Consumer product evaluation: the interactive effect of message framing, presentation order, and source credibility

Richard Buda
Department of Management and General Business, Hofstra University, New York, USA

Yong Zhang
Department of Marketing and International Business, Hofstra University, New York, USA

Keywords Product management, Advertising, Advertising effectiveness, Marketing communications

Abstract Subjects (n = 200) received a detailed description of a product and were asked to rate their attitudes about this product. Presentation order, source credibility and message framing were manipulated in a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ completely crossed factorial design. Subjects who received a positively framed message rated product attitudes significantly greater than those subjects who received a negatively framed message. Also, significant differences in message framing effects were found for those subjects who received the framed message first in the nonexpert condition (credibility) and those subjects who received the framed message last in the expert condition. Findings are then discussed.

Introduction
Product messages are copious in today’s marketplace. Because consumers encounter numerous advertising messages from many sources and through various media, advertisers are increasingly concerned about the effectiveness of their messages. Many marketing and advertising studies have examined ways to enhance advertising effectiveness. Marketing studies have focused on the effect of marketing messages on consumer reactions toward products and the factors influencing consumers’ processing of such messages. Researchers agree that one such factor is how information is presented to the consumer. In other words, the way information is labeled or framed may influence consumer judgment and decision about products (see Puto, 1987; Woodside and Singer, 1994; Ganzach and Karsahi, 1995; Smith, 1996; Smith and Petty, 1996; Zhang and Buda, 1999).

The above studies also suggest that the message framing effect may not be uniform in all conditions, and they may be moderated by other factors. Cognitive response theory has emphasized the role of recipient thought processes and message effect variables such as presentation order and source credibility. If message framing is not uniform in all conditions, then such variables may have an influence on its effects. Evidence exists which suggests that both the message presentation order (Haugtvedt and Wegener, 1994) and the perceived credibility of the message source (Grewal et al., 1994) may influence the final judgment of the message recipient.

Names of the authors appear in alphabetical order and do not necessarily reflect the contribution of each.
Despite the importance of this issue to marketers, few studies have investigated the effect of presentation order and the interactive effect of presentation order and source credibility on the effect of message framing. Is the message framing effect moderated by the order in which such messages are presented to the consumers? In other words, will the message framing effect more salient when the message is presented first or last in a communication? Further, does the perceived credibility of the source of the message matter to the message recipient when he or she processes the framed messages? Is the perceived source credibility directly related to the framing effect? Obviously, such knowledge will be helpful to advertising copywriters and brand managers. This research extends the investigation of message framing effects by testing a group of hypotheses on the interactive effects of message presentation order and the perceived source credibility on the message framing effect.

**Literature review and theoretical background**

**Message framing**

Tversky and Kahneman (1981) examined choices between two strategies for dealing with an emergency situation in which a number of lives would be lost unless one of the strategies would be adopted. Choices differed depending on whether the strategies were described in terms of how likely a given number of lives would be saved with each strategy or how likely a given number of lives would be lost with each strategy, even though the objective information was the same in each case. Prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979) was used to explain these results. This theory suggests two major outcomes about the effect of framing a decision problem in either gain or loss terms. First, it holds that people are risk-averse when a decision problem is formulated in terms of gain and risk-prone when the problem is formulated in terms of loss. Second, people exhibit loss aversion, i.e. that losses loom larger than gains (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981).

The effect of message framing can also be understood from the perspectives offered by research in the field of information processing. The literature on information processing has focused on the cognitive processes by which consumers integrate various types of information. An individual’s judgements and decisions can be influenced greatly by the way information is presented or framed. Judgements and decisions are affected not only by the outcome of the decision but also by the way the initial decision or judgement question is framed (e.g. the background context of the choice described). The presentation of the information is called the decision frame, the way in which the problem is represented to a person.

In marketing and advertising, we frequently encounter situations where a message can be phrased in either positive terms or in negative terms (for example, 85 percent satisfaction rate vs 15 percent dissatisfaction rate; the medicine is effective in 95 percent of the samples vs it is ineffective in 5 percent of the samples). Although positive framing appears more common than negative framing, the way a message is framed can be used in much the same way as other device variables are used in advertising.

Research results also indicate that the effect of message framing may not be uniform in all conditions and can be moderated by other factors. Woodside and Singer (1994), in their investigation of social interactive effects in the framing of buying decisions, pointed out the deficiency of the expected utility model of which prospect theory is a branch (Schoemaker, 1982). For
example, the model is unable to account for context effects, such as verbal
labels, modes of information presentation, response modes, social
dimensions, and other circumstances associated with the decision problem.
Their results suggest that the effect of framing can be influenced by the
social context of the decision.

