites, through videos, images, informational content or interactive. The challenge is to use creative strategies with pets as a part of the advertising content.

Justification

In this new era of the Internet, the massive amounts of information, the capacity for instant viralization and its universal reach, offers a great opportunity to brands connecting them with consumers.

Pets -particularly dogs and cats- reflect a number of psychosocial factors as companionship, cognitive development, emotional closeness, and affection. If advertising reflects and amplifies cultural values, and if dogs and cats have attained positions of power in some cultures, then one would expect to see dogs and cats play more significant or visible roles in advertisers' creative strategies (Kennedy & McGarvey, 2008).

If brands can manage the use of the image of pets within their digital communication strategy, they can easily generate engagement with their customers, or at least get their attention. The use of pets is a good way to become empathetic to consumers because content consumption and interaction is based on the very image that a person wants to give (Scholz et al, 2016).

The difficulty of attracting consumer attention on the Internet

The changes in the media, technology and consumption of leisure and entertainment that our society is experiencing run parallel to a marked inflection point in the behavior and attitudes of the individual toward the consumption of media in general and towards the advertising event in particular (Scholz et al, 2016).

People use social networks to talk and share content that connects with their own experiences, liking or the sense of what they want to be or what they want to perceive of them. In this process, they don't want to be interrupted with advertising and they have the power to reject most of the ads (e.g., ad blockers). On the other hand, thanks to the internet, there is so much information that it is very difficult to capture the attention of consumers. On the Internet we can find more than 350 million different websites (Berman et al, 2006) and consumers receive an advertising impact of 3000 ads a day and only 2% of these can remember by the consumers (Regueira, 2010).

The new consumer has very little tolerance for interruptions and has a large amount of content at his fingertips and therefore has to make quick and systematic decisions about where he wants to see and where not (Ros, 2008). Once he makes the decision to see what he wants, the consumer proceeds to share, comment or even co-create with the content. It is there when he becomes a prosumer; who are those people that "actively co-construct their own consumption experiences through personalized interaction, thereby co-creating unique value for themselves" (Okasaki, 2015). This will only activate when he has felt some motivating factor that connects and generates engagement.

Pets as a trigger of engagement

Customer engagement is defined as the "psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object in focal service relationships" (Okasaki, 2015).

The term engagement is the degree to which the consumer is committed to the brand and this creates some loyalty and motivation for the users to provoke contribution to

co-created content, and this starts when customer participates in a spontaneous way commenting, sharing, modifying content and speaking well of the brand.

Brands now work in developing good content to attract attention and generate engagement, but it is still difficult to attract attention and involves consumers. In this sense we put the pets as content catalysts, with the purpose of they can motivate users to click, consuming video or generate some interactivity with the ad. The use of pets in advertising is an attractive stimulus that can favorably influence consumers' attitudes, even if the stimulus does not relate to the product and provides in the product information (Kim, Lim, and Bhargava, 1998).

Previously we said that the new consumer has to make quick and systematic decisions about what he wants to see. In this sense, it is important to see the relation with heuristics. Lancendorfer talks about how pets help to highly motivated individuals engage in systematic processing by making an effort to analyze and understand relevant information (Lancendorfer et al, 2006). Heuristics are shortcuts that help the consumer to take decisions under pressure and uncertainty. In general, these heuristics are quite useful, but sometimes they lead to severe and systematic errors (Tversky, 1974).

Knowing this, heuristics can help to persuade the consumers, less motivated individuals base their decisions on simple decision rules (heuristics). Such heuristics often derive from experience and have empirical validity. Depending on the level of an individual's involvement with the message content, heuristic and systematic processing can proceed concurrently, or one mode may dominate (Lancendorfer et al, 2006). Her research shows how the use of animals in ads can be persuasive in order to illustrate the effects of heuristic. In an empirical test, she made an ad with two different images. The first one has a dog with a message and the second had the same message without the dog. The experiment shows that the customer has more preference in paying attention to the ad that has the dog as a central picture. So that shows the role of both systematic and heuristic processing as a mediator of advertising's effect on brand attitudes and also can help to have a better memory of the ad.

In neuromarketing some of the brain-tracking tools determined why consumers prefer some advertisements and products over others, and how they respond to marketing cognitively and affectively (e.g. Georges et al., 2014). Researchers have been able to indicate that the human brain activates more when there is a dog in an advertisement than when there is an inanimate doll in it.

Pets in advertising

Harbrecht (1993) agrees animals are universally popular advertising tools. We can use them in most cultures because they are easily recognized for particular traits. For example, Jaguar company associates the reflexes and speed of the car with the animal. Consumers understand the animal meaning and consequently can link their attributes with the product. Another example is Mercedes-Benz, in one of their spots they decided associated the concept "Intelligent Drive" with the body control and stability that a chicken has.

For sure none of these animals (e.g., chicken or jaguar) are common pets, but they are a good example of how brands take some of their traits to create an advantage in advertising while trying to connect with consumers. Phillips (1996) agrees animal symbols are pictorial metaphors used to create and project an image and implicitly communicate information. Using animals in advertising is efficient because pets are so easily recognizable. By using the associations that already exist in our culture, advertisers do not have to educate consumers as to what animal characters mean.

Harbrecht (1993) also agrees that people around the world respond very favorably to animals in advertisements on television and billboards, in magazines, and newspapers. However, he warns marketers to understand the international and cultural orientations of animals since they may convey different meanings to different groups or cultures. For example, the use of dogs in China, may not be the most appropriate pet to cause empathy. Or possibly in India, the use of a cow has a different symbology than the other animal. When advertisers use animals, "consumers are influenced by both the symbolic meanings that have been culturally assigned to that animal as well as the physical attractiveness and likeability of how the animal is portrayed." Spears et al. (1996, p. 90) It is very important the symbolism that each pet has according to the culture.

Most of the time pets, (e.g., dogs and cats) can be used as metaphors to efficiently communicate attribute information and transference between reference and brand. It may seem as absurd the popularity of pet on social networks, but if we look the relevance for the owner, it doesn't look crazy. In the United States pet dog consumerism has increased by over 70% from 2004-2014; From 34 billion dollars to 58 billion dollars (Bettany and Daly, 2008: 409; APPA National Pet Owners Survey, 2013/2014: webpage). Several factors are driving the increased spending on the care of dogs and cats, one of them is that owners consider pets as a family. Nine out of ten pet owners consider their pets members of their family.

Conclusion

Sharing on social networks activates the reward on the own image and the social ties. When people share photos of their animals, they project an image of love, kindness, concern and empathy for the most unprotected. So they use their pets to give a picture of themselves. Brands could do the same. By using pets they can reach and connect with their audiences. They will associate the image that pets project -love, tender, kindness, etc- with the attributes of the brand. That will result in better levels of awareness and positioning for the brand.

On the other hand, the use of animals is a common practice for advertising campaigns. A deep research in this area could confirm that the use of pets has positive effects and a favorable attitude toward the brand, and measure in which level these effects are produced.

To generate engagement, social media managers and other communications officers should include images and videos which seem to better attract customers' attention with pets, as long as it has some strategic relationship in the line of communication of the brand.

My hypothesis that the use of pets results in a better awareness and engagement in an environment in which new technologies spread the news instantly and there is a social reward in sharing contents. Future studies should validate or refute it and measure the influence of pets in digital advertising.

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