THE AIDA MODEL FOR ADVERGAMES

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Abstract:
Marketers are continuously searching for new ways to communicate better with their public and to understand consumers' purchasing behavior. They tried to define and explain the consumer's purchase process by using different models and applying various strategies for improving brand communication. One of the paths followed was the use of hierarchy of effects models. This paper describes the consumer's purchase process by interpreting the AIDA Model in the context of online advergames. The stages of the process are explained based on the interaction established between a consumer and a brand during a game session when the player is exposed to advertising messages embedded in the advergame content. The general setup for the model interpretation is given by the online environment and the specific virtual interactivity of the Internet. Previous studies concerning advergames showed that this new communication tool can increase brand awareness, creates positive feelings toward brand and a general positive attitude which can lead to purchase intention and actual sales. This paper can help advertisers to better understand how advergames work and presents, for each stage of the AIDA model, a series of elements which could be used for driving consumers through the communication funnel and to reach the final stage of the acquisition process.

Key words: advertising models, advergaming, hierarchy of effects, AIDA Model

JEL classification: M37

1. INTRODUCTION

The new economic field pushed firm into becoming more efficient in communicating with their actual and potential customers. The promotional efforts that a company employs for reaching its public depend on the general strategy chose.

For understanding how advertising works and to reach better their public, advertisers tried to define and explain the consumer's purchase process by using different models. The purchasing funnel is a marketing model which focuses on consumer and explains theoretical how consumer "travels" through the communication channel and gets to purchase a certain product or service.

The use of theoretical models for measuring advertising effects on potential consumers help in setting the goals, structure the objectives and analyze the impact of the delivered message. A class of models used for measuring the advertising efforts is the so called hierarchy of effects models.

The hierarchy of effects models represents a process with multiple stages that describe the way that consumers gets from the total unaware of a brand, to awareness, manifests particular preferences, purchases the product, and potentially, develops loyalty for the brand. In this process it is very important for a marketer to clearly identify these hierarchic stages and observe for each case in which stage he managed to bring its consumers. An important hierarchy model is the AIDA model which describes four stages that the advertising drives the consumer into, starting with awareness, interest, desire and finally action.

A very important aspect in the hierarchy models is the consumer involvement. The involvement represents the amount of time, energy, thought and different resources used by people in the process of purchasing a product or service, or devoted in obtaining a particular thing or result. This characteristic is often combined with personal motivation, which can be emotional or rational.

Psychologically, the consumers' involvement in acquisition of a product has different degrees, which could be included in two big categories: low and high.

The low involvement implies that the consumer buys on habit, without thinking to much and analyzing its choice. This aspect has important implication in the communication process: the

effectiveness of the advertising message does not depend on the content and the intensity of the message, but on the frequency of exposure.

High involvement implies that the consumer makes an acquisition as a result of an emotional and cognitive thinking. In this case, the consumer is looking for information related to the product he is interested in. For a good communication process with this type of consumer, the firm has to implement complex advertising, with more information.

Combining advertising purposes with entertainment factors proved to be an efficient way of gaining consumers' attention, enhancing interest, create desire and encourage action, which are in fact the four stages of the AIDA model, which can be used for illustrating a series of consecutive reactions that a consumers have while he is exposed to advertising messages.

An innovative way of transmitting a branded message that was used in the latest years is advergaming. Advergames are a category of online video games constructed around a particular brand or product with the main purpose of promoting them. This kind of branded entertainment is usually free and is available on specialized online sites or on the official website of a brand. When marketers chose to use advergames for their promotional campaigns, they have to understand the particular elements of a video game and how to use them for dealing with high or low involvement from consumers.

To overcome low involvement, marketers can increase for instance the number of billboards that appear in a game, rather than making the advertising insertion more interactive, using for example direct links to the official web page of the brand or explaining different characteristics of the product during the game session. In this case, a firm should allocate media budget toward high frequency of the advertising spots, as the message is absorbed in a long time memory by the targeted audience through repetition.

