It’s Time for TGA: Truly Good Advertising

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ABSTRACT
Good advertising is not enough anymore. With technological and societal progress, savvy consumers, and new media revenue models, advertising needs to be truly good to serve a purpose and to be allowed to live on. In this paper, I outline how truly good advertising (TGA) does not only produce equity for the advertiser, but also generates advertising equity to the benefit of the consumer, adds value to the media context and has a positive impact on society.

Let’s not talk about good advertising anymore. It’s been talked about for centuries already, and written about since at least 1896, when Charles Austin Bates (1896) published his book “Good Advertising: And Where it is Made” (which was the earliest publication I found when I googled). Google Scholar produced nearly 8,000 texts that discuss “good advertising,” within a diversity of fields ranging from economics (e.g., Becker and Murphy 1993), finance (e.g., Abayi and Khoshtinat 2016), strategic management (e.g., Mason and Belt 1986), innovation and technology (e.g., Cooper and Kleinschmidt 1994), journalism and mass communication (e.g., Otnes, Spooner, and Treise 1993), and public policy (e.g., Bodewyn 1985), to, of course, advertising research (e.g., O’Connor et al. 2018).

Still, with all this talk and study of good advertising and how it is made, advertising does not seem to be doing well. In fact, it seems to be dying. Advertising’s impending death has been proclaimed repeatedly in recent years. The New York Times anticipates that advertising will die, because consumers don’t need it (Kuntz 2009) and even hate it (Hsu 2019). So do, for example, Fast Company, because consumers can avoid it (Cassano 2013), The Guardian, because increasingly aware consumers are changing the rules of the game (Prest 2012), and CNBC, because the new media don’t want it (CNBC 2016). Scholars have argued for similar reasons that advertising as we know it cannot survive (e.g., Rust 2016; Schultz 2016; Stewart 2016).

What this all means, I would like to argue, is not necessarily that advertising is not good enough. It is rather that good advertising is not enough.
we found that about 80 percent of all studies focused on effectiveness, in terms of increasing consumers’ liking and buying of the advertised offers (Dahlen and Rosengren 2016).

Throughout the years, the purpose and activity of advertising have been explicitly and consistently defined as persuading receivers to buy or do something, from Daniel Starch’s (1923) “selling in print” to Richards and Curran’s (2002) “paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action, now or in the future”. Good advertising, thus, is advertising that sells and persuades as much as possible. I illustrate this view in Figure 1, where the advertiser 1) pushes advertising on consumers in order to persuade them 2) to buy or do something (these various actions, now or in the future, are typically summarized by researchers as increases in the brand’s equity).

The problem with good advertising, as can be seen in Figure 1, is that it is clearly one-sided, to the benefit of the advertiser. Legendary advertising executive Philip Dusenberry summarized it well in his famous quote, “I have always believed that writing advertisements is the second most profitable form of writing. The first, of course, is ransom notes.” In essence, good advertising is similar to a hostage situation, in which brands kidnap consumers’ attention in an effort to persuade them into opening their wallets.

But, of course, nobody likes being taken hostage. As concluded by Mark Ritson (2015), “There is no prescribed moment when ad avoidance actually began, but we can probably assume it started about 20 minutes after the invention of advertising.” While the study of ad avoidance does not date back that far, it has indeed been subject to a large body of research. A seminal article, focusing on consumer perceptions of advertising clutter in various mass media, was published in this journal by Speck and Elliott in 1997. That marked the time pretty well when 1) advertising had increased its reach to pretty much include anyone, anywhere, and 2) technology increasingly enabled consumers to zap away from it in various ways.

Ever since then, advertising has been a cat-and-mouse game, where advertisers device new means of reaching consumers, and consumers find new ways of avoiding these ads. My own first advertising research publication, for instance, studied click-through rates for banner ads, which were novel and rather effective at the time (Dahlen 2001), but since then, a majority of consumers have started using ad blockers that automatically avoid them (53 percent of consumers in AdWeek’s 2015 survey). These ad blockers have led advertisers to device, for example, pre-roll ads on youtube, which, in turn produce new consumer avoidance behaviors (e.g., Goodrich, Schiller, and Galletta 2015).

