

SUPERIORITY CLAIMS IN ADVERTISEMENTS : WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

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ABSTRACT

Advertising is an essential element in the marketing process. It plays the role in carrying out the promotion of a product. However, the development of technology has led to mass production of the same product brand, which in turn, has resulted in tough competition among the product manufacturers. Thus, copywriters have employed a myriad of techniques to persuade the consumers to arrive at the desired action, that is, to choose and buy the product. One of the most common techniques is to claim the superiority of the product. This may be achieved by exaggerating the facts or creating an illusion of superiority through the use of superlative or laudatory words. Consumers may be easily deceived by the use of language into believing the claims made for the products without looking for any evidence to substantiate them. This is the main focus of the paper – to raise consumers' awareness of such tactics by identifying the words and phrases used by copywriters that have the tendency to mislead or deceive. In turn, they can be more informed, thus, discerning in making decisions in purchasing a product.

INTRODUCTION

Advertisements mainly function as a medium of information between the producers (of the products advertised) and the consumers (or the potential consumers). Without advertising people will not have adequate knowledge of the wide range of products available in the market. However, the development of technology has led to mass production of the same product brand, which in turn, has resulted in tough competition among the product manufacturers. In turn, this means that the consumer market needs to be stimulated so that they will arrive at the desired action, that is, to buy the product. As a result, the role of advertising has changed from that of proclamation to persuasion (Vestergaard and Shroder 1985). The primary motive of advertising campaigns is, thus, 'to benefit the advertiser, usually by persuading the hearer or reader to part with money' (Barnhart & Barnhart 1982 : 32). Varder (1992 : 12) claimed that, 'if an advertisement is not persuasive, the advertising effort is considered a waste, since it does not lead to the desires actions (by the customers)'.

One of the most common techniques used by copywriters to achieve such motive is to claim the superiority of the product. This may be achieved by exaggerating the facts or creating an illusion of superiority through the clever use of superlative or laudatory words injected into the advertisements. The main concern of this paper is that consumers may be easily deceived by the use of such language into accepting and believing the claims without looking for any substantial evidence. It is hoped that this study will lead to consumers' awareness of this trick of trade technique employed by advertisers in persuading the consumers to part with their money.

Advertisement Defined

The definition of the term advertisement has been substantially discussed against its nature and function. Nicholl (1978) suggested that the term 'advertisement' originates from French '*avertir*', meaning 'to notify' or 'to warn'. This suggests that the act of advertising would, therefore, be synonymous with 'giving notice', 'notifying', 'announcing' or 'giving warning'. Thus, Nicholl (1978 : 6), asserts that advertising is 'to bring something deliberately to the notice of others'. Dyer (1982 : 2) saw it as 'the means of drawing attention to something or notifying or informing somebody of something'.

On the other hand, the contemporary definitions of advertisement go beyond making announcements. Advertisement is most commonly accepted as 'the practice of calling public attention to a product or service by paid announcements, usually in newspapers and magazines or on television or radio' (Jenkins 1981 : 55); 'the use of paid-for space in a publication, usually as a means of persuading people

to take a particular course of action, or to reach a point of view' (Wilmhurst 1985 : 96); and 'a paid message from a company that appears in a print or broadcast medium' (King 1995 : 162).

Kamisah and Norazlan (2004 : 136) proposed an amalgamation of the definitions as :

Advertising is the process of drawing the attention of the public to a company's product(s) or service(s) through paid-for visual and/ or oral presentations with the purpose of persuading individuals to change their views or behaviour, normally the purchase of the product or service.

Language in Advertisement

In copywriting, the way language is used is very important. It can attract and influence customers to buy the products. Copywriters cleverly manipulate the language by using carefully chosen words and linguistic features that could inject colourful thoughts and expressions into the advertisements. Thus, puffery and laudatory words claiming the superiority of the products are extensively used so that the objective of the advertising effort can be achieved. Hence, phrases such as 'the best', 'the first', 'unique' and 'the only one' can be commonly found in many advertisements.

Superiority Claims in Advertisements

Superiority claim is one of the predominant techniques employed by copywriters in their effort to advertise the products. This claim basically contains statements that make a direct claim of superiority for the product or suggest superiority by implication. Language is, therefore, greatly manipulated in terms of the extensive use of superlatives, exaggerations and laudatory words. The impact of such use can be pervading on the customers as it can create an illusion of superiority of a product, thus, able to influence and persuade them to come to the desired action.