Message framing and expectations
A variety of perspectives on message framing effects have found empirical
support. But there appears to be no single, uniform manner in which message
framing affects persuasion. Instead, multiple processes can co-occur (Smith
and Petty, 1996). The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) suggests that
variables can effect persuasion in a number of different ways. They can serve
as peripheral cues, they can serve as persuasive arguments or they can effect
the extent or direction of message elaboration (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). In
the present research we are interested in determining how message framing
might effect the extent to which people elaborate or systematically process
information.

In addition to Woodside and Singer (1994), researchers have investigated
other variables that may moderate message framing. Smith (1996) found that
educated consumers are more influenced by negatively framed advertising
and positively framed advertising has a more favorable impact than
negatively framed advertising on purchase-decision judgments for
transformational products (products that bring enjoyable and beneficial
experiences to the user). The influence of price on consumers’ perceptions of
performance risk is greater when the message is framed negatively and the
effect of price on consumers’ perceptions of financial risk is greater when the
message is framed positively (Grewal et al., 1994). The message framing
effect found with consumer products exists with services as well (Ganzach
and Karsahi, 1995).

Smith and Petty (1996) posit that there are two reasons to hypothesize that
negatively framed messages would be processed more carefully than
positively framed messages. Evidence suggests that negative information is
more attention grabbing in general and receives greater scrutiny than positive
information (Ditto and Lopez, 1992; Homer and Yoon, 1992). Alternatively,
negatively framed messages are more likely to violate people’s expectancies.
People are more accustomed to seeing arguments framed in positive (gain)
terms rather than negative (loss) terms (Meyerowitz and Chaiken, 1987).
Studies suggest that when information in a message violates expectations it
is subject to greater scrutiny (Baker and Petty, 1994; Maheswaran et al.,

Smith and Petty (1996) demonstrated that negatively framed messages are
scrutinised more than positively framed messages based on the individuals’
expectations of how the message is framed. In particular, if increased
processing of negatively framed messages results from their contrast with
individuals’ expectancies, then it can be expected that negatively framed
messages would be processed more extensively only when people expect the
message to be positively framed. In addition, when people expect the
message to be framed negatively, the positively framed message will receive
more scrutiny because the positively framed message conflicted with the
individuals’ expectations. Message framing expectations in advertising are
mostly positive but in some instances they have been known to be negative
(e.g. medical or health advertisements). The assumption is that individuals
that have encountered advertising information in the past have experienced
positively framed messages and that the expectation for future encounters is positive.

Message order
Another potential moderator of the message framing effect is the sequence of the framed argument in a message. In other words, the impact of framing may differ based on whether the message is presented first or last in a communication. Interest in message presentation order dates back to early this century in persuasion and communication research (Lund, 1925; Hovland and Mandell, 1957; Lana, 1961; Haugtvedt and Wegener, 1994).

Information-order effects
Horgarth and Einhorn’s (1992) belief adjustment model is a descriptive model of human behavior that explains the occurrence of information-order effects. People handle belief-updating by a general, sequential anchoring and adjustment process in which a current anchor (belief), is adjusted by the impact of succeeding pieces of information. This adjustment provides a new position (anchor), and a basis for further belief revision as additional information is considered. The model thus provides predictions for information (message) order effects on final beliefs. The predictions can take the form of a primacy (message presented first), recency (message presented last) or no effect. When mixed information is received sequentially and a decision is to be made immediately upon receiving the information, the model always predicts recency effects. The final belief of the individual is affected more by information received later than that received earlier, regardless of whether the information processing task is complex or simple.

Working memory
This study utilizes working memory that contains current information under consideration. Working memory can combine information from both the environment (information presented to the consumer) and long-term memory. The central constraint on working memory is its limited capacity. That is, only a few items can be considered at one time. When little time is available for decision making the information search will be relatively quick; the use of the information will be minimal; it will lead to fewer alternatives being considered and a greater weight being placed on negative information (Wright, 1974). The order and number of facts presented should affect the consumer’s ability to recall specific information and therefore influence the decision-making process.

