

Make better Ads by digging up the Clichés – the handout

WHAT ARE CLICHÉ'S FOR MUM? THE ISSUE

The use of clichés in advertising is perpetual and widespread. Creative departments were formed to create original ideas but the clichés won't lie down. How persistent clichés are. And how often they reappear. What is the client to do? Brief for an original creative idea? Or dig out an original angle on a cliché and put some brand paint on it?

Until now the focus of advertising development research has been to identify what is new and different. And dismiss clichés to the margins. This research study was different. Beginning with the idea that there are lots of clichés in respondents' experience. What would happen if we let the clichés out? Could this help us move on to original ideas? The study shows how embedded clichés are in peoples' experience of advertising, the information they store and how customers use them.

It also provides a ready route for flushing out clichés quickly and cheaply. How many campaign development processes have suffered from taking weeks to draw out creative ideas only to find in research how many of them are tired and derivative? Wouldn't it be cheaper to map clichés using respondents instead of advertising creatives? Wouldn't this be a faster way to more original advertising work? And wouldn't a heightened awareness of the category clichés stop us wrecking ads by asking respondents to improve them if we know that they are prone to give generic solutions?

In the workshop you become the guinea pigs. You may all be business professionals but we can assure you that you have heads stuffed with advertising clichés. We want to draw these out to show how to avoid the traps of bad advertising research - pre-testing techniques which make the ads worse afterwards. And for a fraction of the price of a full semiotics study you can get a swift read on the conventions of the advertised category. This study is a potent fusion of semiotics and discourse analysis. A fast way to gather shared meanings while allowing respondents to amplify what they remember and perceive to be important. Whoever claimed that qualitative research is losing its bite?



How we did it – the research study

METHODOLOGY

One of the unwritten rules of research is that methodologies are as dull or as interesting as their topic. We knew from the beginning that it will take more than a conventional focus group to tackle our intriguing task: revealing advertising clichés. And we were right, you can't dig out clichés from a traditional focus group, but you can do it through a qualitative pre-testing one. In our search for the right methodology to unravel clichés we exposed the fallacy of qualitative pre-testing focus groups. The fallacy which also became the premise for our research goes like this: when asked to improve commercials in qualitative pre-testing, consumers are implicitly placed in a specialist posture and tend to “improve” the ads by suggesting as necessary the very clichés they've seen in the category. Not surprisingly, as “specialists”, consumers play back the lessons learnt at the only advertising school they have ever studied: the commercial break.

Starting from this, the methodology was simple: stage a qualitative pretesting and note consumers' recommendations to get your category advertising clichés. In order to maximize the clichés' harvest, we designed a rather extreme variant of a qualitative pretesting: we've selected 5 categories of products, recruited pairs of friends for interviews and asked them to brainstorm a script and to draw a sketch for a TVC. At the end of each interview, they played a role game, and the participants became “agencies” trying to “sell” “the commercial” to “the client” by explaining why their adverts would be effective. We also initiated a condensing stage where they were asked to jettison the less important elements. In practice this meant that the core clichés came out even more strongly.

We ran 18 interviews with 36 women. As there are so many product categories targeting women, we focused on five: detergents, shampoo, coffee, shower gel and processed meat. These were selected considering two main criteria: the ads are mainly addressed to women and the category communication is active enough to produce clichés.

The criteria for recruiting the respondents were the demographic characteristics of each category of products, the preference for TV as a way of spending time and the degree of tolerance on commercials. The interviews took place during May and June 2008.



The five markets we researched and some of the clichés we found

COFFEE

In the coffee category, respondents delivered not so much individual clichés, but more sets of clichés. Common however seems to be the overall emotional promise: "our coffee brings people together/closer".

For the first identified set of clichés, what characterizes it is the general atmosphere: usually a relaxing summer afternoon in a South American landscape, slow instrumental music on the background and happy couples or friends around a table enjoying quietly the coffee. Some executional clichés are particularly associated with this set-up: "we see the steam coming out of the coffee cups", "we see them smelling the coffee and enjoying the aroma", "there's a raffia sack full of coffee beans around", "there should be a sipping scene when we see her slowly drinking from the cup with and obviously savouring it".

In the second set of clichés the emotional promise "brings people together" is altered in the more youngish "brings your best friends together". The functional promise stops focusing on the taste of the coffee and is replaced with its energizing effect. The executional cliché dramatizing this promise is similar to scenes specific to energizing drinks "we see them dancing until the sun rises", "he drinks the coffee and regains the power to continue learning for his exam", "she finds the energy to dress up and go to the party".