Good advertising seems to be more or less an anomaly, something that works for a short period of time before consumers find new ways to avoid it (which they do at an increasing pace) or before it is called out in a cat-and-mouse-and-watchdog game where advertisers invent new formats, such as sponsored content and native advertising, which fly under the radar before either consumers recognize them as advertising or they eventually give rise to new regulations that force advertisers to identify themselves as such. Not surprisingly, there is a growing body of literature on advertising literacy (e.g., Hudders et al. 2017) and disclosures (e.g., Evans et al. 2017).
In all fairness, good advertising has never been solely a matter of finding more forceful or “deceitful” means of kidnaping consumers’ attention. Dating back to the creative revolution in the 1960s, and even Bates’s century-old advice on the use of color and copy, advertisers have been preoccupied with finding ways to attract attention as well (this has also been the focus of the majority of research). To my mind, this could be contrived as sugar-coating, where good advertising literally tastes good, but still serves to have consumers swallow the pill—that is, persuade consumers to buy or do something to the benefit of the advertiser.

Consequently, consumers associate advertising with persuasive attempts and frequently view it with skepticism and negative attitudes, which discount and counteract its intentions. Indeed, persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1995), ad skepticism (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998) and attitudes toward advertising (Muehling 1987) are central concepts in the advertising literature, and new ones, such as offense (Dahlen et al. 2013) and insult (Dahlen, Rosengren and Smit 2014), are adding.

What this all boils down to in the end, is that good advertising is dying because it is not enough. No matter how clever it gets, it remains a hostage situation, which consumers have become savvy, technologically equipped and fed-up enough to resist. It’s time to talk about truly good advertising.

What is truly good advertising?

I propose that, in order for advertising to survive, it needs to be good not only for the advertiser, but also for consumers. That is, consumers need to gain something in return from taking part of the advertising.

By this gain, I do not mean that advertising helps consumers buy better products and make better decisions in some sense. These classic arguments, that advertising weeds out the bad products from the market (because in the long run, brands will not afford to advertise them, e.g., Milgrom and Roberts 1986), allows brands to produce higher quality and cheaper products (because advertising increases demand and produces economies of scale, e.g., Spence 1980), or helps consumers make more informed choices (because advertising informs them of the available options, e.g., Porter 1976), are all just fortunate byproducts of good advertising, which still serve the advertiser’s aim to sell. Obviously, these byproducts are not enough.

Instead, advertising needs to be truly good, in the sense that it is good in and of itself. Truly good advertising (TGA) gives something to consumers whether the advertiser’s aim to sell is fulfilled or not.

TGA is good for the consumer

The idea that advertising can benefit consumers regardless whether it benefits the advertiser is illustrated in Figure 2. While the advertiser still benefits in terms of brand equity, Figure 2 adds advertising equity as a benefit that consumers receive independently of what happens with the brand’s equity. We have proven in a series of experiments and tests that consumers can indeed derive equity from advertising, and that this advertising equity is a unique construct that is separate and independent from brand equity (Rosengren and Dahlen 2015).

The notion that consumers can derive value from advertising itself, typically because they find it entertaining, is not new. Robert Ducoffe published a highly cited article about consumer-perceived advertising values more than 20 years ago (Ducoffe 1995), and advertisers and scholars have always kept a keen eye on consumers’ liking of the ads. However, stuck in the paradigm of good advertising, they have always considered any value and liking for the advertising that does not translate into brand equity as dead-weight, because it does not benefit the advertiser (Rosengren and Dahlen 2015).
While advertising equity does not make consumers more prone to buy or do something, it does something that is absolutely vital for advertising to survive: it counteracts ad avoidance, and even stimulates approach behaviors. We found that our measure of advertising equity (which gauges the consumer’s perceived value and benefit of taking part of the ad itself) could predict the likelihood that a consumer would take part of the brand’s advertising the next time s/he encountered it, or even to voluntarily seek out more advertising from the brand, for example on youtube and in social media.

TGA frees consumers from the hostage situation that puts advertising at the risk of dying, by producing something that they want to take part of rather than is forced on them. It recognizes that consumers are no longer passive receivers of advertising, they are savvy enough and have the technology to actively choose whether they want to take part of and seek out the advertising themselves. This is also illustrated in Figure 2, where both the advertiser and the consumer have been updated from entities (boxes) to forces (arrows) who can more or less keenly approach the advertising exchange.

