How Communication Medium and Message Format Affect Corrective Advertising

Japhet H. Nkonge, Ph.D.
North Carolina A. and T. State University

INTRODUCTION

General Problem Area

The competitive nature of the American free enterprise system places a heavy premium on the persuasiveness of a seller in communicating the attributes of his products or services to a prospective buyer. Twentieth century developments in communication and behavioral research have tremendously enhanced the communication effectiveness of the seller. Unwittingly, perhaps, these conditions have also alarmingly increased the potential influence of the marketer on the consuming public. If the marketer misuses the tantalizing position he occupies, substantial public injury can occur. Actual and probable misuses of modern marketing communication have led to public pressure on the business to act responsibly. Specifically, modern advertising and marketing practices have increasingly come under attack because of what is felt to be the widening disparity between “what the seller in fact said” and “what the consumer actually inferred.”

The task of policing commercial advertising practice is primarily the responsibility of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the formal federal government agency charged with overseeing business-consumer interchange.

During the last ten years, the commission has intensified its efforts to
combat deception in advertising. One phase of this effort has been the monitoring of persuasive commercial messages and the issuance of corrective advertising complaints to firms whose advertisements were construed as deceptive or misleading. Through recent litigation emanating from such complaints, corrective advertising has been established as a remedy legally available to the Federal Trade Commission for use against deceptive advertising. Although empirical research confirms that corrective advertising basically works, retrospective observations of instances where it has been ordered indicate that serious problems still exist in its implementation and control.

One such problem pertains to the format in which the corrective messages are presented. Over the years, there has been a considerable drift from the strictly corrective and subtly confessional format that was originally recommended in the Campbell Soup Case. As an illustration, the format of the message in the Listerine corrective advertising campaign by Warner Lambert Company differed from the one that was suggested in the initial Federal Trade Commission order. It differed even more significantly from the format that was originally recommended. Notwithstanding the reasons for the changes, there is serious concern as to the effectiveness of the evolving partly-corrective message in doing the job it was intended to do. Both the industry and public policy makers want insights into this issue, albeit for perhaps different reasons. The public policy maker's concern could be obviated if the Federal Trade Commission followed the suggestion made by Wilkie (1973, p. 28). He suggested that the commission should leave a respondent firm to use its own devices to achieve the desired correction over a specified period of time and simply assess the results of the firm's compliance at the end of such a period. The Federal Trade Commission has not been consistent in following the above advice.

Another problem regarding corrective advertising is that there has been little overt concern about the media through which corrective advertisements should be transmitted. In past instances where the Federal Trade Commission has issued corrective advertising directives either by orders or through consent decrees, the commission's concern about media in regard to such directives followed one or more of the following patterns:

1) The commission stipulated an amount of money that the respondent had to spend on corrective advertising through an unspecified medium otherwise used to communicate promotional messages about the product in question. In Federal Trade Commission vs. Warner Lambert Company, for instance, the commission ordered the respon-