COFFEE RELATED CLICHÉ DICTIONARY:

coffee beans = sometimes in the "reds direct from the bush" form, either they are in the fried process, or they are throw in a careless way near a cup or package of coffee.

raffia sack = the raffia sack is for coffee like the noble wood barrel for wine. Symbol of abundance, the sack is brimful with coffee beans, ready to burst. Present to reference the traditional ways of storing and processing. The rational suggestion is obvious: if they hadn't replace the transportation method, probable they would keep all the good methods from the past.

steam = the steam is always visible in an unusual and plentiful way on the surface of the cup but also on the surface of any other container for coffee. The same unusual aspect is that the steam doesn't show the temperature, it refers to the flavour/smell. So, a steaming coffee is not a hot coffee, it's a flavourful coffee.

cup of coffee = it's used in a coffee service, two at least , it's an ordinary cup, the colour matches with the package of the promoted brand. The cup is revealed either steaming, forgotten on a table, or in the hands of a person.

The sip from cup = this consumption gesture is the most often mentioned. The most common description is: we see a young girl having in hands a cup of coffee, the young girl is sipping lightly, enjoying and in slow motion, she is closing her eyes, showing pleasure. Sticks out her lips as if she wants to keep the flavor longer.

Sociability = this is the coffee central promise. Either we speak about a couple or a family or a group of friends, all of them feel better together when they enjoy a cup of coffee.

Silence environment = enjoying the coffee is practiced only on certain conditions, conditions that encourage calm and the relaxation. Late summer afternoon, with warm light, nice weather, chill music on the background. The furniture is light, and the ambience Mediterranean. A fairy tale environment.

Energy provider = occasional but frequent enough to become a cliché. It changes to an energy amplifier. The coffee wakes you up, or rescues you like a medicine or a cure without a prescription. The described effects are exaggerated and made humorous.



SHAMPOO

In the shampoo category, two types of clichés were particularly salient: the narrative clichés/ the clichés related to the actual story and a set of executional ones.

The classic scenario “girl gets boy because of her hair” has 3 well-defined key moments:

1. Issue set-up: “at the beginning we see her really unhappy with the way her hair looks”, “she’s alone and sad at the beginning”, “we understand that she has tried most of the hair products, but nothing worked”. In the issue- set up part of the story, the importance of the hair issue is dramatized by an imminent important event in our protagonist’s life: “she had to go to a party”, “she was supposed to go a friends wedding/her own wedding and now she’s late because her hair is a disaster”.

2. Solution: “this is the moment when our shampoo enters the scene”, “usually the shampoo is recommended by a better looking friend”, “she suddenly remembers buying the shampoo”. This is the moment when the benefits of the shampoo are presented, usually by a male voice over.

3. Celebration: “we see the end results: her hair looking beautiful”, “ we see her at the party all happy and dancing and he finally notices her”, “we see her face totally impressed by her looks”, “her friend is obviously jealous when our protagonist enters the room waving her beautiful hair.”

In terms of executional clichés, the most common by far is the “hair shot”. The hair shot is described as an unnatural and even silly movement of the hair: “she should start shaking her head so that we understand that her hair is in focus”, “while she dances she moves ostentatious her full of volume hair”, “we see the hair from above in all its splendour”.

The second most mentioned cliché is the hair washing scene: “we see her while she’s washing her hair”, “the quantity of the foam made by the shampoo is almost unbelievable”, “her gestures indicate intense pleasure”, “while we see her washing, we hear a male voice over explaining how our shampoo works wonders or just some really relaxing music.”



SHAMPOO RELATED CLICHÉ DICTIONARY:

Hair shot = Describes that “an unusual hair shorten”, “close-up frames, where we can see only the hair”, “shaking hair seen from the backside”, is the element that refers to a shampoo commercial. No matter of the shampoo functional benefit, from “against the hair falling of” to “a shine plus”, hair shots always presents the same kind of hair: one relatively long, shining and with volume. Any efficient shampoo makes your hair looks like this and only like this.

The know-everything friend = is empathy personified, either a friend stylist or a stylist friend. The character appears in the middle of the commercial, when the main-character is on depressed. She invariably recommends shampoo X as the only solution, validated by personal experience.

