

# GOOD SHOCK OR BAD SHOCK:

What impact shock  
advertisements are creating on  
the mind of viewers.

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### **ABSTRACT:**

In our daily life we come across many advertisements that suddenly grab our attention due to the presence of an unexpected factor (Williams 2009). This unexpected factor is the main ingredient that turns a normal advertisement into shock advertisement. According to Gustafson & Yssel (1994) and Venkat & Abi-Hanna (1995), Shock advertisement is something that intentionally

startles and offends its audience. The primary objective of an advertisement is to gain attention of its viewer (White 2007) and shock advertisements are fulfilling this objective by surprising the viewers. It is easier to reach the customer effectively who is surrounded by data clutter now a days. On the other hand for some they create fear, they are disturbing and below the belt. People ignore scary and shocking advertisements, they assume that it is not for them as they are not that bad (Williams 2009), so they did not take any notice. Shock tactics in advertising are being used around the world. So far they have played their role in making people aware, round the globe about things like social illnesses, harmful practices and life taking diseases, in addition to that shock advertisement is also promoting deeds like donating to charity and helping the needy. Different people have different views about Shock advertisements. For some it is a savior and for some it is trouble initiator. It depends on the way how advertisers are using shock tactics. But, they are effective they produce results besides being a bit offensive for some. They can be used around the globe to aware people and to cure many societal infirmities.

### **1.1 SHOCK ADVERTISEMENT:**

According to Gustafson & Yssel (1994) and Venkat & Abi-Hanna (1995), Shock advertisement is something that intentionally startles and offends its audience. Moreover Dahl and Manchanda in 2003 added that this offence is created by norm violation, it can be disobedience of law or custom, going against moral or social code or things that outrage the moral or physical senses. Like indecent sexual references, obscenity, profanity, vulgarity, gratuitous violence or disgusting images. So we can develop an amalgamative definition of shock advertisement as, an advertisement that suddenly grabs viewer's attention by creating a buzz, it may be violating moral or social norms, customs or beliefs and traditions or culture.

In our daily life we come across many advertisements that suddenly grab our attention due to the presence of an unexpected factor. This unexpected factor is the main ingredient that turns a normal advertisement into shock advertisement. For example American apparel and Tom ford showing extreme nudity, European commission using series of hard hitting anti-smoking images, NHS “get unhooked” theme and Heinz Deli Mayo advertisement featuring two men kissing.

Shock advertisements directly affect the viewers. Matt Williams writes in an article about shock advertisement in 2009 that shock advertisements work because the message they are conveying is imprinted in person’s consciousness so deeply that he is eventually forced to act upon it. Shock advertisements are successful because the advertiser has found the weakest nerve of his viewers, and that is their emotions and fear.

Matt Williams (2009) also explains that now shock tactics are taking a more emotional shape. According to him people want support and help to change their behavior, they want to do what is in the best interest of their children. Consider MCBBD’s (Miles Calcraft Briginshaw Duffy) recent advertisement “I wanna be like you” anti-smoking advertisement. The advertisements explain the damage that smoking is going to do to our children.

## **1.2 THE ARGUMENT ABOUT GOOD OR BAD:**

A baby is sitting in a kitchen playing with her rattle. After some time the baby begins to hammer the rattle against her chair loudly. The mother gets up, grabs the toy and slams it down against the ground. The baby screams and words appear on the screen: “*Pretty soon, she could find out how her rattle felt*” (The Journal 2000)

In another scenario, a FedEx commercial shows the famous Steve Irwin, star of the TV show, Crocodile Hunter. Steve died from snake bite because the serum was coming by a competitor courier service and it failed to arrive on time (The star 2001).

The primary objective of an advertisement is to gain attention of its viewer (White 2007). That can clearly be seen in the above mentioned advertisements. They are trying to get viewer's attention by surprising them. According to Manchandra, Frankenberger and Dahl (2003), shock advertisement is that form of advertisement which surprise or stun the viewers by consciously violating the norms and values of their society, and this norm violating aspect of shock advertisement helps it to get noticed in a stream of advertisements, after being noticed it easily grabs viewer's attention who in return reacts in the expected manner. Chenecey (2000) added to this by saying that with more conscious customers and a variety of information available, advertising agencies are facing difficulties in reaching the customer effectively, so they are using shock advertisements to pierce through this data clutter. So, the use of threatening and shocking messages has spread a lot in advertisement (Arthur 2004).

