Since TV and radio commercials and print ads have no meaning in themselves, it makes little sense to research them. Advertising functions within an environmental surrounding that gives commercials or ads meaning and determines their effect on consumer purchase of products. It is this environmental surrounding that merits careful research and scrutiny by those who seek to influence consumer behavior.

The environmental surrounding in which we live is structured by electronic media. Radio and television are around all of us all the time, and the same media that surround us, surround everyone in our society. This orientation to electronic sources of information has produced changes in the design of stores, altered purchasing behavior, and transformed the learning process as it relates to advertising.

THE NEW STORE

In the past, it was common for stores to extend into the street or have elaborate window displays. The fruit market
physically extended onto the sidewalk; the barber pole or clothing rack in front of the store signaled the service offered; and the display window told the passer-by what items were inside. Also, there were many pitchmen on the sidewalk who showed us the products they were selling from a cart, or attempted to pull us into the store they represented. Today, television and radio perform these same functions in our home.

Now here is a pen that hasn't got the feature of a number on it, but it gives you any sort of line without changing the point. Now if you understand, realize and appreciate a real good value, and if my physiognomy is not too conspicuous to be comprehended, I'm gonna clarify to such an extent that each and every individual standing here at the present time can very well afford it, I'm
gonna give you this Parker 61 type. Now don't forget, you can take my pen into any pawn shop. Ask him for ten dollars, see how quick he chase you out, but you ask him for five dollars he may give it to you. And today I'm not going to charge you no dollar bills for the pen, but the first lady or gentleman who gives me twenty-five cents gets the pen. And I think it's worth a quarter to anyone.

1949 recording of a street corner pen pitchman

No matter how you punish it, a Bic ballpoint writes first time, every time. Bic medium point nineteen cents. Bic fine point twenty-five cents. Bic writes first time, every time.

1971 television commercial

Today most stores no longer extend toward the street. They look inward. Store extensions and sidewalk props have all but disappeared. Many new stores have no display windows. And many older stores leave the same display for years, or let the
window remain empty. Of course, stores whose products are not advertised on radio or TV (e.g., a pawn shop or leather crafts store) retain the old structure. But for many stores, the only external cue that remains important is the sign above the door. And here, many chain stores need only display their name, not the type of goods sold: e.g., Whalen's rather than Whalen's Drugs; or McDonald's rather than McDonald's Hamburgers. Manufacturers have recognized this change in store structure:

There’s been a definite decline in the materials produced by manufacturers for windows today. All the material produced for display is produced for inside the store or for shelves or for island displays.

Marketing executive, Bristol-Myers

Hard Sell, Soft Sell, Deep Sell

Shelf and island displays aid in recalling television and radio commercials. Now that advertising tells people what products are available, the function of a display in the store is to recall the consumer's experience of the product in the commercial. A druggist I interviewed explained:

Years ago, people would come in and say, “Recommend me something.” Today, they know what they want. Television educates them as to what they want to purchase. Different commercials that you hear . . . you hear of a cough medicine on television, they come in after that and they buy the cough medicine. People want to see and feel what they buy. Years ago they would ask for something. Today, if you don’t show them, the product doesn’t sell. It’s the point of contact that impresses them. You walk into the store and it strikes you right away, and you buy it. If it isn’t there, you just forget. That’s the difference between a modern and an old store.

Local drugstore owner

If a product is always displayed in a package on a store shelf . . .
The advertiser must be careful not to show it on television exclusively in its unpackaged form.

People do not walk into a store today with a precise, memorized list of items they want to buy. If memory were the basis for buying products, retailing operations would be structured quite differently. Supermarkets, instead of emphasizing aisle space where a consumer walks around and selects what he wants from what he sees, could move a customer to the checkout area immediately upon entering the store. The customer would simply punch out the items desired on a computerized card, and a mechanized stockroom would deliver all the merchandise, wrapped and tabulated for payment. But something else is functioning in the buying situation.

