

Pick my brain:

An analysis of the means to influence consumer behaviour



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Writing a thesis is always an exiting process. Especially when you complicate the situation like I did: I decided to go to Canada to write it. Having no knowledge about the country whatsoever, it took me quite some time to get settled and started. That, and the traveling I did, moved up the deadline numerous times. In addition there is the fact that I decided to write in English from the start. Reflecting upon that now, I am happy I did, since it is not only a great exercise, but it also speeded up the process. I have learned much more than I had hoped for, and I am grateful for the chances that were given to me. I would like to thank my supervisor Ap Dijksterhuis for his advice and willingness to supervise me from overseas, and my parents for supporting me in many more ways than just financially. Finally I would like to thank Alex for listening and helping me throughout the process, and my brother Bart for providing the perfect cover illustration. Enjoy the fruits of our labour!

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	5
CONTENTS.....	7
INTRODUCTION	8
CHAPTER ONE : THEORETICAL BACKGROUND	10
1.1 Motivation	11
1.1.1 Classical Conditioning.....	11
1.1.2 Operant Conditioning and Vicarious Learning	12
1.1.3 The Mere Exposure Effect	13
1.1.4 The Mere Measurement Effect	13
1.2 Behavioural Change.....	14
1.2.1 The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)	14
1.3 Conclusion.....	16
CHAPTER TWO: INFLUENCE TECHNIQUES USED BY ADVERTISERS	17
2.1 Message structure.....	17
2.1.1 Be brief and clear.....	17
2.1.2 Presentation order.....	17
2.1.3 Repetition effects	19
2.2 Source characteristics.....	19
2.2.1 Who to use and when.....	20
2.2.2 The attractive source	21
2.2.3 Celebrity endorsers.....	22
2.3 Message content.....	23
2.3.1 The use of humour.....	24
2.3.2 The competition	25
2.3.3 Jingles.....	26
CHAPTER THREE : HOW TO GUARD ONESELF AS A CONSUMER.....	28
3.1 From the view of the ELM.....	28
3.2 Counter arguing	30
3.3 Media Intervention.....	32
3.4 Resistance treatment.....	33
3.5 Conclusion.....	34
CONCLUSION.....	35
REFERENCES.....	38

Introduction

For as long as I can remember, I've had a personal interest in advertisements, in particular television commercials. I once saw a commercial with a bleeding, dancing bear and it touched me so much that I joined an animal protection organization. However, I am not one to be easily influenced by commercials. Even before I started to study scientific research about advertising, I tried to fathom what it was that made a commercial effective. To support my home-made theories though, I had to find some scientific evidence. So I set out to find as much information about the making and receiving of advertisements as possible.

What I found was an overwhelming amount of research conducted by psychologists on the topic. The structure, aim, and design of advertisements have been taken apart, tested, and put back together again. It turns out that the effectiveness of an advertisement can be fairly well predicted, even though there is no straightforward formula for success. Sometimes, a commercial can be very popular with the public, but totally ineffective, because they get distracted and forget about the product (Cantor and Venus, 1980). The opposite scenario is also possible. An extremely tedious or standard ad can raise sales more than ever expected. The detergent industry for example, consistently chooses the same concept: a man that looks like an expert or an authority shows the product to a housewife, and she gets deliriously happy because of the miracle detergent. More of the same apparently works for selling detergent. There are, however, some general theories that can serve as a basis for the effects found in advertising. In the first chapter, I will discuss a selection that I thought would be suitable for this thesis. I chose The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983) as the central explanatory model, because it is universal enough to apply to most phenomena found in advertising, and specific enough to create fitting explanations. In this thesis, subconscious processing deliberately will not play a central role, even though it is an important construct in persuasion literature, since most persuasion attempts never reach our consciousness. However, a choice had to be made, and I decided to focus mainly on persuasion attempts that are consciously processed. Not only to limit the amount of literature discussed, but also to serve what is finally my aim: the topic of resistance to persuasion.

The central question in this thesis is if it is possible to resist persuasion attempts, and if so, how. In order to answer this question, one must first obtain knowledge about how advertisements influence their audience. This will be discussed in chapter two. I tried to give an overview of the vast amount of literature on this subject, and again I made a selection of three main effects I thought were important: structure, source and content. If all the scientific evidence on these constructs is combined, a fairly effective commercial could be put together. After learning about the weapons of social influence that we are exposed to in our daily routine, it is possible to move on to a far less investigated field: resistance. It is human nature to want to make our own choices, without being tricked. This brings me back to the reason I decided to focus on consciously processed messages. We can only fight things we realize are there. However, there are always messages that can be processed consciously, and this is where the possibilities lie. In chapter three I discuss the theories that exist that, despite lack of experimental evidence, seem to be most suitable to this field. The research that has been conducted so far has been incorporated in this chapter, and I give some recommendations on actions that could be taken.

A final question of interest is that if it's possible to resist persuasion attempts, is it really worth it? If we can train people to disregard manipulative intent, does that inherently mean that we should? I address this in my conclusion, where I shortly summarize my findings and interpret them. It is my aim that by reading this thesis, one may realize that persuasion is all around us and that we're not defenseless if we do not want to be. I also hope that it will inspire people to think about the more philosophical question if we even want to resist a process that is so natural.

Chapter one: theoretical background

Persuasion is a part of our everyday lives. As we go about our daily activities, persuasion attempts are all around us, often unnoticed. When we walk through a city, there are ads telling us how to look, smell and act; when we are at work, people try to persuade us to make certain decisions, as do our friends and family members in our free time. As soon as we exchange information by having a conversation, or take in information by reading a newspaper or a book, persuasion processes are active. Not to mention the obvious persuasion we are exposed to in the several years of education we enjoy in the first 15 to 25 years of our lives. Next to that, there are the well-known persuasion attempts in the field of governmental and organisational politics. In short, persuasion can be seen as an attempt to change a person's mind (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981).

However, what does persuasion change specifically? There are a few concepts that are of interest here: attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours.

Attitudes

An attitude can be defined as a general and usually enduring positive or negative feeling about an object, issue or person (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). An example would be the statement "I like chocolate" or "I hate Peter". Both statements express a general opinion and can therefore be considered attitudes.

Beliefs

A belief is the information a person has about an object, issue or person. It may be factual, or just one person's opinion. You could say that a belief is more specific than an attitude, and that it usually explains why a certain attitude is being held. "Chocolate is sweet" and "Peter is stubborn" are beliefs, and they clarify why chocolate is liked and Peter is disliked.

Behaviours

Buying a piece of chocolate and ignoring Peter on a party are the behaviours that follow the attitudes and beliefs discussed before. Behaviours are all the actions a person engages in and can have negative, positive or no evaluative implications for the target of this behaviour.