Advocates of shock advertisement are of a view that advertising is now being used in a more effective manner. Olivero Toscani who is the main head behind Benetton's shock campaigns said in an interview on Good morning America, *"I'm using advertising to raise better and more interesting issue. I'm actually exploiting advertising"* (Good Morning America 2000). Shock advertisements are alarming because they paint the real picture of what is happening in the world, in front of its viewers (Williams 2009). Like *"Benetton campaign featuring the buttocks of an AIDS patient stamped with the words "HIV positive", a bird coated with oil from a tanker spill and Third World child labour"* (Sruhe 2000). Or NSPCC's advertisement featuring a quiet school assembly and silent football ground, and their press advertisements showing pictures of a

girl's mouth sealed with a lip ring and a boy's face with a strip that would show his mouth ripped away (Simms 2004). Shock advertisements are just bringing in to account what is happening all around us. Shock advertisements are an effective way for an organization to rapidly bring the issue to a person's notice (Williams 2009). Shock advertisements alarm people and may create a sense of discomfort in them. But some small discomfort is worth if it is creating a positive impact (Bennett 2008). Shock advertisements convey the desired message, and are a form of publicity even if it is through shock tactics. *"Any publicity is good publicity"* (Scribd, 2009). Shock tactics are being used round the globe in anti-smoking advertisements. Almost every anti-smoking advertisement is using shock tactics. WHO ordered *"pictures of rotting lungs, miscarried fetuses and bleeding brains should be put on all tobacco packages because they are effective in preventing tobacco use"* (Ottawa citizen 2009). In America a very good anti-smoking campaign was designed to run on media in April 2004, the advertisement showed teenagers gathered outside the Flatiron building in New York, they were announcing that tobacco companies kill their customers and they need more customers to stay in business, that is why they need more 'replacement smokers' a teenager was counting from 1 to 8 using a stopwatch, and whenever he said 8 his fellow ran and handout an orange dot to the passerby, with text saying *"Every eight seconds, someone in the world dies due to tobacco"*(Brand Week 2004)

### **1.2.1 Effectiveness of Shock Advertisements:**

For some shock advertisement is good if it is profitable in any sense. Myers (2004) described three factors for advertisement effectiveness; message content, communicator and audience involvement. Are shock advertisements effective, according to these factors? Shock advertisements are attention grabbing *"Weather Benetton's unpleasant images or the provocative play on FCUK, shock tactics will always win column inches"* (Colyer 2002). Williams (2009) is

also the follower of the same view, according to him shock advertisements are the effective way of capturing viewer's attention. Or as said by Andersson, Hadelin, Nilsson and Welander (2004) shock advertisement is a rhetoric and stylistic method of advertisements, which creates certain reactions. By this the researcher has concluded that shock advertisements are attractive, attention grabbing and are followed by viewer reaction. So, they may be called effective advertisements.

Marketing Week in Dec 2004 published a research conducted by consumer research company Quick Wise. The aim of the research was to study the reactions of consumers on shock advertisement campaigns. 27 per cent of the respondents believed that shock advertisement has decayed. Findings included that a shock campaign has to be easy to understand in order to generate a response. The advertisement which was tested for this reason was the Department of Transport's drink driving advert, which showed an accident in a pub, it got 85 per cent rating by respondents. Another interesting thing was revealed during the research, those respondents who were grown up with such campaigns found shock tactics more effective than older people. As a result study concluded that shock tactics do work, consumers think that shock advertisement are more effective, more shocking and divisive the advertisements are, more successful the campaign is going to be.

