

Chapter 52

Playfulness in Online Marketing: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

This article explores different challenges and opportunities of using humour and playfulness in online marketing. Humour has been investigated intensively in marketing, especially in advertising, yet there is little knowledge of the challenges and opportunities in online marketing faced by practitioners. This study analyses key studies conducted in the context of a unique case: a Finnish research project exploring humour as a strategic tool for companies. These studies can provide emerging insights of humour in online marketing which are relevant for practitioners: humour as a transformational appeal, individual differences related to humour appreciation, role of storytelling and playfulness in blogging and challenges related to use of humour such as credibility.

INTRODUCTION

Advertising cannot be easily overlooked as it surrounds us. Humour and laughter are intimately connected with what it means to be a human being (Hietalahti, 2016) and thus, they are also important for marketing, the objective of which is to create relevant products and services and communicate of them in a relevant fashion. Not only does marketing shape what people want and thus how they spend their money, because of the trends and fashions it creates, but it also influences which businesses fail and which succeed (Cluley, 2017). The practices of marketing in general and those of advertising in particular should abide by common principles of appropriateness and good conduct. Ethical aspects of advertis-

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ing and challenges related to legal regulations have attracted interest among researchers (Bjelica et al., 2016) and more recently also specific advertising issues in online environment, such as controversial advertising (Moraes & Michaelidou, 2017). Although the legislation seems clear, practices are at times unclear, as the line between proper and improper marketing and marketing communication is, at times, fine, and becomes even finer when customers travel to other countries, either as real or virtual shoppers. E.g. a tourist cannot help but wonder how some stores in the Canary Island of Fuerteventura are permanently going out of business and consequently advertise that they are selling all their goods at a discounted price. Clearly, when it comes to humour and play, what some people perceive appropriate in advertising, others find inappropriate. Thus, there are opportunities as well as challenges in the use of humour in marketing.

On the one hand, digital commerce is potentially immediately international – as soon as the e-retailer has set up a functional web shop in an international language. Language and related symbolic cues have been acknowledged as relevant issues in current international marketing, especially in online service. In such a physical environment where services are provided, strategic choices of language are important so as to produce such messages for consumers from different cultural backgrounds that are consistent with brands and corporate values (Alcantara-Pilar et al., 2017). In addition, it can be assumed that consumers prefer to use their own language when operating in the global digital markets, and maybe they also look for online advertising to be easily understandable regardless of cultural backgrounds.

This is an interesting starting point for exploring the use of humour and playfulness in marketing and advertising. As Vuorela (2005) studied negotiation behaviour in international sales teams, a type of marketing communication as a genre as well, the following kinds of comments arose from the participants: “...there are no cultural differences here [in the negotiation process], as we are all engineers.” But does culture then not play a role in the types of advertising styles that companies choose? Many companies opt for only ‘serious’ business-like communication as a safe solution, but are they losing or gaining business opportunities in doing so? Lidl is an interesting case in point: in Finland, the German grocery store is known for humorous, even daring advertising. To give an example, they sold lip gloss as a side product to customers during the doping scandal of a Norwegian skier who claimed that the anabolic steroids in her blood originated in lip gloss. Yet, the company is known for non-humorous advertising in Germany.

The aim of this paper is to gain more understanding on the challenges and opportunities of using humour and playfulness in online marketing. Many of the studies that were conducted within the context of a humour-related research project involved company interviews and gaining information of the insight that businesses have of using humour in their marketing practices. The objective of the present paper is to summarise such practitioner viewpoints of the functions of humour and playfulness in order to find new and relevant foci for a further scientific research agenda in the field of humour-based marketing.

BACKGROUND

Playfulness, and humour as a related sub-concept (Guitard et al., 2005), has been recognized by researchers to be a common practice in marketing; it has been studied especially in advertising (Eisend, 2009; Weinberger & Gulas, 1992) and service encounters (e.g., Bergeron & Vachon, 2008; Mathies et al., 2016; Söderlund & Oikarinen, 2018). Humour has also been discussed as a relevant advertising appeal particularly in online advertising, where it contributes to an ad becoming viral, that is spreading efficiently a company’s message in social media (Oikarinen & Sinisalo, 2017; Porter & Golan, 2006).

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