Behavioural intent, planning to behave in a certain way in the future (e.g. planning to go out and buy a brownie tomorrow) is also considered behaviour (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981).

In the following chapter several phenomena of importance will be discussed. I have chosen to focus on two major subjects: motivation and behavioural change. Motivation because from the advertiser's perspective, a customer with no prior history in buying certain products will have to be motivated to start buying, and behavioural change because a customer with certain buying habits must be persuaded to change these habits and turn to the product the advertiser is trying to sell.

1.1 Motivation

Motivation refers to an activated state within a person that leads to goal-directed behaviour (Mowen & Minor, 2001, p.78). There are a number theories of motivation that are worth reviewing.

1.1.1 Classical Conditioning

Through the process of classical conditioning (Mowen & Minor, 2001), a previously neutral stimulus (conditioned stimulus or CS) is repeatedly paired with the eliciting stimulus (unconditioned stimulus or UCS). The CS needs to occur prior to the UCS so that it predicts the UCS. After a number of such pairings, the ability to elicit an unconditioned response is transferred to the CS. The response elicited by the CS is called the conditioned response (CR). Translated to the world of consumers, this would mean that certain products and services could become positively evaluated through repeated pairing with a stimulus. Feinberg (1986) observed that tips in a restaurant were generally bigger when the check was paid with credit card as when it was paid in cash. In a carefully conducted series of studies that followed, Feinberg presented subjects in a spending situation with MasterCard stimuli, while a control group did not receive such stimuli. The results showed that when presented with the credit card logo, participants indicated to be more likely to spend, or actually spend more and more quickly in the presence of credit card cues. According to Feinberg, cues related to spending,

such as credit card logos, are able to trigger spending because of their repeated pairings with the actual act of spending. Thus, even though people may use their credit cards because of the ease of transaction, credit card stimuli may acquire the ability to elicit spending behaviour as a conditioned response. For many consumers the buying act takes on the properties of an unconditioned stimulus that elicits the unconditioned response of positive feelings. Through many pairings of the credit card with the buying act, the credit card becomes a conditioned stimulus that elicits a conditioned response of positive feelings. These positive feelings in turn make it more likely that a person will spend money when it is present. Ads also make use of classical conditioning. Advertisers try incessantly to connect their product with things that are liked by the general public. Car ads, for example, often use attractive ladies in the hope that their attractive qualities will transfer to the car in the mind of the viewer. And they do: in a study by Smith and Engel (1968), men saw a new car ad which included a seductive female model. They rated the car as significantly faster, more appealing, better-designed and more expensive-looking than a control group that viewed the same ad without the model. Even though the results were clear, the men refused to admit the model had anything to do with their ratings when asked about it later.

1.1.2 Operant Conditioning and Vicarious Learning

Operant Conditioning (Mowen & Minor, 2001), is a process by which reinforcement modifies the frequency of a certain behaviour. If a consumer emits a specific behaviour, for example buying a product, the consequences of that behaviour change the probability that this behaviour will reoccur. So if the consequences are positive, the likelihood that the consumer will buy the product again increases, but if the consequences were negative, the likelihood decreases. These consequences are called reinforcers. Without regular reinforcement however, the operant response (the behaviour) will disappear. Companies try to optimize positive reinforcers as much as possible, for example by keeping their business environment clean and inviting, giving excellent service to their customers or having sales on a regular basis.

Vicarious learning is operant conditioning through observing the actions of others. By observing a model, people engage in behaviours that seem to have positive outcomes for the models to obtain these same outcomes for themselves. Advertising campaigns often make use of models, by showing them using their products. There are different kinds of models: a model can be shown as attractive, successful, credible, similar to the observer or overcoming difficulties and then succeeding.

1.1.3 The Mere Exposure Effect

Obviously, if people are not aware of the existence of the product, they will not purchase it. In order to sell a product, the product must be made known to the public. However, it is not all about knowledge of the product. Familiarity is very important as well. Zajonc's (1968) mere-exposure effect holds that people can increase their liking for something simply because they see it over and over again. This phenomenon is not cognitively based; it can occur without people consciously realizing or perceiving the object as familiar (Mowen & Minor, 2001). Some companies are very successful in exploiting this principle by being "in the face" of their customers all the time. Coca Cola and McDonalds are examples of this: their brand names are everywhere, on the bus, at billboards, at major sports events, television, in offices, and elsewhere. This may certainly be part of the reason that Coca Cola (Mowen & Minor, 2001) and McDonalds (Spurlock, 2004) are the largest selling soft drink and fast-food chain in the world.

1.1.4 The Mere Measurement Effect

Customer surveys try to find out which product will sell and how much. This has a very beneficial side effect for businesses. According to the mere measurement effect (Fitzsimons & Morwitz, 1996; Sprott et al., 1999; Fitzsimons & Williams, 2000), merely asking consumers about their intentions to buy influences their subsequent buying behaviour. In a study by Sprott, Spangenberg and Perkins (1999), university students were asked to indicate their intent to recycle aluminium cans. Compared to a group of students that didn't make this prediction, the students recycled relatively more cans in the subsequent semester. Even

though a substantial amount of the research concerning the mere measurement effect has focused on socially normative behaviours such as voting, cheating and exercising (Spangenberg & Greenwald, 1999), some studies are devoted specifically to consumer behaviour. For example, Fitzsimons and Morwitz (1996), asked themselves the question if asking questions about buying intentions could influence purchasing behaviour at the brand level. Morwitz et al. (1993), had already demonstrated that when asked about purchase intentions, consumers were more likely to buy a product in the category than a control group of consumers not asked about their intentions. The difference between category and brand level is of importance, since manufacturers would like to see their sales increase after measuring intent, but not those of their competitors. Fitzsimons and Morwitz (1996) obtained evidence that “measuring intention to buy within a product category affects in a systematic manner the brands consumers purchase” This specifically happens when consumers are currently using a brand. For consumers not currently using a brand, measuring intent will increase the sales of leading brands in the category. A prerequisite for this phenomenon is, however, that the consumer has already formed cognitions about different brand alternatives and has constructed attitudes and purchase intentions for different brands. This is consistent with the view that answering an attitude question about a product will cause the attitude to be more accessible (Fazio et al., 1989; Kardes et al., 1993).

1.2 Behavioural Change

The theories described above all concern the motivation to perform certain behaviour. An important aspect of commerce is to change the behaviour of consumer into acquiring the company’s product. In the following section, one influential model of behavioural change will be described.