Commercial have created a consumer orientation that requires the retailer to bring a large percentage of goods out from the stockroom and into the store. This is the effect of radio and TV commercials: to make the store a stockroom and the salesperson a checkout clerk. The reason for this may be traced to the recall patterns generated by commercials, in spite of the advertisers' attempts to work on the conscious memory of the consumer. You don't ask for a product; The product asks for you! That is, a person's recall of a commercial is evoked by the product itself, visible on a shelf or island display, interacting with stored data in his brain. This process is quite different from memory, and has crucial implications for creating commercial stimuli.
How does memory differ from recall? Well, if you ask people to listen to a story, then repeat what they remember for someone else, the result may resemble the following grapevine experiment. In this experiment, each person received instructions that he would be told a story, and then asked to repeat it for someone who had not heard it.

The story as told by the experimenter to the first subject:

There was an old man who bought a dog. He took him out to a friend’s house by a lake to see if the dog knew any tricks. At the lake he picked up a stick and threw it onto the water. The dog ran across the field and out on the lake, but instead of swimming he walked across the water, picked up the stick, and brought it back to the old man. The old man turned to his friend and said, “Now what do you think of that?” The friend said, “How much did you pay for that dog?” “Five dollars,” replied the old man. “Well,” said the friend, “you got a real gyping. You bought a dog that can’t even swim.”

The story as repeated by subject No. 4, after it had been retold by three previous subjects:

What I heard about the dog was that he couldn’t swim. But I think he did a good thing, whatever he did. And I love animals above grown old people. Grown people like me and other neighbors of mine always exaggerate, and I detest people when they are liars to themselves. I, once in my life was told by my mother and father, never say anything wrong about other children. If you can’t play with them just leave them alone.

The memory process introduces new errors at each stage of repeating the story, which cumulatively leads to total distortion. This form of learning (i.e., hearing a story, memorizing it, and repeating it for someone) is not very accurate or efficient. It is subject to the interpretation of each listener, and therefore the introduction of noise into the original message content (e.g., the fourth subject in the experiment used the opportunity of telling the story, to relate something that was on her mind at that moment). Too, the ability to understand and repeat a message varies greatly within a population.

Memory is not the only mental process available for learning. If I were to tell several people, in a variety of listening contexts, “Because you met me, you’ll be different for the rest of your ______,” and ask them to fill in the last word, the similarity of their responses would be very high. In this instance, I would be structuring the communication environment to evoke a recall mechanism in the listener. My stimulus does not introduce new information. Rather, it resonates with information already within the listener and available for recall. Thus there is less chance for a listener to interpret it incorrectly or respond with the wrong word. Furthermore, this type of recall is the fastest function of the brain, while conscious memory is the slowest.

Most advertisers are unaware of the relation between recall and our electronic information environment, and therefore depend almost entirely on memory to communicate information about a product.

ADVERTISING RESEARCH

Most advertising research follows logically, and incorrectly, from the advertisers’ obsolete approach to learning. Advertising agencies have a central interest in whether people remember commercials they hear on radio or see and hear on television, and they are constantly evaluating their commercials by testing people’s memory of them. A common testing situation involves a group of women who are paid to watch commercials projected in a theater environment. After viewing the commercials, they fill out questionnaires that measure their recollection of details or absorption of product image. The truth-
fulness and honesty of the responses cannot be verified, nor can they accurately measure the degree to which a respondent is capable or incapable of self-reporting his or her reactions. Furthermore, the researchers narrowly focus their questions on a subject’s recollection of commercial *content*, which they consider the essence of what makes a message effective. *Content* is synonymous with scripted visuals, actor dialogue, and announcer copy (in essence, what the creator tried to *put into* the commercial). No effort is made to test the effects of camerawork, sound design, information stored in a viewer that might resonate with the commercial stimuli, or the critical elements in a listening or viewing situation that will give the commercial meaning (in essence, what a person *gets out* of the commercial). For example, when the station is about to break for a commercial, the announcer will say, “A report about the war coming right up.” We then see two or three commercials before hearing about the war. This is a self-defeating practice, first because it makes the commercial an *interruption* of news, and second, because the commercial prevents those who might have a personal interest in the war from hearing it immediately.