In the advertising exchange, the advertiser needs to earn the consumer’s attention. Earning the consumer’s attention is a very popular saying, but we had never seen it put to the test, so we conducted two experiments to do so (Szugalski, Bergkvist and Dahlen 2014). In a first experiment, we found that when the advertiser put greater effort into the advertising (we manipulated it in terms of expense or creativity), consumers were more willing to attend to it. Correspondingly, we found in a second experiment, that when consumers put greater effort into attending to the advertising or even seek it out, they demanded more effort from the advertiser in return.

When measuring the consumer’s perceptions of both the advertiser’s and their own efforts, it became clear that consumers were indeed aware of their own efforts, and that they considered it a form of equity that they could choose to share or not. Consumers were also aware of the advertiser’s effort, and expected the advertiser to make a significant effort to their benefit in exchange for their own efforts. If they did not perceive that the advertiser put enough effort into rewarding them for their time and attention, they chose to discontinue the exchange, meaning that they stopped attending to the advertising and were not willing to receive or seek out advertising from the advertiser again.

Again, the consumers’ exchange behaviors were based on the advertising in and of itself, regardless of the brand and the touted product, and their interest in buying or doing something. Buying or doing something comes next, but TGA makes sure that it even gets to that stage. If consumers choose not to attend to the advertising, it doesn’t matter how good it is at selling and persuading.
TGA is good for the consumer in and of itself, because it needs to be. When consumers can choose whether to take part of advertising or not, and become increasingly aware of the value of their efforts to the advertisers, they will not settle for less. The good news is that when the advertising is truly good in this sense, consumers do indeed take part of it. We found this in our experiments, and there are plenty of real-life examples, such as the Super Bowl ads that have people seated in front of their TV-sets to purposely watch the commercial breaks, the viral commercials that consumers seek out on youtube, and the branded accounts that they follow on social media such as facebook and instagram. However, while these have historically been considered something out of the ordinary, they will need to be the norm in the future.

Truly good advertising is good for the media

TGA could be applied to media as well. If the consumer’s relationship to advertising resembled a hostage situation, then the media’s relationship to advertising could be likened to prostitution. Please forgive the vulgar allegory, but I find it rather accurate, in the sense that advertisers have had to pay the media to do something (feature ads) that they would not voluntarily do. From the media’s perspective, advertising is clutter that annoys, interrupts and distracts from the content (e.g., Speck and Elliott 1997) and should be kept to a minimum only to generate revenue, so as to not drive the audience away (e.g., Ha and Litman 1997).

As technology brings production and distribution costs down, however, the media become less dependent on advertising to cover expenses. Coupled with consumers’ willingness to pay a little extra for not having to be annoyed, distracted and interrupted, the media can remove advertising money out of the equation altogether. We are seeing this happen already, with commercial-free radio (e.g., Spotify) and TV (e.g., Netflix). This is also one reason why promoting advertising approach in own media is becoming increasingly important for advertisers.

However, advertisers will never be able to rely solely on consumers to seek out their advertising. There simply isn’t enough time in the day for it, nor interest from consumers to seek out advertising for all brands that wish to come in contact with them. Therefore, advertisers need the media to feature their advertising. But when money is taken out of the equation, the advertising will need to be good for the media in and of itself in order to be featured.

TGA enhances the audience’s perceived value of the media in which it is featured. My first notion of this was the experiments we conducted on creative media choice (Dahlen, Granlund, and Grenros 2009) and ambient media (Rosengren, Modig, and Dahlen 2015), where we found that entertaining and engaging advertising that somehow connected with the context actually increased consumers’ liking and perceived value of the context itself (e.g., waiting by the airport conveyor belt, riding the elevator, or pushing a shopping cart).

We also tested this notion in two experiments where we placed ads in magazines and found that, when putting greater effort into the advertising (in terms of expense and creativity) and integrating it carefully with the context, the ads could actually increase the audience’s perceived value of the magazine itself, so that they enjoyed it more and spent more time reading it (Rosengren and Dahlen 2013). The advertising was truly good in the sense that it did not only “not distract and disturb”, it even added to the perceived value of the magazine compared to when it did not feature advertising at all.

