

# Use of Humor in Indian Advertisements: Can it help Mar Competition?

**Dr. MRINALINI PANDEY**

Assistant Professor

Department of Management Studies, IIT(ISM),  
Dhanbad-826004, Jharkhand

Phone number: +919430136446(M) E-mail: mrinal\_nalini@yahoo.co.in

## Abstract

Humor is increasingly used as an effective mode in advertising for it is believed that it attracts consumers' attention and helps occupy the mind space of consumers. . Humor aids in pushing across the message of the advertisements without exasperating the viewers. The fun aspect present in the advertisement makes it grab attention of the viewers at large. It enhances Brand easily perceptibility and remembrance of the brand may trigger purchase. According to recent estimates nearly one out of every five television ads comprises humor appeals. The use of humor is an important strategy for marketers. Research in this area suggests that humor is a widely acknowledged method of commercial appeal. When using humor as an advertising appeal it is imperative that it must be aligned with the nature of product, communication aims, channel of communication and the target segment of market. This article thus makes an attempt to analyze the Indian trend of this noteworthy advertising technique and discusses the concept, impact and its effectiveness on consumers. A limited amount of research has been done on the subject in India and the present work lends significant credence to the practice of using humor in advertisements and has implications for companies and consumers. It contributes to gaining insights for the use of humor as advertising device for gaining competitive advantage in the competitive market scenario.

## Introduction

An evaluation of advertisements shown on electronic media suggests that humor is a widely accepted form of marketable appeal. Research suggests that approximately 20 percent of all commercial spots shown in the electronic media namely television and radio contains some component of humor in them. The fundamental belief of this is the conviction that humor improves advertising effectiveness and helps enhance recall. In race of getting ahead and gaining competitive advantage, the marketers are constantly coming up with novel ways to sway consumers and are devising new strategies to attain the growing list of marketing objectives. It is a well established fact that for molding a customer base large enough to generate profitability, attracting the consumers is vital. Differentiation strategy is an easy way out in this respect and still easier way of accomplishing this strategy can be through to make use of humor in advertising. The aim of the humor-laden commercials is understanding and expressiveness. Research in this area contends that humor aids in gaining attention to an advertising message and in augmenting knowledge that leads to recall. A germane question then is how humor is perceived by the audience. A positive perception of humor assists in the learning of advertising content. But before inducting humor it is warranted that the advertisers gain knowledge and evaluate the effect of humor in different advertising scenario, for diverse products, in dissimilar product situations, through diverse medium. Since there is a dearth of studies relating to the use of humor in advertising especially in Indian scenario, this study focuses on preliminary issues and attempts to analyze the Indian trend of this noteworthy advertising technique. The paper discusses the concept, types of humor, pros and cons of using humor in advertising in India.

## A Review of Related Literature

Humor is used widely in advertising. According to Beard (2005) one out of five television advertisements comprise humorous appeals. Marketers are interested in using humor as an appeal since efficacious marketing feats rest on effective and successful advertising. Most of the researchers who have worked on the humor appeal agree that humor appeals intensify attention to the ad (Madden and Weinberger 1982; Weinberger and Gulas 1992; Sternthal and Craig 1973). Also researchers agree that attention is heightened when the humor appeal is pertinent to the brand, product category, or subject being endorsed (Weinberger and Gulas 1992). It is also suggested that a humorous appeal can also draw attention if it is irrelevant and unanticipated (Lee and Mason 1999). Many researchers have investigated the

impact of humor in advertising and some strong and articulate inferences can be drawn from these reviews on the how humor is an effective executional tactic. Though researchers opine about broad generalities about the credible effects of humor may be inapt (Weinberger and Gulas (1992). One therefore needs to be cautious when using humor and should start with a basic premise as to when humor in advertising is effective and will work.

