



Product Promotion in an Era of Shrinking Attention Span

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ABSTRACT

One of the problems of the digital age is 'shrinking attention span'. Products will have to be promoted in all ages, electronic, digital or otherwise as we know and somebody has to attend to the message. The present day challenge for the marketing companies is the noise created by promotion and campaign messages in the electronic and mobile media and the skewed time at their disposal for customers to gain attention! The hapless customer is daily bombarded with so many messages that he/she really does not know what to listen and what to switch off. This being so, the product marketing companies have to daily contend with this phenomenon. This research paper deals with this subject and will review how companies are dealing with this situation currently and their future challenges with the anticipated proliferation of electronic gadgets and the corresponding increase in noise levels! The idea of this research paper owes its origin and conceptualization to a few youngsters who were disturbed by electronic media bombardment. Some solutions and thoughts for action are given at the end of the paper in conclusion.

Keywords--Shrinking attention span, digital age and electronic message, bombardment of messages and the hapless customer, increasing gadgets and solution for this!

I. INTRODUCTION

All new waves of technology and presently, it is digital technology, has its effect; the onslaught of television, smart-phone, video, radio, social media—is virtually shortening our attention spans. A recent non-peer-reviewed study by Microsoft compared the attention span of a human and a goldfish, and found the two were disturbingly close. In fact, the goldfish beat us by half a second. The human span was down about four seconds from 2000, which some have said is due to technology flooding and blinding our eyes, ears, and brains. The average attention span for the notoriously ill-focused goldfish is nine seconds, but according to a study from Microsoft Corp., people now generally lose concentration after eight seconds, highlighting the affects of an increasingly digitalized lifestyle on the human mind.



Figure 1: Marketing for Today's Attention Span Example of Gold Fish
(Source: Flickr user: Lachlan Donald)

Commercials have taken note of this and evolved into shorter formats. Decades ago commercial breaks were a full minute, in our recent past they were 30 seconds and currently they top off at 15 seconds. Advertisers have realized that viewers absorb and understand information quickly during shorter commercials and turn their attention off when exposed to longer duration or content. The Advertising companies have realized that the same message can actually be relayed in a shorter duration, for less cost.

Marketing doesn't end with television, however. According to another study, the shrinking attention span

has also led to increased restlessness between gadgets, with users switching between smart-phones, tablets and laptops up to 21 times per hour. A few mobile marketers have used this knowledge to marketing success. Advertisers must ask themselves: If viewers aren't paying attention, is it worth doing it? Today's marketing is about instant gratification and appealing to users' deepest desires. The rules require advertisers to keep content short, focus on images and craft headlines that is catchy. Effective, short attention span-approved ads could look like this:

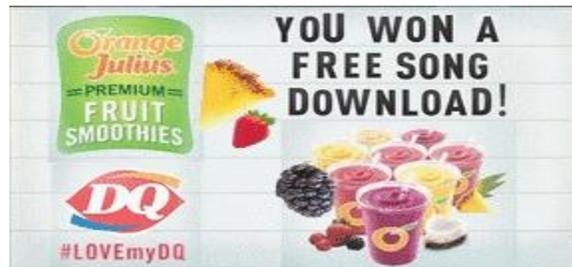


Figure 2: Advertisements with approved short attention spans
(Ref: web pages)

During a time when attention spans are more skewed than ever, there are more creative ways to engage users on mobile or tablet. It's time to give them what they want.

Attention is obviously a necessary ingredient for effective advertising, but the emerging customers' digital lifestyles are changing the brain, decreasing the ability for prolonged focus and increasing their appetite for more stimuli. There are a lot of variables behind the digital initiatives. Media consumption, frequency of multi-screening, and social media usage are the main determinants of attention span variance. Research would indicate that digital lifestyles deplete the ability to remain focused on a single task, particularly in non-digital environments. But, all is not lost. Connected consumers are becoming better at doing more with less via shorter bursts of high attention advertisements and more efficient encoding to memory. Multi-screening, results in consumers being less effective at filtering out distractions; they are increasingly hungry for something new. This gives more opportunities to hijack attention but also that brands need to work harder to maintain it.

II. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

As mentioned in the introductory part, the span of attention of consumers and customers is shrinking rapidly, thanks to the environmental Revolution (!), which is quite apparent. In the current situation marketers have a problem - that is how to captivate the target audience in such a short

duration? The current research paper will focus on this issue broadly with specific objectives as given below:

1. A critical review of changing consumer perceptions
2. What are the critical factors affecting consumer perception
3. Environmental impact on consumer perceptions
4. Marketing challenges in such an environment
5. How current day marketers face such challenges
6. Conclusion and Recommendation

Consumer behavior forms the basis of marketing efforts. Perceptions change due to impact of environmental factors like occupational limitations on availability of spare time for shopping like the modern unitary family in which both the husband and wife go to work. The free time available for them is limited, that too when both are free to do shopping. So, most of the shopping is hopping! The only way for them to acquire knowledge of products and services is through mobile and web based advertisements since they spend almost their entire waking hours on the internet and mobile. So, their purchasing decisions are based on marketing communication through the electronic media with less and less time for gaining attention! Marketing needs to recognize this and be smart to introduce, appeal and create a product pull with in such a short span of time, often less than 30 seconds!

Considering all the above and recognizing that consumers may not have the time to respond to a questionnaire survey, it was decided to investigate the problem through available literature. It is heartening to note that academicians and marketers are already possessed of

the situation as seen from the abundance of literature on the subject. The challenge was to skim through such content as customers do and arrive at appropriate conclusions based on the limited objectives of this paper. This has been achieved to some satisfactory level as may be seen from the conclusions!

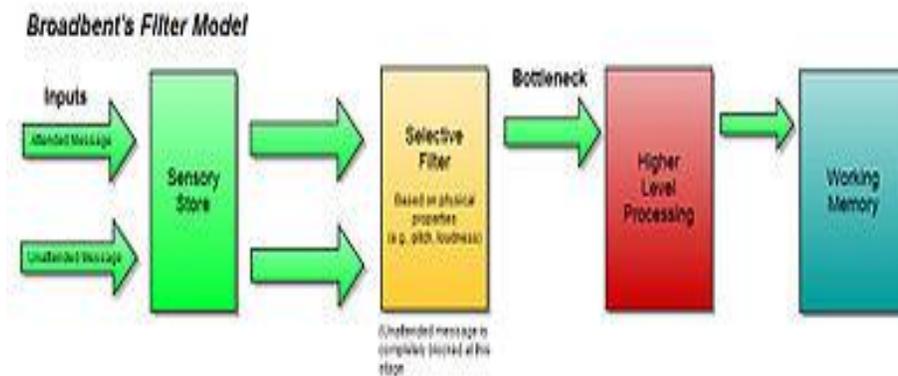
III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

'The true scarce commodity in future will be human attention.' said, Satya Nadella, the chief executive officer of Microsoft while talking about brain and sensory stimuli to attention! A Microsoft Canada study finds the surprising upsides of digital lifestyles. While people's attention levels are dropping, that's only true in the long term. The study found early tech adopters and heavy social media users have more "intermittent bursts" of high attention. They're better at identifying what they want/don't want and need less to process and commit things to memory. While overall our long-term focus does erode with increased digital consumption and digital behaviors, it is found that digital culture is actually changing the way that consumers process information.

Consumers who have more digital lives are actually getting better at processing information and then encoding that to memory. So that is good news for

marketers overall. It changes the way we market to them and how they adapt to our products and services. To get consumers' attention, tactics like branded content, native advertising and useful, entertaining and shareable content work best, according to the Microsoft report. It's really important that marketing communications be very clear, concise, pointed, very personal and relevant, anything that will lead consumers to want to engage with the content. Today, marketers don't always have the luxury of building a story, so that they need to craft headlines that can say it all with a catchy message as clear and concise as possible.

