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Glen Riecken  
*College of Charleston*

Kyle Hensel  
*Clayton State University*

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# Using Humor in Advertising: When Does it Work?

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Glen Riecken and Kyle Hensel

Humor in advertising is pervasive, cutting across all media and numerous product categories (Catanescu & Gail, 2001; Weinberger, Spotts, Campbell & Parsons, 1995). The impact of humor in advertising has received considerable attention in the marketing and advertising literature, but findings are often inconsistent and much remains unclear (Cline, Altsech & Kellaris, 2003; Smit, Van Meurs & Neijens, 2006; Weinberger & Gulas, 1992). Studies tend to address one or more of four themes that revolve around the impact of humorous versus non-humorous ads. Much remains to be learned about when humor in advertising is appropriate and effective.

Glen Riecken, PhD., is visiting professor of marketing, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC 29424.

Kyle Hensel, MBA, is director, Small Business Development Center, Clayton State University, Morrow, GA 30260.

One theme is the impact of humor on advertising objectives. Scott, Klein, and Bryant (1990), in looking at event promotion, suggest that relevant humor increases patronage behavior, but humor not relevant to the event, will have no or even negative impacts. Chattopadhyay and Basu (1990) found no systematic or superior persuasive effects of humorous compared to non-humorous ads. Study results are all over the board. Some studies have found negative, some neutral, some positive, and others mixed results when examining the impact of humor on other communications goals such as attention, brand awareness (usually recall measures), brand attitude, or ad comprehension (see, for example Arias-Bolzmann, Goutam & Mowen, 2000; Chung & Zhau, 2003; Cline, Altsech & Kellaris, 2003; Duncan, Nelson & Frontczak, 1983; Gulas & Weinberger, 2006; Madden & Weinberger, 1984; Sutherland, 1982; Sutherland Sethu, 1987; Zhang & Zinkhan, 2006).

A second focus relates to audience characteristics. Findings suggest that males generally respond more favorably to humor ads than do females (Conway & Dube, 2002; Fugate, 1998; Weinberger & Gulas, 1992; Bauerly, 1990) but others have different findings (see, for example, Crawford & Gressley, 1991). Also, an individual's humor orientation may affect his/her response to humorous advertising—those with a higher degree of humor appreciation are more responsive (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992)—although this may be modified by prior brand evaluation (Chattopadhyay & Basu (1990) or source credibility (Catanescu & Gail, 2001). Zhang (1996) suggests that an individual's need for cognition might also be a factor in how a humorous advertisement is processed and, eventually, in how effective it is toward persuasion.

A third theme examines the type of humor. How an ad uses humor may affect its impact (Catanescu & Gail,

2001; 2002: *Marketing Communications*, 2004). Speck (1991), for example, found sentimental humor outperformed other types of humor in increasing trustworthiness. The most positive advertisement effects are achieved when combining high levels of warmth with high levels of humor (De Pelsmacker & Geuens, 1999). Buijzen and Valkenburg (2004), in examining television commercials, found seven types of humor emerged: slapstick, clownish humor, surprise, misunderstanding, irony, satire, and parody.

One major concern with this stream of research, however, is the lack of agreement on a humor typology. As Shibles (2002) points out regarding such attempts, "The types of humor are like breeds of dog—but in all of them there is still a dog." Parsons (1997) indicates that

as the underlying nature of humor is yet to be resolved, it is not surprising that no general theory of humor has emerged, but rather a collection of proposed theories. The mechanisms that govern humor can be grouped into three broad categories: affective, cognitive and interpersonal.

Affective mechanisms provide a safety valve for

forbidden feelings so that humor is seen as a healthy adaptive behavior. Cognitive mechanisms are related to message structure. Things like incongruity, rhetorical irony, mere surprise or inconsistency can provoke humor. Interpersonal humor reflects the social context in which humor occurs. Humor, for example, may be the result of feeling superior to others (jokes, puns, and so on are used to evoke such a feeling). Disparagement and sympathy are other examples.

Finally, the fourth area of focus examines the situation. Humor impact may be product or situation related (see, for example, Arias-Bolzmann, Goutam & Mowen, 2000; Cline, Altsech & Kellaris, 2003; Parsons, 1997; Weinberger, Spotts, Campbell & Parsons, 1995). Consumers tend to believe that humor is appropriate for some products and inappropriate for others (Fugate, Gotlieb & Bolton (2000). Weinberger, Spotts, and Parsons (1997), and Chung and Zhao (2003), suggest that product categories include such things as degree of purchase risk and whether the product is "functional" or "expressive."