Some of the conclusions that can be drawn after a thorough review of literature are: Humor in advertising generates awareness and attention, augments source liking, amplifies positively the attitude towards the ad, encouraging perceptive ability, and reduces negative thoughts. Although there are studies having vague results signifying that it is uncertain if humor in advertising augments understanding or condenses it. Also, it is somewhat ambiguous as to how humor effects recall or recognition. The conclusion relating to the effect of humor on source believability, effects on attitude towards brand and purchase intent are mixed as well.

Lately there has been an alteration on the way customers deal with advertisements, (Elliot et al.1993; van Raaij 1993) Customers have become more proficient and at the same time more cynical about stimuli from marketers. As this may chiefly impact the marketer inducement techniques, it is uncertain whether customers react differently to humorous appeals. Currently, most commercials converse with their audience by making use of humor and the level of its creativity is magnanimous. However, for an ad to be effective, consumers need to do more than laughing and chuckling when they see a TV advertisement. The ad should alter consumer's behaviour and attitudes. The product and the brand should also be remembered and should lead to purchase intension (Clow, 2007). Therefore it is important to research how humor affects consumers' learning and comprehension?

In this context two theoretical frameworks seem significant (Cantor and Venus 1980; Peter and Nord 1982; Phillips 1968), both suggest a different tool to explain humor's effect on consumers. The first theory is the Information processing theory which presumes how a consumer makes decisions. It follows a pattern of possession, assimilation, and eventually appraisal of information (Bettman 1979; Zaltman and Wallendorf 1983). McGuire's model (1969) establishes that humor improves understanding of message only when it is able to stimulate the attention consumers and stimulate learning. Helson's adaptation-level model contends that the inducements will draw attention when it is distinctly different from the established stimulus norms (Helson 1947, 1959). Thus only humor which is distinct to an advertising context or is apparently unusual will be detected. Extraordinary advertisements are accepted and recollected better than conventional commercials (DeLozier 1976, p. 65). It is also important to decipher how the humor affects and shapes the listener's "reception environment" during the advertising experience (Tyebjee 1978). It is believed that humor creates "arousal to process information" and kindles comprehension and recall.

The Operant conditioning theory proposes an alternative explanation for humor's influence. Operant conditioning "has happened when the possibility that an individual will produce one or more behaviors is changed by altering the events or consequences which follow the specific behavior" (Nord and Peter 1980, p. 38). According to this theory humor is a reward for attending to the advertising message (Phillips 1968). A humor filled advertisement is pleasing. Also it is pertinent that a humorous advertisement should be understood better and recalled more than a comparable non humorous advertisement. Kassarian (1977) and Rothschild and Gaidis (1981) have advocated for the use of operant learning principles to describe advertising effects in low involvement settings.

According to Tellis (1998) humor helps reduce the resistance to the message and condenses the distance among people in communication. Several researches contend that use of humor can augment liking of the advertisement and the advertised brand. Fugate (1998) compiled a list of pros of using humor in ads. Apart from grabbing audience attention, humor enhances ad recall and improves brand image.

Weinberger and Gulas (1992) opine that adding a tinge of humor cannot alone make an advertisement successful. . To be effective the humor should be related directly to the product there is a spurt in humorous advertisements today because it attracts attention in a media cluttered environment; however it is imperative to know that humor can be suitable and effective in some situations. Since humor differs in their efficacy and perceived differently by different demographic groups, cultures and even among individuals, a marketer has be really cautious when using it in advertisements. . Shimp (2010) in his research has provided many evidences that prove that humorous ads work than non-humorous ads only when consumers' appraisals of the advertised brand are already affirmative. Almost all researchers have more or less concluded that humor is advertisements work only the extent differs.