Part of the problem is that advertisers try to compress complex, 30+ second messages of brand humanization into an eight second slot, as they do with commercials. Video advertisements have to be short, simple and relevant, lest they risk losing consumer interest in viewing. They should be rewarded for their loyalty to the game with an advertisement of similar interest. Say you're having a conversation with your neighbor. You get on the subject of politics; you lean one way and he leans the other. You're trying to sell him on your views, but instead he will lose complete interest. Advertising can make or break your app. too many mobile ads, or even the wrong kinds of mobile ads, can drive users away. Maybe videos pop up too often in your mobile game.



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Figure 3: Filter Model of Attention

Broadbent's Filter Model of Attention (See Figure 3) proposes the existence of a theoretical filter device, located between the incoming sensory register, and the short-term memory storage. His theory is based on the multi-storage paradigm of William James (1890) and the more recent 'multi-store' memory model by Atkinson & Schiffrin in 1968. This filter functions together with a buffer, and enables the subject to handle two kinds of stimuli presented at the same time. One of the inputs is allowed through the filter, while the other waits in the buffer for later processing. The filter prevents the overloading of the limited-capacity mechanism located beyond the filter, which is the short-term memory. The

theory has difficulties explaining the famous cocktail party effect, proposed by British scientist Colin Cherry, which tries to explain how we are able to focus our attention toward the stimuli we find most interesting.

More recent research finds that Broadbent's model failed to consider the time requirements of shifting attention. However, he did distinguish that internal and external stimuli can cause shifts of attention, though he did not consider that internally and externally driven shifts of attention may have differing time courses. Others, such as Treisman, believed that Broadbent's model did not account for many other findings. Treisman, who was one of Broadbent's PhD students, proposed feature integration

theory, which asserted that to form a perceptual object, we must first look at its features in the pre-attentive stage and then bind them in the focus attention stage. Treisman stated that instead of a filter, people have an attenuator and it identifies messages based on its physical properties or by higher level characteristics, such as meaning. Attended messages can be perceived according to Treisman's model at a lesser strength, which happens instead of the unattended message being blocking it. These findings based on feature integration theory and the attenuation model contradicted those of Broadbent's model because Broadbent stated that people could not make meaningful connections.

Researchers in Canada surveyed 2,000 participants and studied the brain activity of 112 others using electroencephalograms (EEGs). Microsoft found that since the year 2000 (or about when the mobile revolution began) the average attention span dropped from 12 seconds to eight seconds. On the positive side, the report says our ability to multitask has drastically improved in the mobile age. Microsoft theorized that the changes were a result of the brain's ability to adapt and change itself over time and a weaker attention span may be a temporary side effect of evolution to a mobile Internet culture. The survey also confirmed generational differences for mobile use; for example, 77% of people aged 18 to 24 responded "yes" when asked, "When nothing is occupying my attention, the first thing I do is reach for my phone," compared with only 10% of those over the age of 65.

Published scientific research looking at the effect of modern technology on our cognitive abilities does show an effect on attention. But contrary to popular opinion, it shows attention spans have actually improved. For example, habitual video gamers have demonstrated better attention abilities than non-players – and non-players who started playing video-games began to show the same improvements. More importantly, our minds are adaptive systems, constantly reorganizing and refocusing our mental faculties to suit the environment. So the idea that our ability to pay attention may be changing in response to the modern, online world is neither surprising nor anything to necessarily worry about. However, there is an argument that we must take care to keep control of our attention in a world increasingly filled with distractions.

Earlier we have been relying on times when people were able to be sat at their computer, now you have a consumer who you can reach with your product all through the day. This always on World Wide Web and the huge amounts of content available on the internet has significant implications for the modern day consumers'

attention span. It has even greater implications for the new generation of people who have never known anything but high speed broadband and internet access, the future adult consumer.