Advertising researchers are not able to control situation variables, whether it is the programming before or after a commercial, the time of day when a spot is run, or the elements in a listener’s home that will affect what he gets out of the commercial stimuli. One agency, worried about the artificial qualities of theater testing in relation to home viewing, attempted to simulate a *natural* listening environment by asking women to view commercials in a trailer parked near a shopping center.

This type of testing is of little value, primarily because it is directed toward measuring what a viewer remembers in relation to a commercial, not how people are affected by a commercial message in their home environment where they actually view it or the store environment where the actual purchase will take place. Advertisers are testing in the same way my daughter is tested in the fourth grade. Both the commercial viewer and the fourth-grader are shown visual information or are asked to listen to some comments, and are subsequently quizzed in a formal manner about what they remember. The form of learning being measured has no direct relation to behavior. Social behavior, whether it takes the form of buying a product, developing friendships, or rioting, is determined by a much greater store of experiences in our brain than is available to conscious remembering. Certain stimuli, in the proper context, can recall experiences that we could never remember at will.

Ad agencies generally use a transportation theory of communications. They are trying to get information across to people, to sink it into their brains. And they use research to measure what they have implanted in a person’s mind. What ad agencies seek to measure after they have produced a commercial, I need to know, in my commercial work, before I start. I do not care what number of people *remember or get* the message. I am concerned with how people are affected by the stimuli.

**INFORMATION AVAILABLE FOR RECALL**

The total amount of information imprinted or coded within our brains is huge, and the associations that can be generated by evoked recall are very deep. Information available for recall includes everything we have experienced, whether we consciously remember it or not. This total body of stored material is always with us, and it surrounds and absorbs each new learning experience. Furthermore, it is instantly recallable when cued by the appropriate stimulus.

The evoked recall process is similar to the experience of seeing an automobile accident. In witnessing an accident, you hear the squeal of brakes, the crash of the car, and possibly
see a person bleeding. At a later time, should you hear the squeal of brakes you may also recall many of the sights, sounds, feelings, and associations you experienced earlier. You will recall the event instantly, and this recall will form part of the context that gives meaning to the present stimulus. In the same way, if the advertiser evokes human feelings and human experiences in relation to a product in a commercial, the next time we see the product in a store, there is a good chance it will evoke the associations experienced with the commercial.

An important qualification should be entered here. In a commercial context, one cannot develop unbelievable associations between a product and real-life situations and expect to evoke past experiences in a viewer or listener that will support the attachment of the product to those experiences. That is, a viewer has no past experience of feeling like a king because he likes the taste of margarine, or having women attempt to seduce him when he changed hair tonics. An advertiser's research should deeply explore the actual experiences people

Production problems? solve them this different way.

Production problems? solve them this different way.

Hard Sell, Soft Sell, Deep Sell

have with products in real-life situations, and structure stimuli in the commercials in such a way that the real-life experience will be evoked by the product when the consumer encounters it in a store.

If you are selling a kitchen drain cleaner, the advertising effort might involve building an association in the listener's mind between the real annoyance of a stopped-up sink and the real relief of unclogging it, in the context of using the product. If the commercial is effective, seeing the product in a store will evoke the consumer's feelings about clogged sinks and thereby generate a purchase of the product, to correct his or her stopped-up sink problem at home. The association could be made by having a woman, not necessarily a real housewife, reacting to a stopped-up sink in a believable way (believability is more important than reality). I am not talking about a "Josephine the plumber" type. If the advertiser can render a deep commercial on the feelings of a believable woman after she unstopped a sink that had been troubling her for several days, a real experience is created for the listener or viewer, and it will be stored permanently in his or her brain. When the consumer sees the product in the store, whether he or she consciously remembers it or not, the product may evoke the experience of the commercial. If that experience was meaningful, and there is a need, the consumer is likely to buy the product. Furthermore, if the consumer's expectation is then fulfilled by experience with the product, you have a customer who will come back again.

Advertising typically attempts to influence the consumer by teaching him the name of a product and hoping he will remember it when he goes to the store. But if we make a deep attachment to the product in the commercial, there is no need to depend on their remembering the name of the product. Seeing the product in the store should evoke the association attached to the product in the commercial. As the drugstore owner quoted previously said, "It strikes you."