## Rationale for using humor: What, when and why?

In the globalized economy today, using humor in advertisements has become an increasingly popular phenomenon in the fields of advertising. Companies use humor in advertising campaigns in order to reach out with the message to the target group in a more effective manner. The use of humor in advertisements helps advertisers to stand out from the crowd and get attention. It is believed that among other things, humor make advertisements perceivable, assist in the recognition of brand names and augment message recall. Advertising said to be one of the principal ways to educate consumers about products and the usage of humor in one or other form is primarily due to its huge potential influence. But before deciding on to make an humorous advertisement and air it , the companies should do a proper analysis on the basis of check list provided:

1. **Product life cycle Stage:** The marketers should know as to at which stage the product is in the Product Life cycle. This is important because humor is used as an instrument for attracting the customers. Use of humor in advertisements might work well as this is a period of slow sales growth because the product is newly introduced in the market and one needs to grab attention of the audience. The cost of launching is high and therefore the company may decide on a low promotion expense therefore this strategy of using humor may help reap huge dividends in terms of generating high customer attraction. The advertisement of Samsung Mobile phone is one such advertisement that uses humor to attract attention.

At maturity stage of product life cycle; sales slowdown, profits decline and one need to defend the product against competition. At this stage too adding a tinge of humor to advertising may work primarily because it can help ensure top of mind recall. The advertising should stress on brand differences and benefits and humorous a advertisement may work wonders. Asian Paints Ultima Advertisement is case in point. Humorous advertisements can work well at this stage too. So a marketer has to also keep in mind the product category and know whether this tactic has been used before.

2. **Involvement with the product:** Humor works better for the spectrum of leisure and impulse-purchase and low value product categories in the market today. Some advertisements are of Polo mints, Coffee Break, Tortoise Coils, Ajanta Toothbrush, Maggi Hot & Sour. On the other hand, you have high-end brands such as, Onida, Chivas Regal, Bajaj Sunny, which may make you part with big bucks with a smile.” The strategy has worked wonders for brands like Amul and Maza and Mirinda among others. Humour cuts across the board. “Any product one can think of has used humor in an attempt to sell an idea to some extent. Convenience products are bought frequently, without much assessment between the products, and require little buying effort. Some products goods that are bought on impulse, such as an ice cream, candy, magazines, and batteries. Here humorous advertisements work well. In shopping products category the consumers pay great attention while purchasing and the consumers are very cognizant about the brand. In this category humor can help because such advertisements can ensure attention and can help bring out unique differentiating characteristics of brand subtly. The third product category is called Specialty products. The customers pay more attention and consideration when purchasing these products and are usually high priced. Specialty items as the name suggests are those for which the consumers have to make special efforts to find them. Expensive watches, imported cars designer items can all be considered as specialty goods. Here humorous ad can make it easy to spot the product. The advertisement of Volkswagen uses humor to induce the customer.

The unsought products shopping product is one which is unique and the consumer may not even have knowledge about its existence or maybe knows about it but has never thought of buying. Also, customers often postpone buying unsought shopping goods since they do not consider them to be significant. Therefore for an unsought shopping good; gaining consumers' attention is vital. Humor works well for this category of products. It is the duty of the marketer to convince the consumer about the imminent need for the product. The buyer will first cultivate beliefs about the product, then develop attitudes, and finally make a considerate purchase choice. Since, the consumer's preference for a brand is an outcome of the complex interplay of ethnic, societal, personal and psychological factors so the marketer needs to be disciplined when using humor as a tactic to attract consumer attention.

3. **The message:** The message that the ad conveys is central to the formation of an image of the product or brand in the minds of consumers. The message must be clear and lucid. The message in humorous advertisements must draw attention of the target segment. It must communicate, convince and must reinforce the benefits of the

product and help reduce cognitive dissonance. The presentation of the message must be truthful and due attention should be paid to message formats. The success of humorous advertisements depends on various factors: the context in which the humor is used, the appeal of the idea it is trying to sell in the quality of the humor itself. The message should take care of all these aspects and at the same time ensure transferring some logical, rational, moral or emotional message to the customers. Humor alone without any information about the product benefits may not be proper for the brand. Also the marketer should gauge whether humor intensifies audience knowledge of a commercial message or not. In the same line the marketer should be sure of the effect of humor on message comprehension. They should be confident that the humor in advertisement adds to the brand recall and subsequent purchase intention.