1.2.1 The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The ELM (Petty, Cacioppo & Schumann, 1983) describes the persuasion process as a dual process model, concerning high and low involvement information processing (See fig. 1.2). Involvement concerns the perceived personal value of certain information. According to the

ELM, if a consumer is engaged in high-involvement processing, he takes the central route to persuasion. He attends carefully to the information at hand and compares this with his own attitudes. If the cognitive responses following this careful processing of information are positive, the consumer may change his beliefs accordingly or, when they are negative, he might disregard the message. If he changes his beliefs, his attitude will change, which in turn will lead to behaviour change, and the effects will be relatively enduring and predictive of behaviour (Petty, Cacioppo & Schumann, 1983).

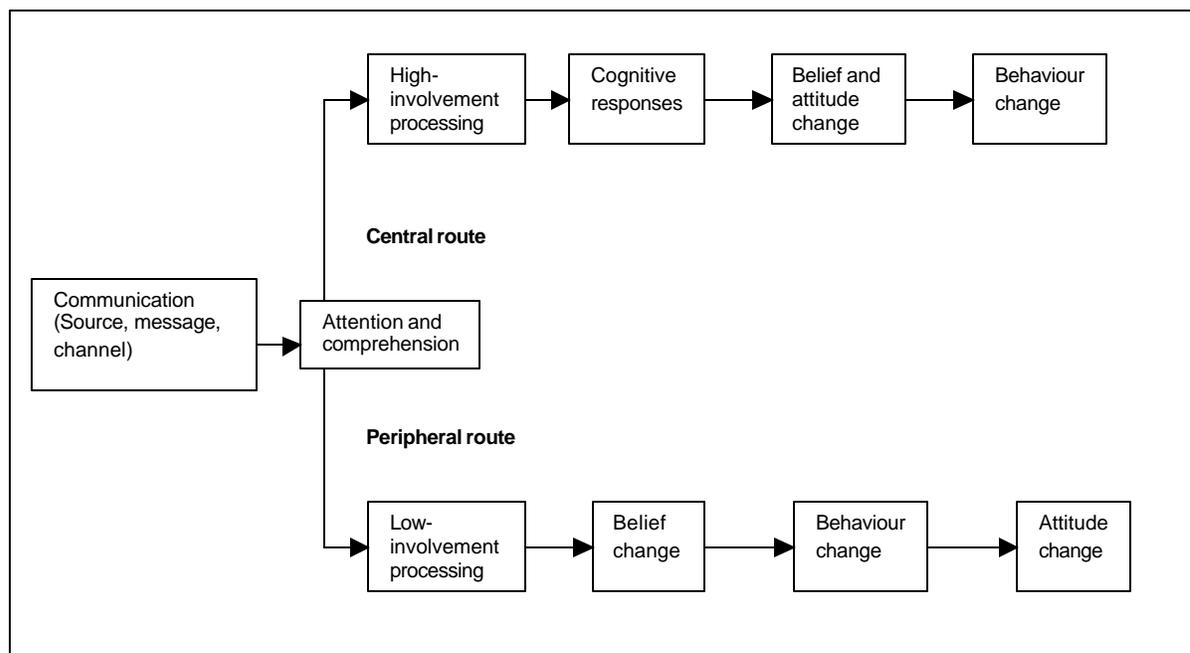


Figure 1.2 The elaboration Likelihood Model (derived from Mowen & Minor, 2001, p.133).

When a consumer takes the peripheral route to persuasion, he is engaged in low-involvement processing. He is not thoroughly processing the information, leading to minimum cognitive responses. Instead, the consumer turns to peripheral cues to decide whether or not to accept or reject the message at hand. Peripheral cues may stem from characteristics of the source (e.g. expertise, attractiveness) of the message (e.g. the mere number of arguments present, and stimuli present in the context of the message, for example pleasant music). When consumers take the peripheral route to persuasion, formed attitudes are likely to be relatively temporary and unpredictable of behaviour (McNeill & Stoltenberg, 1989).

In short, the basic notion of the ELM is that under certain circumstances attitudes will be formed and changed depending primarily upon the manner in which a person understands, evaluates, and integrates the relevant information presented (i.e. central route), as elaboration likelihood is said to be high. At other times however, attitudes will be formed and changed with little cognitive work and based more on other peripheral cues in the persuasion setting typifying the processes involved when elaboration likelihood is low (McNeill & Stoltenberg, 1989).

If a company wants to create a long-term brand commitment, chances are that this will only work with messages that induce high-involvement processing. However, if it wants to sell something that the consumer is not really looking for, or in need of, it is probably best to induce low-involvement processing. It will make the consumer make the purchase, but it will not result in a long term commitment to the product or brand.

1.3 Conclusion

As described above, there are several theories and effects that are of importance here. Of course there are more theories that could apply to social influence, like psychological reactance theory (Brehm, 1966), opponent process theory (Solomon, 1980) and the commitment trust theory of relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), but discussing these theories is beyond the scope of this thesis. The selection above was made based on the research that will be discussed in following chapters. Especially the ELM is of importance to chapter two and three, since most of the research discussed is either based on, or derived from it. This is the case because it is of interest here how advertisers can direct the behaviour of consumers in the desired direction, and subsequently how those same consumers can change the behaviours they were lured into by advertisers. In the next chapter, I will discuss advertising and the social influence techniques used in the process from an advertiser's point of view.

Chapter two: influence techniques used by advertisers.

Every business is eager to land more customers. If someone would find the perfect strategy to obtain the customer's loyalty, he would have indeed struck gold. In reality however, there is no one way to bind a consumer to a product. In this chapter, several selling techniques will be discussed that relate to the theoretical background of chapter one.

A general outline of a persuasive message will be drawn. First, message structure will be discussed. Next, the use and effectiveness of a source is described, followed by how to construct the content of the message.

2.1 Message structure

2.1.1 Be brief and clear.

Regardless of what the content and the purpose of the message is, most advertisers find it crucial that the most important information will be remembered by the customer. Indeed, there is some indication that memory can be of influence. Therefore, a persuasive message should be carefully constructed.

The first thing to remember is never to put more than 7 bits of information in one message (Miller, 1956), even less when you are using celebrity endorsers, since part of their cognitive ability will be focused on the celebrity instead of the message (Lowrey, 1998). For television messages it is even less, just four major copy points should be included in the message.