## Purpose

This study examines the response to humorous advertising in relation to advertising audience characteristics, specifically their humor orientation and gender, and determines whether a pattern where

differences emerge exists. While various studies have addressed these issues, as noted previously, results are mixed and often contradictory. These results were accomplished by measuring respondents' humor orientation, exposing them to a variety of television commercials and measuring their perceptions of and reactions to the commercials and advertised brands. Respondent characteristics were also measured. The commercials used reflected a variety of humor/non-humor, types of humor and products. Consequently, three hypotheses were identified.

H<sub>1</sub>: Humor evaluation is independent of humor orientation.

H<sub>2</sub>: Humor evaluation is independent of gender.

H<sub>3</sub>: Humor evaluation is independent of age.

## Methodology

### Procedure

The study took place in two phases. In the first phase, a number of television commercials were previewed with the goal of identifying those that represented three categories: ones which strongly appeared to use humor in their approach, ones which may be trying to use humor and some that appear to not be using humor. This judgment was made by a panel of full-time graduate business students

who viewed the set of commercials. After independent ratings, discrepancies were discussed. Those commercials with the highest levels of agreement about either having humor content or not having humor content were retained. This resulted in a total of 26 commercials selected for use in the study. Television commercials were selected for two reasons: about one-fourth of television commercials often utilize humor compared to less than 10 percent of magazine ads (Weinberger, Spotts, Campbell, & Parsons, 1995) and television commercials have a greater opportunity to utilize a variety of humorous techniques through the use of both sight and sound.

In the second phase of the project, 554 students enrolled in various marketing classes at a medium-sized southeastern university participated in the study. The students viewed the set of commercials and completed the questionnaire during class times.

The sample was evenly split between males (50.0%) and females (50.0%). About three-quarters were in the traditional college age group (22 or under) and the remainder were older than 22. More than 80 percent were upper division students. Although students are often not regarded as good subjects, in this case, they were deemed acceptable because of the products advertised in the commercials and since the students were raised in the

television era hence being very aware of advertising. They also represented a growing market with rising disposable income.

### **Measurement**

Two major measurement issues were addressed. The first is how to measure an individual's "humor orientation." Multiple approaches are suggested in the literature (Ruch, 1996). Some tend to measure humor orientation in a global sense (see for example, Thorson & Powell, 1993) while others provide measurement schemes in more of a contextual sense of when humor might be appropriate (see for example, Martin & Lefcourt, 1984) or as a moderator variable (see, for example Martin & Lefcourt, 1983; Crawford & Gressley, 1991).

This study employed a shortened version of the Thorson and Powell (1993) model. Their complete Likert formatted scale consists of 29 items. Some of their items reflect humor as a coping mechanism and were excluded from this study. The final version used in this study consisted of only 16 items that Thorson and Powell (1993) purport measure general humor appreciation. Those authors provided evidence that their scale has validity, high reliability, is stable across different samples and appear to be both age and gender neutral. The latter characteristic is particularly important since Crawford and

Gressley (1991) argue that much of the past humor research has a gender bias, which results from the measurement approaches typically used.

A second major measurement issue is the measure of subjects' perceptions of humor in an advertisement. Chattopadhyay and Basu (1990) constructed a parsimonious and internally reliable scale consisting of four items in a 9 point semantic differential format. This study employed their scale plus added a fifth global measure of how funny the respondents found the commercial.

### **Analyses**

An initial analysis was done to ensure that the measurement of humor orientation is internally consistent (Cronbach's Alpha was .85 indicating a high degree of internal consistency) and has the same structure as Thorson and Powell (1993) through the use of a principal components factor analysis. Three factors emerged accounting for 70 percent of the variance. This analysis of the 16 items showed the composition of the shortened scales is similar to what would be expected. One factor may be labeled "Humor of Self," a second factor is "General Appreciation of Humor," and the third factor is "Regard for Humor of Others."

Computation of global measures such as individual "humor orientation" and "perception of ad humor" was

done through simple addition of the responses to items composing those scales. Comparisons of groups were made using chi-square tests. Response mean humor scores were ranked using the product/situational dichotomy and then again using the low, medium and high humor trichotomy.

## Results

Humor orientation scores show a robust range from a low of 16 to a high of 69 with a mean of 36.4; the possible range is from 16 (strong humor orientation) to 80 (weak humor orientation). Judges' evaluations of commercials were used to dichotomize commercials: those not using humor and those that were. This exercise resulted in about one-third of the commercials being in the "non-humor" group. Mean composite scores were computed from the respondents' ratings of each commercial using the modified Chattopadhyay and Basu (1990) scale. Table 1 exhibits the results. A Pearson correlation of .644 ( $p < .0001$ ) found between the judges' ratings and the respondents' mean scores indicated a high degree of agreement as to the humor content in the set of commercials. In fact, for the commercials below the median (more humorous), based upon the sample's response scores, the agreement between the two groups was 100 percent.

