Argument Advertising Ethics and Dogs: MultiModal Argumentation

Once More With Humour

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Abstract

Michael Gilbert’s MultiModal Argumentation model has been useful for a variety of issues in ethics in advertising. In this final conference presentation of his work, I take the reader briefly through a review of MMA, and then sketch an analysis of its use in humourous advertising using dogs.

1. INTRODUCTION

Advertisers in today’s cautious and cluttered world face a problem in constructing an ad that catches the viewer’s attention while avoiding appearing inappropriate. Consumers are exposed to some 3,500 advertisements per day [18] and advertisers know they must do something special and different to catch the consumers’ attention. Advertisers know that humour and visual associations help cut through the clutter, but what may seem like clever visual representation to the designer of an ad may appear as sexist, racist, ageist, or just offensive when viewed by the target market. Constructing an effective and appropriate advertising message requires collaboration in interdisciplinary research into how an ad will make its argument to the viewer, and whether that ad can be considered “ethical”. The word ethical is in quotation marks because ethical decisions are usually based on beliefs formed early in consumers’ lives, making the decision often a very personal one. Nevertheless, we can use a method from York University Philosophy Professor, Michael Gilbert’s MultiModal Argumentation (MMA), to examine the issue of ethics in argument. This paper continues a stream of work by the author dedicated to examining the interdisciplinary application of philosophical models to issues of importance to business, especially in the field of communications that build arguments. To the analysis, it adds the element of humour, as suggested by Professor Thomas Marlowe of Seton Hall University. In examining arguments in ads and, where humour may be found, evaluating its effects, this paper assumes that emotions can be arguments [2], that ads can be arguments [17], and that the visual can be an argument [8].

Michael Gilbert’s MultiModal Argumentation model has long been studied in the fields of Philosophy [3,4,5,6,7] and of Business [11,12,13,14,15,16] as a way of evaluating arguments. Most arguments will of course have at least some logical component, but Gilbert argues that there also are other ways of evaluating an argument. In Western society, the term argument is closely bound with logic, as in a phrase we often hear, “I’m not going to argue with you if you can’t be logical”. Gilbert maintains that while argumentation traditionally is associated with logic and reasoning [1,10,20,21,22], we also must consider three other modes of argumentation:

Emotional “is related to the realm of feelings”;
Visceral “stems from the area of the physical”;
Kisceral “covers the intuitive and non-sensory arenas” [3].

Part of the research to be done by the designer of an ad is investigating the argument the ad makes from all four perspectives. This paper examines print ads with visual elements, looking at differences in logical versus emotional approaches, and examining the role of humour in the analysis. In “confronting them with the world” [19] the designer can examine each form...
of argument and, through research such as focus groups and surveys, determine which ad will best appeal to the target market.

To give an example of my use of Gilbert’s model with advertisements: in a full colour ad in *Esquire Magazine* for the Do It Yourself television network, we see a woman standing in an elegant home with fashionable wood flooring and modern art on the walls. She wears a low-cut sequinned dress and knee-high boots, and carries a hammer. The copy in the lower right corner says, “Esquire Ultimate Bachelor Pad Television Special” with the date and time and the DIY network logo. In this ad, we can find a logical argument to fit a proper syllogism:

- All things built by the DIY network are well built.
- The *Esquire* Ultimate Bachelor Pad was built by the DIY network.

Therefore the *Esquire* Ultimate Bachelor Pad is well built.

We also can find an emotional argument, which we can put in the form of a syllogism:

- All things making use of a beautiful tough woman in an ad are worth experiencing.
- The DIY Network uses a beautiful tough woman in its ad.

Therefore the DIY Network is worth experiencing.

We also can find a visceral argument (the physical image of the woman holding a hammer) and a kisceral argument (the intuitive link between hammer, construction, and beauty). We also find humour in connections made between a woman as beauty and a woman as capable construction worker. Unfortunately we also encounter a rather sexist view of woman and yet another attempt to use an attractive woman to sell a product.

2. ADVERTISING AND DOGS

Fortunately for advertisers, there are other routes to humour in ads. Everyone these days it seems is mad about dogs. They appear in ads for everything from applesauce to zoos. They are particularly being used more frequently in ads because of the number of aging Baby Boomers adopting dogs. Best of all is the fact that we can use dogs in silly, humourous, ridiculous ways to make a product memorable, and unlike a human who might protest, they will not utter even a growl, and they have no access to ethics boards or product boycotting.

A major use of dogs in ads is to advertise products made especially for them, such as treats. This bloodhound shown at his place of employment as a search animal appears to be about to bolt, were it not for the treat awaiting him at the finish of his job – Because dogs don’t always have it easy:

In a MultiModal Argumentation explanation we can see how the ad makes its argument in the four modes:

Logical: All dirty jobs require a treat.

- A dog’s using underwear to track a person is a dirty job.

