

**The public's perception of advertising in today's
society**

Report on the findings from a research study

Prepared for the Advertising Standards Authority

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Contents

	Page Nos.
Research objectives, approach, sample	3-6
Management summary	7-9
The findings	
The public's view of what advertising is and its role in society	10-13
The public's use of advertising	14-16
Use of the different media	17-22
The effects of life stage	23-24
Aspects that increase the effectiveness of advertising	25-26
Aspects that decrease the effectiveness of advertising	27-30
The image of the regulators	31
The evolution of advertising	32-33

The public's perception of advertising in today's society

Introduction

The Advertising Standards Authority invited The Thinking Shop to conduct a study into the public's perception of advertising. The purpose was to inform the thinking of the partners in self-regulation as the system approaches its 40th birthday. It is a demonstration of how the ASA builds understanding of public opinion and develops its implementation of the Code of Advertising and Sales Promotion in a thoughtful responsible way.

The ASA has always used research to keep in touch with the views of the public and to ensure that its service is efficient and fair. This particular study built on previous research. The intention was not to look at specific issues such as the definition of serious offence or the use of specific language in advertising. Instead the research investigated the way the public views the whole advertising landscape, the role of advertising in today's fast changing world of communications and the extent to which advertisers are perceived to be in touch with public views.

Objectives

More specifically the research had the following objectives:

- Gain an understanding of how the public views the role of advertising and how they 'consume' and 'use' advertising (particularly non broadcast).
- Investigate the difference between advertising as a form of entertainment and advertising as either persuader or informer.
- Explore the credibility of advertising, the extent to which cynicism exists and the factors that increase or decrease credibility; within this context investigate the degree of trust in advertisers and advertising.
- Determine the extent to which advertisers are believed to be in touch with the public.
- Evaluate the way the public believes advertising has evolved over time and establish if elements of nostalgia are attached to advertising.

Research Approach

There was a need to investigate the attitudes of the public in some depth. Superficial questioning would not have led to new insights or a broad understanding. A qualitative approach was adopted with Group Discussions being the most cost efficient and effective method of probing areas of public opinion.

In designing the research it was necessary to ensure that the sample was of sufficient scale to provide robust findings but not so extensive as to be unwieldy. The solution was to conduct the research among groups that represented the key life stages.

Teenagers – 16/17/18 year olds still at school

Singles – aged 20 to 24

Parents – with at least one child aged 5 to 14

Empty Nesters – aged 50 to 60

The Greys – aged 65 to 75

These groups represent important segments of the population and are sufficiently differentiated to provide alternative viewpoints.

Within these broad life stages it was also important to consider demographic factors such as region (North/South), urban versus suburban versus small town, socio economic segmentation.

In total 16 groups were recruited. They covered the complexity of sampling and enabled insights into the different targets without being unwieldy.

Details of the composition of the groups are on the next page.

Composition of groups

	Male	Female
16/17/18 year old teenagers (All to be at day school, all to have access to the Internet at home, all to be BC1C2, all living in the suburbs)	South	North
20-24 year old singles (All BC1C2, mix of living at home and away from home, all working, at least half to have access to the Internet)	North Small town	South Small town
	South Urban	North Urban
Parents (at least one child aged 5 to 14) (All living in the suburbs)	North C2D	North ABC1
	South ABC1	South C2D
Empty Nesters aged 50-60 (all BC1C2)	North Small Town	North Urban
	South Urban	South Small Town
The Greys aged 65-75 (All in the suburbs)	North	South

All the groups were split male/female as mixed sex groups can create difficult dynamics.

The bulk of respondents were in the mass market of BC1C2. This mix of socio economic class within life stages works well. The only exceptions were the parent groups. They were split ABC1 versus C2D because socio economic class can be a major factor in determining the upbringing of children.

There was a spread between urban, small town and suburban, but the parents and teenagers were concentrated in the suburbs to reflect the predominance of families in these areas. The rest of the groups were split between the three types of areas. In the South the groups were conducted in central London, suburbs of London and the Marlow/High Wycombe area. In the North they were conducted in Chorlton Manchester, Timperley near Manchester, Leeds and York.

All respondents had televisions. Not because the ASA covers broadcast media but because broadcast media does determine general attitudes. The teenagers and at least half the singles had to have access to the Internet at home because these targets tend to use media differently. However, Internet access was wider than this and many of the respondents in the other groups also had access.

Within the groups the following broad topics were covered:

- Spontaneous awareness of types of advertising
- Attitudes towards advertising and its roles
- Types of advertising and their images
- Use of different types of advertising
- Likes and dislikes of advertising
- Image of the creators of advertising and advertisers
- The evolution of advertising
- The likely changes to advertising in the future
- The control of advertising

Within the groups use was made of stimulus materials These were in the form of current magazines for respondents to flip through and boards with posters, magazine and press advertisements. While the ads were useful to learn about the respondents' attitudes, the purpose of the research was not to evaluate specific executions. The principles behind the findings are discussed in the report rather than detailed reactions to executions. Mentions have been made of particular ads only where they help to illustrate a point.

The groups were conducted between 13th November and 6th December 2001 and were moderated by Sally Ford-Hutchinson and Annie Rothwell (8 groups each).

Management summary of the research into public perceptions of advertising

This was an extensive piece of research with wide ranging findings that are detailed in the next section of the report. The purpose of this summary is to draw attention to the key highlights. It is not a complete précis of the research.

Advertising is everything with a name on it

The first interesting finding was the extent to which the term advertising encompassed for consumers every piece of brand, product or service communication. It obviously included the key media of television, posters (surprisingly high in a strong second place), press, cinema and radio. It also included other aspects of 'selling' such as Direct Mail, door drops, the Internet, branding in store, branded clothing, sponsorship, commercial text messages and even telephone sales. Advertising is simply everything that has a name on it.

Life without advertising would be dull

Consumers feel that advertising is everywhere and that this ubiquity has evolved over time. As such advertising is as much part of the environment as the traffic and the trees. For some, mainly the older respondents, there is perhaps too much advertising, too much pressure to buy but the majority embrace it as part of life. When asked to think about life without advertising the response was that life would be very, very dull. There would be a lack of essential and desirable information. There would be less entertainment. There would be less street colour. There would be less to talk about.

