

Myth busted: The mass market is too literal to understand conceptual advertising

You just have to watch any TV channel traditionally associated with the mass market to see exactly what the dominant logic for communicating with them.

 By [Ben Shapiro](#) 9 Apr 2018



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It predominantly consists of three overarching assumptions:

1. The target market is literal.
2. The target market only really cares about how much things cost.
3. There is no room for innovation.

Aside from there being many flaws in this logic, which I will address shortly, these assumptions have severe repercussions on the advertising industry.

When a creative hears the words “the target market is literal” it immediately conjures up images of portfolios filled with a mixture of show-and-tell, hard sell and product-solution type ads. This is then exacerbated by clients who want the price to take up half the ad, want 10 price points in the ad and who keeps asking “will target market get this?”

And that is why, when you go onto the above-mentioned channels, you tend to see the type of advertising you do. But as marketers, we need to move past our assumptions about the mass market. In fact, beyond assumptions, it is actually our comfort zones that we need to move out of. Things have been done a certain way for so long that we can't see how to do things in any other way.

Let's start by challenging some of that dominant logic:

1. How literal is the target market really?

Some might be very literal (an affliction across any target market I am afraid), but for most, when and if this “literalness” appears, it is often linked to language. We cannot expect every person whose first language is not English, to immediately get nuances and degrees of language in an English 30 - second advert.

So yes, in the defence of the marketer quoted above, if English is the language you choose to communicate in, you will generally need to keep language, jokes and concepts relatively uncomplicated in order to ensure the market “get it”. But, and this is great, big, massive but: English is just one language, there are many others. The other South African languages (languages spoken by the majority of the country, but in all likelihood not spoken by the majority of the decision-makers in the marketing and advertising industry) are rich in proverb and metaphor, constructs that by nature are not literal. I am not suggesting that we now start creating ads using African proverbs and metaphors, but just, that while they may be more literal in English, that does not actually make them literal as an absolute.

So you can breathe in again creatives, there is actually room for concept in the mass market after all. As long as you push yourself and your clients out of your comfort zones a bit, your portfolio is safe!

One last caveat before I move onto the second assumption. Concepts and scripts ideally need to be conceived in the language they are inevitably going to be delivered in. So, simply translating English conceptual work into other languages is also not the answer.

2. Does the mass market only care about how much something costs?

I would be lying if I said that the mass market was not price-sensitive. Obviously, they are. But do they only care about how much something costs? If you ask them in a focus group, they will tell you how important price is – because it is. However, this is misleading, as it overinflates the importance of price in this market. Price is not the only thing they will respond to.

People are more than their financial circumstances. What’s more, they do not want to be constantly reminded of their financial circumstances, and brands that position themselves solely around price, ultimately suffer from issues relating to dignity for the consumers that shop there. What’s more, for the right brand label and level of product quality, the mass market has repeatedly proven themselves willing to spend more (a fact that, to my surprise, still surprises people in the industry when they hear it).

Obviously, I am not saying you shouldn’t raise your prices, I am just saying that price needn’t be the sole focus of your communication. Brands such as DSTV and Jet have experienced great success with their ads by simply tapping into real, human, non-generic insights and turning them into concepts that really represent and resonate with the target market.



PRODUCTION

3D-rendering Gabriel Macht suits DSTV Premium

Leigh Andrews 5 Jul 2016



ADVERTISING

Jet's new brand ad shows that their clothes speak for themselves

Joe Public 12 Dec 2017

Often, agencies do not recognise the creative value in the mass market, and as such treat briefs to them as an inconvenience rather than an opportunity. They pitch irrelevant, premium and impractical ideas and label them as “aspirational” without really having an understanding of what the actual aspirations of the market are.

3. There is no room for “real” innovation in the mass market

One of the most profitable digital innovations in South Africa, and a multibillion-rand revenue stream for the inventing brand stems from an insight into the mass market: The Please Call Me. The problem with “innovators” in advertising, is they launch their thinking into Mars when they actually just need to bring it back to Khayelitsha. Don't avoid the facts about the market, innovate within the reality, then push the boundaries and find relevant, creative innovations that really add value to the market.

Using the right insights at the right time with the right people will always open a door for creativity and innovation. That is just one code that was cracked. How many other multi-billion rand industries are out there waiting to be tapped into? It's called the mass market for a reason: they are the majority of the population, and as marketers, if we don't really get them, then we don't really get the overwhelming majority of people we are trying to sell to.

If this is your market, don't be scared of them. Don't pretend or wish it's something it isn't. Understand it. Own it. Embrace it. Opportunities for creativity, innovation and sales are there, we just need to be open to seeing and taking them.

ABOUT BEN SHAPIRO

Ben Shapiro began his career of almost 8 years on the conceptual side of advertising as a copywriter before he realised his talents were best put to use at the beginning of the creative process - the point when the strategic thinking happens. Since then he has worked across many different brands and categories. Most recently as the lead strategist on Jet, where his insight and guidance have helped steer the brand to new heights.
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