

## THE INFOMERCIAL: THE HANDY DANDY MARKETING TEACHING TOOL

Glen H. Brodowsky, California State University, San Marcos College of Business Administration  
San Marcos, CA 92096 (760) 750-4261

George E. Belch, San Diego State University, College of Business, San Diego, CA 92182 (619) 594-2473

### ABSTRACT

Marketing educators teaching advertising, integrated marketing communications, or promotion are often searching for assignments that require students to apply various theories, concepts and ideas covered in these courses. These topics include the consumer decision-making process, response hierarchies, source factors, message appeals and execution techniques, market segmentation, positioning, sales promotion techniques, and legal and ethical issues. This paper discusses how infomercials can be used as the basis for an assignment that requires students to analyze the application of many of these concepts. Students learn that underlying the sometimes-absurd claims and content of infomercials is a very savvy and sophisticated understanding of consumers and a systematic approach to influencing their behavior.

### INTRODUCTION

Marketing educators teaching advertising, integrated marketing communications, or promotion are often searching for assignments that require students to apply various theories, concepts and ideas covered in these courses. Such topics include the consumer decision-making process, response hierarchies, source factors, message appeals and execution techniques, market segmentation, positioning, sales promotion techniques, and legal and ethical issues. This paper discusses the value of an assignment (Appendix) that requires students to analyze the inter-relationships of many of these concepts as presented in infomercials. Infomercials are generally at least 60 times longer than typical television commercials. As learning tools, they provide substantially more information cues and can illustrate a wider variety of marketing communications concepts than other advertising formats.

The typical infomercial contains several segments designed to move the viewer through the various stages of the decision-making and response processes. Viewers move from problem recognition to information acquisition, to evaluation, to purchase and beyond to post purchase evaluation (through free trial offers and/or money-back guarantees).

Infomercials also use a wide variety of sources or spokespeople, message appeals and execution techniques, and product positioning approaches for students to analyze. We will discuss how an assignment developed for an undergraduate marketing communications course requires students to analyze many of these concepts in the context of an infomercial. However, before doing so we provide a brief overview of infomercials and the increasingly important role they now play in the marketing communications process of many companies.

### A BRIEF BACKGROUND OF INFORMERCIALS

An infomercial is a program-length paid advertisement that promotes an organization's product or service through information and persuasion (Balasubramanian 1994). They first appeared in the early 1980s. At that time, the code restricting the amount of time for commercials per hour was suspended by the Justice Department on the grounds that it violated antitrust laws. Infomercials have been used to promote a variety of products and services. They range from handy-dandy dicers and slicers, to weight loss programs, from exercise machines and sunglasses to presidential candidates. Advertisers spend hundreds of millions of dollars purchasing time to show infomercials. Infomercials are no longer the sole purview of TV psychics, hair-loss products, get-rich schemes and other "too-good-to-be true" products and services. Major corporations such as Apple, Volvo, Nissan, Microsoft, AT&T and many others have recognized the infomercial as an effective addition to the promotional mix (Edwards 2001). Infomercials have also proved to be useful for increasing brand awareness among customers who later look for these products in retail outlets.

The infomercial has been treated by many marketing academics as the stepchild of the promotional mix. While much research focuses on advertising, sales promotion, and direct marketing, the infomercial receives much less attention in the marketing literature. Many view infomercials as a lowbrow form of snake-oil salesmanship relegated to late-night slots on cable television. In spite of their less-than-glamorous reputation, what research exists shows that infomercials work. Hawthorne (1998) notes that a successful infomercial can generate up

to \$120 million in sales in one year, and an additional two to five times that amount if the product is also sold at retail outlets. On average, infomercial revenues often return approximately three times their cost of production and airtime. Approximately 55% of adults watch infomercials, with response rates approximating 5 per 1000 (Rosenthal 1988) and, by the early 1990s over 8 million consumers had purchased products advertised on infomercials (Burke 1993). It is estimated that infomercials generate global sales of nearly \$75 billion each year (Direct Marketing 1999).

