

REVISED 3rd INTERNATIONAL EDITION

**MAX SUTHERLAND**  
**ADVERTISING**  
**AND THE MIND OF**  
**THE CONSUMER**

*What works, what doesn't, and why*



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*This book is published in eight languages (English, Dutch, Polish, Korean, Chinese, Turkish, Indonesian, and Rumanian).*

Puts the psyche of advertising on the analyst's couch to reveal the sometimes surprising mind of commercial persuasion.

Jim Spaeth, Former President, Advertising Research Foundation

This is a well-informed and engagingly written description of the processes involved in the communication of advertising. It does not share the problems of advertising text books, which are generally superficial as well as being invariably out-of-date. Nor is it one of those populist works that receive a wide sale by propagating over-simple theories.

John Philip Jones, author of *When Ads Work* and  
Professor of Marketing, Syracuse University

I learned a lot from the book, while thoroughly enjoying it. It has much to offer for both the novice and the experienced advertising person. Insights about the advertising process are backed up with many examples of real advertising, research monitoring hundreds of advertising campaigns around the world, and a wide variety of academic research. Amazingly, all this is combined in a delightful writing style that entertains while it teaches.

Alan Sawyer, Professor of Marketing, University of Florida

A thought-provoking and practical book on how ads work and how advertising campaigns can be most effectively managed that also contains many useful ideas for achieving more effective advertising campaigns.

Professor John Rossiter, University of Wollongong, co-author of  
*Marketing Communications: Theory and applications*

Breakthrough thinking. I have been consulting in the advertising business and have taught graduate level advertising courses for over 20 years. I have never found a book that brought so much insight to the advertising issues associated with effective selling.

Professor Larry Chiagouris, Pace University

Finally, a book that evades the 'magic' of advertising and pins down the psychological factors that make an ad successful or not. It will change the way you advertise and see ads.

Ignacio Oreamuno, President, [ihaveanidea.org](http://ihaveanidea.org)

A very stimulating, provocative, and interesting book. A gold mine of practical and memorable advertising findings.

Professor Shelby McIntyre, Santa Clara University

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# ADVERTISING AND THE MIND OF THE CONSUMER

*What works, what doesn't, and why*

REVISED 3rd INTERNATIONAL EDITION

MAX SUTHERLAND

  
ALLEN&UNWIN

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Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218  
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It is through the communicating and sharing of ideas and case-study observations over many years that a body of knowledge such as this emerges. Therefore many of the MarketMind staff contributed either directly or indirectly to this book. My thanks also to Alice Sylvester, my former co-author for her efforts on the second edition and for her contribution of some of the case examples retained in this third edition.

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these other households recorded TV programs and fast forwarded the ads, their dad had to record and fast-forward through the programs to *watch* the ads. Thanks to all of them for their understanding and the time to make the book happen.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Max Sutherland is an author, columnist and marketing psychologist who works as an independent consultant in Australia and the USA. An expert in the psychology of communication, his monthly column is posted on the web at [www.sutherlandsurvey.com](http://www.sutherlandsurvey.com). He is Adjunct Professor of Marketing at Bond University and Honorary Principal Research Fellow at Wollongong University.

The highly successful company he founded in 1989, MarketMind,<sup>1</sup> specialized in tracking the effects of advertising communication for many of the leading global advertisers including Gillette, Merck, Kodak, McDonald's, Miller, Qantas, Nestlé and Pfizer. MarketMind was ultimately acquired by a US conglomerate.

His early career included retail sales as well as positions in market research with the Coca-Cola Export Corporation and the Overseas Telecommunications Commission.

With degrees in marketing and psychology, Dr Sutherland has held senior academic positions at a number of universities in the USA and Australia. He has held full-time lectureships in market research and consumer behavior at the University of New South Wales and the David Syme Business School (now Monash University) as well as Visiting Professor at Kent State University and Santa Clara University in the USA. He has published numerous papers in American, European and Australasian journals and currently serves on the editorial board of the *International Journal of Brand Management* and the *International Journal of Advertising*.

He is a former editor of the *Australian Marketing Researcher*, a Fellow and former Chairman of the Australian Market & Social Research Society and a Fellow of the Australian Marketing Institute.