Based upon their humor orientation scores, respond-

ents were divided into three roughly equally-sized groups: those with high humor orientation (scores of 16–32), those with moderate humor orientation (scores of 33–40), and those with low humor orientation (scores greater than 40). These three groups were then compared in terms of their characteristics and their perceptions of the 26 television commercials, using chi-square tests to determine significant relationships. Table 2 shows the results. As may be seen, seven of the 26 commercials have significant ( $pr < .05$ ) differences with regard to humor orientation: New Car/Classifieds, Dodge Dakota, IBM Think Pad, Pond's Facial Cleaning, Pepsi "Cindy Crawford," Got Milk?, and National Hockey League. Four of these (New Car/Classifieds, Pepsi "Cindy Crawford," Got Milk? and National Hockey League) all scored overall above the median response scores. In all four cases, those with a greater humor appreciation found the commercials more humorous and those with the lowest humor appreciation found them the least humorous. The other three ads (Dodge Dakota, IBM Think Pad, and Pond's Facial Cleaning) all scored below the median response scores. In all three of these cases, those with greater humor appreciation found them humorous while those with the least humor orientation tended to either find them humorous or not humorous while the group with the

middle amount of humor orientation tended to not find them humorous.

Given these mixed results, the evidence is insufficient to completely reject  $H_1$  (Humor evaluation is independent of humor orientation); however, an apparent pattern does lend itself to the conclusion that a relationship does exist, at least for certain types of ads.

Gender was also used to compare perceptions, again using chi-square tests. As shown in Table 3, twelve commercials showed males and females differed in their evaluation ( $pr < .05$ ): Direct TV, McDonald's, Dodge Dakota, Wardrobe Furniture, Pepsi "Skydiver," Pepsi "Kid in a Bottle," Mr. Clean, Cracker Jack, Pepsi "Cindy Crawford," In-Laws, Levi's, and Pet Adoption. In the case of Direct TV and Cracker Jack, males found them more humorous than did females. Males were ambivalent about the Wardrobe Furniture ad while females tended to not find it humorous. In two Pepsi ads ("Sky Diver" and "Cindy Crawford"), males tended to find them humorous while females tended to split between finding them humorous or not humorous with few females in the middle. In the remaining seven ads, males tended to find them more humorous than did females.

Given these mixed results, the evidence is insufficient to completely reject  $H_2$  (Humor evaluation is independent of enough significant differences to suggest that a relationship

**Table 1**  
**Degree of Humor in Commercials<sup>1,4</sup>**

| Commercial                 | Judges' Score <sup>2</sup> | Response Mean Score <sup>3</sup> |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| National Hockey League     | 1                          | 10.6                             |
| Coke (man at Pepsi cooler) | 1                          | 10.9                             |
| Budweiser (lizard & frogs) | 1                          | 11.0                             |
| Pepsi vs. Coke             | 1                          | 11.4                             |
| HBO                        | 1                          | 12.6                             |
| Got Milk?                  | 1                          | 12.9                             |
| Budweiser (what's up?)     | 1                          | 13.1                             |
| Levi's (emergency room)    | 1                          | 13.7                             |
| New Car/Classifieds        | 1                          | 14.4                             |
| Tabasco Hot Sauce          | 1                          | 14.5                             |
| Motorola Paging            | 1                          | 14.6                             |
| In-Laws                    | 1                          | 15.1                             |
| Pepsi (Cindy Crawford)     | 1                          | 16.0                             |
| Pepsi (kid in bottle)      | 2                          | 16.3                             |
| Wardrobe Furniture         | 1                          | 17.4                             |
| Diet Pepsi (neighbors)     | 1                          | 17.9                             |
| McDonald's                 | 1                          | 18.1                             |
| Dodge Dakota               | 2                          | 19.1                             |
| Pepsi (goose/sky diver)    | 2                          | 19.1                             |
| Pet Adoption               | 1                          | 20.2                             |
| Cracker Jack               | 2                          | 22.0                             |
| Mr. Clean                  | 2                          | 24.7                             |
| IBM Think Pad              | 2                          | 25.9                             |
| Direct TV                  | 2                          | 27.5                             |
| Pond's Facial Cleansing    | 1                          | 29.0                             |
| Chifley Hotel              | 2                          | 31.5                             |

<sup>1</sup> Correlation coefficient = .644, pr. = .000

<sup>2</sup> Judges' group: 1 = Humorous 2 = Not Humorous

<sup>3</sup> Based upon survey responses on a 5–45 composite score range. Lower numbers represent greater humor.

