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The Positive of Audience-Targeted Negative Ads

Hongjie Sun, PhD, Yong (Eddie) Luo, PhD, Feifei Liu, and Ben Lowe, PhD

The advertisement landscape is evolving. While positive advertising appeals often dominate, a new trend has emerged—the rise of audience-targeted negative advertisements, which, in contrast to traditional approaches, employ moderately negative messages directly targeting the audience. The emergence of these audience-targeted negative advertisements presents a unique opportunity for advertisers to connect with consumers in unconventional ways.

Defining “Negative” Advertisements

Audience-targeted negative advertisements differ from positive ads or other types of negative ads (i.e., shock, comparative, aggressive humor, or two-sided ads) in that they target the people watching them. Rather than focusing on the company or competitors, these audience-targeted negative advertisements aim to elicit empathy from the audience, thus turning audience response into a positive feeling toward the advertisement itself and the advertised product.

Our research explores how audience-targeted negative advertisements influence people and when they are most effective. We conducted in-depth interviews and experiments to better understand consumer perceptions and response to audience-targeted negative advertisements versus other types of advertisements.

Our Study and Findings

In study 1, participants used in-depth interviews to explore perceptions of audience-targeted negative ads and identified four key features associated with these: negativity, uniqueness, humor, and realism. Building on this, participants in Study 2 compared these "negative targeted ads" to other negative and humorous ads. In this study, we found that negative audience-targeted ads are seen as more unique, realistic, and attention-grabbing. Finally, in Study 3, we tested participants to find out what makes these ads most effective. We found that moderate negativity works best for advertising low-status products, leading to better attitudes and higher purchase intent.

Audience-targeted negative advertisements, which diverge from the traditional positive appeals, possess unique features such as negativity, uniqueness, humor, and realism. While traditional negative ads usually trigger negative emotions, such as guilt, fear or anger, these ads grabbed attention and had an emotional impact, triggering positive responses like humor and empathy. Subsequent experiments confirmed that these ads outshine other negative and humorous ads in terms of being perceived as more unique, realistic, and attention-grabbing. Additionally, we found that these ads work best when they maintain a moderate level of negativity, induce positive perceptions of uniqueness, and are best used to advertise low-status products. In essence, the research provides practical insights for advertisers, suggesting that audience-targeted negative

advertisements, when strategically employed, can effectively engage audiences and shape positive perceptions.

Real Estate Implications

The application of audience-targeted negative advertisements in the real estate sector holds promising implications for marketers and property developers. By strategically leveraging negative appeals, such as highlighting common pain points or challenges associated with property hunting, real estate advertisers can engage with their target audience on a more relatable and authentic level. This approach has the potential to humanize the real estate experience, making it more approachable and less intimidating for prospective buyers.

Moreover, the use of humor and realism in audience-targeted negative advertisements can help break down barriers often associated with property transactions. Creating content that resonates emotionally with potential buyers can establish a stronger connection, fostering trust and transparency in what is traditionally a high-stakes industry. However, it would be wise to confine audience-targeted negative advertisements to aspects of real estate buying that are associated with low-status decisions, such as which mortgage broker to choose or which property inspector to hire.

In conclusion, the integration of audience-targeted negative advertisements in real estate marketing represents a paradigm shift with substantial benefits. While maintaining a delicate balance, advertisers can utilize negativity to address pain points, injecting humor and realism to create memorable and impactful campaigns. This approach not only differentiates real estate brands from competitors but also has the potential to reshape consumer perceptions and foster a more positive and empathetic relationship between buyers and sellers. As the advertising landscape evolves, embracing this innovative strategy in the real estate domain could prove instrumental in navigating the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Recommended Reading

Sun Hongjie, Yong (Eddie) Luo, Feifei Liu, Ben Lowe (2023), “The Advertisement Puts Me Down, But I Like It Examining an Emerging Type of Audience-Targeted Negative Advertisement,” *Journal of Advertising Research*. doi: 10.2501/JAR-2023-010.

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Dr. Hongjie Sun's (PhD – Southwest Jiaotong University) research interests and publications focus on consumer behavior, the decision-making process, green marketing, and tourism management. He has published in leading journals such as the *Journal of Advertising Research*, and serves as the principal investigator for a few national research funding in China.

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