Research has shown that this technique has been used extensively in advertisements, particularly in parity products such as those in the health and beauty aid, food and kitchen and technical categories (Barry 1993; Harmond et al. 1983; Harris and Lynn 1997; Wyckham 1987; Shimp 1997; Schrank 1998). It is found that the available products in most of these categories are almost identical, thus, creating the illusion of superiority seems to be the best resort in the advertising effort.

Schrank (1998) has identified nine types of superiority claims used by copywriters in creating the superiority of the competing products : 1) weasel claim; 2) unfinished claim; 3) unique claim; 4) water is wet claim; 5) vague claim; 6) endorsement or testimonial claim; 7) scientific or statistical claim; 8) compliment the consumer claim; and 9) rhetorical question. The following gives a full description of these types of superiority claims :

The Weasel Claim

This type of claim contains modifying words that negate the claim that follows. These modifying words initially appear substantial, but upon analysis, they are actually meaningless. The common weasel words used in advertisements are 'helps', 'can be' 'looks like' and 'enriched'. These words are frequently used by copywriters to attract the readers' attention when the effectiveness of the product is not guaranteed (Stevens 1971). For example, in this claim :

'Listerine fights bad breath',

the advertisement seems to claim that the mouthwisher will stop bad breath. However, a more careful reading may bring to the understanding that the advertisement just informs the readers that the mouthwisher only 'fights', not stops the bad breath. Such a technique is used by the advertisers to avoid the claim from being challenged in terms of its truthfulness. Roman and Maas, thus, called these weasel words as the 'sly little turns of phrase' (133) that are used by copywriters to get the copy 'through legal review' (1976 : 133).

The Unfinished Claim

This type of claim is also referred to as ‘dangling comparisons’ (Roman and Maas 1976). As the name suggests, the advertisement claim of a product is incomplete – it claims that the product is better, or has more of something. Yet, the comparison is made to none. Take the following phrase as an example :

‘Giving you a whole lot more for less.’

What is more claimed here? It is not stated - it is a clever technique to create an illusion of superiority to other products of the same brand. As readers, we should be more discerning by asking what is being compared here. It may not contain any substantial evidence as the claim put forward by Ford in the following example :

‘Ford LTD – 700% quieter’.

When the Federal Trade Commission allegedly asked Ford to substantiate the claim, it proved to be too far exaggerated as Ford revealed that they meant the inside of the Ford was 700% quieter than the outside (http://sunset.ackbone.olemiss.edu/egjbp/comp/ad_claims.html).

The Unique Claim

This type of claim suggests that the product advertised is unique, different and not comparable to any others in its class. Some examples of this claim are illustrated as follows :

‘There’s no other mascara like it.’

‘Only Doral has this unique filter system.’

‘Only Zenith has chromacolor.’

The claim of so-called uniqueness and difference from other products may psychologically appeal to the consumers, thus, able to persuade them to arrive at the desired action.

The Water is Wet Claim

This claim usually states the obvious about the product. It contains statement of fact about a particular product. However, one’s knowledge of grammar rule of language may help him/her to be aware of this subtle technique of superiority claim. Let us take the following advertisement, for example :

‘Mobil : the Detergent Gasoline’

The claim may initially appear substantial as it does not make any advantageous claim over the competitors of the same product. It merely states that other gasoline can act as a cleaning agent too. However, a more discerning reader may notice the used of the article ‘the’ which indicates the only one in its category, ergo, claiming its superiority.

The Vague Claim

This claim often overlaps with weasel, unfinished and unique claims. Schrank asserts that this type of claim involves ‘the use of subjective and emotional opinions that defy verification’ (1998 : 5). As the words used are mostly weasel words, the claims made are often colourful, yet, meaningless and unclear. For example, in the claim

‘Fleishman’s makes sensible eating delicious’,

the phrase ‘sensible eating’ and ‘delicious’ are vague and defy verification. What is sensible eating, and what is defined by delicious? The value of these vague words is very subjective to individuals’ opinion.

The Endorsement or Testimonial Claim

This type of claim involves endorsement given either by celebrities, experts or ordinary people on the superiority of the product advertised. These people would 'lend his or her stellar qualities to the product and claim its superiority' (Schrank 1998 : 5). Although this is expensive as the advertiser has to pay usually a high amount of money for 'borrowing' their stellar quality, such technique can be very effective especially when the people are influential. An example of such claim is :

'MARTRADE Award, MSC Status and Enterprise 50 Award'.

The Scientific or Statistical Claim

This type of claim normally has a great influence on the reader as it provides supporting evidence, either scientifically or statistically, to the verbal message. For example, in the claim :

'Champs DHA 100mg Softgel Capsule provides kids with their DHA (omega-3, long chain polyunsaturated fatty acid),

both the scientific and statistical evidence used makes the claim impressive and contains unquestionable truths, thus, believable to the reader, which in turn, may lead them to the desired attention and action.