Primacy v. recency
In consumer research, relatively few studies have expressly considered the effect of presentation order except Haugtvedt and Wegener (1994). Consumers in their daily lives typically face a multitude of messages from different sources or many facts from one source, and such messages frequently represent different views and convey different information on the same product or service. Two order effects have been identified in prior research. If people encountering two opposing messages form judgments more consistent with the first message, a primacy effect is said to have occurred. On the other hand, if the judgment is more consistent with the second (opposing) message, a recency effect is present. The order effect used in this study was simply based on whether the framed information was presented first or last in a long list of facts about the product. The authors have used the labels “primacy” and “recency” to be consistent with the literature on these types of effects. It is hypothesized that a recency effect would occur because it is consistent with the belief adjustment theory and is more available in working memory and not because it is an opposing message. Marketers should be especially interested in finding out under
which condition the message framing effect is more salient because the simple order of presentation can affect a consumer’s final judgments or preferences.

Although some marketing studies have investigated the order effect (e.g. the order effect of product attribute information, Kardes and Herr, 1990), one study (Haugtvedt and Wegener, 1994) systematically investigated the effects of presentation order on consumer attitude. A significant primacy effect when message recipients encountered the materials under conditions of high personal relevance and a significant recency effect when message recipients encountered the materials under conditions of low personal relevance was found. The presentation order tended to influence the favorability of cognitive responses only for subjects who read the material under conditions of high personal relevance. In addition, high-relevance subjects tended to counterargue with the second message more than low-relevance subjects did.

It would appear reasonable to suggest that an interaction effect may exist between information framing and order of presentation when the product is of low personal relevance. For example, the correlation between the favorability of post messages attitude (measured immediately after the presentation) and the amount of information recalled is generally higher under conditions that encourage low rather than high elaboration of the message content (Mackie and Asuncion, 1990). The generally accepted explanation is that participants under low elaboration conditions had not fully formed an opinion until the attitude inquiry whereas high elaboration participants have evaluated the content and formed their opinion (Hastie and Park, 1986). Specifically, we would expect that positively framed information presented last will result in significantly higher means than positive information presented first or negative information presented first or last.

**Source credibility**

Much of the recent research on source credibility has centered on consumer involvement. Obviously, advertisements are most effective when individuals devote more attention to advertisements, exert greater cognitive effort to comprehend the advertisements, focus attention on product-related information and engage in more elaboration of the product information in advertising (Gordon et al., 1998). Yet, when involvement is low, peripheral cues such as advertising execution variables and source effects may become more important determinants of how consumers perceive advertisements.

Credibility is usually defined as how expert the communicator is perceived to be in the area of concern, and also as how trusted by the individual receiving the communication (Freedman et al., 1981). Proponents of the elaboration likelihood model (cognitive response theory) maintain that persuasion is a joint function of the recipients’ involvement in the outcome and the communicator’s credibility (Hass, 1981). The theory proposes that uninvolved recipients respond with more negative thoughts to a low credibility communicator than to a high credibility communicator. Involved recipients respond with more negative thoughts to a high credibility communicator.

Advertisers have paid special interest to the effects of communicator characteristics on the persuasiveness of the communicated messages. The characteristics of the message source heavily influence the process and
outcomes of persuasion (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). One notion of communicator credibility draws on the elaboration likelihood model. It posits that persuasion is the joint function of the recipient’s involvement in the outcome and the communicator’s credibility (Hass, 1981). The elaboration likelihood model predicts that increasing a person’s motivation causes brand attitudes to have greater impact on purchase intentions, thus, the theory specifies that purchase intentions are a function of attitudes and that motivation will moderate the impact of attitudes on intentions (MacKenzie and Spreng, 1992). Theorists propose that uninvolved recipients respond with more negative thoughts to a low credibility communicator than to a high credibility communicator. The model draws on the elaboration likelihood model notion that a recipient’s own thoughts determine attitude change, although it focuses in particular on the mediating role of counter arguments.

It has been well documented in the marketing literature that communicators with evaluatively positive attributes are assumed to be more persuasive than communicators with less positive attributes (Eagley and Chaiken, 1993). Therefore, source variables essentially may also act as a moderator influencing the impact of a persuasive message. According to researchers, both the source’s trustworthiness and expertise (Dholakia and Sternthal, 1977) determine source credibility. Attribution theory suggests that consumers, when presented with a message, will make an effort to assess whether the message provides an accurate representation and/or whether the source of the message lacks credibility (Kelly, 1967). The persuasive impact of the message is typically diminished whenever consumers attribute reporting or knowledge bias to the source (Eagley et al., 1978). When the source credibility is perceived low, consumers will discount the claims or arguments made in the message. Conversely, when the source credibility is perceived to be high, consumers tend to counter argue less with the claims and are therefore more easily influenced by the message (Grewal et al., 1994). When presented with framed message, a message recipient may try to determine who the source of the message is and how trustworthy they are, resulting in a message framing by source credibility interaction. Positively framed messages presented by experts should influence product attitudes to the greatest extent.