*“British fashion retailer French Connection reinvented itself in the late 1990s by re-launching as FCUK, with attention grabbing shock tactics apparently borrowed in equal measure from punk rock group the Sex Pistols and rival clothing retailer Benetton. Emblazoned on t-shirts and giant poster sites, that FCUK "accidental misspelling" was an enormous though controversial success for several years. While many mainstream fashion brands such as Levi's and Gap struggled to reinvent themselves for a new generation of shoppers, French Connection was firing*

*on all cylinders through the late 1990s and early 2000s, with record profits and rapid expansion worldwide”...(WARC Company profile FCUK 2009).*

Canadian congress of advertising (2002) published a research campaign carried out by SAAQ Canada in Quebec. The campaign targeted drunk driving and drivers who drive fast, especially in 90 Km limit zones. The campaign was based on a shock value, and broke through way ahead of norms. The shock campaign produced very good results, the number of road accident deaths went lowest since 1948. In the research 92 per cent respondents said that the advertisement stood apart from regular TV commercials, 85 per cent reported that it made them to think about speeding, according to 93 per cent the message was convincing and 66 per cent said that they were inclined to reduce their driving speed.

### **1.2.2 For Some It Is ever disturbing:**

For some, shock advertisements are just disturbing and scary. Advertising Standards Authority UK received 24,192 complaints against advertisements in 2007 (Whiteside 2008). NHS's get unhooked theme advert was reported offensive, frightening, scary and distressing for children, it got highest number of complains in 2007 (Whiteside 2008; Clarke 2008). Some researchers raised a point that shock advertisements show extreme situations. Advertisers should pay attention on generating a moderate level of fear in adverts (Michael, LaTour and Tanner 2006). People by looking at such extreme shocking situations, gain a get out clause by thinking that I am not that bad (Williams 2009) and hence don't pay any attention towards the advertisement. Matt Williams (2009) also argues that if the same message and tactic is being used by an advertiser again and again, it becomes easier to ignore it. Further more he says that now people have learned to ignore shock advertisements, if it is shocking they look away turn the page or

change the channel. A number of researchers argue that by using offensive advertisements, in the short term a company may be successful in gathering the attention of public and stand out among other advertisers, but in the long run it may face the risk of damaging its customer base and brand image (Prendergast, Wah-Leung and West 2008; Prendergast, Ho and Phau 2002) advertiser or media can also be effected (Schwartz, 2001; Wong, 2000).

Some people are addressing shock tactics as a growing phenomenon which is getting more and harsher. *“What shocks today may be a common place tomorrow”* (Marketing Week 2002). Bennett (2008) says that it is an age-old gimmick, but in the past it was mild and light, and today’s imagery is like a sledge hammer to the face. Black (2004) relates shock tactics with drug addiction, He says like drugs you have to increase the dose each time to get noticed by the viewers. So this means that it is getting more and more denser with the time. Initially the advertisement creates a positive reaction, but with the passage of time and frequent viewing the advertisement loses its power, when this happens the advertiser produce more explicit material the next time (The Star Malaysia 2001).

Chenecey (2000) asked an interesting question, who should use shock tactics; charities who really need to communicate rapidly with people or commercial organizations whose goal is to make profit? Further more Chenecey (2000) quoted Jonny Watson who was working with WARS at that time, *“When you are selling products that are inherently shocking it’s inevitable that the advertisements will reflect this”*. So, to use shock tactics you will always find some arguments on both sides.

### **1.3 GLOBAL USAGE:**



Shock tactics in advertising are being used around the world. So far they have played their role in making people aware, round the globe about things like social illnesses, harmful practices, life taking diseases in addition to that shock advertisement is also promoting deeds like donating to charity and helping the needy.

Few years back the world witnessed a great disastrous incident in the form of ‘Tsunami’, the global media gathered prayers and help from around the world by using shock tactics in advertisements. When Pakistan got struck by one of the most ruinous earthquakes of the history, then again media around the world painted the picture to global community using shock tactics to encourage help and kept the candle of humanity burning.

#### **1.4 CONCLUSION:**

As an ending note we can say that different people have different views about Shock advertisements. For some it is a savior and for some it is trouble initiator. It depends on the way how advertisers are using shock tactics. But, they are effective they produce results besides being a bit offensive for some. They can be used around the globe to aware people and to cure many societal infirmities. If not totally cure, they can help to reduce the number of harmful practices. Shock advertisement is a global sign, just like tears or a smile that everybody can understand. This adds up a lot to its effectiveness.

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