In a world of instant gratification and where an alternative website is just a click away, website owners need to find ways to firstly grab the attention of a user, and then keep it for long enough to get your message across. If you don't, their cursor will be heading to the back button and on to a competitor at the blink of an eye. So, don't make people wait for the information – before even looking at how you are going to present information on your web pages you need to make sure the page loads as quickly as possible. Include key information upfront and begin with the end in mind – a time poor website visitor is looking for instant clarification they are in the right place. By including key information up front you can convince the user to read on rather than exit to another information source. By deciding what you want the reader to take out from a page, you can tailor your upfront copy accordingly. Keep page content short and punchy and split any detailed content out into secondary pages if applicable – with the limited attention span and desire for instant gratification of the modern day internet consumer just seeing the scroll bar shrink into oblivion can be enough for them to not even start reading a page. Use rich media and alternative content presentation to keep users attention – the use of video as an online communication medium is well documented. But also think about other ways of representing information such as images, graphs and other visual forms. Novelty and the presentation of something that is new and unexpected is one of the key elements of the Reticular Activation System (RAS) which focuses attention. Playing to this trigger through the representation information in alternative forms will help you get your message across effectively. Present information in a logical, sequential pattern – another element of RAS, by presenting information in a logical sequence helps to keep the attention of the user and allows you to take them through some logical steps to conclusion and get all of your key points across.

IV. VISUAL CONTENTS IN YOUR PRESENTATION

The following illustrations (Figure 4 and 5) give a clear idea of how visual presentations can help in online communications as well as other digital communication media.

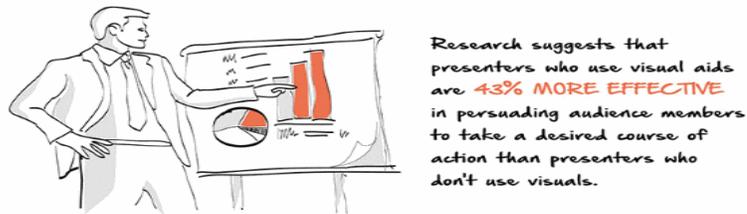


Figure 4: Effect of visual content

Tell the reader what they need, and want, to know, and no more – it sounds simple but far too many people don't follow this rule. You want to tell a consumer, or prospect, everything they need to know, but once you have done

this, stop. If your goal is an online transaction then get them to this point and present them with the option to purchase. If you are producing information give them all the top line stats they need to get your message across, and leave anything supplementary for those that chose to find it.

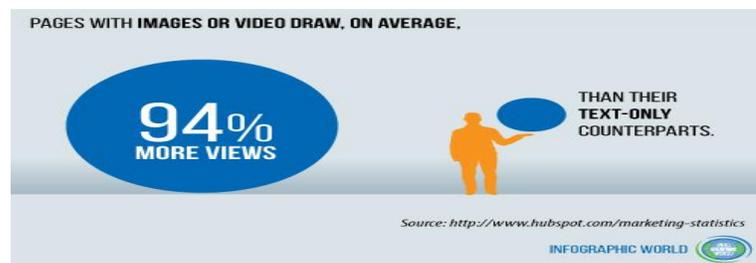


Figure 5: Visual Images better than texts

And the final point in operating a website in a world of short attention spans is to use the data at your disposal effectively for capturing consumer attention.

Microsoft and other media reports miss an important aspect about the human brain: it's adaptable. And in some cases, modern video technology results in increased attention spans, not shrinking ones. The Microsoft "study" claimed that the human attention span went from 12 seconds on average in 2000 to just 8.25 seconds in 2015. Those figures were compared to an average goldfish attention span of 9 seconds. The problem is, no definition of attention span is given, and it's not at all clear how these numbers were developed. Another problem is that when studies do provide a definition of attention, a different physiological dynamic arises. Attention (and its close relative, consciousness) is one of the most studied attributes of the brain today. Thousands of psychological, neurobiological and social science studies have been conducted on how we "pay attention." And one remarkable pattern shows that most of the time, we don't. And that's a good thing.