Advertising has three key roles

The positive attitude towards advertising comes from its multiplicity of roles. It is, of course, a source of information particularly useful for new products or services and for prices and promotions. It is a significant source of entertainment. It is also a part of everyday culture. Advertising is talked about in day-to-day conversations. Words and phrases become part of colloquial language. Not knowing about aspects of advertising would for many, particularly the younger respondents, mean missing out.

Information, entertainment and part of everyday culture are the three levels on which advertising works and the most effective advertising operates on all three. Pure informational advertising may engage the target for whom it is relevant but it will do little more than that. Advertising that entertains can engage a much broader target of consumers and build equity for the future. Advertising that becomes part of everyday culture has its life extended beyond the time of the campaign because it is used and reinforced by the consumers themselves. Advertising that achieves all three roles has maximum power.

Advertising is an indicator of business health

Advertising is inevitably perceived as a selling tool but it is also for consumers a barometer of the economy. For those not involved in business, the advertising is the key indicator of a company or brand's health.

Advertising size matters

It became apparent that the perceived scale of any advertising is important to the way consumers receive it. If advertising is thought to have a lot of money behind it or to have significant presence then this adds credence to the message and adds stature to the brand. So large spaces, mainstream media, sustains presence, the use of colour, a clever or 'big idea' all add weight to the advertising and positive perceptions of the brand.

Advertising quality matters

The effect of advertising can be enhanced by how consumers perceive the quality of the advertising idea (how clever it is), the quality of the production, the quality of the media and the quality of its mood, tone and style. All reflect on how consumers perceive the quality and credibility of the brand.

The brand matters

If the brand is perceived well or the brand is trusted because it is known and established then there is a virtuous circle and the advertising message will be even more credible. If a brand has a recognised area of expertise then consumers question less the claims of new products within that area.

Advertising has got better

The public is more critical of advertising than it has ever been. This is because of a belief that advertising is better than it ever was. It is felt to be cleverer, more reflective of real life, more entertaining and more tuned to different targets.

'Clever' advertising is good advertising

Throughout the research, regardless of consumer life-stage or sex, clever was the word used to describe advertising that engaged and entertained. Clever could be clever in humour, originality of the idea, play on words or special effects

Not all is positive

On the negative side consumers perceive one major trend. It is a trend that threatens to seriously undermine advertising in general. This is the development of what we have termed 'Untruthful truthful advertising'. This is the category of advertising that does not literally lie. It is assumed to be 'legally ' true but it is economical with the truth. It does not communicate the true or whole picture. It is advertising of serious products, mainly financial, that highlights substantial benefits but is vague in its communication of the implications or downsides. It is epitomised by the perceived growing presence of advertising for accident claims companies, consolidation of debts and loan offers.

The threat to advertising in general is that as the cancer of 'Untruthful truthful' advertising spreads consumers become more cynical, critical and doubtful about other advertising claims. 'They are all the same'.

Acceptable and unacceptable advertising hyperbole

This does not mean that advertisers cannot use hyperbole. There has always been hyperbole in advertising and much of it is acceptable because it is companies being

seen to be 'putting their best foot forward', advertising their wares. More important this acceptable hyperbole is associated with small ticket items such as food and household products and if the reality does not quite live up to expectations it does not really matter.

The new unacceptable hyperbole is in areas where decisions taken can seriously affect an individual's life and happiness, like finance. Advertisers are thought to be hiding behind the small print and weasels. This small print is, in the consumer's mind, definitely there to protect the advertiser not the consumer. Recognised weasels are words such as 'from', 'terms and conditions apply', 'limited stocks available', 'subject to status'.

The role of the regulators

Overall the regulators were thought by the public to be 'doing a good job'. However, the area of 'untruthful truthful' advertising was singled out in all groups as the one area where 'they' should be more active, more invasive, more controlling in order to protect consumers.

The only other area of any notable concern was posters (more often referred to as billboards). Unlike the watershed on television and the implicit targeting of press, radio and cinema, poster advertising is exposed to all ages and cultural group. As a result there is more onus on this medium not to offend or upset.

Entertainment is key

Essentially consumers have higher and higher expectations of advertising. With the proliferation of media and the developments in technology there will be increasing opportunities for them to edit out advertising and notice only those pieces of communication that interest or entertain them.

They believe advertising will have to continue to get better to get their attention. Continuing to get better is about more of advertising being clever or cleverer. Cleverer in its originality and in its ability to engage and entertain.

The rewards from advertising will come from advertising that in its turn rewards the consumer.

The Findings

1.The public's view of what advertising is and its role in society

In order to understand how the public views advertising and the role it plays in their lives it is important to explore exactly what is included by consumers in the term advertising.

1.1 Advertising is everything that has a name on it

Not surprisingly the obvious media immediately emerge as part of advertising. Television, Billboards (the term most commonly used), Magazines and Newspapers are all mentioned very quickly. Radio and Cinema are also included but require a little more probing. Not all respondents listen to commercial radio or go to the cinema and so are less likely to have these media top of mind. Transport advertising, usually referred to as tube or bus advertising, is as readily mentioned as radio or cinema particularly in the South where the dominance of the London transport network is apparent.

What is perhaps more surprising is how quickly respondents included the other 'below the line' media in their concept of advertising. So there was very frequent mention of Direct Mail, door drops, sponsorship, the Internet, commercial text messages and advertising in supermarkets.

Advertising was also seen to include telephone sales, heavily product branded magazine features, brand names on fashion items, brand mentions in distribution outlets and branded carrier bags.

In other words advertising is 'anything that has a name on it'.

"It's just in everything, newspapers and magazines and it's on television, you know you go in the high street and it's in the shop windows...it's on everything you do without realising it" Female Empty Nester South Small Town

1.2 Advertising is all -embracing

The all embracing concept of advertising was a widely held one although the older respondents (anyone over the age of 25) felt this was very much a new phenomenon, whereas the younger respondents felt they had grown up with advertising being all pervasive.

The all-embracing nature of advertising means that all respondents believe it is absolutely part of everyday life. As such it is as much part of the environment as the traffic and the trees. It is simply everywhere.

“It’s all round advertising, you are completely blitzed by advertising, it doesn’t matter what you do, you tend to find a big advert” Male 20-24 North Small Town

The interesting question is how do respondents feel about this ubiquity? While some of the older respondents may feel they cannot get away from it, nearly all respondents are accepting of it. More than that, they see its positives.