In high involvement cases, a brand can improve the intensive characteristics of an advergames by selecting the most adequate insertions that can provide relevant and explanatory information about the product they advertise within the video game.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 THE EFFECTS OF ADVERTISING

The existing literature explains different methods that could be used for measuring the effects of advertising. This include awareness (Hansen et.al, 2006), purchase likelihood (Aaker et.al, 1986), brand choice (Cobb-Walgren et.al, 1995), brand perceptions (MacKenzie and Lutz 1989), viewing time (Olney et.al, 1991), memory-based tests (Brennan et.al, 1999; Russell 1998) or purchase intentions (Bellman et.al, 2009; Gotlieb and Sarel 1991; Kamins 1990).

In many situations, determining how efficient an advergames is can be difficult. Tracking the effectiveness of offline advergames is even more challenging. For online advergames, which are the main focus of this paper, the efficiency can be measured, at the very basic level, by gathering the login numbers or the user accounts. Analyzing only these numbers could be insufficient for a good perspective on the matter, so advertisers could measure different aspect through the runtime to obtain the best response. Using special developed tracking tools for online advergames, marketers can record the players' behavior during a game session.

The most popular hierarchy of effects models are the AIDA Model and it's descendent, the DAGMAR Model. The beginnings of the hierarchy of effects models dates back to 1898, when St Elmo Lewis realized that a consumer has to be driven through a series of acquisition stages, not only to setting up a deal. His idea of hierarchy was later made available for the large public in 1910 when it was published in the editorial of the printed paper The Printer's Ink. The article explained 4 stages of effects, attention, interest, conviction and action, known later as the AIDA Model, and indicated that it can be used for advertising campaigns as a model of persuasion.

In 1961 the Journal of Marketing publishes a seminal paper by Robert Lavidge and Gary Steiner (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961) that explained, besides how the AIDA model works, that consumers take use of cognitive and affective processes when deciding to purchase a product.

Since this first publication, multiple variations of this model were published, discussing the stages of the acquisition process. One of these models, which become more popular than the rest, is the DAGMAR Model, an acronym for Defining Advertising Goals for Measured Results. Colley (1984) argued that an advertiser can identify the communication process current stage and set up specific advertising objectives.

2.2 THE HIERARCHY OF EFFECTS MODELS

The basic hierarchy of effects model represents a mental process that a consumer is supposed to experience through an advertisements communication campaign. To fully understand how this type of models work, advertisers have to focus on each individual step of the process, as well as on the concept as a whole.

Previous literature revealed several hierarchies of effects' models (Barry, 1987). Numerous of these models were adopted for analyzing advertising as a long time investment and adopted by many practitioners and researchers.

The first hierarchy of effects model was proposed in 1897 (Strong, 1925) and included initially 3 steps that a sales person should lead his client: to gain attention, maintain the interest and create desire. Latter he added a new step in the process – action. This first model become known in advertising literature as AIDA and was developed from its initial form by Strong (1925).

From the initial model, there have been many changes in the stages of the hierarchy of effects model, presenting multiple phases of communication, starting from total unawareness up to the final purchase (Jones, 1986).

Variation from this model included alternate steps in the process as satisfaction (Sheldon, 1911) and conviction (Strong, 1938). A more complex model was proposed in 1961 (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961) and included six more explicit steps: awareness, knowledge, liking, preference, conviction and purchase. They also introduced the concepts of cognition, conation and affect to explain the response to advertising.

The term of "hierarchy of effects" appeared concrete with Palda (1966) who suggested that each step of the model represent a necessary but insufficient condition for the sequence of stages.

In advertising literature cognition is considered the rational and mental process which involves exposure to advertising information (Hughes and Guerrero, 1971). This sum of effects reflects the learning process, thoughts and the intellectual state (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961) of the consumer. These effects include awareness, attention, knowledge, comprehension, recognition, perception and beliefs, or in other words, all the steps approached in these models which involve learning and understanding the features, use and benefits of a product or service advertised.