He can be contacted at [msutherland@adandmind.com](mailto:msutherland@adandmind.com).

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PART A

WHY ADVERTISING HAS REMAINED  
A MYSTERY FOR SO LONG

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## INTRODUCTION

The subject of advertising seems to be riddled with mystique and apparent contradictions. This book resolves some of those contradictions. It had its beginnings in regular columns for various trade publications and journals; Part B brings together some of those articles and subsequent articles and more material can be found at [www.adandmind.com](http://www.adandmind.com).

This book is not just aimed at advertisers and their ad agencies but also at the people to whom they advertise. As David Ogilvy, a leading advertising expert, said (in the chauvinistic 1960s): ‘The consumer is not a moron. She is your wife!’<sup>1</sup> Our wives, our husbands, our partners, our children are all consumers. The consumer is not an idiot. The consumer is you and me.

Many years ago the advertiser’s dilemma was expressed in this way: ‘I know that half my advertising is wasted—but I don’t know which half!’<sup>2</sup> But developments in market research are beginning to change all that by better enabling advertisers to identify what works and what doesn’t.<sup>3</sup> This book draws on the experience of tracking week by week the effects of hundreds of advertising campaigns over a period of more than fifteen years.

Almost everybody is interested in advertising. The average consumer is exposed to hundreds of ads every day. By the time we die we will have spent an estimated one and a half years watching TV commercials.<sup>4</sup> Yet advertising continues to be something of a mystery.

The response ‘Gee, I didn’t know that’ to an advertisement tends to be the exception. A round trip special price to New York for \$400 is news. Ads that announce the release of new products like iPhone, the Segway, self cleaning windows or voice-operated computers are news. And if we are someone who is compulsive about germs maybe Mr Clean with a new disinfectant that kills germs 50 per cent better than the old Mr Clean might also be news. With news advertising we can easily recognize the potential of the advertising to affect us.

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But most advertising is not ‘news’ advertising. Much of the advertising we encounter doesn’t impart news and it is difficult for us to see how it works on us. As consumers we generally believe it does not really affect us personally. Despite this, advertisers keep on advertising. So something must be working—but on whom, and exactly how?

This book demystifies the effects of advertising and describes some of the psychological mechanisms underlying them. It is written primarily for those who foot the bill for advertising and those who produce advertising. In other words, for those many organizations involved with advertising—the marketing directors, marketing managers, product managers, advertising managers, account execs, media people and creatives. However, in the various editions it has also been read by many interested consumers who wonder how advertising works and why advertisers keep on advertising. Understanding the mechanisms and their limitations tends to lessen the anxieties we may have about wholesale, unconscious manipulation by advertising.

It may come as a surprise to many consumers that those who foot the bill for advertising are often frustrated by knowing little more than the consumers themselves about how, why or when their advertising works. Advertising agencies, the makers of advertising, also know less about these things than we might think. They are seen as wizards at selling, but an agency’s most important pitch is to organizations that *want* to advertise—companies that will engage the agency’s services to design their advertising on an ongoing basis. To keep clients coming back, advertising agencies need to sell the effectiveness of their advertising to those clients and to the world. Inevitably, some agencies become much more accomplished at selling their clients and the world on the great job the advertising is doing than they do at creating advertising that is truly effective.

Like the skills of tribal healers, ad agencies’ powers and methods are seen to be all the greater because of the mystery that surrounds advertising. Books like Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders*<sup>5</sup> enhance this image of the power of advertising agencies because they portray them as having witch-doctor-like powers. So in a way the mystique and aura of advertising works in favor of its makers—the advertising agencies—by boosting their image, status and perceived power.

Way back in 1978 Alec Benn, an advertising agency principal in the United States, claimed in his book *The 27 Most Common Mistakes in Advertising*: ‘There is a great conspiracy participated in by adver-

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tising agencies, radio and television stations and networks, advertising consultants, newspapers, magazines and others to mislead corporate management about the effectiveness of advertising.<sup>6</sup> Benn was pointing out that advertising failed more often than it succeeded, usually because its effects ‘are not measured objectively’.