In summary, the literature review suggests that presentation order and source credibility may interact with message framing and jointly determine the final judgment of the message recipient. This study attempts to demonstrate that message framing may not be uniform in all conditions and may be moderated by other simultaneous cognitive processes such as presentation order and source credibility.

Hypotheses
The above discussion of the literature leads to the formulation of the following hypotheses:

H1: There will be significant main effects for message framing, presentation order and source credibility on product attitudes. Specifically, information presented in a positive frame will have significantly greater mean scores that information presented in a negative frame; information presented last will have significantly greater mean scores than information presented first; and information presented by an expert will have significantly greater mean ratings than information presented by nonexperts.
Method

Subjects and design

A total of 200 undergraduate students, who were either marketing or management majors from two universities in the northeast, participated in this study. A random ordering of experimental packets assigned students to one of eight experimental conditions in a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design consisting of presentation order and framing (positive/negative, negative/positive) by credibility of the source (high/low).

Procedure

Subjects were given a packet with instructions, a detailed description of a new product and rating scales. In this study the new product being introduced was a stereo receiver (low personal relevance). Subjects were asked to read a detailed description of this product and respond to the questions that followed. Half the subjects were presented information at the very beginning of the product description that was positively framed (i.e. “test market results show that 85 percent of the users of this product were satisfied with its performance”). The other half of the subjects received this same information at the very end of the description, thus creating the order effect. Framing effects were created by changing the information presented to a negative frame (i.e. “15 percent of the customers were dissatisfied with the product”), so that half of the subjects received positive information while the other half received negative information. Credibility of the source was manipulated by presenting half of the subjects with information that experts (high credibility) or shoppers (low credibility) reviewed the product and gave their opinion.

Dependent measures

Following the detailed description of the new product, subjects completed measures assessing the attractiveness of the product, their willingness to purchase the product, and their perceived performance of the product. Each of the dependent measures was assessed on three seven-point semantic differential scales. For attractiveness, bad/good, not nice/nice, unlikable/likeable were used. Unlikely/likely, improbable/probable and impossible/possible were used for willingness to purchase, while not confident/confident, not certain/certain and feel unsure/sure were used for perception of performance. Correlation among the dependent measures were high (0.67, 0.69 and 0.72) and thus treated as one variable (alpha = 0.87). Each of the dependent measures were then combined into a composite score (numerical average of all the scales) and labeled product attitudes which was used to analyze the data.

Manipulation checks

In order to check the manipulation on credibility of the source, subjects were asked to rate reviewers of this product on four semantic differential scales (not open-minded/open-minded, not expert/expert, not experienced/expperienced, not trained/trained). Again, a composite score was derived and subjected to analysis. The results indicate that subjects found experts (M = 5.67, SD = 0.76) more credible than non-experts (M = 4.38, SD = 0.80 ($t_{198} = 6.45, p < 0.001$)). Order and frame were checked by conducting a pilot before the collection of data on the actual experiment. A total of 52
undergraduate students participated in the pilot study in which order and frame were manipulated in a $2 \times 2$ ANOVA design. The procedure for the pilot was the same as the experiment except for the fact that no data were collected on credibility. The results showed significant main effects for both order ($M = 5.23, SD = 0.96 (F(3/46) = 2.79, p = 0.051)$) and frame ($M = 4.93, SD = 0.75 (F(3/46) = 8.44, p < 0.001)$) indicating that the manipulations were effective on this small sample. In addition, subjects were asked to comment on the personal relevance of the new stereo and it was found that although most would like to have one, it was not that important to them indicating that this product had low personal relevance.

**Results**

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze the data (Table I). Table II presents the means and standard deviations of the eight cells involved in the experimental design for this study. The results shown in Table I indicate significant main effects for message frame, message order and a significant three-way interaction effect for framing by order by credibility. No other findings were significant.