“I think it’s a necessary thing, it’s quite good for information and if it’s too much in your face then you tend to switch off” - Female Empty Nester South Small Town

1.3 Advertising is everyday culture

Advertising is part of everyday culture in the same way that television programmes are part of culture. Advertising is recognised as being a source of entertainment as well as giving information. It is a media in its own right. As such it provides people with another subject to talk or gossip about. Building on that, it can create the language of the street and bring new phrases or colloquialisms into use.

“Most of the time you take no notice but then every now and then there will be either a funny advert that you remember and you tell someone about it and you relay the brand” Male 20-24 North Small Town

1.4 Advertising is an indicator of business health

There is also a more serious side to advertising. It is part of a modern Western society and it is representative of a free country. Afghanistan was often cited as a typical country without advertising or, perhaps less extreme, China or Russia were thought to have had little advertising.

Advertising is seen as a key commercial tool and the amount of advertising is reflective of a dynamic economy. In fact for those respondents not directly involved in business (most of them) the advertising of a company or a brand is the key indicator of a company or brand’s financial or commercial ‘health’. A brand that has a great deal of good quality advertising must “be doing well.”

“You’re in business you’ve got to advertise” – Male Parents South BCI

1.5 Life without Advertising would be dull

Given the broad-based roles of advertising it was interesting to ask respondents to imagine what life without advertising would be like. The comments above suggest that the view of advertising is a wholly rosy one. This is of course not entirely true. There were criticisms of advertising for being too invasive, giving too much pressure and just simply for being bad advertising.

However, it was apparent that respondents felt life without advertising would be very dull. It might be simpler and slower (perhaps desirable to a few of the older respondents). There would be less pressure to buy things (a notable comment from parents about toy advertising at Christmas) but it would be very much less interesting and exciting.

“Life would be simpler but it would be boring.... everybody would have what they’ve got and then that’s it. You’d end up buying the same thing week in week out” – Male Parent South BC1

“It’s part of communication they (a country without advertising) are probably missing out, advertising is a way of communicating and they are missing out on it” – Female 17/18 North Suburbs

1.6 Advertising is information

All respondents felt that they would be lacking information. Advertising is a key form of communication. Companies would not be able to communicate about products or services, particularly new ideas. Respondents hungry for any new information felt they would miss out and have to troop around shops looking for items.

“If there were no ads around you would just go round picking things up” - Female 20 -25 North Urban

“We all need products and it (advertising) is a way of researching them I suppose –I think advertising is good because you find out about new things coming out.. Like the George Foreman cooker.....I agree it’s only because I saw it that I want one.” - Male Parent North C2D

“I love watching adverts if there is a new product on the market....I like trying new products.” - Female Empty Nester North

1.7 Advertising is entertainment

There would be an emptiness without advertising. This would come not just from the lack of information but also from the removal of entertainment and a whole stimulus to conversation, both within a household and at work or on social occasions.

Advertising does provide people with a universal subject and in the same way that the popular soaps have a role to play, advertising acts as ‘social glue’. It is something to talk about and laugh about. Less often but importantly it can also be the ‘intro’ to difficult subjects. For example if a family is watching a television commercial about drugs then it can provide the entry point to a conversation about that topic.

1.8 Advertising subsidises leisure

There are also practical benefits from advertising that are recognised by a number of the respondents. Advertising is seen to sponsor and, therefore, support many sports, not just at the Premier League level but also at the local level with small football clubs or less high profile sports.

“Local football teams are sponsored by local businesses....., we’d struggle without that” – Male Parent South BC1

Similarly advertising is recognised by some as subsidising the cost of media. They know they get free ITV because of advertising and some respondents recognise that other media such as newspapers or magazines would be very expensive without the inclusion of advertising.

“Without advertising ITV wouldn’t be there” – Male 20-24 North Small Town

“You’d have less TV channels, less radio, Newspapers would probably cost £5 an edition” – Male Parent South BC1

2. The public's use of advertising

As has been intimated in the previous section of this report there are three key ways that advertising is used by consumers or three different aspects of the relationship between the consumers and advertising:

- Advertising as everyday culture
- Advertising as entertainment
- Advertising as information

Inevitably these three aspects can inter relate and in doing so the advertising can become even more powerful. While these three elements have been referred to earlier there is a need to explain in more detail what they mean to consumers.

2.1 Everyday culture

Advertising that creates an impact, either good or bad in the consumer's mind, can become as much a topic of conversation as any other media. So in the office there may be discussion about the latest film, the latest episode of East Enders or the latest Budweiser ad or special effect used in a VW ad.

"We do talk about certain adverts like Monkey on ITV digital it's very funny" – Female 20-25 North Urban

The phrases used in advertising are adopted into the local peer group currency. Particularly for the young (18-25) not knowing the phrase can be as out of touch as not knowing the latest music, club or fashion label.

"I know the young like it but that Bud thing it was on that many times that my bloody parrot's doing it...I hate it, drove me mad.... but my grandson loved it, he used to switch it up." - Empty Nester Female North

The advertising content can also be part of family currency. Jokes might be made about a family member behaving in the same way as someone depicted in an ad and, as was highlighted above, in communal viewing situations (admittedly less frequent nowadays) ads can stimulate discussion.

"When you are watching you would try to guess what the advert was about, pair of jeans advert, makeup and then you would all be wrong" – Female 20-24 North Urban

The media further fuels this integration of advertising into the everyday culture in that advertising developments are often the subject of features in papers or magazines. The Nescafe Gold Blend advertising was often quoted as an example of this where the big media story was about the latest commercial in the series appearing that night.

"Nescafe is a perfect example or remember the Cointreau one with the slightly more mature lady, I mean it was absolutely electric" – Empty Nester South Small Town

Characters (live or animation) created in advertising become as much a part of life as other well known fictional characters. So the Homepride Flourgraders were readily recognised by all ages. The Andrex dog was mentioned frequently as was the Lurpak man.

Another aspect of everyday culture is how the advertising stimulates response. It does give guidance on the desirable badges, again particularly but not exclusively for the young. So the right drink, the right fashion, the right car, the right holiday destination, are all influenced, at least in part, by advertising.

It is recognised by consumers that advertising does create aspirations something that has both positives and negatives attached to it. Advertising is seen to increase social pressure and to make people want ever more items. While this might mean that some people try to buy what they cannot really afford, it is also believed by a few more sophisticated consumers that this encourages economic growth in society.

