

Training Stories in Children's Targeted Commercials: Does it Work?

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Abstract: *The term “training story” is introduced in this paper to describe any short story with instructional aim. Recently, a growing number of television commercials of kids' foods uses training stories, relevant or not with the advertised products. The study seeks to answer two main questions: if ads with training stories targeted at kids really transfer knowledge to children, and if these ads create a positive brand perception on both parents and children. A model of mixed research was used in order to answer the research questions. As survey instruments two semi structured questionnaires were formed. A total sample of 57 children aged 6-12 years and the equal number of their parents participated in the study. Results suggest that commercials using training stories can enhance parents' brand perception while in children they create a brand perception comparable to that of advertisements which use other techniques. In addition, findings confirm that the instructional nature of this form of advertising is strong and understandable by children. In spite of the existing limitations, resulting from the low generalizability of our findings – due to the small sample size – this study offers a new conceptual framework, by adding the issue of the training stories in the advertising research, which from a research perspective remains uninvestigated. By adding this emerged topic, this article contributes to the development of a new research area that could reap considerable benefits for both marketers and training practitioners, especially for those who target their efforts at children.*

Keywords: *advertising, training stories, children, brand perception, marketing*

1. INTRODUCTION

Children continually assume larger roles in their homes, and are becoming further entrenched and involved in the shopping and buying habits of the households in which they live (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2001), whereas have also emerged as independent consumers (Wilson and Wood, 2004). For marketers children represent a future market. Thus, companies focus their efforts on creating brand awareness and positive brand perception in this target audience. Advertising is at the top of these attempts, as research has shown that kids are exposed to an extremely large number of commercials every year. According to Kunkel et al (2004), this number may even have exceeded 40,000 television commercials.

From the age of nine to ten, most children have reached an adult level of television advertising recognition (Rozendaal et al., 2010); additionally, from the age of seven, they seem to have an implicit understanding of the persuasive intent of advertising (Brady et al., 2008; Owen et al., 2007). Children revealed themselves as sentient beings, with the capacity to react, respond and reflect on their experience of advertising (Mehta et al., 2010).

Jones et al (2010) have found that the children are attracted to the advertisements because of specific elements of the marketing strategies utilised. In order to increase children's brand awareness in television commercials marketers incorporate a wide range of advertising techniques, like the use of celebrity endorsers (Handsley et al., 2009) or cartoon characters (Sixsmith and Furnham, 2010; Kelly et al., 2008).

However, a relatively new technique that is gaining ground in advertising is the use of stories with educational content. Concepts such as dental health or nutrition are discussed in these stories. We define these stories as “training stories”. As training story we define every brief TV spot based on a structured scenario with instructive aim. The aim of this paper is the investigation of the effectiveness of television commercials using training stories on both brand perception and knowledge transfer.

2. FORMATION OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is part of the first stage of a large on-going research which is conducted as part of a PhD thesis. The purpose of the main survey was to investigate the influence of advertising on children's buying behavior. The process of analysis revealed that both children and their parents showed a positive attitude towards an ad that uses stories with instructional content. These findings give birth to two central questions:

(a) Can such advertisements strengthen brand perception? In other words, are these ads an effective tool in the effort of a company to gain consumers? Although the influence of advertising on children's perception of brand is well documented from many previous researches (such as Bakir and Palan, 2010; Moore and Lutz, 2000), the formation of brand perception under the influence of advertisements using training stories is an unexamined research territory.

(b) To what extent do these commercials actually deliver knowledge to underage consumers? During the 70's and 80's a part of the learning literature had focused on learning through television (Rice and Woodsmall, 1988; Lesser, 1972), probably motivated by the great popularity of some educational TV programs such as "Sesame Street" or "Mr Rogers' neighbourhood" that aired during late '60s. The above studies suggest that through such programs children can achieve learning. Recent researches focused mainly on learning through videos focusing on young children (Richert et al., 2011; Roseberry et al., 2009). Although these studies offer conflicting results, they demonstrate the possibility of learning through media. However, learning through training stories included in commercials remains unclear.