$H1$ indicated there would be main effects for all three independent variables. The results partially support this hypothesis. Significant differences were detected for message framing and message order. Subjects who received a positively framed message ($M = 5.61$) rated product attitudes significantly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Message frame (A)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>43.04</td>
<td>40.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message order (B)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20.41</td>
<td>19.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility of the source (C)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A by B</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A by C</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B by C</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A by B by C</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.05</td>
<td>8.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Simple effects**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A by B (1) by C (1)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>3.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A by B (1) by C (2)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24.81</td>
<td>19.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A by B (2) by C (1)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21.05</td>
<td>16.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A by B (2) by C (2)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>192</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>199</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table I. Three-way analysis of variance with simple effects analysis for product attitudes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message order</th>
<th>Positive message framing</th>
<th>Negative message framing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expert source</td>
<td>Nonexpert source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presented first</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>5.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presented last</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>6.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>5.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table II. Subjects’ means and standard deviations for product attractiveness ratings*
greater than those subjects who received a negatively framed message (M = 4.69). Also, those subjects who received a framed message last (M = 5.47) rated product attractiveness significantly greater than those subjects who received the framed message first (M = 4.83). There were no significant differences detected between subjects’ ratings of product attractiveness on source credibility.

**Interaction effect**

H2 stated an interaction effect for message framing, message order and source credibility. Specifically that positively framed information presented by an expert last will have a greater effect on product attitudes than all other conditions in the study. Table I indicated a significant interaction effect for the specified combination of variables. An examination of the simple effects analysis in Table I and Figure 1 indicates specific interaction effects. Significant differences in message framing effects (positive, M = 5.40 vs negative, M = 3.99; see Figure 1) were found for those subjects who received the framed message first in the nonexpert condition and those subjects who received the framed message last in the expert condition (positive, M = 6.08 vs negative, M = 4.78; see Figure 1). These results lend support for hypothesis 3.

**Discussion**

Results from this study indicate that framing did have a significant influence on consumers’ decisions. First of all they corroborate earlier findings that message framing, such as, “the glass is either half empty or half full,” influences consumers’ decisions. In this study message framing influenced perceptions of product attractiveness. In addition we introduced two moderators of this process, i.e. the credibility of the source and the presentation order of the message. Results were more encouraging for presentation order than they were for source credibility since there were significant main effect findings in addition to the three-way interaction effect. However, one should not discount source credibility altogether since the three-way interaction suggested customers did consider source as a viable influence on their product attitudes when message framing and message order were considered simultaneously. An anomaly of this study may have been the fact that students were used as subjects and lacked experience in making buying decisions and were less influenced by source credibility. The findings in this study seem to be contrary to extant research on this topic.

**Positive framing**

Of particular interest in this study were the moderation effects of presentation order and source credibility on message framing. It was

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Credibility</th>
<th>Positive Framing</th>
<th>Negative Framing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expert</td>
<td>(6.08)</td>
<td>(4.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonexpert</td>
<td>(5.28)</td>
<td>(4.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1. Three-way interaction between message framing, presentation order and source credibility*
demonstrated that positively framed messages presented first resulted in significantly greater scores than negatively framed messages for those subjects in the nonexpert condition and that positively framed information presented last resulted in significantly greater attitude ratings than negatively framed information in the expert condition. Here, subjects consistently rated the positively framed message higher than negatively framed message. When the information was framed positively, it tended to influence their attitudes towards the product more. However, this condition was clearly moderate by both message order and source credibility. In order for subjects to be influenced in the most effective way they should be presented with the positively framed message first and by a nonexpert or last by an expert. These findings may suggest that working memory is limited to some extent and that there may be other cognitive processes at work other than those considered in this study. Product attitudes were mostly based on the most recent positive information received. Perhaps when consumers are presented with many facts about a product not only will they remember the most recent information but also may not be attending to much of the information. Future research should examine this possibility.

Credibility of the source did not interact significantly with either message framing or presentation order alone. However, when considered in a three-way interaction it was found that subjects randomly assigned to the expert and present last, positively framed and presented last condition scored significantly greater on product attitudes. These findings suggest that consumers respond to the most recent positive information and credibility of the source may play a role but only if they can remember it. Interestingly enough, credibility information was presented last in all conditions. Order was not manipulated on this variable, only on message framing. It appears that source credibility may get discounted under some conditions but not when it is presented as one of the last pieces of information a consumer receives about a product. It would be interesting to study whether source credibility plays a lesser moderator role if it is presented earlier in the study.