<sup>4</sup> Commercial humor score is in descending order from most to least humorous based upon Response Mean Scores. Mean score is 17.7; median score is 16.2.

**Table 2**  
**Humor Orientation and Commercial Evaluation<sup>1</sup>**

| <b>Commercial</b>              | <b>X<sup>2</sup></b> | <b>Pr.</b>  |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| Direct TV                      | 2.93                 | .550        |
| <b>New Car/Classifieds</b>     | <b>24.08</b>         | <b>.000</b> |
| McDonald's                     | 3.90                 | .419        |
| HBO                            | 1.21                 | .876        |
| <b>Dodge Dakota</b>            | <b>14.41</b>         | <b>.006</b> |
| <b>IBM Think Pad</b>           | <b>14.70</b>         | <b>.005</b> |
| <b>Pond's Facial Cleansing</b> | <b>11.09</b>         | <b>.025</b> |
| Wardrobe Furniture             | 5.03                 | .284        |
| Chifley Hotel                  | 3.19                 | .526        |
| Motorola Paging                | 5.94                 | .204        |
| Pepsi (goose/sky diver)        | 1.66                 | .797        |
| Pepsi (kid in bottle)          | 5.52                 | .238        |
| Budweiser (what's up?)         | 3.72                 | .445        |
| Budweiser (lizard & frogs)     | 2.57                 | .633        |
| Tabasco Hot Sauce              | 6.65                 | .156        |
| Mr. Clean                      | 3.02                 | .555        |
| Cracker Jack                   | 5.25                 | .263        |
| Diet Pepsi (neighbors)         | 3.69                 | .449        |
| <b>Pepsi (Cindy Crawford)</b>  | <b>11.20</b>         | <b>.024</b> |
| In-Laws                        | 5.87                 | .209        |
| <b>Got Milk?</b>               | <b>13.60</b>         | <b>.009</b> |
| Pepsi vs. Coke                 | 7.99                 | .092        |
| Coke (man at Pepsi cooler)     | 6.03                 | .197        |
| Levi's (emergency room)        | 4.73                 | .316        |
| Pet Adoption                   | 4.89                 | .299        |
| <b>National Hockey League</b>  | <b>26.37</b>         | <b>.000</b> |

<sup>1</sup>Boldface indicates significance at  $p < .05$

**Table 3**  
**Humor Orientation and Gender<sup>1</sup>**

| <b>Commercial</b>              | <b>X<sup>2</sup></b> | <b>Pr.</b>  |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| <b>Direct TV</b>               | <b>10.13</b>         | <b>.006</b> |
| New Car/Classifieds            | 0.98                 | .611        |
| <b>McDonald's</b>              | <b>7.32</b>          | <b>.026</b> |
| HBO                            | 4.72                 | .093        |
| <b>Dodge Dakota</b>            | <b>13.27</b>         | <b>.001</b> |
| IBM Think Pad                  | 0.71                 | .702        |
| Pond's Facial Cleansing        | 1.04                 | .595        |
| <b>Wardrobe Furniture</b>      | <b>10.29</b>         | <b>.006</b> |
| Chifley Hotel                  | 1.46                 | .481        |
| Motorola Paging                | 3.04                 | .219        |
| <b>Pepsi (goose/sky diver)</b> | <b>6.08</b>          | <b>.048</b> |
| <b>Pepsi (kid in bottle)</b>   | <b>12.82</b>         | <b>.002</b> |
| Budweiser (what's up?)         | 3.39                 | .183        |
| Budweiser (lizard & frogs)     | 1.55                 | .457        |
| Tabasco Hot Sauce              | 4.98                 | .083        |
| <b>Mr. Clean</b>               | <b>7.05</b>          | <b>.029</b> |
| <b>Cracker Jack</b>            | <b>12.87</b>         | <b>.002</b> |
| Diet Pepsi (neighbors)         | 0.46                 | .794        |
| <b>Pepsi (Cindy Crawford)</b>  | <b>7.99</b>          | <b>.018</b> |
| <b>In-Laws</b>                 | <b>15.16</b>         | <b>.001</b> |
| Got Milk?                      | 2.48                 | .289        |
| Pepsi vs. Coke                 | 4.71                 | .095        |
| Coke (man at Pepsi cooler)     | 4.81                 | .090        |
| <b>Levi's (emergency room)</b> | <b>7.64</b>          | <b>.022</b> |
| <b>Pet Adoption</b>            | <b>8.50</b>          | <b>.014</b> |
| National Hockey League         | 1.96                 | .375        |

<sup>1</sup>Boldface indicates significance at  $p < .05$



does exist, at least for certain types of ads.