In psychology, cognition is the central research interest and analyses the complexity of the behavior and the thought process, the way that people process information (Zajonc, 1980), the different skills they use when decoding the information (Wright, 1973, 1975). The differences in the way human process the information they deal with makes the cognitive response modeling be a difficult task for marketers (Hughes and Guerrero, 1971).

The affective dimension deals with the effects of feelings that consumers involve in the acquisition process. This group of effects associates effects from multiple hierarchy models and explains the way a potential consumer feels about a particular product or the relationship established with the brand. This group on feelings include: acceptance, liking, interest, legitimization, satisfaction, evaluation, yielding, preference, emotion, attitude and desire.

The literature (Batra, 1986) gives notice about the different meaning of this feelings and the correct use of them when interpreting the consumer response. The attitude concept appeared in 1920 and started to be studied as a way of understanding the connections between the perception of the external stimuli and the manifested behavior (Smith and Swinyar, 1983).

In some points of view, attitude reveals a behavior prediction and a high willingness. In literature, attitude is defines as an evaluative judgment, and is different from affect which refers to a valence feeling state (Cohen and Areni, 1991). In some opinions, attitude shows that consumers' previous experience makes them more predisposed to react in a particular ways on the basis of perceptions (Boyd et al, 1972). Other definition was proposed in 1993 (Eacly and Chaiken, 1993), and states that attitude is a psychological tendency that is revealed when a consumer evaluates a particular product or service in terms of favorable or unfavorable.

Previous works focused on desire, defined it as the feeling that follows an inclination for wanting certain things and some times accompanies a state of unpleasantness. Desire appears also as the state of mind on a person which has a personal interest and motivation to act in a certain way or to achieve a goal (Indeed et al, 2004). Accordingly (Gollwitze, 1990) considers that desire as a goal determines advertisers to create a goal intention which would lead the consumers in achieving that particular goal. Previous empirical work (Bagozzi, 2000) showed that desire mediated and changes the purpose of motives and reasons in action, and influences the consumer's intention.

Using hierarchy of effects models, a company can follow how far a consumer advanced into the purchasing process and how many of them finalized the process with an actual buying. When the customer remains blocked in one of the stages, the advertisers can learn about the weaknesses of the tools used in certain stages, improve them and find how to better drive the consumer through the purchasing process and the next acquisitions. This also implies modification of the advertising campaign approach and requires improvements in the communication process.

3. HIERARCHY OF EFFECTS MODELS

3.1 GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

First suggestions of consumers' response (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961) were formulated in terms of hierarchy of effects as a progression of stages that a potential buyer gets through from awareness to final action.

These models are based on learning process and consider that consumer goes through a sequence of pre-determined functions in finishing an acquisition process. They are initially built on the general assumption that a consumer will pass through all the stages in the hierarchy, and the purchase will be made after he completes all the previous steps. This premise was debated, as the assumption could not be valid and the consumers could skip steps in the process (Hansen, 1972).

The variety of hierarchy of effects models was determined by the basic consideration that first people learn about product from advertising; next they develop certain feeling about them, and finally take action. This sequence of steps, as proposed by Bovee (Bovee et al, 1995) is often not applicable in the real market, as in some practical situations, the stages do not occur necessarily in this precise order and buyers do not pass through every step of the process.

Previous literature agreed on the importance of three most relevant hierarchy of effects models: the dissonance-attribution, learning and low-involvement hierarchy.

From these types, the learning hierarchy models are the most intuitive (Floyd, 1999) and become highly predictive when a consumer is involved. The thinking model is a model which led people to rationalize and perceive, next to develop certain attitudes, and in the end, to act and behave accordingly.

In the classical cognition-affective-conation model (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961), the various stages of the process differ in dimension and distance in time. In some cases, the distance from preference to purchase could be very large, even if the distance from awareness to preference could be small. An important study (Aaker and Day, 1974) revealed that not all the individuals pass through each step of the process, and they could move up several steps at once. Nevertheless, the most powerful model in personal selling remains the hierarchy which assumes a rational willing person which faces a potential decision (Floyd, 1999).