Attention is actually the result of a series of reactions in the brain to sensory stimuli. First, a stimulus (say, an object picked up by the eyes) makes its way to the posterior parietal cortex of the brain, which seems to be the center of managing stimuli and attention. The brain has to disengage from whatever it's focusing on now, move to look at the new stimuli, engage that new stimuli and raise a sense of alertness to that new stimuli. It's important to note that behind all this focusing of attention is another response, that of deliberately ignoring other stimuli. That's important, because our eyes and brains (to say the least for nose, ears and skin) are receiving thousands of stimuli at any given moment.

Such adaptability has been the hall mark of human race and is evolution (See Fig.6). Evidence suggests that some of our ancestors turned to non-vegetarian food when climate change reduced resource rich vegetables. The signatures of these changes may remain in our genes as is evident from our adaptable nature.



Figure 6: Sashimi or BBQ: How and why did humans start to eat meat?

Adaptive behavior has been studied by scientific community and particularly Psychologists and the conclusion is summarized as: Attention filters behaviorally relevant stimuli from the constant stream of sensory information comprising our environment. Research into underlying neural mechanisms in humans suggests that visual attention biases mutual suppression between stimuli resulting from competition for limited processing resources. As a consequence, processing of an attended stimulus is facilitated. This account makes 2 assumptions: 1) An attended stimulus is released from mutual suppression with competing stimuli and 2) an attended stimulus experiences greater gain in the presence of competing stimuli than when it is presented alone.

V. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Review of Literature has clearly brought out that Consumer perceptions are constantly changing due to better education, training, opportunities for interaction at work place and social interactions. Demographic changes are also simultaneously taking pace like the families are no longer big and it consist of husband, wife and kids only. Several environmental factors are responsible for this. One important factor is the lack of time. Modern day families consist of husband and wife couples, both working and so their mutual communication time is reduced not to speak of available free time together to do house hold cores like marketing for daily needs. But they belong to the group of consumers to whom products and services have to be marketed. So, one clear perception which emerges is that consumer is constrained by time to listen to marketing messages and promotion schemes. This is what leads to shrinking attention span available to marketers!

So, marketers have to do their jobs in quick time and faster to gain the attention of consumers in an environment of shrinking attention span. Perception is affected by promotion through various media, and particularly the electronic media since it is easily accessible and less time consuming for customers. Consumer attention seeking marketing models and consequent challenges of marketing people have been outlined in the literature review.

With the rapid adoption of smart phones and tablet computers and the expansion of free Wi-Fi, hotspots, and reliable 3G we live in an 'always on' world. You only have to take a look around you in any public location, be it a coffee shop, supermarket, or on a commuter train to see that people are accessing the web on a constant basis. This is great for web based businesses as it means their audience is not only growing with each technological advance, but is also reachable round the clock.

Marketing challenges would consist of understanding latest concepts of human psychology and behavior that has concluded that human behavior adapts to new challenges. So, the digitalized environment will not be

a challenge for present generation of teenagers and future managers as it is made out by Microsoft or other studies. The human quality of continuous adaptation will prevail! Marketers have understood this in developed countries and where digitalization has already reached an advance level. In India, thanks to the impetus given by our honorable Prime Minister Shri. Modiji, this challenge is already accepted by the younger generation!

The specialty of Marketing has been that it has the capacity to accept new challenges and so, we have no doubt that the present challenge of attention span which is a temporary will be soon overcome!

VI. THOUGHT FOR ACTION

Our mental abilities are changing, as they always have done in order to best serve our success in changing environments. But now, more than ever, our environment is made up of those who either want our attention or want to sell access to it. It will certainly be interesting to see how our cognitive abilities adapt to meet this new challenge. However, as individuals we too must start valuing our attention as much as the advertisers do. Human's cognitive abilities change all the time and can even vary day by day. It is not completely clear what effect technology has on our attention span. Even though Information technology might be the reason we can't focus as well, it is very hard to prove that. But it is clear that there needs to be more studies done on how technology affects humans. We all use technology on a daily basis but we have little comprehension of what it does to us. It is nice to be able to Google the answer to almost any question, but is there a price to pay for that? Technology has its pros and cons but how does it affect humans? Hopefully Life Sciences or Yoga can answer that question soon.

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