### **Types of humorous Advertisements: an Indian Experience**

Television ads are of 30 to 60 seconds slots. Within this brief period the advertiser has to attempt and seize the target audience's attention and push the message across. Humor is an effective tool that helps garner customer attention. The various types of humor used in Indian Advertisements are as follows:

1. **Satire:** Satire is Humor that mocks human weaknesses or aspects of society. It is believed that sarcasm works when that is focused at individual who is in a powerful position. "Naukri.com" has made best use of the situation and the Poor Hari Sadu advertisement is telling about the boss-subordinate relationship. Another example is the humor in the 'JeevanSaathi.Com' ad, where the father is shown trying to find a bridegroom for his daughter in almost every man, this advertisement gains attention because of the sarcastic tenor.
2. **Pun:** It is defined as a play on words that sound alike but have dissimilar meanings. Example is advertisement of Verito where the protagonist uses pun on words saying "tu baja to achcha leta hai, gata bhi hai kya" The pun on the word "bajana" brings the humor as well as puts forward effectively the sophisticated man's handling of such situations that occur every day on the road. Second advertisement of Verito about ' Dyal babu road" is another good example.
3. **Irony:** Irony is humor concerning absurdity and dissonance with norms, in which the projected meaning is reverse, or nearly opposite, to the literal sense. Verbal, situational and dramatic irony are the three main types of irony. "Jeena ka license" ad of ICICI Prudential is an example.
4. **Comparison:** Samsung Galaxy advertisement and Micromax mobile phone's advertisements. In Samsung's advertisement the line that catches our attention and amuses us in "aapke paas nahi hai uncle" and in Micromax's advertisement of the similar handset the line is "Aapke pas nahi hai aunty." The humor in micromax advertisement arises due to comparison.
5. **Exaggeration:** Amplification is at the central to advertising, almost all the ads attempt to make brands look better, bigger and more significant than they really are to the customer. Kellogs 24 days challenge ad is an example. The Happy dent White's ad where one's teeth start shining the minute he consumes the product, and then the teeth substituting the tube lights is another example of the limits to which marketers can exaggerate.
6. **Personification:** The orbit and Cadburys advertisement have animals. Ms Palampur the 'Fully Vaccinated African Black Bull' revealed as the winner of a beauty pageant, and would be film star tickles us.
7. **Silliness:** Having a lack of common sense; ridiculous and stupid ads do draw attention and trigger laughter Example is tradeus.com's advertisement. Bingo's advertisement and Flipkart.com's advertisement
8. **Surprise:** To be effective, humor has to be used creatively. The message has to be congruent with the needs of target audience. The Pepsodent ad is funny and garners attention of the target audience and advocates the 10 "values" of the toothpaste without getting preachy. And the ringing 'Cheatercock' gains everyone's attention too.

### **Pros and cons of using humor in ads**

Unless the advertisement's message, the category benefit and the brand values are closely linked, there are chances that the advertisement is remembered more than the brand. According to estimates by The Economist, "people read around 10Mb of material every day, hear around 400Mb a day, and see 1Mb of information every second. "To break the clutter

and gain audience attention thus becomes a challenge. Also a huge section of the target viewers is probably in a low involvement state. As per the concept of cognitive passivity it is very difficult to move these audience into higher involvement states. Also, there is research evidence to show that low involvement audience will have a great degree of miscomprehension of the ad. The crux therefore is relevance and use of creativity: "If people react favorably towards the product, it makes for noticeable and cost-effective advertising." There are certain pros and cons for using humor in advertisements. The advertiser has to be conscious, put himself in the audiences' shoes before embarking on with a new humorous advertisement. The points given below should be kept in mind if humor has to work.