The Compliment the Consumer Claim

This type of claim praises and flatters the consumers with regards to the right choice they have made in choosing the product over others. The following illustrates this :

'We think a cigar smoker is someone special.'
'The lady has taste.'

The laudatory words used such as 'someone special' and 'has taste' can make the reader feels special and clever having made the right decision in purchasing and using the product.

The Rhetorical Question

In this type of claim, a question is posed on the reader, and a positive answer is required (of the reader) which is none other than to affirm the goodness of the product. As put forward by Myers (1994 : 49), 'many questions used in advertising are rhetorical; that is, they assume only one possible answer'. An example of this is :

'Can't wait?'

THE STUDY

This study looks at the use of superiority claim in the advertiser's effort in achieving their aims to entice and persuade potential customers. This study examines the claims in selected advertisements with the aim of educating consumers to be more critical and discerning when presented with such claims.

Objective

The general objective of this study is to analyze the language of superiority claims used in randomly selected print advertisements. Specifically, the study aims at :

- a. analyzing and classifying the basic superiority claims used in the advertisements; and

- b. determining the most commonly and frequently used claims in the advertisements.

Methodology

This study is both qualitative and quantitative. It employs a text analysis method involving 15 randomly selected print advertisements that are featured in English. Shcrank's nine types of superiority claims described earlier were used as the framework for analysis. The verbal messages of the advertisements were analysed pertaining to the presence of the superiority claims. Words, phrases and slogans were closely examined, analysed and categorized as to which type of claims they belonged to. In addition, the data collected were also treated to simple frequency counts to find out the most commonly and frequently used claims in the advertisements.

Sampling

Fifteen local print advertisements were randomly selected from the newspapers and magazines. As mentioned earlier, only those that were featured in English were selected. The advertisements were labeled as samples 1 – 15. The categories of the product featured were identified and tabulated as the following :

Table 1 : Product Category of Selected Advertisements

Sample	Category
1 - 4	Health
5 - 8	Information Technology
9	Shop / Kiosk Service
10	Electrical
11	Stationery
12	Transportation
13	Banking Service
14 - 15	Beauty

FINDINGS

The analysis of the data shows that the advertisements are laden with superiority claims. It indicates the presence of superiority claims in the advertisements (see Tables 1 – 9 in the appendix for the classified claims).

The analysis of the findings show that, the most commonly or frequently used claim is the 'unique', followed by 'weasel', 'vague', 'scientific or statistical', 'rhetorical', 'unfinished', 'water is wet', 'compliment the consumer', and 'endorsement or testimonial' respectively. The following table shows the percentage of the claims used in the advertisements.

Table 2 : Percentage of Superiority Claims Used in Advertisements

Types of Superiority Claim	Percentage
1. Unique	26.4
2. Weasel	22.2
3. Vague	20.8
4. Scientific or Statistical	12.5
5. Rhetorical	8.3
6. Unfinished	2.8
7. Water is Wet	2.8
8. Compliment the Consumer	2.8
9. Endorsement or Testimonial	1.4

As can be seen from the table, the 'unique claim' is the most frequently used in the advertisements. Harris and Lynn (1997) assert that social theorists have contended that people have a need for uniqueness. Thus, copywriters take the advantage of this need by creating an illusion of uniqueness of the products through cleverly chosen words, phrases and slogans. For example, in the claim 'The latest in portable digital media storage from the greatest name in memory' (sample 7), the phrases 'the latest' and 'the greatest' may evoke some image, portraying the uniqueness of the product, making it stand out from the other brands in the same category.

The next frequently used claim is the 'weasel', in which, words are cleverly chosen to enhance the superiority of the claim made on the product. Words such as 'can', 'help' and 'enhance' are commonly used to qualify the verb they precede. Such technique is popular in advertising as the words used can add colour to the claim, thus, making the product appealing to the customer. Yet, at the same time, this is also a strategy to evade or retreat from making any direct claim when the effectiveness of the product is not guaranteed. For example, in the claim '... promoting high growth' (sample 14), the word 'promoting' does not guarantee that the product will result in high growth – it only promotes the growth. Roman and Maas (1976 : 133) term these words as 'little disclaimers', and suggest that the consumers are very likely to miss the disclaimer and only believe the promise of the non-guaranteed ability of the product as claimed.