**Conclusion and future research**

These findings suggest that further examination is needed on cognitive processes that may influence consumer behavior. This research has opened several questions that should be investigated. The role of individual cognitive differences among consumers may be the next step in the process. For example, does the ability to cognate or attend to information moderate other cognitive processes such as recalling information from memory? In addition, is there an emotional component that may interact with consumers’ ability to recall and use information presented to them? Future research may need to consider these more abstract cognitive variables.

**References**


Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

The best ads are positive ads

One of the most common debates in advertising is over the use or otherwise of negative and positive messages. When describing our own product, we should always strive to present things in the most positive manner possible – the glass is half full rather than half empty, eight out of ten cat owners say their cat prefers Whiskas.

So we should not be too surprised when Buda and Zhang find that subjects receiving “... a positively framed message rated product attributes significantly greater than those subjects who received a negatively framed message.” But we should not simply say “that’s obvious” and move on. The truth is that, despite the common sense of positively framed messages, too many advertisers fall back on anodyne or non-committal messages.

Sometimes this failure is because, frankly, the advertiser hasn’t musk else to say. But more often it reflects laziness on behalf of the advertisement’s creators. So long as a positive statement can be made with credibility (more about this later) we should make it. So why do advertisers fail to “accentuate the positive”?

Advertisers are frightened of the truth!

No this doesn’t mean that advertisers lie. What I mean is that advertisers prefer to make some unchallengeable (and often meaningless) statement about their product or service rather than communicate real facts. The desire to make a “positive” statement is there but the results are too often nebulous and unspecific. The aim seems to be to create a happy glow in the person experiencing the advertising.

We can compare this tendency to vagueness with the precision of the “attack” ad. Because attacking another product involves the risks of that product’s marketers resorting to legal actions, we are careful to be precise, concise and specific in what we say. Moreover, we are required (everywhere but in political advertising) to give substantiation for any critical comments about a competitive product.

In developing the positive message – and that is more powerful when done right – advertisers need to apply the same set of rules as they use in determining the copy for an “attack” ad. Is it true? Can we substantiate what we say? Is there independent or survey evidence in support of our positive contentions? If we can’t answer these questions with the affirmative then don’t fall back on the vague and wishy-washy – go and find some hard facts about what you are promoting.

Use research – and accept the bad with the good

Advertisers and advertising agencies use a great deal of market research. Indeed, a great deal of expertise in research methods and their applications resides in the typical advertisement agency. But this expertise is focused on testing advertisements and advertising treatments rather than on providing the bullets for the advertisements to fire.

Imagine the situation. A new client presents the agency with an advertising brief. Attached to this brief is a long, turgid research report from the company’s in-house research team. The advertising planner takes one look at this tome and employs it as a valuable doorstop. The creatives tear out pages to make paper darts.
Why? Because the research doesn’t ask the right questions. It tells us about the market. About market share. About the profile of the client’s customers. But it doesn’t have in it the facts that can provide a positive spin to the advertising message.

I’m not arguing here that the purpose of commercial market research is just to provide the facts for advertising – market information and intelligence is a vital element in the creation of advertising strategies. But there is a role for research in finding the positives. If your research doesn’t do this then you should consider commissioning studies that do provide positives. And in doing so you will also find out about the things consumers don’t like about your product – the very things that might form the basis for your competitor’s knocking copy.

Trawl independent studies and reviews – they tell you a lot about your product

For some sectors, there is an abundance of good independent information about product performance – both qualitative and quantitative. Use this information – learn from the motor sector where independent comment is a stock in trade of advertising. The car marketer that cannot find some positives from the vast amount written and researched has probably got a real lemon on his hands.

Don’t despair if your product doesn’t come out on top in a consumer review. There will undoubtedly be advantages highlighted in the review that can be used as the basis for positive copy. And don’t criticise the reviews or attempt to explain away bad parts of research. Consumers trust independent reviews and research far more than they trust you and your advertising.

Another source of good advertising copy is your customer – seek feedback and, where the response in good and focuses on the specific use it (with permission) in strengthening your positive message.

Be happily positive – it might just give advertising a good name

It’s depressing when we have advertising experts saying that negative advertising is better than positive advertising. It’s also untrue – the best advertising is positive and uplifting.

So throw away the negative ads, get some facts in front of the copywriters and tell them to create strong, specific and positive messages that talk to the customer about why your product is so good. You’ll be happier, your legal bills will drop and you’ll produce better advertising.

(A précis of the article “Consumer product evaluation: the interactive effect of message framing, presentation order, and source credibility”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for MCB University Press.)