1. The concept should be novel, interesting, imaginative and very, very funny.
2. Humor has to always flow naturally. Trying too hard may be catastrophic, especially if the desperation shows. Some of the past Raymond's ads were criticized as advertising poor joke.
3. Humor must also consider an individual's psyche it will succeed in only if it doesn't offend individual sensibilities.
4. Significant argument to ponder when using humor in marketing is that different things are funny to different individuals. An ad that makes one person roll over from laughter may not be that savory for the other. The demographics of the segment market must always be deliberated before airing an ad. Habib's ad before Durga Puja is an example, how it backfired.
5. Advertiser to set measurable and realistic expectations. Some variety should be there otherwise the audience gets bored seeing the same ad again and again, after all how many times can one laugh at the same joke! Besides discernment of humor is subjective: what is amusing to one individual can be boring or even annoying to another.
6. It seems using humor lends instant attention to the brand. But here, the marketer needs to be really meticulous in the selection of humor; humor needs to match the product.
7. Though advertisers' purpose is to get their ads noted, they must be thoughtful and conform to codes of practice like the ones set by ASCI. Communications should be intended to generate maximum effect but, at the same time, should not be offensive or irritating.
8. Advertisers should know the product and the customers that is the taste and preferences
9. Using humor has a very strong point in favor that it adds entertainment value and to a certain extent can prevent zipping, zapping and muting.
10. Advertisers should know the competitors and their positioning strategy
11. They should choose their positioning strategy on the basis of product USP and be cautious to match the Products USP with that of the humor tactic they choose.
12. Go for a post implementation review by taking feedback from employees, customers and the stakeholders. Analyze the impact of using humor on the sales of your brand as well as that of rival brands.

### **Conclusion, Limitations and Implications for Future research**

Humor as a form of entertainment can really work wonders. The tickling advertisements can guarantee awareness and recall of the brand. The more genuine the humor is, the greater is the probability that consumers will identify the brand. It is suggested that marketing managers should tactically use humor in order to warrant the anticipated impact. There is no doubt that the advertisements across diverse media are pregnant with humorous ads but the big question that remains is how immense this influence is and does it ensure product purchase. This study is a review of the use of humor in ads in India and has limitations because it does not do an analysis per say on the effect of these ads on the audience. Also only a few ads have been explored here.

Therefore it is important that further in-depth studies are conducted into the nature of consumers' recognition of brands and product. Research in future should examine audience attitudes towards, or interest, in brands and branded goods to gain a more thorough understanding of an individual's propensity to be influenced by humorous advertisements of product. Finally, using humor in advertisements growing importance as a component of integrated marketing

communication requires that marketers strive to better understand its potential. This knowledge is expected to help marketers better define their strategies for marketing and brand integration in their marketing communication plans. This study is beneficial for the companies who want to utilize humorous advertisements for their products as they can devise their advertising strategy accordingly.