Therefore, the dog deserves a treat.

Emotional: The expression on the dog’s face tells us what he must be feeling.

Visceral: The picture is graphic and hits home right in the gut.

Kisceral: We make the leap from the picture of the dog and the underwear to what the task will involve.

In each mode, we come to the conclusion that the advertised Dog Treats are a good thing to buy for our dog. An interesting result of the application of MMA to the analysis of humourous dog ads is the sense that all humourous ads use all of the modes of argument.

I could continue this analysis with more ads, but I have been doing this for a long time and this is my last conference presentation before I retire, so I am just going to take you through a series of funny dog ads showing in how many different ways advertisers are using dogs today. Keep an eye out for the different modes of argument – logical, emotional, visceral, and kisceral. All of them use all the modes, and all of them use humour.
The ad may provide a solution to a problem with a dog that many owners experience – bad dog breath:

Good treats can make a dog healthier, especially in the area of tooth care – Give your dog stronger teeth:

An ad for doggy daycare emphasizes the fear that parents have for someone left home alone, and as more dogs become surrogate children, it is easy to use that fear in a humorous way to advertise a service that looks after your dog while you are away – What’s your dog up to when it’s home alone?:

Numerous dog ads are designed to appeal to people who may be thinking of bringing a stray dog into their home – There’s no better friend. Adopt a dog:

Or a company might be advertising to sell purebred dogs. This one combines people’s love of dogs as well as chocolate:

Dogs are used to advertise products with no direct relationship to dogs – Batteries, Never let their toys die:
3. DISCUSSION

Use of humour in MultiModal Argumentation analysis brings very much to light the importance of each mode when analyzing ads, whether for ethical concerns or for measuring effect. Most ads will have at least a portion of each of the modes of analysis in them. In the ads using dog humour in this paper, it is possible to see all the modes in each ad. It is just possible that among all ads, those that use humour as a major driving force need to have equal measures of each mode – logical, emotional visceral, and kisceral – to be effective. For any particular ad to be successful, it need not have equal amounts of each mode, nor is it necessary in order for the ad to be ethical. But to be successful as a humourous ad, there must be strong representation from each mode.

In a humourous ad, logic must be there to make the joke and to ground it in some sort of reality. A joke without some logical backing rarely works. It is the twist on the expected logic that produces the humour. This is the case in the ad for bird seed that shows us a Blue Jay body (bird, not Toronto baseball player) with a dog’s head. It is totally illogical for a bird to have a dog’s head, but the twist on the logic is that bird can become somewhat like the dog, a good friend to humans if the bird is fed the right food.

An attempted joke that is only logical is not necessarily funny. There must be an emotional component to the joke. Emotion makes us laugh, makes us understand what has been put before us and appreciate its value as something that moves us in some way. The ad shown here with the dog’s tongue wrapped around its head makes us feel good and laugh simply to see it. It then leads us back to logic as it makes the argument that a good car will provide enough speed for a dog to enjoy its traditional head-out-the-window-in-the-wild-wind experience.

The visceral reaction, the gut reaction, to humour must be there; an ad trying for a humourous effect must hit us at a direct level so that catching the joke comes quickly but not too quickly. It is the slightly delayed reaction to the combination of colour mix of black and white with the name “the black connection” that makes us realize that the little white dog is advertising eyeglasses.

And finally, the kisceral, or intuitive, must be there to help make the jump from each of the other modes to the proposed joke. In the ad that used the bloodhound not anxious to smell something nasty in order to do his job, we see all four modes acting together, each as important as the others. Logic tells us that doing
something unpleasant must carry some kind of reward in order to get it done. Emotion grabs us with the look on the dog’s face. Of course we could make a logical link that dirty clothing would upset the dog, but it is the expression on his face that makes it clear just how upset he is. This is something of a physical joke. We need to experience how the dog must be feeling faced with the dirty clothing and this is made clear not only by the expression on the dog’s face, but by the visual image of the clothing, and by the dog’s posture. And finally we make the leap to humour from the implied fact that in order to do his job, the dog is going to have to smell the clothing and we find the dirty clothing standing for the criminal activity we believe has gone on before this. All four of these components are equally important in conveying the humour in the ad and ultimately in making the pitch for the product advertised.

4. CONCLUSION

Michael Gilbert’s Multimodal Argumentation model has been widely used in Philosophy and other areas, and it has given me an enriched research programme over a number of years, examining the different modes of analyzing argumentation made in advertisements. My thanks to Professor Michael Gilbert for MMA, and to Professor Claudio Durán, also of York University, for introducing me to it and researching many a paper together, and to Professor Thomas Marlowe of Seaton Hall University [9] for suggesting the addition of humour to the analysis.

REFERENCES

[15] Ripley, M Louise, “The Creation of a Youth Culture: Distortion in a Dark Glass”. In Paul C.