Sometimes commercials inadvertently use a primitive version
of the process I am describing. These commercials do not utilize the real-life associations people have with the product. Rather, they create slogans or “unique selling propositions” to achieve a name identification effect. Given no other reason to buy product X as opposed to product Y, this vague feeling of familiarity with the name or slogan may be sufficient to induce purchasing product X. Endless repetition of a commercial may produce a similar effect. That is, while the ad content attempts to make the product unique, the running of the ad makes the product commonplace and environmental.

If one approaches a commercial from the base I am outlining, the role of testing becomes one of measuring people’s behavior in the store. It is irrelevant to study whether people remember a product after seeing a commercial. The researcher could better concern himself with consumer action and reaction when he or she sees the product on display.

The function of advertising is to give the consumer materials and associations that he can recall in purchasing situations. A commercial should attach those meaningful associations that will be evoked by the stimulus of seeing the product in a store. Store design, package design, and marketing strategies should provide a context that is most likely to induce evoked recall. Effective advertising must encompass this total process.

DESIGNING A COMMERCIAL

Those of us who create commercials are in the business of structuring recall. When audience recall is effectively structured, the audience becomes an active part of the communication process.

One of the major changes that has come into the world with the electronic environment as a total surround is that the audience becomes a work force instead of being target for campaigns.

I'm in my store and I see customers all day long. After Walter Cronkite’s had the news on the night before and has given us a sensational story, the customers will tell me about it. They do have the details, they have them correctly.

Still, the same news agents who put on the Walter Cronkite news show turn around and give these same people who can get the story once very effectively, these same news people will give us a commercial over and over again, forty times the same commercial. I don't understand how they think we have one kind of mind for the news and another kind for commercials.

Marshall McLuhan
Personal recording

When the audience is viewed as a work force in the communication process, the experiences and attitudes people bring to a viewing or listening situation become active elements in our advertising effort. Under these conditions, we know that the content of media includes far more than the visual and auditory information in the commercial itself. The wealth of stored information contained within the brains of members of the audience interacts with the stimuli presented by the advertiser in creating the total content of the commercial. It is for this reason the old Salem commercial could leave out the final phrase in their jingle, “You can take Salem out of the country, but . . .", once it had saturated our information environment. The audience served as a work force for the commercial and filled in the final phrase.

As the media speed up the information flow in our society and allow everyone to share the same information, the ability to participate by feedback on the part of an audience is increased. In an amazingly short time, the average viewer will recognize a new commercial campaign, identify the variations among different commercials within the campaign, and develop responses (often, puns or caricatures of an actor’s voice) to specific lines or situations in the spot. Indeed, most commercials burn into the public’s mind long before they are taken off the air.

Liquor store owner
For a commercial designer, this speedup in rate of absorption (and indignation when they notice a commercial being repeated over and over) has many practical implications. After running a sixty-second commercial a few times, we can easily substitute a designed-down thirty-second version of the spot with minimal loss in effect. Also, we can take a campaign that has been running for some time and design a new campaign with pieces from the old. This can evoke the audience’s experience with the old campaign as well as build new associations with the product. For example, I have redesigned old Coke spots into a totally new campaign. In some of these spots, the word “Coke” was not even mentioned, yet the attachment of the commercial associations to the product was quite deep.

More fundamentally, the liquor store owner’s comment suggests that a properly designed commercial need only be run a sufficient number of times to reach the intended audience once. It may be run over a long period, since new groups of people will encounter the problem or develop a need for the product as time goes on, but within any fixed period of time they need to see an effective commercial only once.

Suppose, for example, that you are about to buy a car and are having trouble making a decision. If, during this period, you see a commercial that touches deeply on the problem you are experiencing, you will be inclined to resonate with it. By tuning into your problem, the commercial will induce deep participation and generate positive feedback. Viewing the commercial once can accomplish this, and multiple viewings will not significantly strengthen the effect.