“Without advertising there is no driving force to make people want to improve their lifestyle” - Male Parent South BC1

In reality no consumers admitted to feeling forced to buy anything they did not want or could not afford. This pressure was always attributed to someone else, someone supposedly more vulnerable, someone less able to say no or resist the pressure.

“You don’t have to buy anything really...you don’t have to take any notice... you don’t feel pressured” – Female 17/18 North Suburbs

2.2 Entertainment

The entertainment derived from advertising is immediately apparent in the ease with which respondents talk about ads they like or enjoy. This is primarily driven by television but can also be true of billboards or cinema. The admired advertising (and advertiser) is almost always seen as being humorous, clever and original.

Clever was an interesting word that came up time and time again in the research. The respondents both admired and enjoyed clever advertising. Some respondents talked about advertising that they did not at first understand but which drew them in and made them remember it because they had to work at it. Hence rewarded comprehension, while not being a term they used, was recognised as effective by some respondents. Conversely too obvious or bland ads were criticised.

“Advertising is cleverer now, very much so...because you have got to watch the advert, pay attention, to get what they mean.” - Empty Nester Female North

Humour was mentioned almost as often as clever. It was important in entertaining and engaging consumers. Current favourites much enjoyed were ITV DigitalMonkey, Bisto/the 70 year old pregnant lady and BT/that has to go.

“What is going to stick in my mind is humour - a product can boost its reputation by getting your respect through humour.” Male 20-24 South Urban

Other aspects of advertising that helped in its role as a provider of entertainment were good music (car ads), the 'aaah' factor such as the Andrex puppy and any series of ads that created a mini soap opera such as Gold Blend.

"The Andrex ad... I used to like the one where the puppy ran down the stairs with the toilet roll." - Empty Nester Female North

2.3 Information

This enjoyment of advertising does not mean that there was no basic role for advertising in giving information. Consumers valued the information provided by advertising. They recognised that ads particularly in print media did not set out to entertain but did provide useful, interesting information. Information that is often hard to find elsewhere. They also knew that ads that irritated them often got the message across or acted as reminders of the brand name.

The information that most interested consumers was either new products or services or price and promotions. There seemed to be a desperate concern that without advertising it would be impossible to know about new products or services. There was no doubt that all, no matter what age, wanted this information. The fear of missing out is a real one.

The price and promotional aspect of advertising was one where media such as newspapers and door drops came into their own and these were definitely used by respondents to compare prices and shop wisely. Similarly ads can be a useful direction towards distribution outlets or to further, more detailed information (websites, telephone numbers, brochures etc.).

"I like to read about travel and the different bargains. I read a lot about the different places and holidays." - Empty Nester Female North

Finally the information contained in advertising can be simply 'food for thought. It can provide inspiration from the 'what shall I cook for dinner?' dilemma to 'what is the latest fashion?' or it can make you think more deeply about a topic (Greenpeace).

3. Use of the different media

The different media do have a different balance of the three factors of advertising – everyday culture, entertainment and information. The media are used in different ways but they do inter-relate and one can link to another. Below is a description of the consumers' use of each of the media.

3.1 Television

As the most dominant advertising medium, television was the most likely to be remembered and talked about. It is a universal currency. However, it was less dominant than anticipated and respondents readily talked about other media.

The reason for television's dominance comes from its ubiquity, its entertainment value and the generally important role that television plays in people's lives.

Advertising on television is an accepted intrusion although in certain situations it becomes more of an irritant (notably in films and sport such as football or motor racing). The timing and the volume of advertising can also be an irritant. Very frequent advertising breaks annoy, as can breaks very early in the programme. On satellite or cable the volume of advertising is seen as notably greater than on terrestrial. The timing of the breaks is also thought to be more irritating.

"I do get tired now as there tend to be four adverts in the middle of an hour's programme whereas there used to be three." – Female Empty Nester South Small Town

Despite these complaints, television advertising is the most entertaining and as such is thought to bring brands to the forefront, highlight brand changes and launch new brands.

Television is less of an information source except in the sense of bringing new things to the attention of the public or directing consumers to other more detailed sources of information through telephone numbers, websites or to the retail outlet itself.

"You're not going to need a fantastic amount of information because it is very rare that a completely new product comes out so you know exactly what it does – soft drinks for instance need to capture attention" – Male 20-25 Urban South

3.2 Billboards

This medium was surprisingly top of mind, often being the medium mentioned after television. The term used by consumers was most frequently billboards although some did refer to posters or hoardings. Mostly they were viewed very positively as bringing welcome enlivenment and colour to the streets and a diversion from boring journeys in the car or on the bus.

"If you're sat on the M40 and it's bumper to bumper you're looking for something to look at" – Female Empty Nester South Small Town

“We like them because you’re stuck in a traffic jam and it stops you from going insane” – Male 20-24 North Small Town

Their prominence can be such that they can be used as landmarks either for giving directions or, more often, for punctuating a journey or giving a feeling of ‘nearly there’.

The most liked billboards and the ones with the most impact were based again on cleverness- a simple message conveyed in a clever or humorous way. Because of this the greatest effect of billboards were either saliency or, in their terminology, just getting the name across or acting as a reminder. Also billboards seemed to convey a stance taken by a company. This might be rebelliousness as in FCUK but could be more campaigning as in charity or public service ads.

There was a recognition that the ubiquity of billboards meant they were entertainment for all but this also means that the lack of targeting requires more control than any other media. Unlike the watershed on television and the implicit targeting of press or cinema, children or specific cultural groups will see billboards. As a result there is more onus on this medium not to offend or upset.

3.3 Magazines

There was a duality about the way that consumers used magazine advertising. The nature of flipping through a magazine meant that there was the most potential for consumers to edit out advertising that did not interest them. Conversely with certain magazines, usually specialist magazines, there was also the most opportunity to use the advertising as an important source of relevant and desired information. There were mentions of buying computer magazines specifically for the ads but any tight targeting of ads to the reader was appreciated and the product information was welcomed. Other examples were gardening magazines for the older respondents, fashion for teenagers and home magazines for some housewives.