Another important thing is to be clear. If the message is confusing, or presented in a unclear manner, it is less likely to be understood by the receiver and it will lose its persuasive power. (Cox & Cox, 1988)

2.1.2 Presentation order

A message is most persuasive when the receiver can remember the important points of it (Even though there are ways to persuade that are not memory-based, as will be discussed later on). Memory-based attitudes are mostly determined by what is retrieved first: therefore, it is

important to strategically place sequential arguments in the message (Unnava, Burnkrant & Erevelles, 1994; Haugtvedt & Wegener, 1994). Placing major points in the middle of a message is a poor choice, since either the information at the beginning, or at the end of the message will be best remembered (Mowen & Minor, 2001). If material at the beginning of the message is most influential, a primacy effect occurs. Unnava, Burnkrant and Erevelles (1994) conducted an experiment in which they presented an ad to participants and asked them after a brief period of time about their attitudes towards the advertisement. The results supported primacy effects, but only for auditory messages. When visual stimuli were presented, there was no evidence of a primacy effect. A recency effect occurs when arguments placed towards the end of the ad are most influential. Haugtvedt & Wegener (1994), asked students to evaluate two messages under high- or low-involvement conditions (see the section on the ELM in chapter one). The messages either opposed or supported instituting senior comprehensive exams as a prerequisite for graduation at college, and were presented in the pro/con order or in the con/pro order. Primacy effects occurred when students were low in involvement (the exams wouldn't be introduced for two years and it would be at a different university), whereas recency effects occurred in high-involvement conditions (the exams would be introduced at their own university next spring). According to Haugtvedt and Wegener (1994), high-involvement processing creates high attitude strength, which makes the attitude resistant to the counterarguments following the first persuasive message, and thus creating a primacy effect. Under low-involvement processing, however, the recipient creates relatively weak attitudes, vulnerable to change when the counterarguments of the second message are processed.

In short, when constructing a persuasive message, make sure that important points are placed either at the beginning or the end of the message, especially when it's an auditory message like a radio ad or even a television advertisement, in which the message is usually brought to the consumer by means of voice-overs. A second thing to be aware of is to place the message at the beginning of a commercial sequence if the message content will induce high-involvement processing, and at the end of the sequence if it will induce low-involvement processing.

2.1.3 Repetition effects

If a consumer only sees an advertisement once, it is likely that he will not remember (Krugman, 1972). Advertisers make sure that their message is to be repeated a number of times in a certain period. But how often and with what interval should the future buyer be exposed to an ad? According to D'Souza and Rao (1995), it should at least be more often than the competition offers theirs. However, if an ad is repeated too often, advertising wear-out will occur, which means that the customer will decrease his liking for the advertisement because of over-exposure to it (for an overview of the literature, see Cox & Cox, 1988). According to Krugman (1972), as little as three exposures may be enough to arouse the viewer's interest, induce recognition, and plant the message into memory. After three exposures however, interest decreases and the viewer blocks the message. To prevent this, most advertisers slightly alter their commercials, while leaving the underlying content intact. Advertisers often create fairly elaborate commercials to be shown in the beginning of the campaign, only to show a fraction of the commercial later as a reminder.

Some support has been found for the hypothesis that exposure has a strong positive effect for complex ads, but not so much for simple ads (Cox & Cox, 1988), which suggests that the more complex the ad, the more often exposure to the consumer will have to be repeated. Companies with a restricted budget should bare this in mind while constructing a commercial; sometimes simplicity is key. However, Cox and Cox (1988) also found that even though ad liking did not increase for simple ads as much as for complex ones, brand liking increased substantially for both variations, an effect possibly due to mere exposure of the brand name. In summary, balancing the amount of exposure together with variety in lay-out will optimize the persuasive power of the message.

2.2 Source characteristics

After deciding the structure of the message, there's the question who should convey the message. There are a few choices one can make. It could be an expert, explaining why he with his expertise recommends the product, or it could be a layman, explaining just his good experiences with it. Another choice is to go with an attractive source or model. In both the case of the expert and attractive source, one could choose for a celebrity endorser. The expert

could be a renowned athlete recommending certain running shoes, while an attractive source could basically be any attractive celebrity. And then there's the celebrity that is neither an expert nor attractive, in this case his or her status is enough for the advertiser. In the following section, the most important findings regarding source characteristics will be discussed.

2.2.1 Who to use and when

The choice to use expert or attractive sources depends on the circumstances of the advertisement. An expert is a person that is assumed to have extensive knowledge and/or experience with a product. Advertisers often use experts in their commercials to convince the public that their product is preferred by the people that matter: dentists recommend certain toothpaste, scientists tell us that the new facial cream of company X was found to be number one in their tests. An attractive source doesn't necessarily have to be physically attractive, although in most cases he or she is. It can also be a likeable source, of someone the public wants to model him- or herself after.

A study by DeBono and Harnish (1988) suggests that, provided that certain circumstances are met, a source can do the trick. Their hypothesis was that under conditions of high personal involvement, source characteristics tend to be processed via a central or systematic route, while peripheral processing occurs with low personal involvement (McNeill & Stoltenberg, 1989; Petty, Cacioppo & Schumann, 1983). Personal involvement was defined as high or low self-monitoring. High self-monitoring people are concerned about what is appropriate behaviour and want to be in accordance to this as much as possible. They tend to be very concerned with how they come across to the outside world, which makes attractive sources more personally involving, and therefore increases systematic processing. In contrast, low self-monitoring people are mostly concerned with being in accordance with their own values, feelings and dispositions. They try to be as true to themselves as possible and tend to attribute less importance to the outside world. This makes expert sources more personally involving, and hence increases systematic processing. The results supported this notion. Only high self-monitoring individuals who listened to an attractive source and low self-monitoring individuals who listened to an expert source seemed to have systematically processed the message. They tended to be persuaded by the quality of the arguments presented in the

message. This does not mean, however, that they agreed with the message because of the source. The source merely motivated them to carefully process the message content. The exact opposite occurred when low self-monitoring individuals listened to the attractive source, and high self-monitoring individuals listened to the expert source. Regardless of the strength of the arguments presented, they changed their attitudes in the direction of the position advocated in the message using peripheral processing.

2.2.2 The attractive source

In general, attractive individuals are perceived in a highly positive light, which makes them reflect very favourably on the products they represent (Debevec & Kernan, 1984, Cialdini, 2001). Advertisers know this, and use it to their advantage. There are some restrictions to the beneficial effects of attractive sources, however. Gender is one of them. In a study by Debevec and Kernan (1984), an audience saw a presentation either given by an attractive, or an average looking model. The models were either male or female. It seems that males are more effective targets when it comes to attractive models. Overall, attractive models were perceived in a more favourable light than average-looking models and attractive female models generated greater verbal compliance than did attractive males among all subjects, but especially among males. Even though females reacted more positively to attractive male models than average-looking models, their attitudes and compliance toward the advocated issue were not affected, whereas for males this was the case. The authors suggest that a peripheral route to persuasion through the use of attractive female models will only be effective for a male audience. In addition, they suppose that the use of average male models is better to be avoided when attempting to persuade women. Same-sex models had no significant effect on males or females.

