What is this thing called 'Ambient Advertising'?

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Abstract

The field of marketing communications is currently undergoing a period of great change. This is a reflection of many factors, and is in response to the need to find new ways of increasing cost-effective 'break-through' communication. One new development has been the introduction of the somewhat radical practice of 'Ambient advertising'. This paper sets out to define what is actually meant by this term. It is contrasted to out-of-home advertising and a model of consumer response to Ambient advertising is proposed. Consideration is also given to the measurement of effectiveness with acknowledgement that the way the consumer interacts with such campaigns is unique, suggesting that a traditional advertising approach may be less appropriate. Further issues for consideration are also identified.

Introduction

The marketing communications arena is undergoing arguably its greatest period of change. This is a reflection of factors such as the advent of powerful 'mega-agencies' by virtue of amalgamations, specialist niche service providers, changing agency structures, media convergence, greater focus on agency accountability (Eppes 1998), major technological innovations, and the growth of 'Integrated Marketing Communication' (IMC) (Schultz 1991). The understanding of Integrated Marketing Communications is still evolving with claims that IMC has been in "a pre-paradigm state" and in need of "all types of research to help build a solid theoretical and practical approach" (Schultz and Kitchen 1997). This paper considers one recent addition to the suite of marketing communication activities, which is even less well understood: Ambient advertising.

Increased competition in crowded categories, short term focus in industry (Jones 1990, Srivastava 1991), greater focus on accountability, a decline in media advertising effectiveness, and the proliferation of brands (Reed 1997) has businesses demanding more effective advertising at lower costs. Concurrently, perception of increased ad clutter arising out of the information technology revolution has led to a decrease in effectiveness of traditional advertising (print, radio, television, billboards, and transit etc). To what degree traditional advertising is less effective is, in one sense, not the critical point. The mere fact that there is a market place *perception* of decreased effect is in itself problematic and indeed an important driver towards a more confrontational approach to advertising, or at least a re-think on what may work.

An added problem for advertisers relates to targeting 'jaded audiences'. In America alone, advertising expenditure is over $160 billion a year, which buys an average of 1,500 person-exposures every day of which a fraction are remembered and fewer still in a positive way, placing estimates of wastage at as much as $40 billion a year. (Sheth & Sisodia 1995). Factors such as these have seen advertising agencies and clients choosing more 'radical' methods of advertising.

The rise of sex-related advertising has been cited as an example of a trend towards more arresting campaigns, driven by the perception of decreased response and increased clutter. For example, in Australia, Windsor smith, Wonderbra and adultshop.com billboards, the rise of magazines such as *Ralph* and *FHM*, and TV programs like Sex in the City (McIntyre 2000). Sex is not the only strategy to make a return in an effort to develop a 'break through' approach. United Distillers recently ran a campaign of 'blink ads' for their Stolichnya Lemon Ruski brand. This involved 'one second advertisements'; attention grabbing less for the product than for the strategy which achieved widespread editorial coverage, partly because at least one commercial station refused to air the ads (Goodsall 1999). Whether these are but isolated examples or indicative of a larger trend towards more confronting advertising is yet to be determined, but they are worth acknowledgement - to set the scene from which Ambient advertising has developed.

Defining Ambient Advertising

'Ambient' is a term being used by clients and agencies, and is just starting to appear in the literature, but there exists some uncertainty about what it really 'is'. Because of its 'newness' and perhaps the difficulty in 'pinning it down', there has been very little written on the subject and no attempts have yet been made to adequately define it. To minimise the void between theory and practice, it is considered important for new ideas and concepts such as this to be discussed in an academic forum even if only to refute existence or value.

Ambient was first used in relation to advertising in 1996 by Concord Advertising, a UK agency specialising in outdoor campaigns. It evolved from a need to apply a single term to what was an increasing request from clients for 'something a bit different' in their advertising. Clients, concerned with issues of cut-through, competition, decreased effectiveness and disinterested audiences wanted (and still want) advertising 'with bite' from their agencies. This push by clients for something different saw agencies placing ads in unusual places, such on as floors, petrol pump handles and backs of toilet doors - previously not considered as locations for advertising. Such campaigns did not fit neatly into existing categories like out-door, print, radio or television and hence a new term was coined.

