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Neural Advertising: The Sounds We Can't Resist

By Jeffrey Kluger

If you're like most people, you're way too smart for advertising. You flip right past newspaper ads, never click on ads online and leave the room during TV commercials.

That, at least, is what we tell ourselves. But what we tell ourselves is hooey. Advertising works, which is why, even in hard economic times, Madison Avenue is a $34 billion–a–year business. And if Martin Lindstrom — author of the best seller *Buyology* and a marketing consultant for *Fortune* 500 companies, including PepsiCo and Disney — is correct, trying to tune this stuff out is about to get a whole lot harder.

(Watch TIME's video "Why a Baby's Laugh Will Make You Buy.")

Lindstrom is a practitioner of neuromarketing research, in which consumers are exposed to ads while hooked up to machines that monitor brain activity, pupil dilation, sweat responses and flickers in facial muscles, all of which are markers of emotion. According to his studies, 83% of all forms of advertising principally engage only one of our senses: sight. Hearing, however, can be just as powerful, though advertisers have taken only limited advantage of it. Historically, ads have relied on jingles and slogans to catch our ear, largely ignoring everyday sounds — a steak sizzling, a baby laughing and other noises our bodies can't help paying attention to. Weave this stuff into an ad campaign, and we may be powerless to resist it.

(See the best and worst Super Bowl commercials of 2010.)

To figure out what most appeals to our ear, Lindstrom wired up his volunteers, then played them recordings of dozens of familiar sounds, from McDonald's ubiquitous "I'm Lovin' It" jingle to birds chirping

and cigarettes being lit. The sound that blew the doors off all the rest — both in terms of interest and positive feelings — was a baby giggling. The other high-ranking sounds were less primal but still powerful. The hum of a vibrating cell phone was Lindstrom's second-place finisher. Others that followed were an ATM dispensing cash, a steak sizzling on a grill and a soda being popped and poured.

In all of these cases, it didn't take a Mad Man to invent the sounds, infuse them with meaning and then play them over and over until the subjects internalized them. Rather, the sounds already had meaning and thus triggered a cascade of reactions: hunger, thirst, happy anticipation.

"Cultural messages that get into your nervous system are very common and make you behave certain ways," says neuroscientist Read Montague of Baylor College of Medicine. Advertisers who fail to understand that pay a price. Lindstrom admits to being mystified by TV ads that give viewers close-up food-porn shots of meat on a grill but accompany that with generic jangly guitar music. One of his earlier brain studies showed that numerous regions, including the insula and orbital frontal cortex, jump into action when such discordance occurs, trying to make sense of it.

TV advertisers aren't the only ones who may start putting sound to greater use. Retailers are also catching on. The 0101 department store in Japan, for example, has been designed as a series of soundscapes, playing different sound effects such as children at play, birdsongs and lapping water in the sportswear, fragrance and formal-wear sections. Lindstrom is consulting with clients about employing a similar strategy in European supermarkets, piping the sound of percolating coffee or fizzing soda into the beverage department or that of a baby cooing into the baby-food aisle.

(See the top 10 TV commercials of 2009.)

None of this means that advertisers just have to turn the audio dials and consumers will come running. Indeed, sometimes they flee. In the early years of mainstream cell-phone use, the Nokia ringtone was recognized by 42% of people in the U.K. — and soon became widely loathed. That, Lindstrom says, was partly because so few users practiced cell-phone etiquette and the blasted things kept going off in movie theaters. The Microsoft start-up sound has taken on similarly negative associations, because people so often hear it when they're rebooting after their computer has crashed. In these cases, manufacturers themselves must reboot by changing the offending sound slightly or replacing it entirely.

If history is any indication, marketers will keep getting more manipulative, and the storm of commercial noise will become more focused. Even then, there may be hope: Lindstrom's testing shows that people respond to a sound better when it's subtler. If nothing else, smart marketers may at least keep the volume

low.

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See the top 10 tasteless commercials.

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