The saving shampoo = No matter how serious the problem, from a dry hair to romantic or professional problems, the simple utilization of the shampoo is sufficient to transform the situation. The shampoo has a unique way of working: sometimes through direct action, at other times through indirect action making the hair beautiful so solving the problem. Dry and degraded hair is a very frequent shorthand descriptor. Irrespective if feeds or gives volume, the shampoo always actions from the roots.

Shining and volumised hair = “The shine” and “the volume” are the two most common benefits they mention. Any other benefit (for example “hydrated”, “against the hair falling out”) is not enough unless it delivers on voice-over, “shining and volume”.

Special occasion = is used to raise the stakes, transforming hair shortcoming into a crisis.

She gets attention = Irrespective of the set-up, party or office, someone appears spellbound by the happy user.

Hair washing hair scene = Consumption scene preceded by pouring the shampoo in hands to observe consistency. The scene takes place in the shower and the attention is on the abundance of foam. We never see the beginning or the rinsing.

The success in career = Is one of the indirect effects of using a good shampoo. The look of her hair is the only obstacle. Suddenly when the problem is solved, we see getting her confidence back and ready again to resume her social and professional ascent.



DETERGENTS

Detergent is universally perceived to be the most hackneyed category as the research demonstrates. A typical detergent ad has *benefit*, *scenario* and *woman portraying* clichés, along with a set of repetitive *executional elements*.

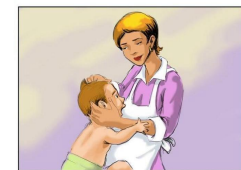
The benefit clichés refer to a. *cleaning* or b. *pleasant scent*; sometimes the ad focuses on both of them.

The most frequent story logic to dramatize the benefit(s) is the *problem - solution scenario*, for example a stain-generating accident occurs, increasing the stress of the leading character. In the end the detergent is introduced as the saviour of the day.

Another cliché scenario is represented by the multitude of coincidences, e.g. the stain destroys a climactic moment of happiness. The detergent pack appears out of nowhere. The solution makes everybody happy!

The leading character of the ad is the *30-40 year old woman* presented each time in a boring, conventional and role: looking after a household / or a small business (usually a restaurant) involving stains. Sometimes she's a mother, and children play the role of introducing stains into the story. Occasionally we meet the saviour, who is female mentor figure, older and experienced in cleaning.

There are plenty of repetitive executional motifs: *the ordinary detergent* - often labelled as such, the *comparison procedure* (between the branded and the non-branded detergent, the 1st and nth washing and before-after), the *special formula*, and a collage of *visual process cues* (the washing machine swirling the clothes, stains, laundry hanging to dry, the pack shot etc.).



DETERGENT RELATED CLICHÉ DICTIONARY

The heroine = 30 something female protagonist in chains of domestic servitude. Often portrayed as a mother, and sometimes like a pub or restaurant manager. While she is preoccupied with many household activities (making dinner, cleaning, taking care of children), her primary role is to make dirt vanish.

The ordinary family = the woman above seems to be affirmed by a formula family: mother, father, 1-2 children. There are middle class queues. Children are used in the story to introduce an inexhaustible supply of dirt.

Stain /staining situations = The stain's appearance is the TV commercial culminating point. The stain is always presented as an existential drama: the accidental is overreacted and the consequences are horrible. The fault belongs to an inexperienced or innocent person. The detergent is introduced into the story by a stained cloth (most of the time coat or table face).

The mentor = a third character who has always the solution for dirt. She is the gatekeeper for the detergent.

Coincidence = The detergent ads use a providential framework. We witness a perfect demonstration of the product. The stain breaks into the happiest moment, the children get dirty in front of the mother, the child arrives home with dirty clothes just when the mother is washing, the new detergent package appears from nowhere just in as the stain becomes an issue.

The language of detergent = the speech is usually impersonal, didactic.

The artificial appearance of the detergent = it presented as a magical solution. It appears in unexpected places.

The impostor detergent = a feeble competitor tailor made to make the hero detergent look good. A series of comparisons is made: before vs. after washing, usual detergent vs. detergent X, first wash vs. *n* washes (colour resistance)

Pack shot = The final image, which usually contains, besides the package and claim image, an image that reinforces the outcome of using the detergent: clean / perfumed cloth. The pack shot usually includes additional functional messages.



