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NECROMARKETING IN ADVERTISING*

Summary: Fear appeals have long been used in marketing communication as a persuasive messaging that attempts to arouse fear in order to divert behaviour, and death is the ultimate form of fear for mankind. This paper explores the use of fear appeals specifically through an investigation into how death is used in advertising efforts. The authors introduce the term necromarketing and proposes dual routes of death marketing: explicit and implicit. This paper explains the term necromarketing and provides examples of necromarketing to support the dual routes used in persuasion.

Keywords: necromarketing, marketing, mass media, advertising, fear appeals.

Introduction

Companies are constantly looking for new solutions to stand out from the competition and effectively promote their products and service to consumers. Non-profit organisations are looking for new ways to cut through the clutter and get people to act on the messages disseminated. Therefore, both profit and not-for profit companies and organisations are attempting to grab and hold the attention of consumers to lead them through the five stage adoption process of marketing, culminating in a purchase or adoption of the product/idea. To this end, fear appeals are heavily used, as communicators have long known that emotion, and specifically fear, is a great motivator. In fact, over a half a century of political research has shown that fear is one of the most powerful emotions to evoke, especially when the fears have a basis in reality [Fichnová, Satková, 2007].

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Death is the ultimate form of fear and most human action is taken to ignore or avoid the inevitability of death [Becker, 1973]. Since 2009, there has been a decided increase in the number of advertisements and public service announcements featuring death and tragedies and illness (Wojciechowski, 2010). Today it is common to see death shown explicitly as with a corpse at a crime scene, or through the portrayal of an autopsy [Shelton, 2007]. Ultimately the idea of death is alluded to in a myriad of marketing communication efforts, often times with finesse. Studies have shown that the genie of fear is most effective ‘when used as a scalpel rather than a cudgel’ by stroking audiences anxieties instead on inflaming them [Begley et al., 2007, p. 4].

Thus, this paper exams the idea necromarketing which represents the crafting of messages and visuals by way of established persuasive communication methods, but features situations and objects explicitly or implicitly connected to the death. Necromarketing also parasites on death and tragedy thereby eliciting an emotional attachment to the product, service or cause.

1. Dual routes of necromarketing

Necromarketing is a dual process model of marketing, characterised by two possible routes: explicit and implicit. Similar to Petty and Cacioppo’s Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), necromarketing examines how death, both explicitly and implicitly, affects the processing and evaluation of consumers regarding brands. Similar also, is the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) of information, which attempts to explain how people come to a decision. Like HSM, Necromarketing allows for the simultaneous processing, and overall shares many of these same concepts and ideas. A recent study conducted at the University of British Columbia’s Sauder School of Business [Dunn, 2014] finds that people who feel alone and afraid develop an increased emotional attachment to brands nearby. Thus, this investigation into necromarketing is relevant and could have significant influence in new avenues of communication and marketing.

The dual processes used in necromarketing are explicit and implicit death references. Explicit necromarketing deals with displaying catastrophes, misfortunes and deaths in their pure, direct form. A direct death reference or display includes the depiction of corpses, autopsy, death, illness or bad luck and undertaking services. This direct form of necromarketing is in fact, a main necromarketing presupposition [Solewski, 2013]. The explicit form of necromarketing is a valued and heavily used method in marketing communications because of the inevitability of death for mankind. Perhaps it is for this reason

alone, that the idea of death fascinates the human race. Explicit necromarketing creates an immediate connection between the brand and the consumer, in part because emotions dictate that connection. Feelings lead to emotions and emotions connect people; tragedy touches people, creating greater sensitivity at that moment. Thus, the explicit form of necromarketing has a profound effect on the human conscious.

Implicit necromarketing, on the other hand, is the indirect presentation of death. This indirect presentation, however, does not limit the impact on the consumer. The implicit route works by attaching to already present human fears and insecurities about the inevitability of death. Working on the subconscious, the implicit route of necromarketing could be thought of a 'softer' sell than the explicit route, but is no less effective. Necromarketing is possible to be used identified in a wide cross section of products and services, such as cosmetics, pharmacology and plastic surgery, automobile manufacturers, HIV support, safe sex appeals and athletic shoes.