### **USING INFOMERCIALS TO ANALYZE MARKETING COMMUNICATION CONCEPTS**

Infomercials are clearly becoming a more common form of television advertising. They provide marketers with the opportunity to provide detailed information and product demonstrations that help viewers learn about and experience the product vicariously. This often leads to the development of favorable attitudes. Moreover, infomercials provide a context whereby advertisers can use principles of direct marketing and sales promotion by encouraging viewers to respond by taking some immediate action. From a pedagogical perspective, infomercials can be a valuable learning tools that illustrate a wide range of advertising, marketing communications, and promotions concepts for students to analyze. In the remainder of the paper we will discuss how the "infomercial analysis" assignment can be applied to various areas covered in advertising/marketing communications courses.

#### **Analysis of Consumer Decision Making and Response Processes**

Infomercials generally follow a formulaic sequence that parallels the basic five-stage buyer decision process of problem recognition, information search, evaluation, choice and post-purchase behavior. The formula appears to assume a learn→feel→do cognitive processing model. Viewers first learn as they are shown information about the benefits of the product or service. Next, viewer feelings are evoked through emotional testimonials from those whose lives have improved by using the product or service. Finally, a direct response appeal encourages viewers to take action and order the product or service. Post purchase behavior is also addressed through "money back guarantees" or "30-day risk free trials." In addition, promotional premiums are offered to those who respond within a given time period. The typical infomercial uses techniques that take the viewer through the response process more than once. Usually, one pass through-from

introducing the problem to the commercial-within-a-commercial promotional sales pitch (the order information screen) - takes about 15 minutes of the entire 30-minute production. Then, the process is repeated by stringing together portions of each of the original segments of the infomercial. During the second run through, the product ordering screen often remains in a picture-in-picture portion of the screen while other modules (demonstrations, testimonials, scientific evidence) are presented.

In a typical advertising or marketing communications course, students learn about the stages of the consumer decision-making and they are also introduced to response models such as the AIDA, adoption, information processing or hierarchy of effects model. As part of this assignment, students are required to analyze how the sequence of the infomercial segments follows the decision-making process and moves the viewer through the various stages of the hierarchical response models. They can analyze how infomercial marketers try to accelerate a process that may normally spans weeks or months and develop an appreciation of how consumers move through the various stages of the response hierarchy. For example, most infomercials begin by focusing on problem recognition and illustrating consumer frustration with existing solutions or alternatives. Then, the product or service being advertised is introduced as a solution to these problems.

Singh et al (2000) have noted that infomercials include desirable characteristics of advertising along with direct experience as the detailed demonstrations help viewers experience the promoted product or service vicariously. They have also argued that infomercials facilitate vicarious learning as the length of the messages allows for a detailed discussion of product attributes that can inform and educate the viewer. The product demonstrations featured in infomercials can also help viewers learn more about the product, which can enhance the development of favorable attitudes toward the product or service and increase the probability of purchase. A recent study by Agee and Martin (2001) found that the majority of purchases made from infomercials involved some degree of planning rather than being made on the spur of the moment. They also found that impulse purchasers view infomercials less frequently than planned purchasers, have seen the infomercial for the product less often, and think less about the reasons for purchase provided in the infomercial. Students should consider whether the infomercial they are analyzing is likely to result in immediate versus more delayed or planned purchasing.

Finally, the infomercial can be used to emphasize the importance of marketers' appeals to post purchase behavior. The vast majority of infomercials include some sort of risk-free trial or money back guarantee. This is neatly tied in with promotional premiums as the audience is assured that they can return the unused portions of the products, get their money back, and keep the promotional premium as a free gift. The students should discuss how these marketing techniques reduce respondents' perceptions of risk surrounding the purchase. They should also demonstrate an appreciation of how these techniques help ensure that even if they are dissatisfied with the purchase, customers might still be left with a positive reminder of the purchase experience.

### Source Choices

As part of the assignment, students are required to analyze the different types of sources or communicators used in the infomercial. While a typical 30-second television spot may use an expert, a company spokesperson, a man-on-the-street testimonial, or a celebrity, many infomercials use all these types of sources. Many use celebrity hosts such as athletes hawking exercise equipment or weight loss programs (Mitch Gaylord; Jake of Body by Jake); television and movie stars endorsing skin or hair care products (Victoria Principal, Florence Henderson, Judith Light); or individuals who have become infomercial celebrities, such as Richard Simmons and the originator of the genre, Ron Popeil of Ronco fame. There are some crossovers as well. TV star Suzanne Somers endorses the thigh-master and heavyweight boxing great George Foreman pioneered his famous grill through an infomercial.