“My husband buys a sailing magazine, he’ll look through it purely because it is so full of adverts that he wants” - Female Empty Nester South Small Town

“For me you can switch off a lot of magazines, half of them is advertising, as soon as you flick over the page it’s a picture, it’s there all the time” - Male 20-24 North Small Town

There was also quite widespread criticism of advertising overload in magazines, notably general interest monthlies. This overload was mostly about sheer volume of advertising but could also be about volumes of ads in single categories. In this pre Christmas time there was strong feeling that the male general interest magazines such as GQ (used as stimuli in the groups) were simply overloaded with expensive ads for watches and aftershave s.

While some respondents recognised that advertising did keep the cover price down, with monthlies that were perceived as expensive there was a general feeling that consumers were paying a high cover price for a magazine full of paid for advertising.

Cosmopolitan was singled out as advertising over kill. The weeklies were seen as better balanced. Hello, OK and Prima were praised as better “reads” with fewer ads.

“It feels like you’re being ripped off you spend £2 or £3 and its stuffed full of adverts.” - Male 20-25 Small Town North

“Cosmopolitan, that’s full of adverts.if you stripped that down, you might get three pages of reading and all the rest is adverts.” - Empty Nester Female North

“It’s not like Prima.....Prima is brilliant..I’ve had that from day one.” - Empty Nester Female North

The most positive response to magazine advertising was to ads that were in tune with the reader and yet again, thought to be clever. There was a very fine line between the aesthetics of much magazine advertising and the wallpaper effect. So beautifully photographed ads may be viewed as such or may be edited out.

3.4 Newspapers

Many felt that they simply did not notice or look at advertising in newspapers. However, when probed it was apparent that when they were looking for information they actively did. There were mentions of individuals going through the newspaper and cutting out information on specific types of financial services or, more often, going through all the car or computer ads to compare specifications and prices.

“I am seriously thinking of taking equity out of the house. Every time there is an advert I cut it out. I’ve got a file this thick, at the moment I am just picking out adverts and collecting information.” - Male Empty Nester South Urban

Hence newspapers were an important and welcomed source of information on relevant products or services. However, it is worth highlighting the difference between the use of local and national papers. Local papers were much more likely to be used for price or promotional information in local stores or shops, while national newspapers were often used for everything from comparative ISA performances to holidays and flights to pricing consumer durables.

3.5 Radio

Not all respondents listened to commercial radio and there was high potential for irritation by the advertising. Some respondents claimed to avoid commercial radio because of the advertising. If they wanted simply to listen to music maybe while driving then the frequency of the advertising intruded and so they avoided certain stations.

“I have a forty minute drive in the mornings and I just want to listen to something soothing so I choose a channel that does not have advertising” – Male Parent South BC1

The main irritation from radio advertising came from the high repetition of specific executions. Consumers felt that when they listened to commercial radio, ads were repeated ad nauseam.

‘They just tend to be more repetitious on radio than on TV’ – Male Parent South BC1

However consumers also recognised that they did remember some of the brands advertised on radio, for example Carphone Warehouse. As with other media, the effectiveness of the advertising was dependent on the cleverness of the execution, frequent executional changes and the relevance of the message to the listener of that radio station.

‘‘There is a lot of advertising that is on the radio, sales ads for blue cross sales and bonus days’’ – Female 20-25 North Urban

3.6 Cinema

There were respondents who rarely or never went to the cinema. Those who did, usually younger, had a mixed response to the advertising. Some would specifically go into the cinema late to avoid the ads but others felt they were enjoyable in their own right. Cinema ads could be fantasy entertainment (typically drinks advertising) or they could be ‘naff’ (the local Indian restaurant). However even the ‘naff’ ones had an amusement value to them, indeed almost a nostalgic value that made them enjoyable.

‘‘You are forced, you haven’t got a choice... you can’t risk going away because you might miss the start of the film’’ – Male 20-24 North Small Town

The existence of the film classification system meant that this was the most self-selecting of the media and so had the least need for any censorship other than the rating of the ad itself.

3.7 Internet

Younger respondents were recruited to have access to the Internet. In reality there was widespread access among the sample though not necessarily widespread usage by the individuals. Other than the youth bias of the Internet (the young simply took it for granted) there was a male bias. However there was growing interest and usage among all groups including the 65 plus groups.

Although the Internet was used for entertainment and communication it is also a very important medium for research and information. In commercial terms it is widely used to find out availability or choice of products and services, to look for specifications, to find out about distribution and to compare prices. Some respondents also bought on the Internet although this was less frequent than information seeking.

In terms of specific advertising on the Internet as opposed to brand websites, the banner advertising was simply accepted and may or may not be noticed depending on the quality and relevance to the viewer. However, there was significant irritation at ‘pop-ups’ that were unwarranted intrusions, distracted the viewer from the task in hand, took time to close down and were thought by some to slow down the computer.

“What is really annoying is when you load a page up and it’s a page of text which takes about ten seconds but it says downloading and it takes 5 minutes and it’s a blooming advert” – Male 20-24 North Small Town

3.8 Other media

There were numerous other media mentioned by respondents so a brief description of the consumer reaction is given.

Sponsorship was quite frequently mentioned, both sponsorship of programmes such as Daz and Emmerdale Farm or Cadburys and Coronation Street and sponsorship of sport. There was acceptance and even enjoyment of sponsorship of programmes if well done. There was high approval of sponsorship of sport because it was thought to help the sport. It was particularly liked if the sponsorship was of smaller sports or local events.

“I quite enjoy Emmerdale, I love the talking dogs and I know that Daz is the sponsor and I’ve got to admit that I actually went out and bought Daz” – Female Empty Nester South Small Town

‘Through the Door’ advertising was recognised by everyone as on the increase. There was a spectrum of reaction from useful and used to totally ignored. The more welcome items being leaflets giving special price offers at local retail outlets.

“If it is something about insurance you’d just bin it but if it were a magazine for a shop..like Matalan..you’d look” – Female 20-25 North Urban

Direct Mail is another form of ‘Through the Door’ but was usually addressed to an individual. It created more negative response and was more often unwelcome mainly because of the financial bias of much Direct Mail. There was particular resentment of Direct Mail addressed to young people offering them endless numbers of credit cards. This was disliked particularly by parents of teenagers and was often thrown straight in the bin before it even reached the individual but the young themselves did not particularly welcome it.

