

# Why, When, and How Much to Entertain Consumers in Advertisements? A Web-based Facial Tracking Field Study

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## Abstract

Can you have too much entertainment in an ad? The data suggests it's possible. In this study, in partnership with colleagues from the MIT Media Lab, we used facial tracking technology to evaluate the impact that different levels of entertainment in TV ads had on consumers' nearly 5000 ad viewing and purchasing decisions. There is much evidence that the presence of positive forms of entertainment (e.g., content that is clever, humorous, creative) in TV advertisements can increase the effectiveness of the ads by making them both more attractive and more persuasive. We found, however, that too much (or misplaced) entertainment, can actually be detrimental to the persuasiveness of the ad. By explaining why, when, and how much to entertain consumers, we identify how advertisers can maximize the persuasiveness and effectiveness of their advertising in order to increase sales.

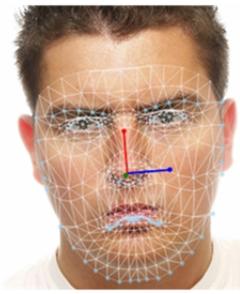
## In-Home Field Experiment

We have completed what is, to our knowledge, the first large-scale, web-based field experiment to measure entertainment levels through facial expression analysis [Figure 1]. Our novel facial tracking system captures facial expressions associated with entertainment (e.g., smiles) using the web camera in participants' computers. Continuous measurement of the smile responses and facial cues allow us to determine participants' interest in fully viewing the ad and their intent to purchase the featured brand. We showed a sample of 82 ads with various levels of entertainment from 3 product categories (beverages, confectionary, and alcohol) to 275 people in their homes and workplaces [Figure 2]. The remote nature of the technology is both scalable and unobtrusive, allowing for the collection of data from a more natural out-of-lab environment where entertainment and other advertising content compete with environmental stimuli for the consumer's attention.

## Findings

The data suggests that entertainment can play both a cooperating and a conflicting role with the brand regarding the attractiveness and persuasiveness of an ad. Brand managers should take into consideration three elements in designing effective entertaining TV ads: the **level** of entertainment, the **location** of the entertainment relative to the first appearance of the brand, and the **stage** in the purchase funnel they intend to affect. We explain these three elements next.

Tracking the face



Tracking smiles



Figure 1: Remote tracking of the face and smiles. Source: Noldus

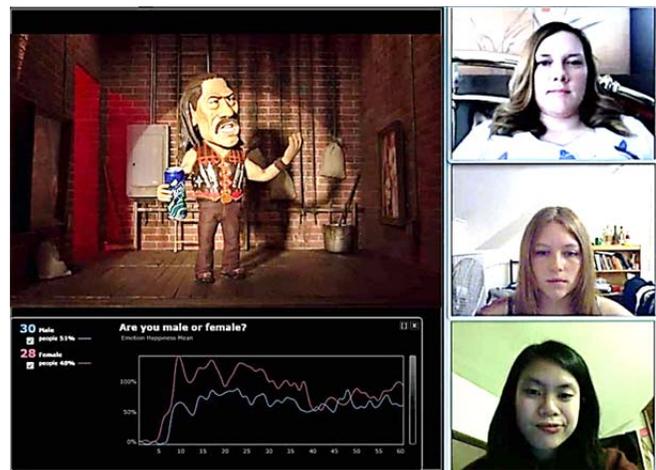


Figure 2: In-home filming of consumer responses to TV ads.

**Level:** Entertainment impacts purchase intentions via two routes: directly through a persuasion mechanism, and indirectly by increasing viewing interest through an attractiveness mechanism. The latter is straightforward. The more entertainment in the ad, the more attractive it is, and the more likely consumers are to continue viewing the ad. The former is an inverted-U shape. Increasing levels of entertainment directly increase the ad's persuasiveness up to a certain point, decreasing thereafter.

Figure 3 demonstrates this effect by comparing three ads for Pepsi Max, shown to three randomly assigned groups of consumers. Facial tracking revealed that the ad entitled 'Catch' scored among the worse in terms of level of entertainment, being in the 2<sup>nd</sup> percentile (%ile) of all ads studied. Yet, due to a strong brand, consumer viewing and purchase intent was at the 18<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> %iles, respectively. On the flipside, 'First date' was regarded as one of the most entertaining ads, in

the 96<sup>th</sup> %ile, and this contributed to high viewing (81<sup>st</sup> %ile) and purchasing (22<sup>nd</sup> %ile). Yet, the ad with highest purchase intent, at 77 %ile, is actually one that has a moderately high level of entertainment. ‘Love hurts,’ in the 81<sup>st</sup> entertainment %ile, strikes a balance between entertaining viewers to grab their attention and maximizing the brand’s persuasiveness.

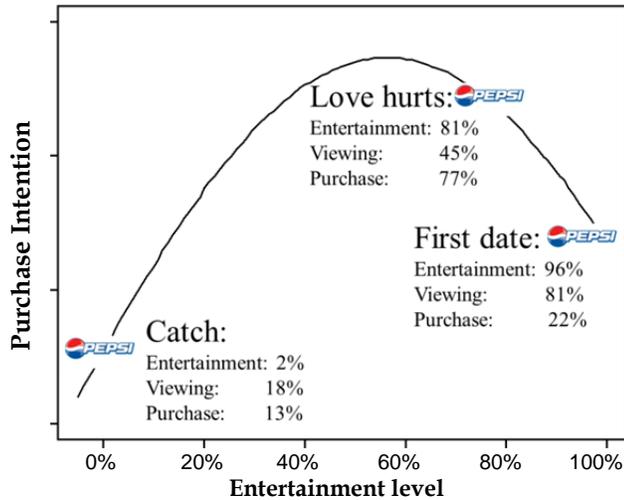


Figure 3: Too much entertainment in ads damages the brand.

**Location:** It matters. Entertainment evoked before the consumer is aware of the brand being advertised (e.g., first appearance of the brand) has a competing effect with brand persuasion. While it may elicit positive facial reactions and have beneficial effects on a person’s desire to watch the entire ad, it reduces purchase intent. Entertainment evoked after the consumer sees the brand has a cooperating effect with persuasion by increasing interest and purchase intent.

**Stage:** Lastly, the optimal amount of entertainment to use in ads depends on the stage of the purchase funnel (i.e., awareness, interest, or purchase) where the advertiser intends to influence consumers. The amount of entertainment for ads created to impact the top stages of the purchase funnel, e.g., converting awareness to interest, should be higher than that which is optimal to impact the bottom stages of the funnel, e.g., converting interest to purchase. This explains, for example, why many Super Bowl ads are highly entertaining, as they function to increase awareness whereas direct marketing ads have much less entertainment, in an attempt to trigger a purchase.

*Conclusion*

Creative professionals in advertising agencies increasingly compete with one another for the funniest, most creative, or most entertaining ad, whether it be for an award, a Super Bowl spot, or a viral video. This “race to be most entertaining” can come at the expense of the persuasiveness of the ad, thereby undermining the ad’s success at driving brand consideration and purchase. To maximize ad

persuasiveness, it is up to the brand manager to curb the race for entertainment for entertainment’s sake, and balance the level and location of entertainment relative to the brand. Our findings suggest that David Ogilvy, celebrated adman from the agency Ogilvy and Mather, was right both in 1963, when he claimed that the advertiser should “resist the temptation to entertain” the viewer, and later in 1985 when he claimed that entertainment can sell. This research provides a roadmap for balancing these two advices.