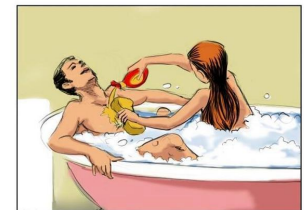
SHOWER GEL

Most of the commercials made by consumers portrayed women in the bathing or showering moment with high focus on product usage and after effects

The “3-step story” is outlined as it follows:

1. The woman fears rejection because she is not attractive enough.
2. The solution - Bathing/shower time. Consumers wanted to explicitly describe the difference of bathing (relaxation, creamy, aromatic products) vs. showering (refreshment, booster, usage of citric products). Either way, all scenes must focus on product usage and the alteration of the character’s mood “the gel is the real hero”, “We must see her washing herself” “ Maybe a sponge. She pours the gel on it and washes herself enjoying the foam around her”.
3. The idea - usually a line and a product-shot. “At one point, the commercial must stop to plant an idea like “for sensitive moments, for magic moments”, “we must use big words”; “At the end we must see them both in the bathtub. He is fascinated by her”.

Executionally, most of the consumer made shower-gels commercials include a bathroom setting, two protagonists (woman and partner), languorous voice-overs, clearly mentioned product-benefits (like hydration, finesse, freshness etc.) and focus on product features (gel composition, details about smell, texture etc.) “Shower-gel commercial’s aren’t difficult because they has specific elements and they are all the same”



SHOWER GEL RELATED CLICHÉ DICTIONARY

The naked woman in the shower = all the shower gel ideas employ the same stereotype, a beautiful woman who spends most of the screen time showering. You are supposed to aspire to her experience. Showers fulfil her and it is the gel (not the shower) which delivers the fulfilment.

Washing action = is the main scene of a shower gel TV commercial. Most of the time presented in slow motion. The washing becomes ritualised almost artistic.

Mood transformation = the most frequent dramatized emotional benefit of the shower gel. The mood is changing for better after usage giving energy and well-being.

Functional benefits frequently mentioned = Freshness and hydration.

Abstract metaphor showing effectiveness = Animation that presents the functional benefit of the shower gel, in a metaphorical form and easy to remember: soap bubbles, a vessel with a white liquid similar with the milk or the hydrating cream. Oceanic metaphors of marine flora and fauna support this though often presented ornamentally.

Sensory cues = Diffuse light used to reproduce the perfect moment of relaxation during a bath. Music in a low tone suggests relaxation sensuality and fragrance. Happy music conveys energising properties usually with a shower.

The bathroom = locus of the experience and demonstration. Beautiful and spacious. Ornaments add sensory cues: candles, rose petals, drops of water, folding screen etc

Cleaning rituals = Delicate skin is a common motif which demonstrate the working of shower gel. Proved by stroking skin during or after the bath either self-stroking or by the partner. Delicacy and smell are the key benefits. The sponge = helps the woman when she's using the gel. Also shows the texture of the gel. Gel pouring Key frame in the demonstration sequence. The pouring uses circular moves and in generous quantities.

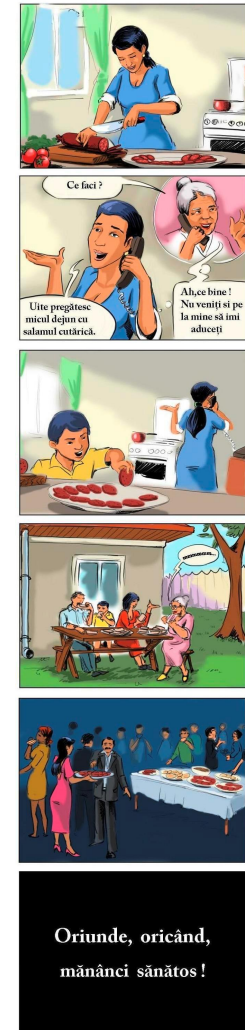


PROCESSED MEAT

In the processed-meat category respondents underline many similarities in the way the product is presented and used.

Most category ads shape around one similar pattern: mother and child as main characters, kitchen setup and highly appetizing product demos - including the cutting scene, the thickness of the slices which are very fresh and water-sprayed, special placements on plateaus or cutting-board, even the eating of a great looking sandwich in slow motion.

The demonstration and the pack-shot are the two most important moments of the ad and following well-established guidelines, as is the usage of a big cook-knife that cuts very thin slices, the pinkish color of the product and the final presentation of the entire product range.