3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To answer the research questions, two semi-structured questionnaires were used as survey instruments. The first one was directed at children aged from six to twelve years old while the second instrument was a questionnaire targeted at parents. Both research instruments included a series of open and closed-ended questions, in a combination of structured and in-depth interviews. This approach, called "mixed method" or "mixed research", was resulted in a collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. Descriptive statistics were employed in order to provide a basic overview of the quantitative data. Qualitative data were analyzed with respect to their nature and the principles of the analysis of such data.

Each child had at his position five minutes to recall advertisements that it had watched on television. Children were asked to describe the content of each commercial that they had recalled, the character used (were applicable) and to express their perception towards the quality of the product and the brand name.

One of the parents of each child was questioned in a separate time. Parents were asked to answer questions regarding the commercials that their children had recalled. Among these, answers about the purchase of advertised products and also the rates of parents' brand perception were achieved. In those cases, when parents failed to recall an ad, aid was offered by the researcher. If the commercial had not been recalled even after the offer of an aid, the procedure was moving on to the next advertisement.

A content analysis of ads was made, in order to facilitate a more complete understanding of the research findings.

Through a random sampling procedure a total sample of 57 children and an equal number of parents, from the region of Thessaly, Central Greece, was collected. The interview process lasted 42 days, from the 12th of June until the 23rd of July 2010.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 The children's point of view

Out of the 57 children participated in the research, 30 were girls and 27 were boys. All 57 children were able to recall advertising messages. The recall scores were ranged from two to nine. A sum of 340 recalls was recorded. The majority of these recalls were related to food and toy commercials (52.4% and 23.5% respectively). More than seven in ten recalls (72.1%) referred to commercials that included one or more cartoon characters. Commercials with the higher recall rates are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Commercials recalled by children and recall rates

Brand name	Product		Strategies used for the advertisement	Recall rate
	Category			
Parizaki Yfantis	Small pariza (cold meat cut)		Animation character who sings and dances	89.5%
Junior-FAGE	Yogurt dessert		Cartoon character, Training story	54.4%
Kellogg's Coco Pops	Breakfast cereal		Cartoon character, Promotional game	47.4%
Bebe Lilly	C.D.		Animation character who sings and dances	47.4%
Lays	Potato chips		Celebrity (Lionel Messi)	43.9%

The second most frequent referred recall concerns the product "Junior FAGE" which is a yogurt dessert for kids. The main character of the advertisement is a cartoon named Junior. Junior is a smiley boy which, in FAGE's commercial, invites

children to take a walk with him. Viewers watch a training story that aims to teach some principles of the traffic behavior (Figure 1). Junior explains some basic principles of good traffic education for pedestrians or cyclists saying: “At the red light we stop, at the green light we pass, we are beware at the signals of the traffic policeman, we stop at the stop sign”. The TV spot lasts for 50 seconds. The brand name is referred two times.

The children reported positive brand perception (54.8%) while they evaluate the product’s quality as “fair” (38.7%) or “good” (35.5%). Compared to the other products which ads are recalled there were no differences in brand perception or in perceived quality (Table 2).

The instructive nature of this advertisement is understandable by children, given that kids’ majority said that the commercial is “instructive” (67.7%). Other commonly reported descriptions of the advertisement are: “funny” (58.1%) and “useful” (51.6%). Even though most children claimed to know the principles of traffic before they watched the ad, they considered the advertising useful “for younger children” or “for kids who are not aware”.



Figure 1. A snapshot of the commercial

All 31 children that recalled this commercial were in a position to remember Junior’s advises (stop at the red light/stop sign etc.), while a large proportion stated that they were motivated by the advertisement to learn more about the traffic behavior. Most children said that they had discussed with their friends about the advertisements. As one kid stated:

“In the school we discuss everything we watch on TV: football, commercials, movies or music videos”.

Table 2. Comparison of perceived quality and brand perception between Junior-FAGE and other products in the children’s sample

Variable	Category	Junior-FAGE (n=31)*	Other products (n=309)*	M-W test**
Perceived quality	Poor	25.8%	25.9%	U=4,696.000; p=0.849
	Fair	38.7%	35.9%	
	Good	35.5%	38.2%	
Brand perception	Negative	12.9%	24.9%	U=4,523.500; p=0.572
	Neutral	32.3%	20.4%	
	Positive	54.8%	54.7%	

* n refers to recalls

** Mann-Whitney test

4.2 Parents’ responses

A total of 57 parents participated in the study. Males constituted 45.6% of the sample, and females constituted 54.4% of the sample. Participants were primarily Lyceum graduates (35.1%), with a mean age of 37.45 years (S.D. =3.15 years). Parents’ percentages of correct unaided recall, and aided recall rates were computed for each commercial recalled by their children. Table 3 illustrates the rates for the commercials in question.