Unusual locations are considered a defining characteristic for Ambient advertising. However, 'unusual locations' lose their point of difference with repetition and time, and so cease to be something different. This suggests two things. Firstly, that if 'unusual locations' is a part of the definition of Ambient advertising then, what might be considered Ambient one day may not be the next, as audiences become familiar with any given location and the point of difference or 'unusuality' fades. Secondly, and related to the first point, is that Ambient could be seen as a moveable term and defined by advertising norms of the day.

Defining Ambient on this basis is somewhat arbitrary. What might be unusual for one person could have been seen dozens of times by another. Consider the examples of transport advertising (taxis, painted buses), transport tickets, shopping trolleys, hot air balloons, blimps, sky writing, digital billboards etc. Would we define these as Ambient? While these locations are different they are perhaps no longer unconventional and have encroached on mainstream territory by virtue of their repetition. Such advertising has attained a degree of prevalence and although may still be considered unusual, has lost the 'wow!' factor – a key descriptor used by those involved in creating Ambient campaigns (Croft 1998). Unusual location is not the only point of difference for Ambient. The method of execution is often unusual as well. Holographic projections, role-plays and graffiti are a few examples of this and certainly fit within the 'something different' imperative.

The preceding discussion has highlighted the factors of location, execution and temporal issues as being important to Ambient advertising. These are considered essential factors and provide a sound basis from which to explore a potential definition. Consequently, the definition adopted for this paper is:

> The placement of advertising in ***unusual and unexpected places***
> **(location)** often with ***unconventional methods*** **(execution)**
> and ***being first or only ad execution to do so*** **(temporal)**.

Newness, creativity, novelty and timing are key themes in Ambient advertising. This definition is deliberately narrow and attempts to exclude 'mainstream' advertising as referred to earlier. Implicit in this definition is that Ambient is a moveable and somewhat subjective term and will shift according to the advertising norms of the day.

One of the fundamental premises of Ambient is that the world is an advertising stage. Everything is a potential advertising medium—sides of cows, rockets, golf-hole cups etc. This raises a number of key questions beyond the scope of this paper: What are the implications of omnipresent advertising and what does it say about contemporary culture? How have we arrived at this stage and where might it lead?

Ambient advertising has seen a massive increase in popularity in a short period of time. In the UK, expenditure on Ambient has doubled in the past two years to $A156 million and has outgrown all other sectors. (Burbury 1999). It is also starting to take off in Australia and has been adopted by brands such as Nike, Daiwoo, travel.com, Imodium, Levi's, I can't Believe it's Not Butter and others in local campaigns. World wide, major advertisers including Coca-Cola, Kellogg, Virgin, Nestle and numerous car companies have also invested in Ambient advertising campaigns. Yet despite this, Ambient remains relatively unexplored and almost no analysis exists.

Ambient and Out of Home advertising

The origins of Ambient can be linked to out-of-home advertising and hence it is appropriate to introduce this for consideration as a potential framework to facilitate the advancement of knowledge and understanding of Ambient advertising. 'Out-of-home' is a more general term than its cousin 'outdoor advertising' and refers to all advertising that is literally out-of-home. There are strong similarities between out-of-home and Ambient advertising, especially in terms of locations, rate-setting, effectiveness measurements and similarities in communication effects – that is, useful for a quick prompt (awareness/reminder) – not suited to provision of lengthy information (cognitive engagement). Also, like out-of-home advertising, Ambient is often used in conjunction with other campaigns and is not generally a stand-alone tactic. (Azari & Kamen 1984) Because of the generally low processing time both out-of-home and Ambient requires good creativity to leave a lasting impression. (Maloney 1962, King & Tinkham 1990) Both out of home and Ambient can be very cost effective, have broad reach, be difficult to avoid, and Ambient can also lead to mainstream media coverage (PR effects). However, they can also be visually polluting, difficult to measure effectiveness (isolate effects) (Bhargava & Donthu 1999), have wastage, limited message capabilities, and Ambient in particular can also have negative associations (intrusive/tasteless), and the medium may overshadow the message ('fantastic ad but can't remember what for').

