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Habermas’ Communicative Theory of Action and the Internet Marketing Communication Effectiveness: The Case of Direct E-mail vs. Banner Advertisement

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Abstract

Based on (1) the conceptual analysis of several perspectives on communication richness and (2) the results of a small experiment utilizing college students, it is argued that a critical social theory (CST) perspective by Habermas provides marketing communication researchers with a strong conceptual frame of reference which can lead to better understanding of the Internet marketing communication effectiveness. It is thus proposed that future communication research be conducted with communication context taken into consideration.

Marketing Communication Effectiveness

As one of the basic instruments of marketing, marketing communication is concerned with (1) informing targeted consumers about a tangible/service product’s competitive superiority and (2) persuading them into purchasing the product (Dickson 1994). Thus, marketing communication includes both personal (e.g. direct, face-to-face communication between a sales associate and a potential customer in a department store) and non-personal communication (e.g. indirect advertisement via a mass medium: point-of-sales display, etc.) activities. In this context, a marketing communication process model (Kotler 1994) depicted in Figure 1 has provided marketing communication researchers with a conceptual frame of reference whereby they test the effectiveness of various marketing communication tools.

[Figure 1] Marketing communication process

Sender -> (Message) Coding -> Medium -> Decoding
  -> Receiver -> Feedback to Sender
* Each arrow is subject to various noises.

In this tradition, most marketing communication researchers (e.g. Sirgy 1998) seem to agree that marketing communication effectiveness can be evaluated in terms of (1) pure communication effect and (2) sales effect. Since hundreds of non-communication factors (e.g. situational factors such as product availability), may also affect the sales of a product, marketing “communication” researchers tend to concentrate their attention on “communication effect,” which normally subsumes cognitive, affective and conative effects of a communication tool (i.e. massage, medium, etc.) on a receiver. In this context, communication media effectiveness has been assessed in terms of the level of exposure per a unit of expenditure (e.g. reach and frequency of a TV ad, CPM, etc.). This observation is in line with information richness theory (IRT) which has been one of the central theoretical perspectives in the field of information systems (IS).

Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action

As noted above, IRT has been a dominant theoretical perspective for most IS researchers and communication media use has been a central research topic in the field of IS. According to IRT, communication effectiveness is independent of social context where the communication takes place (Ngwenyama and Lee 1997). Instead, communication effectiveness is a sole function of media’s capacity to process “rich” information. In this sense, face-to-face communication is the richest medium with instant feedback capability and many cues. In short, IRT represents positivist approaches to IS. However, some empirical studies have been reported to contradict IRT’s argument (e.g. Markus 1991). In this vein, a few IS researchers introduced interpretivist perspectives on communication richness (e.g. Lee 1994; Markus 1994). The interpretivist perspective conceptualizes communication richness as a function of “mutual (sender and receiver) understanding.” In this sense, a receiver of information is more than just a passive receptacle of information. Nonetheless, the interpretivist perspective still suffers from the fact that the perspective does not account for the role of communication context where the sender, the receiver, and the context interact.

As shown elsewhere (e.g. Ngwenyama and Lee 1997), Habermas’ critical social theory (CST), especially that of communicative action, can provide IS and marketing communication researchers alike with an alternative theoretical perspective whereby inconsistent and sometimes contradicting findings of previous IS research on communication richness/effectiveness can be rationally explained. What differentiates CST from both positivist and interpretivist perspectives is that the receiver of a message can be “critical” of it through the process of critical reflection. The results of the process enable the receiver to detect and analyze distorted communications. Communication richness in this sense is judged by how well a person succeeds in emancipating oneself from distorted communications. Conceptualization of communication richness in terms of CRT seems to be better
than the positivist/interpretivist perspective in explaining communication effectiveness.

**Marketing Communication Effectiveness on the Internet**

Marketing on the Internet became a buzzword in the 1990’s. Although the Internet is just one of several instruments whereby interactive home shopping is made possible (i.e. CATV, catalog, DM, telemarketing, etc.), the Internet has tremendous amount of direct implications for both marketing channels and marketing communications. Due to the relative superiority of the Internet to other non-store shopping media in terms of its market potential, marketing communication on the Internet has become one of the hot topics in the fields of marketing and IS as well. In this context, banner advertisement and direct e-mail advertisement are considered two major communication tools on the Internet (Bayne 1997). It is thus practically very important to assess the effectiveness of the two communication tools on the Internet.

Conventionally, marketing communication effectiveness has been evaluated using a positivist approach which is similar to IRT. In order for effective communication to occur, noises (e.g. loss of information due to competitive advertising) in the communication process (See Figure 1) should be brought down to a minimal level. However, even when the level of noises is brought down to a minimum, communication effectiveness can still be lower than predicted, which can not be fully explained via traditional positivist approach to marketing communication effectiveness. It thus seems necessary to predict communication behavior on the basis of CST which can offer a thick description of communicative actions. Banner advertisement is basically a multi-media tool with a combination of a standardized written message (i.e. copy) and some graphics. The purpose is to draw higher levels of viewers’ attention and clicks on the banner. On the other hand, direct e-mail advertisement is based on a written message with relatively low level of social cues but with instant feedback capability (i.e. highly interactive communication). Thus, it is hard to predict the relative effectiveness of each communication tool on the basis of IRT approach on communication richness. With a little understanding of the Internet as a communication context, however, it becomes easier to predict the relative communication effectiveness of each tool on the Internet. For one thing, many people regard the Internet as “information superhighway” where they can surf and get lots of information. People may access the Internet with the basic purpose of getting information. Thus, a communication tool with potential for offering more information may have a higher level of communication effectiveness. For another, e-mail communication can pinpoint the area where additional information is needed, which will lead to better understanding of the information being communicated and to greater possibility of emancipation from distorted communications. Banner advertisement appears to be relatively inferior to e-mail advertisement in these aspects. A laboratory experiment utilizing 323 local undergraduate students also supports the preceding observation in an empirical sense. Specifically, e-mail advertisement (i.e. message) was found to be eliciting more interest among the participants than banner advertisement in a computer-related service product (p<.00). This finding somehow resembles the relative effectiveness of print advertisement and TV advertisement. Of course, external validity of this finding is not established yet. However, the point here is that, with communication context taken into consideration, it is possible to offer better understanding of communication behavior.

**Conclusion**

Communication media taken out of context may have a limited role in explaining peoples’ behavior of information use. Examples of communication context may run the whole gamut from the level of personal involvement (e.g. information on high involvement product versus that on low involvement product), product type (e.g. information on specialty goods versus that on convenience goods), and to personal (i.e. information receivers’) characteristics such as prior knowledge, interactions among these contextual factors. To sum up, by way of incorporating the role of communication context into marketing communication effectiveness research (i.e. via utilizing CST perspectives such as Habermas’ theory of communicative action), e-mail message was found to be more effective than banner advertisement.

**References**