The dissonance-attribution hierarchy models have their origins in the theories of dissonance (Festinger, 1957), self-perception (Bem, 1972) and attribution (Heider, 1958). This model is usually applied when consumers are the first to act, develop an attitude and assume a choice they make. Consequently, consumers prospect for information, take decisions and support their choices, ignoring the external influences that disagree whit them (Aaronson, 1969; Batra and Vanhonacker, 1986). In this process, consumers become more involved with their choice and are consequent in attitude (Floyd, 1999). These kinds of models do not provide relevant information regarding the product alternatives choice.

In the low-involvement hierarchy, people become aware about the existence of a product and initiate the purchase. After purchasing, consuming and experiencing the product, they develop an attitude towards it. This model implies that consumers like certain products because they had bought and tested them (Smith and Swinyard, 1978). The consumer implication is low and the disparities between the choices of alternative products are small.

The economic reality forced marketers to improve old methods and adapt models for the new consumer. The hierarchy of effects models implies more stages than the traditional models, such as new technologies, re-purchase and the changes in consumers' behavior. This new approach implies the use of the purchasing funnel concept, which was associated for the first time with AIDA model in 1924 (Townsend, 1924) in the work Bond Salesmanship. The concept of purchase funnel is applied in advertising as a way to direct promotional campaigns towards targeted audience. When it is properly applied, and takes account of the principles of AIDA model, the purchasing funnel should lead to raising the product awareness, produce interest, create desire and encourage action.

3.2 THE AIDA MODEL IN ADVERGAMES CONTEXT

The AIDA Model (Strong, 1925) is in fact an acronym for attention, interest, desire and action and describes a cognitive journey of a consumer that travels through four main stages. This model can be approached as a tool to encourage action by stimulating the purchase of a certain product or service. It is a good way for advertisers to create efficient promotional campaigns by conducting the consumer through four psychological stages, from unawareness to concrete acquisition.

To obtain the desired result, marketers have to use special measures in every of the four stages of the process. These steps have the purpose of mapping the cognitive route that a consumer gets through.

Further, we explain the four stages of acquisition, also graphically described in figure 1.

a) Attract the **attention**: The advertiser has to promote the product in such way so the customer becomes aware of the existence of that particular service. The purchase process begins from the moment when a consumer does not know about a certain brand, so he first has to find out about the existence of the product or service. This first step in cognitive hierarchy focuses on ways to catch and retain the consumer attention.

Advergames are a type of persuasive videogames, meaning they "mount procedural rhetoric's effectively" (Bogost, 2007). Procedural rhetoric is defined as the "way of creating, explaining or understanding processes," and processes as the "methods, techniques and logics that drive the operation of systems" (Bogost, 2007). So, procedural rhetoric refers to the power of computational systems to make persuasive arguments.

These particular characteristics of advergames help in attracting and retain the players' attention and make them become aware of a specific brand, in a way that traditional media is unable to do.

Besides this, gaining attention through an advergames implies the use of special techniques when inserting the billboards into the game environment. The use of strong imagery to market a product has always been a powerful way to get a potential customer's attention. Another well-

known method of grabbing attention is the use of large headings, utilizing color and whitespace to maximize their effect.

In a promotional campaign, the use of advergames can be a teasing approach for attract the public's attention over a new product. Measuring the impact of this can indicate the grade of acceptance from consumers of new products or services before they are actually available on the market.

b) Raise **interest***: Consumer interest appears when he actively expresses it in connection to a product or service that he knows about.

Advergames can produce interest by including special advertising insertions that allow the players to interact with the brand and learn about special features and characteristics of a product. In an advergames, the message is blend within the game action, so the player understands the use and the particular elements of the advertised product by simply following the game rules or interacting with the product during a game session.