Although an important proportion of parents failed to recall the commercial of “Junior-FAGE” more than seven out of ten classified this product’s quality as “good” (73.1%). The evaluation of this product is significantly higher compared to that of other products whose ads were recalled (U=2,208.500; p=0.009). The majority of families have bought the product (53.8%) at least once.

Respondents described the commercial as “instructive” (92.3%), “useful” (84.6%), “educational” (73.1%) and “pleasant” (69.2%). Participants emphasized the benefits one kid could have after the exposure to this advertisement. As one respondent reported,

“Children repeat what they hear in ads, so a story like this becomes a daily game among children or between a child and a parent, which ultimately results in learning”.

Table 3. Parents' recall rates

Brand name	Recall rate*		
	Unaided	Aided	Total
Parizaki Yfantis	100.0%	-	100.0%
Junior-FAGE	61.3%	22.6%	83.9%
Kellogg's Coco Pops	18.5%	51.9%	70.4%
Bebe Lilly	92.6%	7.4%	100.0%
Lays	44.0%	32.0%	76.0%

* Sample sizes are: n=51 for "Parizaki Yfantis", n=31 for "Junior-FAGE", n=27 for "Kellogg's Coco Pops", n=27 for "Bebe Lilly" and n=25 for "Lays"

Parents were generally positive towards this kind of advertising, and a large proportion of them considered the commercial under examination as "worthy of imitation" (26.9%).

Comparatively with other advertised products (Table 4), parents were found to have a significantly more positive brand perception. Brand perception is positive for the 84.6% of cases, while none of the parents stated a negative brand perception.

Table 4. Comparison of brand perception between Junior-FAGE and the other products in the parents' sample

Variable	Category	Junior-FAGE (n=26)*	Other products (n=239)*	M-W test**
Brand perception	Negative	0.0%	26.4%	U=2,016.000; p=0.001
	Neutral	15.4%	20.1%	
	Positive	84.6%	53.6%	

* n refers to recalls
** Mann-Whitney test

5. CONCLUSIONS AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Although training is a widely researched subject, only few scholars have focused on specific population subsets such as the elderly (Vitner et al., 2008) or people with disabilities (Bruce et al., 2010). Surprisingly, little academic effort has been focused on children's training. The purpose of this research was to examine whether the use of training stories in television commercials targeted at children can have effects on both brand awareness and learning gained by kids. The commercial examined here includes a story that intends to offer training related to some basic principles of traffic behavior.

Regarding its educational nature, the concerned advertisement is successful as most of the children have not only comprehended the advertisement, but stated that they have been encouraged to learn more about the traffic behavior. The training offered by the use of such stories seems reasonable given that one of the characteristics that stimulate the training motivation is the voluntary attendance (Aziz and Ahmand, 2011). Attending these training stories is voluntary; therefore one can assume that those who watch them are willing to be trained. The fact that more than two in three children surveyed and more than nine out of ten parents stated that they understand that advertising has an instructive nature, confirms the above assumption.

As the analysis has confirmed, the use of training stories has a positive influence on children's brand awareness but their effect in shaping positive perceptions of the brand or product's quality is uncertain. On the contrary, it was found that parents' brand perception is more positive for products advertised thereby. However, the fact that only one of the products analyzed uses this style of advertising, as well as the small sample size, limit the generalizability of our results.

The research presented here is not able to clearly confirm or reject the success of training stories towards building a brand perception. A reason is that, since the paper emerged as a side-product of another research, it was not designed from the outset in order to identify the effect of such techniques in the perception of children. Studies or experiments focused on training stories could expand the results emerged from this research.

The core conclusion of this survey is that the use of advertising which will include training stories could be effective for the promotion of social messages. Public or non-governmental organizations can exploit this technique in order to effectively promote concepts such as social responsibility, recycling or ecological practices.

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