Students can be asked to assess the effectiveness of these spokespeople with respect to their credibility expertise, likeability, attractiveness, and their appeal to the target audience. Singh et al (2000) note that the effectiveness of vicarious learning from an infomercial often depends on the "fit" between the model or endorser and the product or service being promoted. Students' analyses can focus on how well the celebrity matches with the product or service (Kamens 1990). Infomercials are also particularly rich with implications discussed in McCracken's (1989) meaning transfer model of celebrity endorsement. This model suggests that a celebrity's effectiveness as an endorser depends on the culturally acquired meaning he or she brings to the endorsement process. For example, the use of popular ex-athletes such as Olympic decathlon champion Bruce Jenner endorsing fitness-related products or actresses such as Victoria Principal or

Kathy Lee Crosby promoting cosmetics fits quite well with McCracken's model.

In addition to celebrity endorsers, most infomercials include testimonials from average people who have used the product or are offered the opportunity to do so. Many of these testimonials involve emotional descriptions of how the product has increased the users' self-esteem, free time, relationships, financial situations, or overall quality of life. Students should be able to identify the links between these testimonials and the affective stage of the buying decision process as positive associations are created between products and the people who use them. Often, several different types of people provide testimonials in a given infomercial. These 'average' people represent various ethnic, age, or other demographic classifications. Most students note, somewhat skeptically, that many of these 'real-life' people are paid for their testimonials and question whether they are actually likable or believable. This is an issue they should be encouraged to explore in their discussions of the legal and ethical concerns surrounding infomercials.

Source factors for infomercials also include the use of experts. White-hatted chefs endorse cookware, while white-coated physicians endorse everything from skin care systems to weight-loss regimes. While the man-on-the street provides emotional testimonial and encourage liking the product and foster believability, expert testimonial sources lend their credibility to the product's claims and add to the audiences' knowledge about the product and its benefits.

### Message Appeals and Execution Styles

Infomercials use a variety of message appeals and execution styles to move viewers from learning about the problem-solving benefits associated with their products or services, to developing positive attitudes toward them, to ultimately purchasing them. They move the audience through the stages of the response process by using both rational and emotional appeals. As part of the assignment, students must identify and analyze the types of message appeals and execution styles and discuss how they relate to the stages of the decision-making and response processes. Students should be able to analyze how infomercials use various types of rational-based appeals to illustrate the relationship between problem recognition and the benefits or solution offered by the product or service being promoted and the ways infomercials provide information to move consumers from "awareness" to "interest" stage of the response process. These

include feature, competitive advantage and product/service popularity appeals. They then can analyze the various execution techniques that support rational appeals such as the presentation of scientific or technical evidence, testimonials, product brands or alternatives.

Once the viewers' interest is sparked and the audience is sufficiently educated about the product's features and benefits, infomercials often turn to more emotional-based appeals. This is often done through the use of user testimonials. Newly slimmed-down followers of diets or exercise gurus tearfully share their personal stories about how using this particular product or service has changed their lives. Alternatively, slice-of-life portrayals of satisfied customers using the product illustrate how happy their lives have become since discovering the new product or service. Students may note that these testimonials and demonstrations are designed to build an emotional bond between the viewer and the product as they move from the knowledge to the liking (cognitive to affective stages) of the buyer response process.

### **Sales Promotion Offers**

After analyzing how consumers learn about the product or service and develop positive attitudes and feelings toward it, students can then follow the progression of the infomercial to the action stage of the buyer response process. In most infomercials, this appears as a mini commercial within the infomercial. The product is pictured as the voice-over reviews the product's features and benefits on one side of a split screen, while pricing and ordering information appears on the opposite side. Students can analyze how various sales promotion techniques encourage viewers to take immediate action. They may note how promotional pricing strategies are often used to encourage immediate action ("Order Now and Make only Two Payments of \$49.99 instead of three payments). Promotional premiums are another technique used as incentive to induce immediate action such as "order now and receive an extra attachment absolutely free." Other premiums may include an extra container of the product itself or some complementary product such as a how-to video – all free to those ordering now. The limited- offers, special pricing, and/or additional incentives to encourage immediate action and the use of toll-free 800-numbers all provide students with excellent examples of how sales promotion tools can be used as part of the direct marketing techniques of infomercials.