Advergames are created with the purpose of transmitting certain messages related to a brand. So, it is important for the brand to make the player understand the particular characteristics of the product and the way it could be used. This implies the decoding of the message in the way it was conceived. Marketers have to understand what elements are proper for the game message and what elements should be excluded, knowing that " the game is supposed to be under the control of the player who may produce a multiplicity of alternative, sometimes contradictory, game sessions" (Frasca, 2007).

Videogames usually include certain elements as cut-scenes that could be analyzed separately using general game elements and applying patterns of audio-visual structures studied previously by scholars (Joost et al, 2008). There are also elements, such as background text, isolated images or text including instructions which can help in making players to be interested in the product.

c) Create **desire***: Desire is considered the actual aspiration to a particular product, service or brand. Marketers can take use of advergames for inducing desire for a certain product.

To do this efficiently, they have to carefully choose those characteristics that are the most relevant for the product and could be adapted for the video game. The relevance of these insertions creates positive feelings, flow and activates the ludic functions which will trigger desire. Marketers have to concentrate on making the buyer to enter into a mental disposition to purchase the product.

When using advergames, desire could be raised through visual, audio and textual elements. Authors (Barthes, 1986; Kennedy, 1982; Whittock, 1990; Forceville, 1996, 2007; Joost et al. 2008) explained that elements that are originally used by other media such as television and movies can also be applied for advergames.

Video game elements, such as the character design, interface design, or the design of other elements present in the game, could contribute to increasing desire. Depending on the intentions of the creators, audiovisual, visual and textual layers could play different roles in advergames. Ideally, these three layers will work as complementary layers one to another, the most important layer being the one that have more relevance in the persuasive structure of the game.
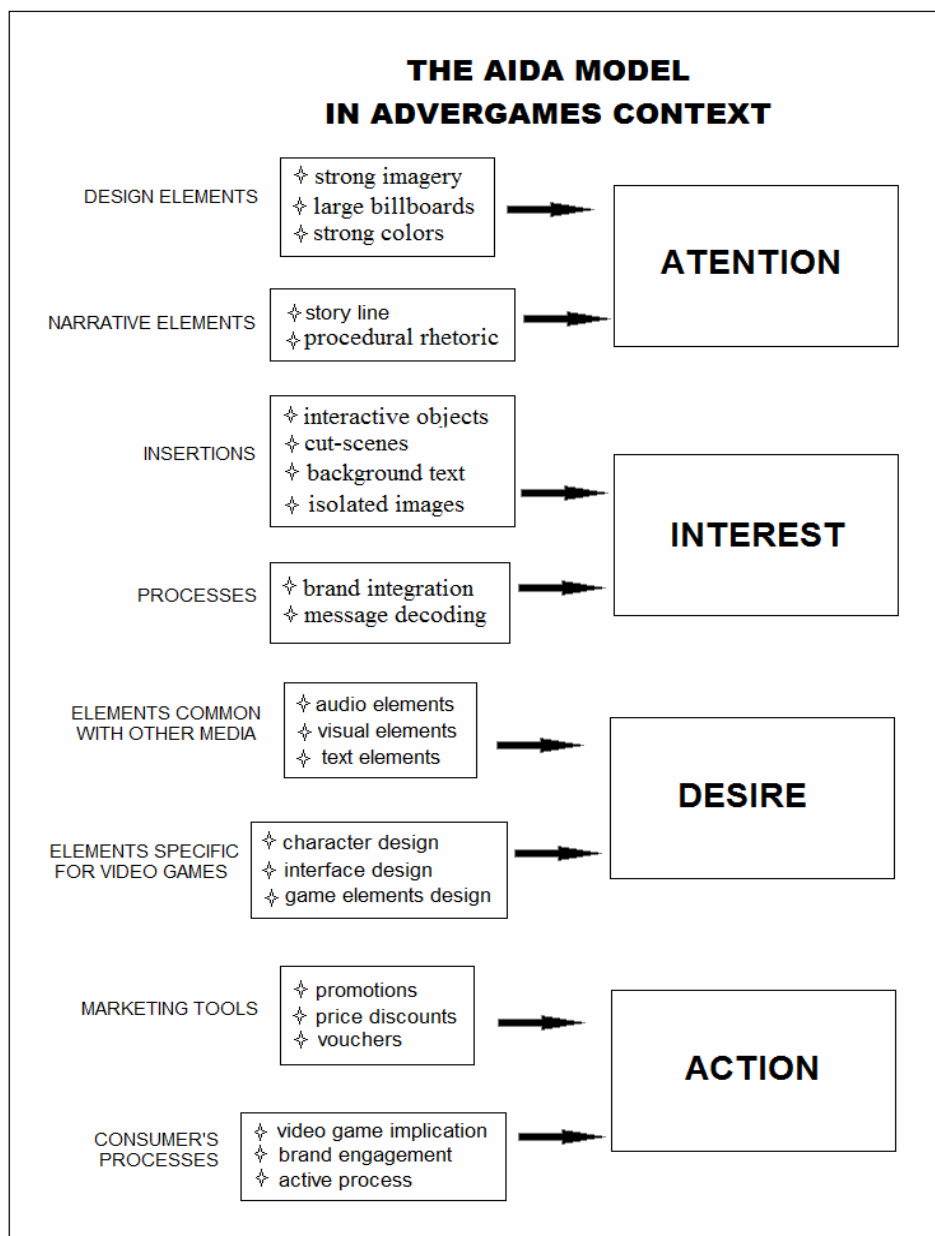
Figure 1. The AIDA model in advergames context
Source: Realized by the author according to the stages of original AIDA Model (Strong, 1925)