The 'vague claim' comes next. This claim portrays an illusion of superiority through the use of words of vague value such as 'cool sounds' (sample 9), 'optimal security' (sample 5) and 'perfectly balanced statement' (sample 12). There is some kind of overlapping between this claim and the unique claim as some of the words used can belong to both types. This technique is quite popular among copywriters as the claim can evoke people's emotion and curiosity which can result in the desired action.

The 'scientific or statistical claim' is also among the frequently used claims by copywriters. This is because with the substantiated evidence, consumers are unlikely to question the superiority of the product. For example, evidence like 'Hi-Malt, Hi-Minerals and Hi-Vitamins' (sample 4), and '100% complex carbohydrates and fructose-free and sucrose free' (sample 3), may appear impressive and seem to contain unquestionable truths of the products advertised.

Although 'rhetorical question' is less found in the corpus, this type of claim is used as it may be effective in provoking the customers to consider the product. Rhetorical questions like 'Have you seen the new Toshiba Pocket PC?' (sample 6) or 'What makes us different from the rest of the look-a-likes?' (sample 11) can provoke the customers' minds, thus, lead them to buy the product.

The 'unfinished', 'water is wet', and 'compliment the consumer' claims are also evident in the corpus. However, these claims seem not to be popular among the copywriters of the advertisements selected. An explanation for this may lie in the fact that such claims do not really assert the superiority of the products. For example, 'Supradyn. Multivitamin Preparation' (sample 2), only implies equality with other multivitamin products. Thus, the claim may not appear persuasive enough to lead to the desired action by the customers. Copywriters, thus, may avoid using such type of claim.

The least frequently used claim is the 'endorsement or testimonial', where only one clear example is evident in the corpus; 'Endorsed by 17 international quality standard bodies' (sample 10). Although such claim can be very convincing, believable, and therefore, persuasive, the cost incurred to obtain the testimonial from the experts may be the reason for this single evident in the advertisements examined.

DISCUSSION

The tough competition among similar products in the same category has led to the vigorous attempts in creating illusions of superiority of the products. The findings of the present study have illustrated advertisers' efforts in claiming the superiority of their products so that the desired actions (from the consumers) could be attained. However, consumers should be aware of this strategy as advertisers seem to overstep the boundaries of giving truthful and substantial information about the products advertised. There have been legal cases that provide evidence so that consumers should not be notorious believers to such claims.

For example, the Independent Television Commission (ITC) which licences and regulates commercially funded television services in the United Kingdom has upheld a complaint made on an advertisement for Asli Atta, an ethnic flour, shown on Zee TV. The advertisement claims it as 'number one' and 'the best of all'. The claim was challenged by its competitor – research into flour reveals that the market did not rate this product as the leading brand. As a result, the advertisement has been ordered not to be shown again in that form as it was disputed to be misleading and deceptive.

Along the same line, the Division of Drug Marketing, Advertising and Communications in the U.S. has objected to the claims made by Cephalon Inc. on Provigil Tablets :

PROVIGIL : A Prescription for Daytime Wakefulness.

The claim was alleged to be false and misleading as it lacked fair balance and did not have substantial evidence, i.e what was the exact prescription, who endorsed it, etc. Thus the company was ordered to cease the dissemination of sales aids, journal and advertisements, websites and all other promotional materials of provigil (<http://www.pharmcast.com/warningletters/yr2002/Jan2002/Cephalon0102.htm>).

Another example is the charge made by the Federal Trade Commission on the unsubstantiated performance superiority claims made by Unocal Corporation, Union Oil Company of California and their advertising agency, Leo Burnett Company Inc. for Unocal's 89 and 92 octane gasoline grades (<http://www.ftc.gov/opa/predawn/F93/unocal-leo.htm>) :

... you can't trust your investment to just any gasoline. That's why 76 developed our 92 unleaded. It's the highest level octane gasoline you can buy to help your car run better, longer, and ... Compared to regular unleaded, our 89 octane will give your car smoother starts and stops ...

It was contended that the companies did not have any reasonable basis to substantiate their claims on the octane gasoline. As a result, the companies agreed to settle the charges by not making any attribution of any gasoline without any substantial scientific evidence.

CONCLUSION

Though the study is a small scale one, the findings suggest that superiority claims are extensively used in our local advertisements and will continue to be employed as an effective technique in achieving the advertisers' objective. As consumers we should be aware of the clever and creative use of language that can make the claims believable and contain unquestionable truths. We should be critical and discerning in accepting the claims made of the product advertised. As pointed out by Schrank (<http://sunset.ackbone.olemiss.edu/~egjbp/comp/adclaims.html>) :

A few of these claims are downright lies, some are honest statements about truly superior product, but most fit into the category of neither bold lies nor helpful consumer information. They balance on the narrow line between truth and falsehood by a careful choice of words.