PROCESSED MEAT CLICHÉS

The kitchen = the main locus of the commercial. Carefully and fully furnished (capacious fridge, table for at least 4 people) and decorated usually with aspirational cues (napkins, stainless classic cutlery, tablecloth)

Usage occasions = breakfast the main occasion. Salami TV commercials stubbornly present breakfast as the main meal of the day. picnics are the other usage occasion. The picnic is useful for showing easily prepared food, chilling and good spirits, the most important benefits of this product category.

Snacks on the move = a way to to present a bigger and various product range. Also offers the possibility to create even more spectacular and appetizing sets to underline a new moment of consumption.

The slicing ritual = the key-point because it presents product ingredients in detail and can create a better appetite sensation. The cutting is always done with an over large kitchen knife, the slender slices are shot falling spectacularly on the tablecloth/plateau/sandwich.

The freshness = mandatory in a salami TV commercial to ensure the product trust and stimulate the watcher appetite. It's suggested with the help of water drops that trickle down the salami and the other ingredients (vegetables: salad, fresh cut tomatoes).

Other cast member = the child - children are used in these films for two reasons: to show that it is suitable for children and to communicate that the product is healthy. The grandmother represents an important figure from childhood, cooking skilfully, the grandmother is the “guarantee of quality” this is proper food.

The sandwich = the culmination of the salami TV commercials, always made of the same ingredients: lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers and cheese. There is always an appetite shot by the maker or the child consuming it.

Water Drops/Dew = fully spread on the vegetable in the kitchen next to salami and on the product as well, it communicates the freshness and natural cues.



Putting clichés to work

We can anticipate one response immediately - anyone can analyse advertising. Is this any more than any student might produce for a media studies exercise? But there is much more here. What makes the difference is that this is the creative output of real customers. And shows as development research often fails to show, the connection between the norms of the category and how these are remembered and internalised. Clichés should not be casually dismissed. They can be seen as a cultural grammar for what the brand is promising and what the product delivers. The challenge is to go further - because the problem with clichés is they rarely contain a brand differentiated benefit - they promote the category. And they are so familiar that they may be internalised without the viewer taking in minor points of difference. Ads riddled with clichés reinforce existing perceptions when more often than not, a marketer wants to create new and heightened perceptions of what the product delivers.

Recommendation 1 – How to make your ads better

Firstly understand the grammar of the category properly before you set out to break the rules. Brands function in a market context - it is absurd to attempt to be original without understanding the conventions. Those who ignore them are doomed to repeat them. There is also the practical point that it is much cheaper and quicker to use respondents to map a category than to use advertising creatives who are expensive and whose time is limited. The benefit of researching the clichés of the category before briefing the creatives is that they know the conventions, and they know the clichés to avoid. But critically they also know what is memorable, and what respondents choose to remember - the power of key images. The power of a creative idea is to express a truth in an original way - this method leads to a much more collaborative and productive way of working with the creative department which saves time as well as money.

Recommendation 2 How to avoid making them worse

Conventional qualitative pre-testing gives respondents the opportunity to provide suggestions about how they would 'improve the advertising. This study should be warning enough that respondents given the opportunity are likely to offer suggestions that come from their reading of the category. They will give you clichés and under pressure will give you more (not less) conventional suggestions - recalling previous successful executions. Paradoxically some clients find this reassuring! Respondents like ads that are familiar and reject the new and different. Research needs to become attuned to category norms so we can recognise ideas which stand on the margins of these norms. This method gives us the chance to create original and different work precisely because we choose to look at the advertising clichés first.



Contact details

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Elena is one of the most senior, most highly decorated planners in Romania. For the last 3 years she has worked on Proctor & Gamble in Eastern Europe. Her paper on Wash And Go won an APG silver in 2007 and also the prize for the best use of qualitative research. She has also won several Effies. At the ripe old age of 26 she is now firmly part of the Romanian advertising establishment.

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John Griffiths - Founder of Planning Above and Beyond

John is a communications planner, researcher, trainer and facilitator who in recent years has regularly run training in Romania for the International Advertising Association and advertising agencies in Bucharest. This project came about when he asked the Burnetts planning team what they would learn if research respondents wrote their own ads. They took up the challenge - and this study is the result. Last time John spoke at the MRS conference his paper won the prize for best new thinking and was shortlisted for best paper and best innovation in methodology. When John was 26 he was doing his first advertising job. Elena remains far in front!

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EXPLORE THE LEOSHE Adcliches project on the website: <http://www.leoshe.ro/clisee/index.html>

