

# The psychology of advertising

 By [Chris Brewer](#)

8 Jun 2015

NB: Psychology is the study of normal human behaviour - abnormal behaviour lies within the speciality of Psychiatry, which is why psychiatrists get so many patients from ad agencies...

An advertising campaign succeeds or fails in conveying the message via audio and/or visual stimuli. (There are other senses too, but there's only limited space here). If we fail to communicate the idea, feeling or image we consider necessary to achieve our sales objective, we are clearly wasting our money.

We may fail to communicate simply because we use a language our audience cannot understand (you can see this every day when, for example, cellphone companies advertise their various "packages" - I'd be surprised if more than 5% of readers actually understand them). Or it may be because we are not expressing our messages or images in terms of the recipient's needs, wants and backgrounds.



© Bruce Rolf - [123RF.com](#)

An obvious error would be to expect a teetotal copywriter to produce an advertisement for a Scotch whisky or a vegetarian writer to make an exciting ad for pork.

Basic fundamentals of psychology are applied in the creation of advertising, but how does this advertising psychology work?

The captains of the advertising industry theorised from as long ago as the 17th century about what makes a good, effective advertisement - but this was largely 'armchair philosophy' (guesswork) with no research or objective study to support it.

Today, the advertising man has an instinctive working knowledge of psychology - but that doesn't imply that a psychologist would make a great ad man, or vice versa.

This innate talent really does exist - and it's easier to explain by looking at other endeavours, such as music.

When the melodies created by The Beatles were analysed by 'serious' musicians, they were found to be 'brilliantly constructed'. As Prof Wilfrid Mellers said of one of their songs ('She's Leaving Home') "...It's instinct; the Beatles didn't say, I'm sure, 'let's have a dominant modulation followed by a cadence when we get to the second verse' - but that's genius you see."

Similarly, the professional advertising person will apply sound instinct to whatever material is produced.

In the second half of the last century, many single-minded postulations were made which embraced some form of answer or another to the question of how, exactly, the advertising process works and, consequently, how it could be improved - long or short copy, humour or sincerity, etc.

They all had one thing in common, which was that none of them could be proven.

David Ogilvy pronounced that "long copy sells product" and he wrote the most famous line in advertising history; 'At 60 miles an hour, the loudest noise in this new Rolls-Royce comes from the electric clock'.

Ogilvy, a complete stranger to humility, said "factual advertising like this outsells flatulent puffery. The more you tell, the more you sell. Notice the very long headline - and 719 words of copy, all facts." (A senior executive at Rolls-Royce apparently said "we really must do something to improve our clock").

Although admen all over the world had that ad pinned up on their walls as a shining example of superior advertising and it won many awards, it didn't sell any cars and Rolls-Royce had to be sold before it declared bankruptcy.

There is no record of whether David Ogilvy changed his mind about long copy after that.

The simple point is that you have to know what your customers want and how they think. I know that sounds too simple - but it's true. The Ad Industry Philosophers can produce all kinds of surveys and postulate as much as they want, but it still comes down to that.

Know your customer. And by that I don't mean looking at a computer printout of numbers. You're not selling to numbers, you're selling to people. So meet them, talk to them, understand them.

The psychology of advertising is knowing which button to press to get your target market consumer to act - to buy your product.

[chris@brewers.co.za](mailto:chris@brewers.co.za)

Read my blog ([brewersdroop.co.za](http://brewersdroop.co.za)) or see what other amazing things we do at [brewers.co.za](http://brewers.co.za)

*\*Note that Bizcommunity staff and management do not necessarily share the views of its contributors - the opinions and statements expressed herein are solely those of the author.\**

## ABOUT CHRIS BREWER

Having joined the ad industry in London, Chris Brewer spent most of his career in media analysis and planning - but has performed just about every advertising task from Creative to Research. He's an honorary lifetime member of the Advertising Media Association and regularly advises agencies and clients regarding their media plan costs and strategies. He is also often asked to talk at industry functions. Email: [chris@brewers.co.za](mailto:chris@brewers.co.za). Twitter: [@brewersapps](https://twitter.com/brewersapps). Read his blog: [www.brewersdroop.co.za](http://www.brewersdroop.co.za)

- Welcome to the latest Monty Python fiasco - 21 May 2020
- Is digital advertising worth all the hype? - 4 Dec 2017
- TV we got right - 20 Nov 2017
- Innuendo and the power of the pen - 6 Nov 2017
- When was the sale lost? - 23 Oct 2017

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>