THE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT FOR COMMERCIALS

Because electronic media are part of our environment, we do not consciously perceive them as a mediating factor in the flow of information. We are so involved with electronic media that we are not aware of their effect upon us. If you ask people how specific media function in their daily lives, you find they are most accurate in reporting on those media with which they are least involved. For example, they will tend to report most accurately concerning newspapers and magazines. They begin to lose accuracy in reporting on television as it functions in their environment, and they fall off completely with radio. Media research shows that only 2 percent of the population are consciously aware of radio as a vital source of information in their lives—about the same percentage who, when questioned, report air as one of the ingredients they consume in life. A few statistics suggest at least the scope of our involvement with radio: There are 320 million radios in the United States. The average household has 4.9 sets. Eighty million cars are equipped with radios. We spend over two hundred million dollars each year on transistor radio batteries.

People don’t remember radio as a source of information because they do not consciously listen to it. Rather, they bathe in it and sit in it. Just as we are not conscious of breathing, we
are not actively aware of radio-mediated sound in our environment. Yet we are deeply involved with radio, and we are strongly affected by radio programming that allows us to participate. Recent attitude-change research has shown that the most favorable condition for affecting someone's attitude involves a source the listener depends on or believes in, and yet one he does not actively or critically attend. Thus radio is an ideal medium for affecting attitudes through evoked recall communication.

Television serves a similar function as radio for many people, at certain times of day. Many housewives use the afternoon soap operas as a surround for ironing or preparing meals. And many teen-agers do their homework in a Rowan and Martin surround. Common sense would suggest that this is a very conducive environment for communication. Participation is deep, and a listener or viewer uses the medium as a companion. Yet some advertisers are wary of the growing use of electronic media as environmental surround. One advertising executive put it this way:

Background listeners are those who really don't listen at all, but regard radio as a pleasant accompaniment to whatever they're doing . . . . The more foreground listeners radio can deliver, the better we like it. We want alert, attentive listeners—juices flowing, money out, ready to run down to the corner drugstore.

When foreground radio becomes cluttered, it moves to the background of our attention. However, if background radio contains stimuli related to a listener's life (e.g., if it mentions his name), it becomes foreground again. Advertisers have used media only as a means of putting things into people, not as a means of evoking what is already in the listener. The background listener, or the passive viewer, has a sympathetic relation to his electronic environment. Further, he has a lifetime of experiences stored within him. A commercial can provide the stimuli to regenerate those experiences, bring them into the foreground, and associate them with a product. This form of learning is harder to reject since there is no explicit message bombarding the listener. Also, the viewer or listener is more likely to retain the effects of the commercial since he does not have to remember anything. If the commercial is successful, it builds an association between the product and meaningful experiences in real life that is permanently stored and available for recall in purchasing situations.

**CONSUMERISM**

Advertisers could have complete control over the attacks directed against them by consumer groups. However, the ad-
Advertisers’ focus on product claims prevents them from exercising this control.

Consumerism arose as a mass movement when public television exposed the commercial environment. When commercial TV was the only form of programming available, the public accepted it as synonymous with television. Only a relatively few people were acquainted with British or Canadian television, and therefore knew that the U.S. system was only one alternative. With public television, more people became aware that there are various television environments, and began to see the unique characteristics of commercial TV. NET, PBS, and various cable programming enabled us to step out of the commercial TV environment and see the pollution generated by certain advertising.

Consumerism is an antipollution drive in relation to the toxic areas of advertising. As such, it is a reactive form of behavior. Consumer groups utilize the Fairness Doctrine, equal time provisions, and other FCC laws that allow them to respond to some action that has taken place on the public airways. This reactive behavior is conditioned by the advertiser’s output. Advertisers, therefore, can control the actions of consumer groups by carefully designing their own output. How-

**USP—INCREDIABILITY**

A major U.S. company that (1) states privately that there is absolutely no difference between their product and their competitors', and (2) finds no correlation between their advertising and sales, nonetheless bases their advertising on promoting a unique selling proposition:

We believe in stressing unique product benefits. While most of our competitors' product contain ———, the ——— image belongs to us. Our advertising has successfully developed an awareness of this product claim, even though it is an intangible.