“ I do object to the credit cards... as soon as the children hit eighteen or University they have at least three credit cards coming through the door” – Female Empty Nester South Small Town

Telephone sales were interestingly classified by many as advertising and were deeply resented as an unwelcome intrusion in the home particularly if the introduction to the sales pitch was misleading. The 60s plus respondents were the most troubled by telephone sales, claiming to receive some every week. When a respondent mentioned ‘the telephone preference service’ and the ability to exclude calls, the rest of the group immediately wanted the details for registering. For a few respondents their irritation was increased because they felt sorry for the individual at the other end of the telephone who was only trying to do their job.

“Calling on the telephone adds pressure...it puts you on the spot, you just hang up”
 – Female 20-25 North Urban

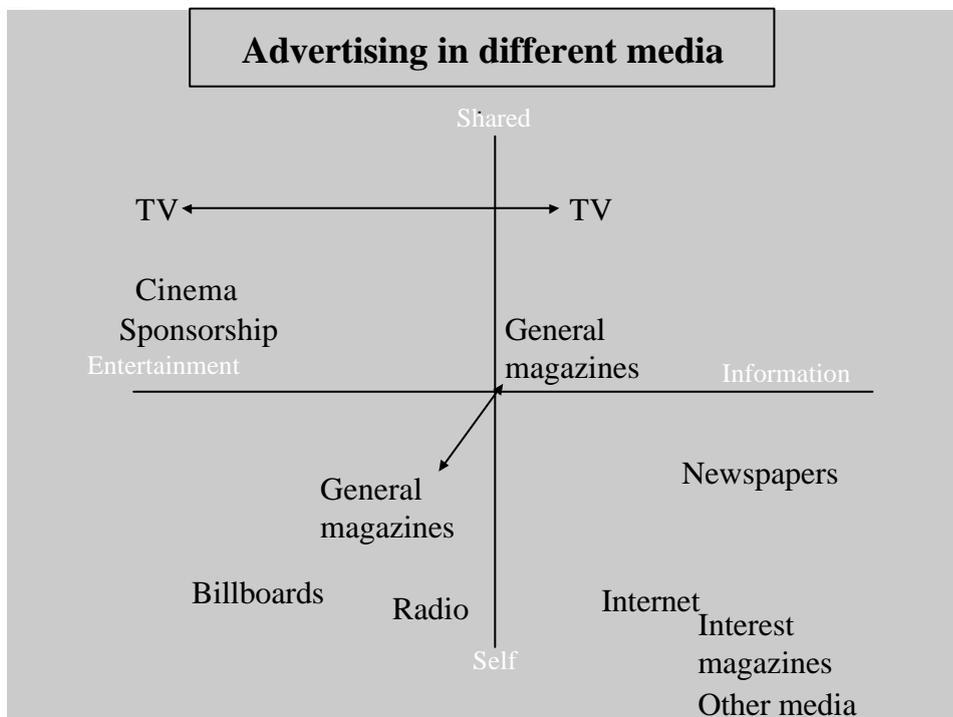
Magazine features were an interesting example of where there was a difference in the age groups. While most respondents thought of features as features, the younger respondents, notably the teenagers, saw them as simply another form of advertising. If there is a brand and a price then it is an ad. However, it was quite acceptable and indeed welcome as it gave guidance on products and services.

There was recognition that product branding was everywhere. Having a brand name on a carrier bag or on a tee shirt was as much advertising as a billboard. It was accepted as part of life and indeed many of the younger respondents were, therefore, walking (or rather sitting) ads in the groups.

3.9 Comparison between the uses of the media

In order to compare the use of the different media it is possible to plot each medium on a two-dimensional chart showing entertainment versus information and a shared medium versus ‘for self’. Obviously some media occupy more than a single space and how they move can be shown on the chart.

The following is a summary of consumers’ use of advertising by media.



4. The effects of life stage

During the commentary some points have been made about the different responses of the different demographic groups interviewed. It is useful to summarise some of the overriding factors that are driven by demographics or more importantly different life stages.

First the differences were less than were anticipated. Those differences that did occur were a question of different strengths of opinion or different degrees of importance attached to factors rather than differing fundamental viewpoints.

What is true is that the memory bank of advertising will differ by age of respondents. Inevitably the older have longer memories of advertising and greater experience of its evolution. Advertising was perceived to have increased in quantity, have greater ubiquity and to have increased in quality.

“The advertising years ago – there just used to be a running commentary about the product and a little scenario is the background whereas now all the adverts are very different and they advertise everything now”.- Female Parents South C2D

“They credit people with more intelligence now than they would in the olden days they used to have some silly little jingle coming out for Tide washing powder and a woman in her pinny. I think there is far more understanding now of how to influence people.” - Male Empty Nester South Urban

Inevitably the purchasing priorities of consumers change with life stage and their interest in product or service categories varies. Younger respondents are very interested in fashion items, technical items and, aspirationally, cars. Mothers are concerned with everyday shopping for the family. Men are generally more interested in consumer durables. The ‘empty nesters’ and the ‘greys’ are probably the most interested in financial services. For the ‘greys’ this is an area of particular concern.

None of this is surprising but it does affect how individuals respond to different media and the extent to which they feel that the advertising that predominates in that media is targeted at or has relevance for them.

“What’s irritating most is I watch Countdown and they always have adverts for stair lifts, it’s so depressing... they assume that the viewing public at that time of day is of a certain age” – Female Empty Nester South Small Town

In the purchasing arena the feeling of confidence varies by age and experience. There is almost a bell shaped curve of confidence. At the younger end of the spectrum there is a lack of confidence, as decisions have to be made in new areas. Confidence then increases with experience. For older respondents it then decreases. For them there is a feeling both of the need for more decisions in a faster moving world and a feeling of the greater importance of some of those decisions as income is restricted and likely to decrease rather than increase.

Finally the life stage affects the feeling of protection towards others. Essentially the feeling of protection of others starts with parenthood and continues for their offspring

(as they grow up and have to make bigger decisions) and then for their offspring's offspring. In terms of advertising this feeling of protection means more desire to make sure that there is no misleading advertising or that undue pressure is not put on the vulnerable to purchase more than they can afford.

5. Aspects that increase the effectiveness of advertising

The most effective advertising or the ads that have the most 'ad power' combine all three factors of Everyday Culture, Entertainment and Information.

Advertising that is entertaining can engage all, even those not in the target. By doing so it can build 'value' for later.

Advertising that only provides information can have real relevance and value for the target market but is not building extra values among a wider audience.