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APPENDIX

Table 1 : The Unique Claim

Sample	Category	Claims
3		... makes this unique formulation extremely delicious
3		The only Halal nutritionally-complete formulation for diabetics
5		... providing superior contrast
5		The latest 15" XGA TFT
5		Another innovation from Japan's No 1 PC Brand
6		Microsoft's latest industry-standard Microsoft Windows Pocket PC2002 Operating System
7		The latest in portable digital media storage from the greatest name in memory
7		Only a Canon gives u Total Solution
7		We are the only one that offers the complete yet simple digital solution
9		The ultimate convenience store
9		Three times larger than the average convenience store
9		The special fuel
9		Malaysia's First Superstation
10		Only National has the widest range to meet your specific needs
10		The most efficient nationwide after-sales services
11		Malaysia's most popular pencil
11		Made from the best graphite technology in Germany
13		Thanks to our advanced technology
13		Your biggest asset really, is having the largest Malaysian bank behind you

Table 2 : The Weasel Claim

Sample	Category	Claims
2		One great-tasting supradyn effervescent tablet
3		Basically, Nutren Untuk Diabetic balances good sense with good taste
3		... along with a specially developed fibre blend, helps meet the daily nutritional ...
3		... extremely delicious
4		... convenient health beverage
4		You can always enjoy the full power of delicious ovaltine
5		... virtually hack-proof ...
6		... ultra-compact Pocket PC e310 features phenomenal processing power, brilliant screen technology
6		The pocket PC combines innovative technology, unprecedented expandability
7		... reliable and easy to use
12		Stunning appearance
13		Clearly, the next dimension in eye-colour
13		These crystal-clear cubes hold an irresistible attraction
13		32 incredible, long-lasting shades
14		Prevent your hair from thinning
14		Promoting high growth ...

Table 3 : The Vague Claim

Sample	Category	Claims
3		... balances good sense with good taste
4		Power up wherever, whenever
4		... go-go-go energy
4		Jam-packed with Hi-Malt, Hi-Minerals, and Hi-Vitamins
5		Enjoy optimal security with Fingerprint Recognizer Technology
5		... for more realistic image
6		Familiar business applications to set your work and play in full motion
7		Only a Canon gives u Total Solution
7		... for total digital solutions
9		Relax to the cool sounds of destina FM
9		... to give your car better acceleration and maximum power
10		... your specific needs
10		... more than what any other air-con manufacturer can offer you
11		Blackmores Bio ACE + Zinc is formulated with the essential nutrients to supplement your diet
12		BMW 525i with sports package makes a perfectly balanced statement

Table 4 : The Scientific or Statistical Claim

Sample	Category	Claims
1		... formulated with the essential nutrients to supplement ...
2		... a well-balanced formula of 12 vitamins and 8 minerals
3		Contains 100% complex carbohydrates and fructose-free and sucrose free
4		Jam-packed with Hi-Malt, Hi-Minerals, and Hi-Vitamins
5		Powered by the latest Centrino Mobile Technology TFT Supershine View (SSV) LCD Technology Screen Panel
6		Powered by Intel StrongARM 2006 MHz processor
10		5 distinct ranges, 21 different models and 5 separate power ratings
10		Exported to more 120 countries and used by over 30 millions people worldwide
12		Inside the BMW 5 series are the new generation of in-line 6-cylinder engines that feature advanced materials which reduce weight

Table 5 : The Rhetorical Question

Sample	Category	Claims
6		Have you seen the new Toshiba Pocket PC?
6		Have you ever wondered why pockets were invented?
9		When was the last time you had fun at a petrol station?
9		So why wait?
11		What makes us different from the rest of the look-a-likes?
12		What goes with increased power?

Table 6 : The Unfinished Claim

Sample	Category	Claims
13		... look bigger, brighter, more expressive ...
14		... firmer skin

Table 7 : The Water Is Wet Claim

Sample	Category	Claims
2		Supradyn. Multivitamin Preparation
7		Canon. The Total Digital Solutions Provider

Table 8 : The Compliment The Consumer Claim

Sample	Category	Claims
2		By taking one great-tasting supradyn effervescent tablet every morning, you'll give your body a well-balanced formula of 12 vitamins and 8 minerals
5		World' s Most Unique Password - You

Table 9 : The Endorsement Or Testimonial Claim

Sample	Category	Claims
10		Endorsed by 17 international quality standard bodies