### **Target Audience and Positioning**

Another important element of this assignment is getting students to appreciate the concept of market positioning and target markets. The project requires students to analyze the positioning of the product or service presented used in the infomercial and the market segment(s) being targeted. Students must define the positioning based upon the source, message content, appeals and execution styles used in the infomercial. Students must describe the positioning strategy used in the infomercial using some of the commonly discussed positioning approaches described in most advertising, marketing communications or promotions texts. These might include positioning by product attributes and benefits, by use or application, by problem-solution, by user, by product class or by competitor. This provides an opportunity for students to understand how a variety of appeals, execution techniques, sales promotion, and advertising techniques are integrated to present a clear message to the target audience and to motivate people to purchase the product.

Based on cues presented in the infomercial, students must also identify and succinctly define the advertiser's target audience. While some students are tempted to claim that the target audience includes everybody, they are required to identify the target audience based upon the product or service, message content, and sources used in the infomercial. If several market segments appear to be targeted, students must link the specific cues to the groups they believe they represent in the target audience.

### **Legal and Ethical Issues**

The infomercial assignment provides an opportunity for students to analyze some of the legal and ethical issues associated with marketing in general, and infomercials in particular. Wicks and Abernathy (2001) note that from a consumer protection standpoint, there is great potential for economic harm resulting from the purchase of products that fail to perform as promised in infomercials. During the 1980s, many consumers viewed infomercial claims as too good to be true. Indeed, the Federal Trade Commission has prosecuted more than 70 cases of infomercial fraud that resulted in more than \$24 million dollars in redress to duped consumers. Concerns have been raised regarding the reputation of the infomercial industry including the nature of products sold in infomercials, the level and type of claim substantiation used by infomercial advertisers and the need to improve infomercial clearance. In a

recent study Wickes and Abernathy (2001) found that 23 percent of stations airing infomercials had not requested substantiation or verified the claims of any infomercial run in the past month. Infomercials are very controversial by their very nature and the potential for false and/or deceptive advertising in infomercials is very high. Students should be asked to evaluate the infomercial they analyze from a legal and ethical perspective. Their discussion should consider a variety of factors ranging from the nature of the claims as well as the potential for fraud or deception among more vulnerable target audiences such as less-educated consumers, the elderly, among others. The students should be asked to cite examples of how the infomercial guards against potential claims, such as through the use of disclaimers.

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper has been to discuss how infomercials draw upon a wide range of advertising and marketing communication concepts and techniques for students to analyze. Moreover, they seem to follow a set format that moves consumers through the decision-making and response process and leads them toward purchase. That this formula works seems clear from the enormous proliferation of infomercials, the number and variety of products and services offered through them, the cast of celebrities endorsing products through this genre, and the huge growth in sales resulting from infomercials.

The infomercial can be a very effective teaching tool for an undergraduate advertising or marketing communications course. The typical infomercial illustrates the use of a wide range of marketing communications techniques in a self-contained package that is easy for students to digest. Moreover, many infomercials are fun and entertaining to analyze, as their cheesy image actually seems to enhance their attractiveness and interest among undergraduate students. Infomercials are a pop-cultural phenomenon with which most students are familiar. Their entertainment value often makes infomercials interesting to students who hardly expect to see them analyzed and discussed in detail in a university classroom. This disarms students who might be skeptical of more traditional and stilted examples of advertising. Students also begin to see that, underlying the sometimes-absurd claims and content of infomercials is a very savvy and sophisticated understanding of consumers and a systematic approach to influencing their behavior.

Many who are pursuing undergraduate or graduate business degrees may consider themselves more sophisticated than the average consumer who might be moved to purchase exercise equipment, miracle drugs, or spot removers from an infomercial broadcast late at night. Bringing infomercials into the classroom provides an excellent opportunity for the instructor to remind these future marketers that the majority of the market is comprised of middle income consumers who shop at warehouse clubs, visit discount retailers, and order products from home shopping television broadcasts. It is very easy for executives or academics to look down their noses at these outlets that appeal to the common man with their mass-merchandised-inventories of low-priced goods and services. The truth is quite the opposite. The success of the discount retailer – as well as the infomercial, results from a scientific and sophisticated approach to understanding the needs and motivations of a vast majority of the shopping public. These popular retailers and marketing communications tools offer marketing educators, and their students, in-depth insight into the minds of customers. This makes them most appropriate examples of successful business practices in the marketing curriculum.