Again, the Super Bowl ads could serve as real-life example of TGA, and how it is potentially good for the media. According to a survey by Huffington Post (Spies-Gans 2016), among viewers under the age of 30, more people tuned in for the commercials than for the game. Similarly, in my native Sweden, many moviegoers come early to see the advertising that precedes the movie, which they find enhances their movie-going experience, because advertisers have traditionally put extra effort into making entertaining commercials. This is good for the theaters, which reap the
benefits of both happier and timelier audiences. One could probably find real-life examples in several other media, for example ads in magazines, but I don’t know of any advertisers or media that have systematically targeted such effects. Yet.

**Truly good advertising is good for society**

I also believe that TGA can be applied in relation to society. Advertising has long been associated with negative societal impact. As Richard Pollay suggested in his highly cited article (Pollay 1986), more than a century’s evolution and refinement of good advertising has made it so powerful at persuasion that it reaches beyond the advertised products and impacts people’s perceptions of themselves and others, fostering, for example, materialism, anxiety and egotism. These effects are, of course, unintended, as good advertising does not aim to hurt people and society, it just wants to persuade consumers to buy and do things. But the disregard for advertising’s effects beyond what the advertiser intends are also at the root of the problem.

Research has found that exposure to advertising can indeed make people more materialistic (e.g., Kwak, Zinkhan, and Dominick 2002), lower their self-esteem (e.g., Dimofte, Goodstein, and Brumbaugh 2015) and reinforce negative stereotypes (e.g., Appel and Weber 2017). A common explanation for these effects is that advertising is a form of cultivation, which impacts reality because of its sheer pervasiveness in people’s everyday lives—it’s everywhere. In 2007, the mayor of Sao Paulo reacted to this pervasiveness by labeling outdoor advertising a form of pollution and banning it from the city’s public spaces, and several other cities have since followed suit, as reported in The Guardian (Mahdawi 2015).

For advertising to not be banned altogether at some point, it needs to recognize the effects it has on people beyond the scope of the advertiser’s interests. A first step has recently been taken in the updated, new definition of advertising as “brand-initiated communication that impacts people” (Dahlen and Rosengren 2016). This new definition holds advertisers accountable for potential, negative effects that their advertising has on society.

However, the recognition that advertising has extended effects on consumers provide opportunity to not only make “advertising that is not bad for society”, but to make truly good advertising that benefits society at the same time as it serves the advertiser’s interest. Recent experiments have found that carefully crafted portrayals and messages in ads can increase consumers’ interest in the advertised products and at the same time increase their own creative efficacy (Rosengren, Dahlen, and Modig 2013) and proneness to (unrelated) prosocial behavior (Defever, Pandelaere, and Roe 2011), as well as counteract stereotypes (Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen 2017a), and even increase social connectedness and empathy (Liljedal, Berg, and Dahlen 2020; Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen 2017b).

TGA is good for society, because it needs to be. First, the opportunity to do good, to my mind, includes a moral obligation to do so. Second, advertisers will be at a much better position arguing that advertising does good rather than defending it as “not being bad” for society. Third, advertising needs to be about more than making money in order to attract talent (to both industry and academia) in the future. As commented by the Guardian (Vesty 2016) on a global survey of 27,000 LinkedIn members, “millennials want purpose over paychecks” (and the same was true to large extent for the other cohorts as well).

Examples of TGA from a societal perspective have become increasingly common, for example, some by-now-classic examples are Dove’s “Campaign for real beauty” featuring models of various shapes, sizes and colors, Always’ “Like a girl” femvertising, and IKEA’s “All homes are created equal” featuring gay couples and interracial families. However, these are still discussed as exceptions rather than the rule, both in industry and academia.
Let’s talk about truly good advertising

It is an old marketing axiom that one cannot please everyone, but this is basically what I suggest: advertising needs to be truly good for all parties involved. I am not saying it will be easy, maybe it is indeed impossible, but I would like to see all the brainpower in the industry and academia give it a try. Readers might not agree with me, but I am happy if TGA stirs a debate—if only to discuss something else than good advertising (it’s been talked about long enough already).

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