d) Lead to **action**: Action represents the final step of the buying process. Taking action is actually making the next step in purchasing the selected product or service. In this stage marketers focuses on determining the consumer to finalize the entire cognitive process with an actual acquisition, with the concrete action of buying the product or service.

The characteristics of the online environment put the consumer into an active position, compared to the traditional media which is mostly passive.

Video games in particular create an environment where the player is in an active state of mind where he could be easily influenced into getting from desire to action. In this environment marketers can easily promote action, as the pleasurable benefit of controlling the game action and experiencing the brand are usually transferred to the user.

When dealing with advergames, marketers can use different ways to motivate a consumer to take action and purchase the product. The most popular methods are the use of promotions, price discounts or vouchers which will invite the consumer to buy. This implies also different benefits for those consumers who played the advergame when they will actually buy the product or the service advertised into the game.

CONCLUSIONS

Measuring the actual desire that has been transformed into action is a difficult task for advertisers. Many consumers express interest and desire for a product, but they do not reach the final stage of the acquisition process, the actual buying. From desire to action is in fact the longest distance in the whole process. Advertisers have to understand the reasons that could block and interfere in the finalization of the acquisition process, like financial reasons, conceptual reasons, personal beliefs and lifestyle.

In the case of advergames, raising awareness and inducing interest takes use of special promotional techniques such as direct download from the brand website, direct e-mail presenting the advergame and informative commercial. An advergame which pleases consumers can generate desire and positive reaction, as well as viral sharing of the game experience, which could lead to actual acquisitions.

This article brings theoretical contribution to the study of advergames by identifying a series of connections between game characteristics and the effects produced on consumer, underlining the specific elements of a video game design which an advertiser can control through advertising actions, and the effects on consumers. The reactions that a player has while he is exposed to an advergame can be understood as a sequence of hierarchical stages that can be described using the AIDA model.

The model proposed opens two paths for further research. The first path is theoretical; researchers could focus on identifying different connections that could be generated through the advergame-player interaction in the online environment, starting from the elements identified in the model adapted for advergames. The second path is practical, and could focus on developing various instruments for identifying and measuring the relations established between certain characteristics of an advergame and the effects produced on consumers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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