



Ehrenberg's View of Advertising

Byron Sharp June 2010

ANDREW EHRENBURG

Andrew Ehrenberg was awarded a gold medal of the United Kingdom's Market Research Society (twice); an honorary fellowship of the Royal Statistical Society; an honorary doctorate from the University of South Australia; and a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Advertising Research Foundation. He was born on May 1, 1926, and died after a long illness on August 25, 2010, at age 84.

In 1961, the very first volume of the Journal of Advertising Research (JAR) featured an article written by Andrew Ehrenberg, a young researcher from a commercial market research agency. It is to the credit of the JAR to publish an article that was written by a British practitioner and featured U.K. data—this was long before other U.S. marketing journals decided to try to embrace an international outlook. Every decade thereafter, JAR featured articles by Andrew Ehrenberg and his collaborators: 20 articles spanning 1961 to 2002.

Andrew Ehrenberg would go on to become professor of marketing and communication at London Business School and, later, London South Bank University. He published more than 300 scholarly articles in many journals, including the prestigious science journal Nature. It is JAR (and perhaps also Admap) readers, however, who can best claim to have an appreciation of the breadth of Ehrenberg's work and his impact. In the pages of this journal, his

work included papers on advertising, of course, but also on pricing, marketing metrics, the need for scientific laws, new products, data analysis, modeling, and the communication of data.

That original article—a paper on measuring TV viewing—was sensible, practical, and clear. In other words, classic Andrew Ehrenberg. Yet, it gave no hint—not the slightest tremor—to forewarn of the shockwaves that his later articles would produce.

In 1974, his paper "Repetitive Advertising and the Consumer" bluntly set out his early views on how advertising works: not by persuasion or manipulation (through either emotional or rational mechanisms) but largely by reinforcing existing propensities. It was a radical thesis. Even 26 years later, Ambler would write, "The assumption that advertising equals persuasion is so ingrained in the USA that a challenge elicits much the same reaction as questioning your partner's parentage" (Ambler, 2000).

If Ehrenberg had just taken on rational persuasion, he would have made many friends in advertising agencies. Moreover, he would have seemed very modern (even today, when neuroscience has once again thrown a spotlight on emotion). Andrew went a step further, however, to dismiss the notion that because advertising contains emotional content, it must work through persuasion—by unconscious manipulation, by building irrational preferences.

Advertising theorists have long tended to fulminate from their armchairs. Some come with advertising-agency experience, and others work from laboratory experiments. Andrew Ehrenberg, however, had by the mid-1970s spent almost 20 years studying data on the real-world repeat buying of consumers: no wonder he saw things differently. Yet, in "Repetitive Advertising and the Consumer", he gave only the briefest description of the robust patterns in buying behavior and attitudes that underpinned his views.

I remember Andrew's being upset when the 1974 paper was reprinted in the 2000 volume of the JAR featuring "classic" contributions to advertising research that were deemed to have had lasting value. Of course, it was a great honor, but Andrew feared that people would misinterpret the editors' intent and think the material had a 2000 point of reference reflecting his current views.

"Repetitive Advertising and the Consumer" contained some exemplary thinking, but he felt it was too blunt and assertive, with little flesh on the bones of the argument and so easily misinterpreted and/or misrepresented. Andrew was a harsh critic of his own work; he felt he wrote poorly and would not release anything until it had been revised many dozens of times (much to the lament of his co-authors, though his readers benefited).

In 1997 in the JAR, he described the patterns in buying behavior that underpinned his views in the article "Advertising: Strongly Persuasive or Nudging?" I suspect that this empirical evidence of consumers' "polygamous loyalty" was just as earth-shattering to many readers as was Andrew's thesis that advertising works largely by reinforcing and gently nudging existing habitual loyalties.

It was "Advertising as Creative Publicity," however, that Andrew wanted people to read. By the time it was published in the JAR in 2002, Andrew had filled in some of the gaps in his argument. For example, he had systematically documented the fact that a large proportion of advertisements (about half) do not even try to persuade (Ehrenberg, Barnard, Kennedy, and Bloom, 2000; Mills, Kennedy, Ehrenberg, and Schlaeppli, 2000). Most important, however, is that this article brought in memory research

and theory to explain how advertising could affect sales without using persuasion. It also touched on the need for advertising to make the brand distinctive rather than differentiated.

Here was theory that fit the real-world facts, and this was the way Andrew liked things. He felt that social scientists should follow the proven route usually followed by the physical sciences: to first look for real-world law-like patterns that generalize across a wide range of conditions and, only then, to seek to craft theories or explanations built around scientific laws.

Andrew wanted to move marketing research from the traditional approach of armchair theorizing leading to qualitative hypotheses that were "tested" by subjecting a single idiosyncratic set of data to obscure statistical analysis. He called the models that academics and practitioners created.

If you had been trained to do research by SONKing, Ehrenberg's writing was confronting but, to some, it was like a breath of fresh air. Similarly, if your life consisted of writing or implementing advertising briefs centered on "unique selling points," brand differentiation, and points of difference, Ehrenberg's view of advertising provoked an emotional reaction: people felt either threatened or liberated.

The Ehrenbergian view places much greater importance on creativity, on branding, on understanding memory structures. It is a positive story for advertising practitioners, many of whom were attracted into the advertising industry by creative brand- oriented advertising.

[This] model of advertising seems to account for the known facts, but many quantitative details still need elucidation. Such developments could markedly influence the planning, execution, and evaluation of advertising.

—Andrew Ehrenberg, 1974

Today, there is much work still to be done for researchers to understand how advertising can best throw a spotlight on a brand and refresh and build memory structures. And marketers need to better understand the particular memory structures that are devoted to their brand and how these are distributed throughout the minds of the buying population.

Andrew Ehrenberg gave us a new perspective on what was important to do in our advertising and what was important to research.

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