Advertising that moves into the Everyday Culture will be sustained by this move and the informational and entertainment effects of the advertising will be expanded.

Hence hitting any one of the three elements is important, hitting all three will maximise the return on advertising investment.

5.1 Size matters

It also became very apparent that the perceived scale and quality of any advertising is very important to the way it is received. In colloquial terms size matters. If a campaign is thought to have a large budget behind it or it is thought to be a major campaign then this adds credence to the message and adds stature to the brand. So large space sizes, mainstream media, the use of colour, high production values or even a clever or big creative idea all add weight to the advertising. It is important to emphasise that these are consumer perceptions of size of campaign rather than necessarily reality.

"If it's big and glossy and in colour you think well they've spent some money on that they must be trustworthy, why I don't know" Female Empty Nester South Small Town

"I think if you see a lot of adverts and it's in your face on TV or on Billboards, it must be good because they've got all this money to do advertising" – Female Empty Nester South Small Town

5.2 Quality matters

It is also true that quality matters. The effect of the campaign can be enhanced by the quality of the idea, the quality of the production, the quality of the media placement and the quality of the mood and tone or style of the ad. All these reflect on the quality and credibility perceptions of the brand.

5.3 The brand matters

The advertising of a known and trusted brand is readily trusted unless something happens to suggest that trust is misplaced. Consumers are aware of the persona of brands and expect that to be reflected in the advertising. They are also aware of brand expertise and, therefore, question less the claims of a brand in its area of excellence.

“ I trust bigger companies more because they are more likely to be there if something goes wrong ..you have a point to go back to.” - Male Parent North C2D

“That Mr Muscle when it first came out I tried something that was good..so I tried the next one...I think I’ve tried everything that they’ve got and they have been really good.....

Yeah...me too, You use them continually once you have tried them.” Female Empty Nesters North

“You trust a well known name rather than one you never heard before..you know Tesco.” - Empty Nester Female North

5.4 There is power in staying power

There is also evidence that there is power in staying power: A brand that has been around for a long time must be good otherwise it would not have survived, hence its advertising is more readily accepted. In this sense the brand idea living in the advertising strengthens the power of the advertising as it is building on what has gone before and what lies in the memories of consumers.

“The’re still there so they must be good – Weetabix, Heinz and Tango” - Female 20-25 North Urban

6. Aspects that decrease the effectiveness of advertising

The description above makes the world of advertising seem very rosy. Inevitably this is not entirely true and there are aspects of advertising that are fiercely criticised by the consumers.

6.1 'Untruthful truthful' advertising

The first negative that comes out of every group of consumers, whether they are 18-year-old boys or 65-year-old women, is the dislike of what might be called:

'Untruthful Truthful advertising'

This is advertising that does not literally lie. It is assumed to be 'legally' true but is economical with the truth. It does not communicate the true or whole picture. It is advertising of serious products that highlight substantial benefits but are 'vague' in their communication of the implications or downsides.

It may also have what the consumers call 'weasels' in it. It is advertising full of small print that is thought to be there to cover the advertiser's back rather than to help or protect the consumer. It can also be advertising that uses words such as 'priced from' and consumers know they are unlikely to be able to buy the product at that price. Other weasels are felt to be 'terms and conditions apply' and 'limited numbers available'.

"You see the print at the bottom and its absolutely miniscule. People our age probably couldn't read it anyway..but yeah it looks ever so rosy when you see the big bit until you read the little bit at the bottom." - Grey Female South

"It doesn't tell you the full story... they tell you enough to catch you...they don't let you slip off the hook by telling you what is detrimental." - Male Parent C2D North

"They put it (the small print) there because then it's all in black and white because they have to cover their backs" - Female 17/18 North Suburbs

"Terms and conditions apply – so I always think there is a catch to it" - Female 17/18 North Suburbs

" Plumbs were advertising loose covers for £199..when the rep came round he said my suite shape was not the correct shape for the sample and it would cost £1500. This was from £199.....I think the wording in the ad was ..from." - Greys Female South

" It's very, very tiny printed...you find that it says something that seems to be very different from what you are reading above." - Grey Female South

6.2 Acceptable and unacceptable advertising hyperbole

There is acceptable advertising hyperbole and unacceptable advertising hyperbole. The acceptable hyperbole does not worry the consumer and is about the manufacturer putting his best foot forward or describing or showing his product in positive terms. It is mostly associated with FMCG products. It is expected. At the end of the day if the product does not wash quite as white or taste quite as delicious as suggested it does not really matter. These are claims that are not vital to life.

“They tell you Carlsberg is probably the best, they are not committing themselves to saying it’s the best, not committing themselves 100%, but in a good way. It’s a good quality drink, it’s honest ain’t it.” - Male Parent C2D North

Then there are other claims that are more fundamental to an individual’s well being. Any hyperbole in this area worries consumers a great deal. It worries them for other people but it can also worry them for themselves.

These worries are mainly to do with financial advertising that purports to be factual and serious. If this type of advertising is misleading or exaggerates and makes individuals take the wrong decision then it is likely to be seriously damaging to their happiness.

“I think there is an issue of risk here when you talk about the implications of finance you may have signed up to pay for something for the next 5 or 10 years it could be horrendous – if I bought a washing powder that doesn’t wash as white well tough, forget about it and get on with your life” - Male Empty Nester South Urban

In this context advertising encouraging people to make a legal claim if they have an accident and advertising encouraging people to consolidate their debt received consistent and vociferous criticism from all types of respondent. As did advertising encouraging young people to take out loans and pay back small monthly amounts (over years). Such advertising is often viewed as a ‘con’. It seriously undermines the credibility of all advertising.

“Those adverts where you consolidate your loan...they show a couple that are in a muddle and then at the end they are in a supermarket with a new car...they were in a mess and now they have a new car...okay there payments has gone down but it is going to take 20 years longer to pay off... it’s all too free and easy....and then if miss a payment they take your house.” - Female Parents North

“They said no win no fee its perfectly true but what you had to do was take out an insurance cover.... No win no fee came across but it was difficult for anyone to see in the small print...I didn’t realise it was in the small print about the insurance... I didn’t realise what the catch.was”- Male Empty Nester South

*“Loans for your car at APR 9% –they come through the door to my son...well I get to them and throw them away before he sees them.....
Yeah my son did that last week. He took out a loan for £1500. He said its only £50 a month Mum, but he doesn’t realise how long for. It’s about three or four years and he has spent it already.....
It’s like you put up your house for collateral and then you find you can’t afford to pay, you can be evicted.” - Female Empty Nesters North*

The reason that this type of advertising is so consistently criticised is because it is thought to be growing in presence. It is thought to dominate some of the satellite or cable channels. The ‘claims’ advertising is likened to the culture of the States (a suing culture) and it is seen to be targeting the vulnerable.