Since then, advertising has begun to be measured more objectively and more often (indeed continuously) and this has highlighted the hard fact that many ads still fail. Part of the reason is that advertising agencies get too little in the way of ‘news’ to work with—there aren’t the breakthrough things to say about existing brands to cause immediate impacts. But the other part of it is a historical overreliance on intuition and introspection.<sup>7</sup> When these qualities are used instead of objective measurement as the basis for deciding what works and what doesn’t, there are more ads that fail than ads that are outstandingly successful. Sustained effects occur less than half the time.<sup>8</sup> Until recently these failures stood a good chance of going unrecognized because the majority of campaigns were not tracked in a formal way.<sup>9</sup>

In the general population there are those who believe that advertising is all powerful and that the mechanism of advertising must be unconscious and subliminal, because its effects do not seem open to introspection. Such views are associated with the ‘dark and manipulative’ view of advertising. This book reveals a much more benign interpretation of advertising’s so-called ‘unconscious’ effects. In elaborating on some of the subtler mechanisms of advertising, it dispels many myths and exaggerated claims. At the same time it reveals just how subtle advertising’s influence can be and how much of an impact it can have on the success or failure of one brand over another.

This book will help advertising agencies to diagnose the *why* of what works, and what doesn’t. It shows advertisers how to get better results from their advertising budget and their agency. And it reveals to consumers how advertising works to influence which brands we choose—especially if the choice doesn’t matter to us personally—and why it is that we find it difficult to introspect on advertising’s effect.

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# 1 INFLUENCING PEOPLE: MYTHS AND MECHANISMS

- Why do people buy bottled water that is available free from the tap?
- Why does advertising work on everybody else but not on us?
- Why do advertisers keep repeating an ad that we have already seen?

All these questions reflect the general belief that advertising works by persuading us, yet we don't feel personally that we are at all persuaded by it.

Why is it so difficult for us to introspect on advertising and how it influences us? Because we look for major effects, that's why! Too often, we look for the ability of a single ad to persuade us rather than for more subtle, minor effects. Big and immediate effects of advertising do occur when the advertiser has something new to say. Then it is easy for us to introspect on its effect.

But most effects of advertising fall well short of persuasion. These minor effects are not obvious but they are more characteristic of the way advertising works. To understand advertising we have to understand and measure these effects. When our kids are growing up we don't notice their physical growth each day but from time to time we become aware that they have grown. Determining how much a child has grown in the last 24 hours is like evaluating the effect of being exposed to a single commercial. In both cases, the changes are too small for us to notice. But even small effects of advertising can influence which brand we choose, especially when all other factors are equal and when alternative brands are much the same.

## **Weighing the alternatives: evaluation**

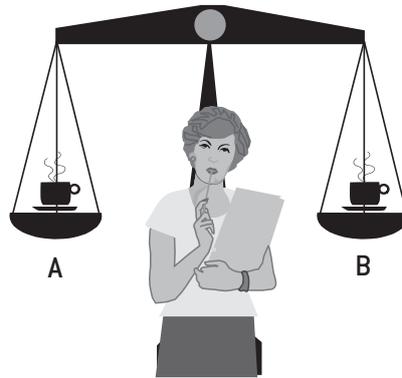
It is easiest to understand this with low-involvement buying situations. The situation is like a 'beam balance' in which each brand weighs the same. With one brand on each side, the scale is balanced. However, it takes only

a feather added to one side of the balance to tip us in favor of the brand on that side. The brands consumers have to choose from are often very similar. Which one will the buying balance tip towards? When we look for advertising effects we are looking for feathers rather than heavy weights.<sup>1</sup>

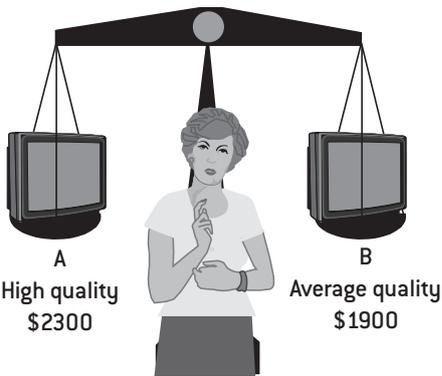
The buying of cars, appliances, vacations and other high-priced items are examples of high-involvement decision-making. This high level of involvement contrasts with the low level brought to bear on the purchase of products like shampoo or soft drink or margarine. For most of us, the buying of these smaller items is no big deal. We have better things to do with our time than agonize over which brand to choose every time we buy something.