Finally, age was used to compare humor evaluations.

The respondents were grouped into those of traditional college age (22 or younger) and those older. Table 4 shows

only four commercials showed any difference by age: HBO, Chifley Hotel, Budweiser “What’s Up?,” and Levi’s. In

**Table 4**  
**Humor Orientation by Age<sup>1,2</sup>**

| <b>Commercial</b>              | <b>X<sup>2</sup></b> | <b>Pr.</b>  |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| Direct TV                      | 0.74                 | .691        |
| New Car/Classifieds            | 0.70                 | .706        |
| McDonald’s                     | 0.91                 | .633        |
| <b>HBO</b>                     | <b>11.15</b>         | <b>.004</b> |
| Dodge Dakota                   | 4.27                 | .118        |
| IBM Think Pad                  | 3.79                 | .151        |
| Pond’s Facial Cleansing        | 0.95                 | .622        |
| Wardrobe Furniture             | 0.13                 | .935        |
| <b>Chifley Hotel</b>           | <b>6.08</b>          | <b>.048</b> |
| Motorola Paging                | 0.68                 | .712        |
| Pepsi (goose/sky diver)        | 0.56                 | .757        |
| Pepsi (kid in bottle)          | 5.06                 | .080        |
| <b>Budweiser (what’s up?)</b>  | <b>6.21</b>          | <b>.045</b> |
| Budweiser (lizard & frogs)     | 2.51                 | .285        |
| Tabasco Hot Sauce              | 0.42                 | .810        |
| Mr. Clean                      | 1.73                 | .421        |
| Cracker Jack                   | 0.65                 | .723        |
| Diet Pepsi (neighbors)         | 0.04                 | .981        |
| Pepsi (Cindy Crawford)         | 0.75                 | .686        |
| In-Laws                        | 0.26                 | .880        |
| Got Milk?                      | 3.34                 | .188        |
| Pepsi vs. Coke                 | 0.20                 | .905        |
| Coke (man at Pepsi cooler)     | 0.72                 | .698        |
| <b>Levi’s (emergency room)</b> | <b>8.45</b>          | <b>.015</b> |
| Pet Adoption                   | 0.15                 | .929        |
| National Hockey League         | 1.87                 | .389        |

<sup>1</sup>Boldface indicates significance at  $p < .05$

<sup>2</sup>Ages 22 and younger vs. ages 23 and older

three cases (HBO, Chifley Hotel, Budweiser “What’s Up?”), the younger group found them more humorous. In the Levi’s case, it was the older group who found it more humorous.

Given the preponderance of evidence (22 of the 26 ads showed no age related differences), it seems that H<sub>3</sub> (Humor evaluation is independent of age) may be accepted.

## Discussion

Results from this study suggest that using humor in advertising can be tricky. Practitioners and researchers have long known that humor can be an effective tool for drawing attention to ads. A danger, however, is that not everyone sees humor in the same light and some evidence from this study supports previous studies that indicate that humor orientation and gender can be two factors that may come into play. In order to gain some additional insight into when humor ads may be more effective, categorization of the humor content of the commercials was undertaken. The humor employed in each commercial was identified as either “product” or “situational” in nature. Each commercial was also labeled with one of the seven humor approaches suggested by Buijzen and Valkenburg (2004): slapstick, clownish humor, surprise, misunderstanding, irony, satire, and

parody. Those using slapstick and clownish humor (3 commercials) were labeled as “low cognitive humor.” Twelve commercials used surprise or misunderstanding and these were labeled as “medium cognitive humor” while the remaining eleven commercials all used irony, satire, or parody and were identified as “high cognitive humor.” Because this was done after the fact, no hypothesis was formed and no statistical tests were performed.

When response mean humor scores were ranked based upon the product/situation dichotomy, results showed that 75 percent of the situational ads had scores above the mean (less humorous) compared to 50 percent of the product ads. Ranking scores based upon low/medium/high cognitive humor, all three of the low cognitive ads scored above the mean whereas 75 percent of the moderate cognitive and 63.6 percent of the high cognitive ads placed below the mean score (more humorous). Some relationship between humor content and the degree of humor found in the commercials does appear to exist suggesting that practitioners should consider the type of humor they will use in creating humorous ads.

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