So why then do so many advertisers selling products for women like clothes, shoes, make-up etc., use attractive female models? According to Mown and Minor (2001), seeing the attractive model wearing, for example, certain clothes, creates a halo-effect: the audience thinks that the beauty of the model will rub off on them if they buy the clothes.

Advertisers seem to go with the rule that attractive people sell. As described above, this might certainly work for males watching female models. However, a peripheral route to persuasion is not entirely beneficial. As I described in Chapter one, a peripheral or heuristic route generally tends to be of short duration, and resulting attitudes tend not to be significantly related to behaviour (McNeill & Stoltenberg, 1989; Petty, Cacioppo & Schumann, 1983). Research by Steadman (1969) suggests that the use of sexy illustrations impairs brand recall. According to Steadman, a sexy model certainly gets the attention of the audience, but during the first exposures it directs attention away from the message and onto the model, impairing systematic processing. Again, it all depends on the audience though. When people held favourable attitudes towards the use of sexy illustrations in advertisements, their brand recall was better than for people that held unfavourable attitudes towards sexy illustrations. Steadman also suggests that with more exposures, brand recall will improve by habituation to the illustration and a renewed focus on the message itself.

2.2.3 Celebrity endorsers

Celebrities can be all of the above: They can be attractive, they can be experts, they can be humorous, or simply likeable. It seems natural that, the more of these characteristics they possess, the more effective the commercial will be. Speck, Schumann and Thompson (1988) addressed this issue by examining when it would be better to have an expert celebrity and when it would be better to refrain from expert celebrities. One group was exposed to ads with an expert celebrity endorser, and the other to ads containing celebrities without expert status. Evaluating time was also varied: subjects either had 20 or 60 seconds to evaluate the ad. Some interesting results emerged. In general, additional time led to more complete recall. In addition, recall improved more over time when the endorser had no expert status. The authors suggested that this may be because the subjects had to create a relationship between the endorser and the product, stimulating systematic processing, whereas with expert celebrities, the relationship already existed. They also found evidence supporting the notion that when already obvious relations are spelled out by the advertiser, processing becomes more passive and diminishes recall. There was some evidence that irrelevant celebrities produce strong incongruence effects: When the audience is confused by the seemingly randomly chosen

celebrity in the ad, systematic processing is increased, thereby enhancing recall. However, they found no clear-cut distinction between the use of expert or irrelevant celebrities.

In short, before making the decision whether or not to use an expert, attractive or celebrity model, an advertiser has to ask himself who he wants to reach. It seems that for males, an attractive female model would be the obvious choice. In order for them not to get stuck on the model and actually process the message, the audience either needs to hold a positive attitude about the use of attractive models, or the message needs to be repeated enough times for the audience to focus their attention on the message itself. It should also be noted, that men mostly react positively to female models when they represent a romantically oriented product, and not a functional one (Debevec & Kernan, 1984). The same principle holds for females, although much less so.

It could also be useful to find out if the audience you're trying to reach is high or low in self-monitoring, and to base the choice for either an expert or an attractive source on that. For an audience high in self-monitoring, attractive sources seem a sensible choice. One might think of products like cosmetics, clothing, and all other things that have to do with the outside world. For a low self-monitoring audience, an expert choice is probably best. An example of a good category would be household products. Friedman and Friedman (1979) found that expert sources were most effective for this category.

When using celebrity endorsers, it is advised not to use too many cues about expertise when using an expert. When using an irrelevant celebrity source, emphasizing the incongruence just a little bit may increase systematic processing and enhance recall.

2.3 Message content

There are several of important choices to make when it comes to the content of a persuasive message. Will the message be brought to the consumer in a humorous or a serious manner? Should the advertisement mention its superiority over other brands and if so, should brand names be used? Is a punch line or a jingle the right move?

It all depends on the kind of product to be sold, and the sort of people to be convinced. In the next section, message content will be discussed.

2.3.1 The use of humour

There's an advertising prize in the Netherlands called "de Gouden Loekie". In the last 8 years, humorous commercials have always been chosen by the Dutch public as the best commercial of the year. One study found that as much as 24.4 percent of commercials played in the United States, and 35.5 percent of British commercials used humour (Weinberger & Spotts, 1989). This gives the impression that humour in messages will get the public to like it. This might be the case, but that does not necessarily mean that these kinds of commercials will be most effective. The question whether or not the use of humour is efficient in advertising has been extensively studied in the last decades (e.g. Smith, 1993; Weinberger & Gulas, 1992; Weinberger & Spotts, 1989; Lammers et al., 1983; Cantor & Venus, 1980), and has produced somewhat contradictory results. It appears to depend on the context. In the following section some relevant results will be described.

Humour in advertising certainly has some beneficial effects. Usually, it places people in a good mood, lowering the amount of counterarguments generated to the message (Lammers et al., 1983; Cantor & Venus, 1980). But this is not true for all cases. Women tend to be less amused by the use of humour in advertisements: while humour tends to inhibit counter arguing of men, it enhances the generation of counterarguments among women (Lammers et al., 1983). It also depends on the age of the audience: in a survey among advertising executives younger audiences were viewed as the most appropriate group to expose to humorous ads (Weinberger & Spotts, 1989). In addition, Smith (1993), has found some support for the notion that humorous messages may only be effective when the advertising claims are weak. According to the author, humour in an ad tends to lead to more peripheral processing so that the strength of the ad claims are not evaluated as closely as when more serious ads are employed.

Another theorized beneficial effect of humour is that it attracts attention to the ad, increasing its recall and comprehension (Lammers et al., 1983; Smith, 1993; Cantor & Venus, 1980). Here also results are inconclusive. In some cases, humour can create a distraction from the content of the message. In one study, subjects' recall of a radio commercial was much worse when it was a humorous instead of a serious message (Cantor & Venus, 1980). The authors also note, however, that retention may improve over time. Lammers et al. (1983), did indeed

find that recall majorly improved after a delay. It improved so much in fact, that the number of overall cognitive responses elicited from the audience was greater for the humorous appeal, creating a sleeper effect.

A third positive effect is that humour may also make the ad particularly resistant to advertisement wear-out. Perhaps because people like humour, they have a greater tolerance for the repetition of humorous ads and are less likely to escape from them by leaving the room or mentally “tuning them out”. Finally, humour significantly increases the liking for the ad, which in turn increases liking for the product (Cantor & Venus, 1980).

In short, when making the choice whether or not to use humour in an advertisement, one should determine who to persuade and how. Humour would probably be a sensible choice when the advertising claims are weak, and the receiver is young and male and has the time to process the information. In all other instances, a serious ad might be the more obvious choice, but of course this all depends on the context in which the campaign is placed.