“Claims Direct had a court case themselves over something – let’s get rid of these dodgy ads” – Male 17/18 South Suburbs

“There’s all these if you have tripped or fallen...they want you to sue. They want our society to become just like America where they are suing.” - Empty Nester Female North

‘Untruthful Truthful’ advertising is the serious element that reduces the effect of advertising but there are other less serious aspects of advertising that receive criticism.

Certainly poor production of advertising whether it be TV or press or any other media raises questions over the quality of the product, as do clumsy adaptations of what the consumer describes as American style advertising.

“This (a magazine ad) is so cheesy you would just turn the pages” – Female 20-25 North Urban

6.3 Irritation

Irritation with advertising also appears to reduce its effect. Irritation is caused by a number of factors.

First unwanted intrusion causes irritation. This can be advertising during a football match, on the radio, through the letterbox, pop-ups on the Internet or telephone sales in home.

Exhaustive repetition is also irritating. It is primarily associated with radio, satellite and cable TV.

Stupid executions or the depiction of stupid people can also irritate to the point of viewers zapping or leaving the room.

Incomprehension with no reward can irritate. This may be a result of the individual being out of target and respondents did acknowledge this.

Unreadable print can also causes extreme irritation (mentioned more by the elderly) and can cause cynicism and distrust of the ad and the advertiser.

Finally an overload of advertising in one category can also cause irritation. In magazines it can be seeing ad after ad for watches or aftershaves. On TV it can be ad after ad for accident claims.

This research supports the truism that good advertising is advertising that rewards the recipient. Rewards either with entertainment or interesting well-presented information or originality and cleverness that can be admired, respected or even adopted.

7. The image of the regulators

In a study sponsored by the Advertising Standards Authority it seemed inappropriate to avoid the whole area of regulation although this was not the main objective of the research. It was interesting to see how consumers felt about advertising controls after they had discussed the general subject of advertising in some depth.

There was some limited awareness of the ASA and the ITC and some recall of the 'Legal, decent, honest and truthful' thought, but there was little knowledge of how to access or approach the regulators. Only one woman in the whole study had ever complained and she had accessed the ASA via the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Overall respondents felt the regulators were doing a good job but there were still areas where, to quote, 'they should do something'.

Ultimately 'they' should protect the vulnerable by making sure that advertisers, particularly in the financial area should be openly truthful, not economical with the truth. Also with pricing and offer claims they should look at the weasels and the small print that advertisers are seen to use to cover themselves. Small print is very much seen as for the protection of the advertiser rather than the protection of the consumer. Advertising in these important areas should be clear in the truth to all consumers.

(There was some debate within the male groups, as to who the 'they' should be- whether addressing of the 'untruthful truthful' was the role of the advertising or the finance regulators)

They should also stop ad overload, by which consumers mean too many ads in one media and particularly on one topic.

Finally though they should not necessarily tighten up on billboard advertising, they should not let the billboards become more risqué than they are. As the medium viewed by all the regulators should not lower the bar any further.

8. The evolution of advertising

Respondents were asked to think about how advertising might change in the future. This is a notoriously difficult question for even the ‘experts’ to answer. In order to try to probe this area respondents were asked to think first about how advertising had already evolved.

8.1 Advertising has got better

Overall advertising is thought to have developed positively and is better than it was. It is more original and clever, more reflective of real life, more entertaining, more selectively targeted and, for most, appeared politically in balance.

This does not mean that past advertising is not remembered with fondness. There is a nostalgia about the great past advertising and nostalgia is not just the reserve of the older respondents. Even the young think of advertising (or brands) from their childhood with fondness. Hence when there are revivals of past advertising these are greeted like ‘old friends’ and are enjoyed again. This positive feeling is part escapism, part familiarity and part comfort.

“I like those Coca Cola adverts with them lorries at Christmas, that’s been going for years” – Female 17/18 North Suburbs

“I like that one ..it was a tribute to that chap who died, JP Hartley..she paid tribute to it last night...even my husband said isn’t that lovely.” - Empty Nester Female North

“The Oxo family I used to think that was gorgeous.” - Empty Nester Female North

“ There was one when I was a child...there was a hoarding at the top of the boot repair shop. It had a mouse and he’d got spindly little legs with two great big boots on, all lovely and shiny, you know and advertising Cherry Blossom Boot Polish....I’ve never forgotten that” - Greys South Female

8.2 Advertising is wider and broader

Another big change in advertising is thought to be simply its growth and the fact that it is everywhere. It has a wider and broader role. There are advertised categories now that never had advertising in the past.

“Advertising wasn’t so invasive as it is now because you’ve got television and radio and all the rest” - Male Empty Nester South Urban

8.3 Advertising is more obviously targeted

Finally advertising is seen by consumers to be much more targeted than it was. They know that specific ads appear in specific types of media. Hence watching a programme with ads for products for the elderly such as incontinence products can

make younger respondents feel uncomfortable as though this is not for them. However, the skill of the advertiser at targeting is also respected and can make them feel very comfortable with a particular medium.

“I think there is different markets now they are aiming for all the time, rather than it being you know the whole population, it’s like you fit into a bit of it, rather than trying to throw the whole thing at you.” - Male Parent C2D North

8.4 Advertising should become more entertaining

Given their views about the evolution of advertising respondents felt that in the future advertising would have to be even better to get their attention, to engage them. This engagement is likely to come from the power of entertainment. In this area consumers are more and more demanding, seeking cleverness, originality and humour.

“I think they should stick with humour because there is all this dull stuff (watch advertising in men’s magazines)” - Male Parent C2D North

This does not mean that information is not important. It is and will continue to be, but it is likely that the advertising will direct people more and more to sources of information rather than trying to communicate all the information in the ad. In this context the Internet will merely grow in importance. However, it will still be the advertising that will direct people to the Internet and perhaps provide them with the trust and reassurance that they need when they get there.