### REFERENCES

- Agee, Tom and Brett A.S. Martin. 2001. Planned or Impulse Purchases? How to Create Effective Infomercials. *Journal of Advertising Research* 41, 6 (November/December): 35-42.
- Balasubramanian, Siva K. 1994. Beyond Advertising and Publicity: Hybrid Messages, Their Effectiveness, and Public Policy Issues. *Journal of Advertising* (23): 29-46
- Burke, Tom. 1993. Program Length Commercials Can Bring These Six Benefits to a Major Brand Campaign. *Advertising Age*, January 25: 3
- Direct Marketing*. 1999. And Now a Word From Our Sponsor. 62, 2: 48-50.
- Edwards, Jim. 2001. The Art of the Infomercial. *Brandweek*, September 3: 14-19.
- Hawthorne, Timothy. 1998. When & Why to Consider Infomercials. *Target Marketing*, 21, 2: 52.
- Kamens, Michael A., 1990. An Investigation into the 'Match-Up' Hypothesis in Celebrity Advertising. *Journal of Advertising* 19, 1: 4-13.

McCracken, Grant. 1989. Who Is the Celebrity Endorser? Cultural Foundations of the Endorsement Process. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16, 3, (December): 310-21.

Rosenthal, Edmond 1998. Program-Length Ads Break Down Most Broadcast Barriers. *Television/Radio Age*, December 26:

Schibsted, Evantheia, 2001. Ab Rockers, Ginsu Knives, E320s. *Business2.Com* May 29: 46-49.

Singh, Mandeep, Siva K. Balasubramanian and Goutam Charkraborty. 2000. A Comparative Analysis of Three Communication Formats: Advertising, Infomercial, and Direct Experience. *Journal of Advertising* 29, 4 (Winter): 59-75.

Wicks, Jan LeBlanc and Avery M. Abernethy. 2001. Effective Consumer Protection or Benign Neglect? A Model of Television Infomercial Clearance. *Journal of Advertising* 30,1: 41-54.

## APPENDIX

### Infomercial Analysis Assignment

Infomercials sell billions of dollars of merchandise and services to households each year. On any given night, you can see infomercials on television selling a wide variety of goods and services. Obviously, they are profitable or else you wouldn't see so many infomercials so many times. While a thirty-second spot on prime-time television can make consumers aware of a product or encourage them to buy, it is hardly possible to move consumers through the entire response process in such a short time span. Infomercials, on the other hand, last up to 30 minutes. Your assignment is as follows. Choose an infomercial that is currently airing on television and analyze it in detail by paying attention to the following:

1. Analyze how the infomercial takes the viewer through the various stages of the consumer decision-making and response process. Discuss how different segments of the infomercial appeal to different stages of the decision-making processes and response hierarchy models discussed in class.
2. Analyze the various sources/spokespeople who appear in the infomercial giving attention to factors such as source credibility (expertise, attractiveness, likeability). If a

celebrity is used in the infomercials discuss why he or she was chosen and how they fit or match with the product or service being promoted.

3. Discuss the types of message appeals and execution styles used throughout different portions of the infomercial. How do they tie-in with the different stages of the buyer decision and response processes.
4. Analyze the use of various sales promotion and direct response techniques in the infomercials. Describe them, discuss their effectiveness, and how they might affect the consumers' purchasing process.
5. Discuss the positioning strategy or approach used in the infomercials based upon the content of the infomercial, type of appeals and execution style. Analyze the target market for this infomercial and the product or service advertised.
6. Finally, discuss some of the legal and ethical issues that might be associated with this infomercial. What ethical or legal problems may arise from this infomercial with regard to the nature of the product or service being sold, the types of performance claims being made, the level and type of claim substantiation and the potential for fraud or deception?

Please provide a well-written and well-reasoned analysis in a maximum of 5 pages double-spaced.