The fact is that in many low-involvement product categories, the alternative brands are extremely similar and in some cases almost identical. Most consumers don't really care which one they buy and could substitute easily if their brand ceased to exist. It is in these low-involvement categories that the effects of advertising can be greatest and yet hardest to introspect upon.

Even with high-involvement products the beam balance analogy is relevant because very different alternatives can have equal weight. We often have to weigh up complex things like 'average quality at a moderate price' against 'premium quality at a higher price'. Often we find ourselves in a state of indecision between the alternatives. When the choices weigh equally in our mind, whether they be low-involvement products or high-involvement products, it can take just a feather to swing that balance.<sup>2</sup>



*Figure 1.1: Low-involvement decision: deciding between two virtually identical alternatives.*



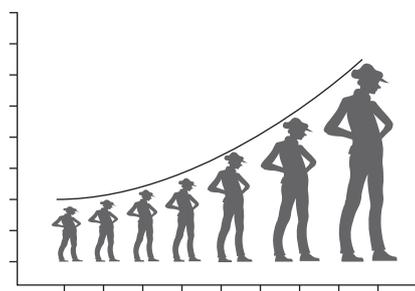
*Figure 1.2: High-involvement decision: very different alternatives can have equal weight.*

With high-involvement decisions we are more concerned about the outcome of the weighing-up process, so we think more about how much weight to give to each feature (quality, size or power). How many extra dollars is it worth paying for a feature? Automotive writers for example can reach very different opinions. The more complex a product's features the more complex this assessment because there are usually both positive and negative perspectives. For example, a compact car is positive in regard to both fuel economy and maneuverability but negative in regard to leg room and comfort.

So which way should we see it? What weight *should* we give to a particular feature in our minds? When advertising emphasizes points that favor a brand, it doesn't have to *persuade* us—merely raise our awareness of the positive perspectives. Chances are we will notice *confirmatory* evidence more easily as a result. When we subsequently read a newspaper or consumer report or talk with friends, research shows that we are prone to interpret such information slightly more favorably.<sup>3</sup> This effect is a long way from heavyweight persuasion. Rather it is a gentle, mental biasing of our subsequent perceptions, and we will see in Chapter 2 how perspective can influence our interpretation. It is not so much persuasion as a shifting of the mental spotlight . . . playing the focal beam of attention on one perspective rather than another.

### Repetition

As with the amount by which our kids grow in a day, we are just not aware of the small differences advertising can make. Even though these imperceptibly small changes in time add up to significant effects, individual



**Figure 1.3:** *Small cumulative increments. We don't notice a child's growth in 24 hours.*

increments are too small for us to notice. They are just below what is known as the just noticeable difference (JND).

Through the process of repetition these small increments can produce major perceived differences between brands, but we are rarely aware of the process taking place.

The cumulative effects of changes in brand image become starkly noticeable only in rare cases:

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for instance, when we return home after a long absence and find that an old brand is now seen by people in a different light—that in the intervening period the brand has acquired a different image.

Registering a claim in our minds (e.g. ‘Taste the difference’ or ‘Good to the last drop’) does not necessarily mean we believe it. However, it makes us aware that there *are* claimed differences between brands. This is a proposition (a ‘feather’, if you will) that, when everything else is equal, may tip the balance of brand selection, even if only to prompt us to find out if it is true.

Repetition increases our familiarity with a claim. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, a feeling of greater likelihood that the claim *is* true begins to accompany the growing familiarity. This effect of repetition is known as ‘the truth effect’.<sup>4</sup>

We tend to think that if something is not true it would somehow be challenged. If it is repeated constantly and not challenged, our minds seem to regard this as *prima facie* evidence that perhaps it is true. The effect of repetition is to produce small but cumulative increments in this ‘truth’ inference.<sup>5</sup> It is hardly rational but we don’t really think about it. We don’t go out of our way to think about it because low involvement, by definition, means we don’t care much either way. Such claims are ‘feathers’.

