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Connecting with Clients: Best to Be Funny or Clever?

Holly S. Howe, PhD, Lingrui Zhou, PhD, Rodrigo S. Dias, PhD Candidate, and Gavan J. Fitzsimons, PhD

Humor has been a popular marketing strategy for many brands throughout the years. In our research, we argue that if a brand wants to use humor, they benefit more from using clever humor versus merely being funny. We define clever as a humor attempt where the audience has to make a mental connection to understand the joke. This might include wordplay, making a pop-culture reference, or jokes that require people to “read between the lines.” When a brand uses clever humor, it is better able to connect with the audience. This connection can lead to more positive brand attitudes and greater brand engagement.



About our Study

We performed multiple studies to assess the impact of and to compare humor and cleverness. In our first study, we assessed the engagement of a tweet depending on whether it was clever or simply funny. Study participants rated these tweets on a scale of 1-10 on how funny and how clever they perceived them to be. After participants rated the tweets, we looked at the engagement of each tweet—the likes, retweets, and replies.

For study two, we showed our participants one of two separate advertisements for a single brand. The first was purely humor while the second was viewed as cleverly funny. The cleverly funny ad elicited significantly more positive brand attitudes than the merely funny ad.

In study three, we showed participants ads using a variety of different humor styles (e.g., absurd humor, physical humor, teasing) as well as different clever humor styles. We then asked participants to rate these ads on seven-point scales with respect to brand warmth, brand competence, and brand attitude. The clever ad elevated consumers’ brand attitude because the brand seemed warmer (e.g., friendly, nice, warm, sincere) and more competent (e.g., able, skillful, confident).

Our Findings

Our findings for study one show that cleverness is a significant predictor of replies, retweets, and engagements. In study two, participants had a more positive brand attitude toward the brand if they were exposed to the cleverly funny ad rather than the purely funny ad. For study three, we

found that cleverness was a significant predictor of warmth, competence, and brand attitude. We then demonstrated that clever humor improves brand attitude *because* it makes the brand seem warmer and more competent.

Overall, we found that being clever is more effective than simply being humorous. Using cleverness, brands can tap into the intelligence of the target audience and create more positive impressions of their brand. As found in other literature on this topic, we find inconsistent effects of “funniness” in our studies. For example, we find that the effect of humor on brand attitudes is dependent on the brand, the characteristics of the brand, the humor attempt, and the audience.

A clever advertisement, however, may make your brand stand out among others, as cleverness often makes the audience think or have an “Aha!” moment. Tapping into the audience’s intelligence makes you seem friendly (because you made a joke) while maintaining your professional competence (because you made a *clever* joke).

While our research indicates that clever marketing is superior in building a long-lasting connection with customers, the benefits of clever humor are more pronounced with consumers who have a high need for cognition—that is, those who enjoy an intellectual challenge. Firms must understand their target audiences, as clever marketing will likely be more effective for a sophisticated brand, while other forms of humor may be more effective for a rugged, outdoorsy brand.

Real Estate Implications

Clever humor in advertising can be an effective means of marketing to current and prospective clients. Creating brand engagement and lasting impact is vital in customer retention, but it is not just as easy as cracking a funny joke. The first step in an effective clever marketing campaign is to know your target market: consumers who enjoy thinking tend to respond more positively to clever ads than consumers who do not. Knowing and understanding who you are targeting is the best way to ensure effectiveness. Next, craft your clever advertisement by making a joke that requires your consumers to think. This can include making a pop-culture reference, using wordplay, or letting consumers “fill in the blank” to complete the joke. Funny humor can be effective for some groups, but our research shows this effect is shorter lived and does not make as deep an impact as a cleverness. By using clever writing and wordplay that resonates with your clients, you can create a sense of intellectual satisfaction that makes you seem friendlier and smarter, leading to more positive outcomes for your brand.

Recommended Reading

Howe, Holly S., Lingrui Zhou, Rodrigo S. Dias, Gavan J. Fitzsimons (2022), “Aha over Haha: Brands Benefit More from Being Clever than from Being Funny,” *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 33(1), 107-114.

About the Authors

Holly S. Howe, PhD

Assistant Professor of Marketing, HEC Montréal (Canada)

Dr. Holly Howe (PhD – Duke University) studies conversation and, specifically, how brands can communicate to consumers through the use of humor. Dr. Howe has published in *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Journal of the Association of Consumer Research*, *Psychology and Marketing*, and *Psychological Science*, among others. Dr. Howe is also a co-founder of an open-science online grocery store, which is a free-to-use space where researchers can study consumers habits while they shop.

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Dr. Lingrui Zhou's (PhD – Duke University) research examines how different types of relationships, between both brands and consumers, affect perceptions and decision making. Her first stream of research investigates the impact of brand-to-brand interactions and brand-to-consumer communication on consumers. Her second stream of research examines consumer-to-consumer relationships, focusing on interpersonal connections and gift giving. She has published in the *Journal of Marketing* and in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

Rodrigo S. Dias, PhD Candidate

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Rodrigo S. Dias is a PhD candidate in marketing. Rodrigo is interested in consumer finances, financial decision making, and the psychology of happiness and well-being. His research has been published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* and the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

Gavan J. Fitzsimons, PhD

Edward S. and Rose K. Donnell Professor of Marketing and Psychology, Duke University

Dr. Gavan J. Fitzsimons' (PhD – Columbia University) research focuses on understanding the ways in which consumers may be influenced without their conscious knowledge or awareness by marketers and marketing researches, often without any intent on the part of the marketer. His work has been published in numerous academic journals, such as the *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Marketing Science*, *Management Science*, *Organizational Behavior and Decision Processes*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, and *Psychological Science*. His ideas have also been featured in many popular press outlets such as NPR, CNN, MSNBC, the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Psychology Today*, *Oprah Magazine*, and *Time Magazine*, among others.



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