2.3.2 The competition

Comparative ads are advertisements that compare themselves to the competition. Direct comparisons are made when the competition is explicitly named, while indirect comparative ads compare the sponsoring brand to other brands, but without specifically naming them. The use of comparative ads has been debated in the past decades. Advertisers like using comparative ads: a content analysis of television ads by Pechmann and Stewart (1990), showed that as much as 80 percent of advertisements in the United States use some sort of comparison with the competition. In contrast, scientists have failed to find clear-cut evidence in support of comparative advertising (Pechmann & Stewart, 1990). An often mentioned drawback is that referring to the competition advertises the competition as much as the sponsoring brand (Prasad, 1976). It has also been stated, however, that comparing yourself to the market leader can create a halo effect (Prasad, 1976), leaving the consumer thinking that the advertised brand is “up there” with the rest of the major brands. Prasad (1976) investigated the effectiveness of direct and indirect comparisons. Overall, the results indicated that recall was higher for direct comparative ads on several levels. Contrary to popular belief,

no evidence was found for the presumed halo effect of comparative ads. The author suggested that the position of the brand in the market might be of influence to the effectiveness of comparative advertising. Pechmann and Stewart (1990) investigated this by comparing direct, indirect and non-comparative advertisements on purchase intentions, while taking market share into account. The results suggest direct comparative claims are most beneficial to low-share brands comparing themselves to high-share ones, while making no comparisons at all is best for high-share brands. Indirect comparative claims seem to be most suitable for moderate-share brands.

In summary, established brands would better refrain from comparing themselves to others, while newcomers and low-share brands would benefit by explicitly comparing themselves to these established brands. Moderate-share brands should compare themselves to “brand X”.

2.3.3 Jingles

Many of today’s commercials use music to make a commercial extra memorable. Some use existing music, while others create their own in the form of a jingle. For example, MacDonald’s currently employs the latter form: the especially created song “I’m loving it” by a famous pop star is now the brand’s trademark. Numerous different variations exist, but they all are based on the original song. Slogans have been claimed to be the most powerful element in advertising (Noble, 1970). Advertisers use jingles to enhance retrieval for their slogans. However, even though the use of jingles is a widespread and generally accepted form of advertising, little research has been conducted on the subject (Yalch, 1991). According to research by Yalch (1991), the effectiveness of jingles is modest, and depends on a number of things. In his experiments, subjects either had to retrieve brand names by just hearing jingles (or not), or aided by a multiple choice test. The results supported his hypothesis that the number of correct associations was greater for advertising using a jingles, when the subject was exposed to the ad only once. With two exposures, the effect was non-existent. The author suggests that with more exposure, recall is aided, decreasing the necessity of a jingle as a retrieval aid. One could conclude from this that high-exposure campaigns like those of MacDonald’s are in no need of a jingle, since the repetition effects are stronger than the

retrieval aid of jingles. However, the author also suggests that enjoyable music might be effective against advertising wear-out, although this has yet to be investigated.

In short, the use of jingles appears to be aiding brand retrieval, although especially for low - exposure campaigns.

Chapter three: how to guard oneself as a consumer

As described in chapters one and two, corporations have figured out a number of ways to influence and persuade consumers to like their product. Most of the times, the consumer has no idea that he is being manipulated into buying these products. Does this mean that the consumer is helpless and at the mercy of businesses and their advertisements?

This subject has not been given a lot of attention by researchers, and therefore there are no clear answers to the manipulating powers of the advertisers yet. But my in opinion there surely are ways in which a consumer can guard himself against persuasion attempts.

In the next chapter, relevant research will be discussed. First, the relation between the ELM and consumer defence will be reviewed. Second, a number of different techniques of defence are discussed, at first counter arguing, and followed by media intervention and resistance treatment.

3.1 From the view of the ELM

In the light of the Elaboration Likelihood Model, a consumer that processes information through the central route will fall prey less easily to factors like the attractiveness and likeability of the source, perceived expertise and the sheer number of arguments presented. Central route processing can occur in a bottom-up or data driven manner, or in top-down or knowledge driven manner (Shadel et al., 2001). The authors argue that bottom-up processing could be regarded as relatively more objective than top-down processing. Two factors are of influence here: motivation and degree of prior knowledge. The former factor is generally associated with the goal to objectively gather as much information possible and basing a judgment on that, while the latter one is usually associated with the somewhat more biased processing of prior knowledge. In either case, attitudes that change as a function of central route processing are enduring and resistant to counterarguments, and more predictive of future behaviour (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). As discussed in chapter one, peripheral processing relies on heuristics as mentioned above, and attitude change is relatively unreliable and vulnerable to counter argumentation.

This leads to the conclusion that if a consumer wants to avoid being fooled by advertising tricks, central route processing could be of great help. Most advertisers aim for consumers that are off-guard, so they can lure them into buying their products on the basis of heuristics like an attractive model, a perceived expert, or a very humorous commercial. However, a consumer off-guard is also lacking brand loyalty (Petty, Cacioppo & Schumann, 1983; McNeill & Stoltenberg, 1989). As discussed in chapter two, if a company wants to assure that customers will remain loyal to their brand, it is probably better to aim for the critical consumer, and win him over with strong arguments instead. This way, the consumer will reach the conscious conclusion that this choice of brand is probably most beneficial for him, resulting in a strong attitude that is resistant to change (Pomerantz et al, 1995; Rucker & Petty, 2004).

Now that I have established that it would be beneficial to consumers as well as businesses to have persuasive messages being processed via the central route, there are some important restrictions to discuss. As mentioned above, central route processing can occur in top-down or bottom-up manner. However, these are not two independent factors. Both processes will generally confound, but one could speak of *relatively more* objective or biased processing. In order for a consumer to process information in a relatively objective manner, he has to have the motivation to do so (Shadel et al., 2001). When an issue is personally involving, the consumer will think of it a great deal more. As a result, a greater degree of cognitive elaboration is expected. Thus, there is a positive relationship between degree of personal involvement and degree of central route processing (DeBono and Harnish, 1988). According to Shadel et al. (2001), this could especially make adolescents vulnerable to some advertisements. They state that, because some advertisements appeal to the self-conflicts that arise in adolescence, some messages will seem like an opportunity to solve these conflicts. Especially for advertisements of products that are subject to moral debate like cigarettes, alcohol and risky behaviours like skydiving or going to the casino, this rule might apply. For example, if the adolescent is in conflict about whether to be shy or independent, a commercial about a lone ranger with a cigarette in the corner of his mouth can give him the idea that if he smokes, he is not shy, but independent. Elaborate processing of information will occur and this might influence his future attitude towards smoking.