As mentioned before, like HSM, necromarketing allows for simultaneous processing. Where the initial persuasive message may be shock or revolution, these emotions cause the consumer to evaluate the message more deeply by virtue of the emotional arousal. Where necromarketing differs from both ELM, and the Heuristic-Systematic Model is the level of processing. With both of these established models, the argument (or persuasive message) must be evaluated, and a determination must be made if the argument is strong or weak in order to classify the method into the appropriate process. However, necromarketing affects consumers on a more basic level, where there is not any rational thinking when evaluating brands. This is because nothing makes us more uncomfortable than fear, and mankind has many items to fear: fear of pain, disease, injury, and failure to be remembered when we die. This is why, in part, marketers use fear as a motivator as often as they can. They present a scenario they hope will invoke a sense of fear, and then often provide a solution – a path back to a comfort zone – that entails using specific products or services. In addition, tragedy has been shown to have an immediate effect on brand connection [Esch et al.]. This connection is enhanced by the power of emotions, in that death and tragedy touches consumers, causing them to be more sensitive than when exposed to other appeals. Human behaviour becomes irrational with exposure to death, and connects mankind to the brand on an emotional basis [Dunn, 2014]. Emotions are indeed a strong connecting mechanism for branding, as they make the consumer forget possible imperfections a brand may have [Duffy, 2003; Travis, 2000].

A fear appeal is composed of three main concepts: fear, threat, and perceived efficacy. "Fear is a emotion that is usually accompanied by heightened

physiological arousal. Threat is an external stimulus that creates a perception in message receivers that they are susceptible to some negative situation or outcome. And, perceived efficacy is a person's belief that message recommendations can be implemented and will effectively reduce the threat depicted in the message" [Gore et al., 1998, p. 36]. Furthermore, Witte and Allen [2000] concluded that fear appeals are most effective when they contain both high levels of threat and high levels of efficacy. That is, the message needs to contain (1) a meaningful threat or important problem and (2) the specific directed actions that an individual can take to reduce the threat or problem.

Fear appeals can be direct or indirect. A direct fear appeal focuses on the welfare of the message recipient. An indirect fear appeal focuses on motivating people to help others in danger. Fear can be an effective motivator. "In the typical fear appeal context, fright and anxiety in the target audience can result because danger to themselves is perceived by members of the audience" [Bagozzi & Moore, 1994, p. 56]. In fact, stronger fear appeals bring about greater attitude, intention, and behaviour changes. That is, strong fear appeals are more effective than weak fear appeals [Higbee, 1969]. In addition, fear appeals are most effective when they provide (1) high levels of a meaningful threat or important problem and (2) high levels of efficacy or the belief that an individual's change of behaviour will reduce the threat or problem. That is, fear appeals work when you make the customer very afraid and then show him or her how to reduce the fear by doing what you recommend [Witte, Allen 2000]. However, too much fear can lead to dysfunctional anxiety [Higbee, 1969]. In general, there is a direct relationship between low to moderate levels of fear arousal and attitude change [Krisher, Darley & Darley, 1973].

The presence of death references in promotion does not have to necessarily evoke negative emotions, however. Sometimes death is positioned in advertising as a humorous situation. Likewise, many labels that are linked with the symbol of death, such as a skeleton or personified death, are not automatically considered negative or threatening. Consider the Geico Insurance commercial *Horror Movie: It's What You Do*. A group of scared teenagers are being chased through the woods, presumably by a killer, and stumble upon a house, where they decide to hide behind a wall of chainsaws. This ad plays on fear in a humorous manner by making fun of the poor decisions made by characters in horror films. After the group hides, the murderer they were trying to evade appears behind them, rolling his eyes. In this example of implicit necromarketing, although the teens appear to be in danger of death, viewers themselves do not feel threatened because of the humour.

More often than not, advertisement campaigns use recognisable and sometimes stereotypical death symbols that directly appeal to the consumer's fear of death. Advertisements featuring depictions of coffins, gravestones, crosses, and

even deceased humans as ghosts are appeal to the viewers fear through direct references to death. Some promotions using these types of death references also allude to a life after death, adding another dimension of emotion to the fear appeal.