Key Differentiators of Ambient:

- greater emphasis on tactics such as surprise, humour, creativity and consequently audience involvement (participation by receiver reinforces message, Schiffman 1997).
- more engaging than out-of-home and hence less wastage. Unlike billboards, selective perception in terms of noticing the ads for the brands you buy and avoiding those ads for brands not in the considered set, is not applicable because such ads can't so easily be selectively ignored (East 1997).
- draws upon incomplete message more than out-of-home. The 'unusualty' raises level of interest in consumer and hence their willingness to expend cognitive effort to process message.
- greater importance of reference group, opinion leadership, resonance with target audience ('like the ad like the brand') - ie Word-of-mouth.
- the importance of the way in which the consumer 'discovers' Ambient to its effectiveness. Ambient works partly through surprise and creativity and the discovery of the communication by the recipient. The recipient is invited to believe that they have 'found' something and is empowered by this and can better identify with the communication - leading to a relationship with the target audience.
- importance of target audience, more specifically targeted than out-of-home. Creators of Ambient campaigns are generally young, (under 30 - Generation Xers) and targeting audiences of similar age. Typically this has been seen as a notoriously hard to reach demographic (*AdNews* 1999) - not as gullible as their Baby Boomer parents, and consider themselves to be quite media literate and able to 'see through' advertising.
- Another important differentiator is the way the consumer engages with the medium. Semiotics or symbols are an essential way of conveying meaning especially in low-processing time advertising situations. (Fiske & Hartley 1989) Well chosen images, colours, contexts etc can connote certain meanings more effectively and quickly than text alone. With Ambient advertising, the medium can be seen as a sign. It might, for example, connote innovativeness, cleverness or even arrogance and forcefulness.

Measuring Effectiveness

The difficulty in measuring advertising effectiveness applies no less to Ambient than out-of-home and other forms of advertising. Ambient is not a 'usual' tactic designed to meet conventional communication objectives and hence 'usual' measures may be inappropriate or at least difficult to identify. It may indeed be necessary for alternative assessments to also be considered. Some potential methods may include:
- Sales response after campaign (however this has an attendant measurement problem similar to out-of-home; wastage, confounded results etc),
- If widespread media coverage results, then measure in similar ways to PR, ie editorial space,
- Recall, recognition with target audience,
- Measure the importance of creativity and simplicity to effectiveness, especially as a result of low processing time.

Advertising is not an instruction, but a conversation that requires shared meanings to be effective (East 1997). Numerous models exist that seek to explain consumer behaviour, and typically they incorporate 'gates' through which a consumer must pass as they move toward purchase (Schiffman 1997). In relation to Ambient, such models are less applicable because of their linear structure. More appropriate might be Awareness-Trial-

Reinforcement (Ehrenburg 1988), where Ambient is supportive and is not designed to move consumers through gates to purchase but to reinforce. Perhaps more appropriate is Edell & Burke's 'Attitude towards ad' model (1987) where the consumer is seen to form feelings and judgments when exposed to an ad which then inform beliefs and attitudes towards advertised brand. A potential model for consideration is presented in Table 1.

Attitude-toward-ad model (Edell & Burke 1987)	**Ambient Model** (adapted from Sheth-Newman-Gross -model of consumption values, 1991)	Example	Semiotic example
	Sender	Receiver	
Exposure to ad	Emotional value: shock effect, stimulate consumer's feelings, vouyersim, spectacle	Receiver is surprised to see message on back of toilet door. (subconsciously titilated)	Exposure to symbol, icon (if on its own, incomplete message)
Judgements about the ad (cognition), feelings about ad (affect)	Epistemic value: (philosophy concerned with origins, nature, methods & limits of human knowledge) receiver feels empowered by perceived utility of curiosity, novelty, consumer, something to ponder, incomplete message need for closure, knowledge	Receiver wonders who else has seen this, realises it's an ad	Consumer must make cognitive link between sign and its referent (symbolic cues to support product claim)
Attitude toward ad / brand	Social value: referent groups, opinion leaders, word-of-mouth, resonance with target audience	Wants to share discovery with friends	Decoding, understanding
All values need to be maximised to produce positive attitude change			

Table 1: Proposed Ambient advertising model

Conclusions and issues for further consideration

Consumers and advertising messages have evolved and become more sophisticated. From this background has risen Ambient advertising. The 'communications and technology revolution' has given us omnipresent information. Ambient advertising is a new arena for both marketer and consumer engagement, and one still very much in need of exploration.

The absurdity and broader implications of such ad locations are not so much questioned, as considered clever and effective. Criticism has, to date, been limited to likening the medium to junk mail. But this does not go far enough and ask what are some of the implications of omnipresent advertising and what does it say about contemporary culture? Whilst this paper cannot directly address the magnitude of potential questions in its written form, it is anticipated that introducing the question 'what is Ambient advertising' should ultimately lead to a rich discussion of such issues.

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