However, when the adolescent grows up being educated about smoking, enhanced elaboration, be it in a different fashion, will also occur. Biased processing of a persuasive

communication leads to elaboration of message content in a direction that is consistent with prior knowledge (Shadel et al., 2001). If the information is consistent with existent knowledge, this will only strengthen the initial attitude. If the information is inconsistent, this will generate a greater degree of counter arguing against it, and the initial attitude will be retained (Wood, 1982; Pomerantz, Chaiken & Tordesillas, 1995). To return to the example about smoking, an adolescent who encounters information about smoking throughout his life, will have extensive knowledge about the health hazards of smoking (these days, this information is readily provided by schools and caregivers). If he comes upon a message that conveys that smoking is a “healthy” behaviour (i.e. by displaying vigorous and healthy models), it is likely that on the basis of his prior knowledge, he will generate an extensive series of counterarguments to the “smoking is a “healthy” message. And if he encounters an antismoking ad that details the health dangers of smoking, he will generate more arguments that are consistent with this prior knowledge, and strengthen the attitude that smoking is unhealthy and not to be engaged in (Shadel et al., 2001).

It seems that education is key here, at least for the behaviours listed above. When children grow up being educated about certain behaviours, they will form an attitude based on this education that is strong and resistant to change. This would be preferred to shielding children and adolescents from certain information, because the self conflicts that arise during adolescence might make one especially vulnerable to the images displayed by advertising. In my opinion, therefore, the notion that children are better off ignorant of the existence of certain issues like smoking, drugs, sex, etc., is erroneous. If children grow up informed about the pros and cons of these things, they will usually form a well-based attitude that is resistant to factors like peer pressure, self-conflict, and also misleading advertising. And this effect will not be restricted to adolescence, but will last well into adulthood.

3.2 Counter arguing

When people think and reflect on their thoughts, it's called metacognition. According to Rucker and Petty (2004), metacognition can be a powerful tool against persuasion. Usually, when a person receives a persuasive message, they actively seek information they have that is consistent with it to validate the message. However, people who accept a message largely

because of the presence of positive thoughts have not explicitly considered potential drawbacks. Rucker and Petty (2004) suppose that, when a person uses metacognition while being exposed to a persuasive message, this might lead to counter arguing. As described in the previous section, counter arguing can be very effective in preventing an attitude change. When a person is generating counterarguments, he is literally thinking of reasons why the arguments used in a message are false or misrepresentative of the truth. For example, when a person sees an ad for a very fast and sportive car, he could only consider that that is a desirable car to have and go out and buy it. But if he would stop and think about the drawbacks of a sports car, he would reason that a fast car is also gas consuming and expensive, and this might make him reconsider.

Variables that have been shown to increase counter arguing are i.e. forewarning of persuasive intent, instruction to counter argue, and high levels of message repetition (Rucker & Petty, 2004). All these factors are associated with relatively unfavourable attitudes toward an advocated position. Because of these variables, the consumer focuses on what he doesn't like about a message or product, and this results in less agreement. However, counter arguing doesn't always result in rejection of the message. If a person tries to generate counterarguments but fails, this can actually strengthen agreement with the persuasive message. In a series of experiments, Rucker and Petty (2004) found that failed counter arguing makes attitudes stronger than after undirected thinking. They gave their participants a very strong message, and instructed them to either counter argue, or just think about the message. Even though the actual attitude between groups did not differ because the message was so strong to actually find numerous counterarguments, the certainty with which these attitudes were held was much stronger for participants instructed to counter argue. In other words, participants tried to find counterarguments to the message, but failed, and thus concluded that the message must then be true.

This only happens however, when the recipient is engaged in central processing. When a person is distracted, for example, this can prevent counter arguing because it's hindering central processing (Petty, Wells & Brock, 1976).

3.3 Media Intervention

In summary, stimulating the consumer to counter argue could be an effective way to lessen the influence of advertising. However, the consumer is not always able or willing to do so, nor is it reasonable to expect him to process every persuasive message this way. Not to mention that most persuasive messages are processed subconsciously^{*}. A possible solution could be to use the media against itself. If an advertising campaign would be composed that points out to the consumer how advertisements usually persuade them and how to see through simple tricks like arguments that seem strong, but can actually be counter argued fairly easily, this could make customers aware of the persuasive intent, and stimulate them to counter argue.

Such a campaign has never been realized, but there have been media interventions comparable to it that have been studied, although marginally. Schilling and McAlister (1990) suggest that, even though mass media campaigns for drug prevention in the late 1980s have proved to only bring about small changes, media interventions could certainly help awareness when designed carefully. They state that in combination with a more general ongoing campaign, advertisements could be effective. And it does not have to be limited to Public Service Announcements (PSAs) and advertisements: regular programming could add to the effect, maybe even more so than advertisements. Consider that most television dramas have now incorporated healthy behaviours to set an example. Only few, if any, actors smoke or drink (heavily), and if they do this usually leads to trouble (Schilling & McAlister, 1990). This could set an example for the many viewers that watch these shows on a daily basis. Another option is the talk show. Talk shows can send out a very powerful message when the host is perceived as highly trustworthy. Take Oprah Winfrey for example. Not only is her show broadcasted in most countries that have television, but she also brought about major changes in the behaviour of Americans. She started an interactive book club and got Americans interested in reading. Her influence is so extensive that when she commented that she would never eat a hamburger again because of mad cow disease, sales dropped so dramatically that the Texas cattlemen filed a lawsuit against her. Surely, when she would host

^{*} Subconscious processing is of great influence in persuasion literature, but it is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss.

a show or even shows on persuasive messages, this could make many aware of persuasive intent in advertisements.

Another powerful tool is the consumer organisation. Most western countries have organisations that look after the consumer (in The Netherlands it is the 'Consumentenbond', and in the North-America Consumer's Digest). These organisations test products on various levels and compare them to the competition. If a consumer wants to inform himself about a product he needs to buy, he can turn to a consumer organisation for all the pros and cons of the product, and then make an informed decision, without taking the advertiser's word for it. This is an ingenious way to go around the claims made in flashy advertisements.

Unfortunately, the presence of these organisations is often not recognized by future customers, simply because there is no heavy advertising for it. A gain, the media can be use against itself: if consumer organisations are put in the spotlight, consumers might turn to it more often.

In short, when efforts are combined, an extensive ongoing campaign about the persuasive mechanisms of advertising could contribute to counter arguing by the consumer, and to a more thorough search for information provided by independent organisations, lessening the persuasive power of advertisers.

3.4 Resistance treatment

Influence professionals can draw from a varied arsenal of weapons of influence whose effectiveness has been experimentally established. Unfortunately, the focus has been much more on form of persuasive attack than on defence against it. So far, the discussed literature is mostly speculative. The literature on resistance to persuasion lacks a vast amount of experimental proof, but I have found some research that I will discuss.