In the Mercedes-Benz audio-visual advertisement, *Danse Macabre*, or 'Dance of Death' death is personified as a man in a black coat with a scythe – an allusion to the well-known 'grim reaper'. He appears in the passenger seat during a drive, momentarily distracting the driver. The grim reaper simply smiles and says 'sorry' to the driver who now faces an impending crash and presumably death. The driver quickly breaks the car, avoids the crash and thus Death, and with a victorious and sarcastic grin replies with the same phrase: 'Sorry'. In this ad, the safety features of the car save its driver from dying, describing the emotional pivot model [Young, Kastenholz 2004] in which the viewer may have had a fearful and/or negative reaction to the commercial in the beginning, but by the end their emotional state is strongly positive [Young, 2006]. The death of the driver appears to be unavoidable, but the unique qualities of the product suddenly change the state of a situation providing a sense of relief to the viewer.

Effectiveness of strong fear appeals in communication is disputable. "Evoking intensive feeling of fear is not a guarantee of a behaviour change. It explains by a psychic mechanism of self-defence ('it cannot happen to me') which activates mainly by repeated application of fear impulses" [Hradiská, 1998, p. 88]. However, though it is not a guarantee that behaviour will be changed, most ads that appeal to some sense of fear prove to be very effective, even when they do not offer a direct solution to the threat of death.

During the 2015 Superbowl, Nationwide Insurance premiered their *Make Safe Happen* commercial, in which a young boy lists all the things he will never be able to do, like learn to ride a bike, get 'cooties', or get married. When he finishes his list, he explains that he will not be granted those special life moments because he died in an accident. Though Nationwide did not offer a direct solution to avoid deadly accidents, like Mercedes-Benz did with their new brake technology, they suggest that "together, we can make safe happen" and prevent horrible accidents that result in the deaths of children.

Many advertising campaigns using aspects of necromarketing use the death of children to induce intense fear emotions. Because of the strong emphasis society places on the safety and protection of children, these indirect appeals to fear are typically very effective. The Michael Stich Foundation advertising campaigns focus on helping children suffering from HIV or living with AIDS in Germany and often use, in their printed advertisements, necromarketing. In a 2007 marketing campaign, the foundation focused on HIV transfer from mothers to babies. This print advertisement depicts a walk in a park on an idyllic sunny day, but the calm face

of a mother sitting on a bench contrasts with a child pram represented as a coffin on wheels. The text reads *'Like his mother, HIV positive'*. Implemented into a normal environment, necromarketing creates contrast situations evoking fear, shock and outrage. Another print advertisement showed a vulture, rather than a stork which traditionally delivers babies in nursery rhymes, carrying a baby in its beak with the text *'HIV is not a good start into life'*.

Conclusions

Necromarketing is readily apparent in advertising campaigns. The aim of the majority of these ads are, first, to provoke as well as shock and ultimately persuade consumers to accept the presented idea, and second, to provide an answer to the fear. Competition and effectively promote their products and service to consumers. Both profit and not-for profit companies and organisations are attempting to grab and hold the attention of consumers to lead them through the five-stage adoption process of marketing, cumulating in a purchase or adoption of the product/idea. To this end, fear appeals are heavily used, as communicators have long known that emotion, and specifically fear, is a great motivator. Since 2009, there has been a decided increase in the number of advertisements and public service announcements featuring death. The idea of necromarketing represents the crafting of messages and visuals by way of established persuasive communication methods, but features situations and objects explicitly or implicitly connected to the death and have been found in a variety of corporate marketing efforts.

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NEKROMARKETING W REKLAMIE

Streszczenie: Odwołania do strachu są stosowane od dawna w komunikacji marketingowej jako persuader komunikatu, podejmuje się starania wzbudzenia strachu w celu odwrócenia zachowania, a śmierć jest ostateczną formą strachu dla ludzkości. Niniejszy artykuł rozważa stosowanie odwołań strachu, a w szczególności, w jaki sposób śmierć jest używana w działaniach reklamowych. Autorzy wyjaśniają pojęcie necromarketing i proponują dwie możliwości prezentacji marketingu śmierci: jawną i ukrytą. Ten artykuł wyjaśnia termin necromarketing i podaje przykłady necromarketingu wspierane dwoma źródłami stosowanymi w perswazji.

Słowa kluczowe: necromarketing, marketing, mass media, reklama, powoływanie się na strach.