## References

1. Baron, R., P. Baron, and N. Miller (1973), "The Relation Between Distraction and Persuasion," *Psychological Bulletin*, 80, 310-23.
2. Bartos, Rena (1981), "Ads That Irritate May Erode Trust in Advertised Brands," *Harvard Business Review*, 59 (July-August), 138-140.
3. Bither, Stewart W. (1972), "Effects of Distraction and Commitment on the Persuasiveness of Television Advertising," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 9 (February) 1-5.
4. Brooker, George (1981), "A Comparison of the Persuasive Effects of Mild Humor and Mild Fear Appeals," *Journal of Advertising*, 10, 29-40.
5. Cantor, Joanne (1976), "Humor on Television: A Content Analysis," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 20 (Fall), 501-10.
6. Cantor, Joanne and Pat Venus (1980), "The Effect of Humor on Recall of a Radio Advertisement," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 24 (Winter), 13-22.
7. Duncan, Calvin P. (1979), "Humor in Advertising: A Behavioral Perspective," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 7 (Fall), 285-306.
8. Festinger, Leon and Nathan Maccoby (1964), "On Resistance to Persuasive Communications," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 68 (November), 359-66
9. Gardner, David M. (1970), "The Distraction Hypothesis in Marketing," *Journal of Advertising Research*, 10 (December), 25-30
10. Gelb, Betsy D. and Charles M. Pickett (1983), "Attitude-Toward-The-Ad: Links to Humor and to Advertising Effectiveness," *Journal of Advertising*, 12, 2, 34-42.
11. Greyser, Stephen A. (1973), "Irritation in Advertising," *Journal of Advertising Research*, 13, 3-10
12. Gruner, Charles R. (1965), "An Experimental Study of Satire as Persuasion, *Speech Monographs*, 32 (June), 149-54
13. Helson, H. (1947), "Adaptation-Level as a Frame of Reference for Prediction of Psychophysical Data," *American Journal of Psychology*, 60, 1-29.
14. Jacoby, Jacob and Wayne Hoyer (1982), "Viewer Miscomprehension of Televised Communication: Selected Findings," *Journal of Marketing*, 46 (Fall), 12-26.
15. Kassirjian, H.H. (1978), "Presidential Address, 1977: Anthropomorphism and Parsimony," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 5, H. K. Hunt, ed., Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Consumer Research, xii-xiv.
16. Kelly, J. Patrick and Paul J. Solomon (1975), "Humor in Television Advertising, *Journal of Advertising*, 4 (Summer), 31-5.
18. Kennedy, A. J. (1972), "An Experimental Study of the Effect of Humorous Message Content Upon Ethos and Persuasiveness," unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Michigan.
19. Kilpela, D.E. (1961), "An Experimental Study of the Effects of Humor on Persuasion," unpublished Master's Thesis, Wayne State University.
20. Lull, P.E. (1940), "The Effectiveness of Humor in Persuasive Speech," *Speech Monographs*, 7 (December), 26-40.
21. Markiewicz, Dorothy (1972), "The Effects of Humor on Persuasion," unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, The Ohio State University.

22. McGuire, William J. (1969), "An Information-Processing Model of Advertising Effectiveness," paper presented at the Behavioral and Management Science in Marketing Symposium, University of Chicago, June 29-July 1.
23. Mitchell, Andrew A. and Jerry C. Olson (1981), "Are Product Attribute Beliefs the Only Mediator of Advertising Effects on Brand Attitude?," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 18 (August 1981), 318-32.
24. Murphy, John H., Isabella C.M. Cunningham, and Gary B. Wilcox (1979), "The Impact of Program Environment on Recall of Humorous Television Commercials," *Journal of Advertising*, 8 (Spring), 17-21
25. Nord, Walter R. and J. Paul Peter (1980), "A Behavioral Modification Perspective on Marketing," *Journal of Marketing*, 44 (Spring), 36-47
26. Peter, J. Paul and Walter R. Nord (1982), "A Clarification and Extension of Operant Conditioning Principles in Marketing," *Journal of Marketing*, 46 (Summer), 102-107.
27. Phillips, Kalman (1968), "When a Funny Commercial Is Good, It's Great.," *Broadcasting*, 74 (May 13), 26.
28. Pokorny, G.F. and Charles R. Gruner (1969), "An Experimental Study of the Effect of Satire Used as Support in a Persuasive Speech," *Western Speech*, 33 (Summer), 204-11.-436-
29. Rothschild, Michael L. and William C. Gaidis (1981), "Behavioral Learning Theory: Its Relevance to Marketing and Promotions," *Journal of Marketing*, 45 (Spring), 70-78.
30. Shama, Avraham and Maureen Coughlin (1979), "An Experimental Study of the Effectiveness of Humor in Advertising," in 1979 Educators' Conference Proceedings, N. Beckwith et al., eds., Chicago: American Marketing Association.
31. Sternthal, Brian and C. Samuel Craig (1973), "Humor in Advertising," *Journal of Marketing*, 37 (October), 12-18.
32. Taylor, P.M. (1964), "The Effectiveness of Humor in Informative Speeches," *Central States Speech Journal*, 15 (November), 295-96.
33. Tyebjee, Tyzoon T. (1978), "Cognitive Response and the Reception Environment of Advertising," in *Research Frontiers in Marketing: Dialogues and Directions*, ed. S.C. Jain, Chicago: American Marketing Association, 174-77.