There are some situations in which the consumer will catch on to persuasive intent. In a research setting, participants are more likely to respond contrary to the experimenter's wishes when they believe that the experimenter is trying to trick them (Christensen, 1977; Goldberg, 1965). A similar effect occurs when ingratiation attempts are too obvious: when it's clear that the flattery is a manipulative attempt to achieve ulterior goals, it can backfire (Jones & Wortman, 1973). Finally, when pointing out a persuader's undue manipulative intent, the persuasive message will become ineffective (Fein et al., 1997).

Sagarin et al. (2002) conducted a series of experiments on awareness of manipulative intent. They hypothesized that resistance treatment could create a perception to blunt persuasion in the advertising arena. In their experiments, they trained participants to look for signs of illegitimate authority. Participants were given a few examples of actual advertisements that used legitimate and illegitimate authorities. They were then trained to look for signs of illegitimate authority, like posed expertise. After this brief training (about ten minutes) participants were given new ads to judge. As a result, trained individuals were significantly better in detecting illegitimate authority, and indicated that they were not intending to buy the advertised products or services. However, this last effect was only found when it was proved to subjects that they were just as vulnerable to advertising tricks as everyone else. The authors did this by giving them a carefully designed advertisement and later pointing out what had fooled them into thinking that buying the product would be based on the information given, and not the way the information was presented.

In short, training in detection of undue manipulative intent can prevent persuasion if one is aware of his vulnerability to it. There is by far not enough evidence to take these results any further than an indication that something can be done, but the results are promising.

3.5 Conclusion

In summary, even though the experimental proof available is insufficient, there is ample indication that the consumer is not helpless against social influence techniques used by advertisers. One can be trained to detect illegitimate authority, and future research will show if training will also be effective for use of other forms of persuasion. The best way to beat something is to use its powers against itself, and that seems to be the case here. The power of persuasion can be used to educate consumers about this same power, thereby diminishing it. To this end, media intervention might be an effective means. It could push the consumer in the right direction by pointing out his vulnerability to undue manipulative intent, and pave the way to consumer organisations that will provide him with impartial information. The consumer is certainly not alone in his battle against the social influence techniques used in advertising, but maybe this should be pointed out more by...why not..., an advertising campaign?

- The first step towards knowledge is to know that we are ignorant -

Richard Cecil

Conclusion

Advertising is an interesting phenomenon. Everybody knows an advertisement is designed to persuade people to buy products or services, or to do something they wouldn't do without encouragement. And still, people take great interest in designing and receiving advertisements. There are awards for the best advertisement, millions of dollars are spent to create that perfect commercial, and people seem to regard a job as a copywriter as a creative outlet to be jealous of. Not to forget the most important thing of all: advertising works. Why? My guess is that it's exactly the knowledge that we are being influenced that makes us interested. If we are going to be persuaded, we'd rather let that happen because of an advertisement that is so funny it makes us laugh out loud, or so unconventional that it causes a stir, or even so annoying that we can hardly imagine anyone believing it's message. Advertising turned into a contest, and everybody wants to win.

In this thesis I have discussed three different steps that lead to the conclusion that I will come to now. The first step was theory. The second step was to discuss the evidence on the powers of the advertiser over the consumer. With all the knowledge on the bag of tricks of advertisers, the question arises how to defend oneself against it. Now we come to the third step, and central question of this thesis. I believe the phrase "knowledge is power" first coined by Sir Francis Bacon centuries ago, is most applicable to this problem. The consumer can use the knowledge on persuasion to resist it. As I discuss in chapter three, it is crucial to educate children from early on about undue manipulative intent, so they can form strong and persistent attitudes. And this is not restricted to misleading advertising: educating children about all kinds of behaviours could result in less vulnerability to risky behaviours in adolescence (Shadel et al., 2001). Another form of education is stimulating metacognition (Rucker & Petty, 2004). It's natural for people to try and validate information they receive. When encouraged to counter argue a persuasive message however, failing to do so may lead

to a much stronger favorable attitude. When one can successfully counter argue a message, this means that the persuasive intent was detected and unsuccessful. A third educational option is media intervention. An extensive media campaign against persuasion can stimulate people to turn to metacognition and counter arguing. After all, if a consumer is not aware of his options to resist, he will not. This has never been realized, but examples from the field of drug prevention (Schilling & McAlister, 1990), provide promising recommendations. If the campaign does not limit itself to advertising, but also makes use of public discussion in the form of talk shows, television shows and education in the field, it could be an effective tool. People learn by example (see the section on vicarious learning in chapter one) and the example should be set by as many sources as possible. Celebrity sources like Oprah Winfrey, expert sources like Consumer's Digest, and attractive sources like the stars in soap opera's and the model in advertisements. All the tools discussed in chapter two could be used for this campaign.

The ultimate education is training. The first tentative results on resistance treatment are promising (Sagarin et al., 2002), although as stated before, much more research is needed.

So there are definitely options for the worried consumer. But how worried should he be? In the process of writing this thesis, this question arose. I started out to find weapons against the powerful advertisers, and I think I successfully located possibilities. It could certainly be useful and worth it to resist some forms of persuasion, when it comes to life-changing decisions like buying a house, or deciding which political party to vote for. Even less important decisions like buying expensive goods require careful thought and ample information processing. For all these situations, it could be beneficial if people found their way to consumer organizations better, without being side-tracked by beautiful models, trustworthy looking experts or a very funny punch line. Sometimes it is of great importance to make a well balanced decision. However, a lot of times it is not. When buying shampoo, is it worth the trouble to wonder why we choose one brand instead of another? A lot of the processing of advertising happens subconsciously, since we have only limited conscious data processing capability (Wilson & Brekke, 1994). In my opinion, we should not pursue a daily decision making routine free from persuasive intent. The costs of trying to engage in central processing all the time are too high for the benefits derived from it. We might turn to a different brand of shampoo or shoes after extensive information gathering, but I believe we

can better use that energy for the things that are really important in life. But this does not mean that my efforts were in vain. Making the consumer aware of persuasive intent and pointing out simple ways to check if the decision was made on solid information or on heuristics, could have a positive effect. Not only would one fall prey to advertisers less easily, a beneficial side-effect of this that I can see occurring is the rise in consumer self-esteem. If the customer feels in charge, this could have overall beneficial effects. Maybe if the consumer feels less like a puppet on a string, played by the advertisers, the mystery around persuasive messages will lessen, and the interest in advertising can turn to simply enjoying the creativity put into it. If we can just laugh about a commercial without fearing that this will influence us in some unknown way, maybe we will stop changing the channels so quickly on commercial brakes. The contest would have only winners: advertisers will keep persuading us and make their money, but the ability to hit the brakes will be at the consumer's side. And that's a very empowering thought.

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