FINANCIAL WORD

Lucian Camp identifies why some advertising campaigns connect more effectively than others.

One of the scarier things about writing a column like this is the danger of accidentally revealing ignorance. "Wouldn't it be great," the writer muses in all innocence, "if someone wrote a play about a prince of, say, Denmark, whose father is killed by his mother and stepfather and who vows to get his revenge." "Doh," say all his readers. "Where were you when the rest of the class was doing Hamlet?"

This column isn't about Hamlet, but it may generate a "Doh" reaction, especially from readers who know about advertising research. It seems to me that when it comes to figuring out how advertising works, there's a missing measure. It's hard to express what it is precisely, but it might be called something like connectedness, or intrinsicness, or maybe just good old integration. But somehow none of these seems quite right.

Anyway, even though I can't express this idea, fortunately I can explain it. I'm talking about the extent to which consumers are willing or able to accept that the advertising has a bearing on their perceptions of the brand being advertised, rather than just on their perceptions of the advertising itself.

Take an example from the automotive market. Like most people, I have the greatest respect for Skoda's recent advertising. It helped that the company was bought by VW, stopped making the kind of cars whose main role was to act as the punch line for jokes and started making what are, to all intents and purposes, VWs for about 70% of VW prices. But the ads still played a big part in laying to rest the old joke punch line image, and dancing wittily and entertainingly on its grave.

By contrast, I am the only person in the universe who doesn't much admire Honda's current advertising. Yes, yes, very clever, very creative, beautifully executed, but for me – in the hierarchy of all car advertising campaigns in the history of the universe – probably the least effective in changing my perception of the cars being advertised in any way whatsoever.

I still find Hondas absolutely as boring, anonymous and soulless as I ever did. I still observe that the average age of people driving whatever they're called, Civics and Accords, is about 117, and their passengers a good 30 years older. And lazy as I am, I'd rather walk to any destination up to ten miles away than drive there in a Honda.

I can't explain the fundamental difference between Skoda and Honda advertising, but there is one. It's the same as the difference, in high street banking, between NatWest and Halifax advertising on the one hand, and Barclays and HSBC on the other.

NatWest and Halifax don't have the most marvellous advertising in the world, but their campaigns do have some bearing, even if only slight, on the way you think about the institutions concerned. Maybe it's mostly just spin and hype, but NatWest does seem to be trying to avoid some of the worst and most cynical follies of their competitors. And Howard and his friends do go some way to convincing us that Halifax offers us a jollier, friendlier, slightly less savagely mercenary alternative, still drawing in some vague way on its building society antecedents.

HSBC entertained us for some years with its "world's local bank" campaign – a campaign that was a good deal cleverer and more sophisticated than it looked, as now becomes clearly apparent when we compare it with the banal and silly "everyone's different" approach that has replaced it.

But I don't believe the campaign ever had the slightest effect in making the retail branches, products or services of the bank feel any bigger in scale or more cosmopolitan in outlook than anyone else's.

Barclays' current "now there's a thought" campaign is beyond analysis. But their previous Samuel L. Jackson executions were, to me, a definitive example of Honda-syndrome advertising – clever, well-written, well-directed, but existing in complete and total isolation from anything except themselves and telling us nothing at all about Barclays except that someone there was too easily impressed by a presentation from their advertising agency.

Once you focus on this issue – the extent to which the advertising seems in any way *attached* to the brand – you can put other campaigns in other markets to the test. For example, I've never thought that Guinness's recent advertising has much to do with the way I feel about Guinness. But my perceptions of Fosters, on the other hand, have been built almost exclusively by the ads.

It may seem quaint to modern eyes, but Mars Bar's good old "work, rest and play" campaign absolutely shaped the way we thought about the brand – and a good, solid, satisfying shape it was too. The replacement "pleasure you can't measure" campaign makes no connection to the Mars Bar at all.

And to finish with a slightly different example where the issue is more to do with corporate brand and ethos, it's hard to explain why Orange's advertising seems to offer a real, if occasionally somewhat opaque, window into the true character of the business, while in different ways T Mobile's, Vodafone's and O2's campaigns aren't about anything beyond themselves.

Sorry, but I have to tell you I'm not going anywhere with this, or at least anywhere beyond where I've now got to. It may well be, as I nervously suggested at the beginning, that this thing I'm talking about here – call it *connectivity* between the advertising and the brand – is perfectly well documented and understood by everyone in the business except me.

It may well be that I'm just completely wrong about it, and Samuel L. Jackson actually did a fantastic job in persuading everyone that Barclays was, indeed, fluent in finance.

Or it may be that some campaigns do indeed have this connectivity thing and can work hard to change brand perceptions whereas others don't and can't. Possibly it's just one of those lap-of-the-gods things and *che sera, sera*. But there is a final possibility – that there is a little understood but important issue here, and perhaps with a bit of further thought it could be understood and managed much better than it is at the moment.

If so, it would be a development that might save a whole bunch of advertisers – including Honda, HSBC, Barclays, Guinness, Mars, T-Mobile, Vodafone and O2 – an awful lot of money. ☐

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