In summary, the reasons we are unable to introspect on advertising’s effects—especially in low-involvement situations—are:

- the effect of each single ad exposure is small;<sup>6</sup>
- with repetition, even imperceptibly small effects can build into larger perceived differences between brands;<sup>7</sup>
- if something is repeated constantly without challenge, our minds seem to regard this as *prima facie* evidence that maybe, just maybe, it *is* true (the ‘truth’ effect);
- often it is no big deal to us which of the alternative brands we choose, anyway.

If you have ever wondered why advertisers seem to persist in repeating the same ad—if you have ever wondered why they think this could possibly influence sane people like us—then here is the answer. Much of advertising creates only marginal differences, but small differences can build into larger differences. Even small differences can tip the balance in favor of the advertised brand. This is especially true of ‘image advertising’.

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## Image advertising

The effect of image advertising is easier to see in relation to high-involvement products, so let us start with a high-involvement example—Volvo cars.

Volvo traditionally focused its image advertising on safety. Through repetition, it built up a strong image of the Volvo as a safe car. Other brands have caught up a lot in recent years but on a scale of 1 to 10 for safety, most people would still rate Volvo higher than almost any other car. Safety is now an integral part of our perception of this brand. (The fact that the car actually delivers on this promise has of course been a very important ingredient in the success of the safety campaign—but that is another story.)

One effect of image advertising, then, is to produce gradual shifts in our perceptions of a brand with regard to a particular attribute—in Volvo's case, safety (in other words, to effect marginal changes in our mental rating of the brand on that attribute). This is often not perceptible after just one exposure because the change, if it occurs, is too small for us to notice.

Now let's take a low-involvement product in the very late stages of its product life cycle—hair spray—and tease out some insights from its history of brand image advertising.

The first brands of hair spray originally fought for market share on the basis of the attribute of 'hair holding'. That is, each brand claimed to hold hair. To the extent that they all claimed the same thing, they were what are called 'me-too' brands.

To break out of this, one brand began to claim that it 'holds hair longer'. Just as Volvo claimed that it was safer, and thereby moved Volvo higher up the perceived safety scale, so this brand of hair spray made people aware that some brands of hair spray might hold hair longer than others. It then attempted to shift perception of itself on this attribute and marginally increase the mental rating consumers would give it on 'length of hold'.

The next brand of hair spray to enter the market, instead of tackling that brand head-on, cleverly avoided doing battle on 'length of hold'. The new brand claimed that it was 'long holding', but also that it 'brushes out easier'—a dual benefit. In doing so it successfully capitalized on the fact that hair sprays that hold longer were harder to brush out (or were until then). Many years later came the attribute of 'flexible hold'.

These examples of image advertising for hair spray and cars illustrate how one effect of advertising is to alter our perceptions of a brand. Advertising can marginally change our image of a brand by leading us to associate it with a particular attribute (like ‘longer holding’ or ‘brushes out easily’), and to associate in our minds that attribute with the brand more than we associate it with any other competitive brand.

Gauging the effects image advertising has on us is made even more complex because these effects may not operate directly on the image of the brand itself. Image advertising may produce small, incremental differences in the image of a brand, as in the case of Volvo—but sometimes it is aimed at changing not so much the image of the brand itself but who we see in our mind’s eye as the typical user of that brand.

### **User image**

In advertising for Levis, Revlon, Guess, Louis Vuitton, or Dolce & Gabbana, the focus is often on people who use the brand. What changes is not so much our perception, or image, of the product as our perception of the user-stereotype—the kind of person who typically uses the brand, or the situation in which the brand is typically used.

When these brands are advertised, the focus is very much on image but often with this important, subtle difference. The advertising aims to change not how we see the brand itself—the brand image—but how we see:

- the stereotypical user of the brand—the user image;
- the stereotypical situation in which the brand is used.

If the user image of a brand resembles us, or the type of person we aspire to be, what happens when we come to buy that product category? The user image acts as a feather on one side of the beam balance. If everything else is equal it can tip the scale (but note, only if everything else is equal).

User, or situational, image changes usually fall short of the kinds of rational, heavyweight reasons that make perfect sense of any choice.



*Figure 1.4: Jim Beam ad reinforcing the stereotypical user image—young, single males.*

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