Review by Peter Mouncey in the *International Journal of Market Research*

**Persuasive advertising: evidence-based principles**

*J. Scott Armstrong*
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The title of this book conveys the hope behind every advertisement or advertising campaign. The reality is, as we know, somewhat different. Armstrong’s book provides insights into why advertising can fail to meet the expectations of those commissioning or executing campaigns, and provides a detailed principles-based framework to help marketers live their dreams.
Let me start by outlining the breadth and depth of the research and analysis that underpins the author’s advice and guidance on what contributes towards persuasive advertising. This book represents the culmination of no less than 14 years of research and writing by the author. The evidence presented within the covers is drawn from 640 papers and 50 books; the author draws on 33 meta-analyses covering more than 1800 studies. In total, 3000 research sources were used as the foundation for the analysis. Following an extensive review with input from 20 marketing professors, the original list of 566 principles identified by the author as contributing to the development of persuasive advertising was reduced to just ten main categories.

So, the subtitle, ‘evidence-based principles’, means exactly what it says – this book represents a unique analysis based on research studies covering all key perspectives of what generates ‘persuasive advertising’. In the extensive list of references, you will find published research dating back to the early decades of the 20th century, demonstrating the early interest in the ‘science’ of advertising methods. Quotes, by pundits and others, on advertising cover a much longer time-frame. The importance of evidence-based thinking pervades the book, including two appendices containing evidence-based checklists for management-level presentations and written reports (there is also an appendix on briefing an advertising agency).

Many UK readers will be familiar with the IPA Effectiveness Awards, published in the ‘Advertising Works’ series, which are frequently used as sources of evidence. While this underlines the international importance of this competition in providing evidence to help identify what leads to successful advertising, especially from a business results perspective, these are case studies rather than empirically based research studies. However, conspicuous by its absence is any reference to the seminal analysis of the IPA dataMINE database, containing over ten years of entries to the IPA awards, by Les Binet and Peter Field (Marketing in the Era of Accountability, Warc/IPA, 2007). Maybe this omission was simply a timing issue.

Readers of IJMR should find this book of interest from three perspectives: first, the obvious professional interest many market researchers have in the advertising sector; second, the body of knowledge referenced throughout the book, which provides readers with an extensive list of research on all aspects of advertising drawn from a wide range of journals and other sources; finally, and very importantly, is the research methodology employed by the author in selecting credible sources, in particular the criteria used by Armstrong in identifying what constituted ‘evidence’ in building the case for identifying the principles contributing to persuasive advertising. One might have expected this to be relegated to an appendix, but the author devotes the opening chapter to a discussion on ‘types of evidence’, including a section covering ‘barriers to the use of evidence-based principles’, which identifies the fact that, despite the extensive body of knowledge on advertising effectiveness, advertisers remain ignorant of this literature, or tend to ignore it.

The author divides the reasons why advertisers ignore this mine of evidence into invalid and valid factors.
The former includes evidence based on convenience samples; subjects trying to help researchers confirm their hypotheses; old studies; findings that seem like common sense. These are discussed in more detail in Appendix A, and to some extent refuted as valid objections. For example, Armstrong identifies the high proportion of studies based on convenience sampling, rather than probability methods, and concludes from his analysis that: ‘convenience samples – whether using students or friends or subjects recruited through ads ... or through mall surveys – are relevant for experiments involving decision-making processes’, citing evidence from other fields to support this view. In my view, convenience sampling may have its place in research methodology, but is too often inappropriately used instead of more meaningful and representative sampling methods.

Factors that the author thinks have more validity include: ‘relevance’; covering access to evidence and the difficulties of easily identifying relevant material; a lack of replication, and, what the author wonderfully describes as ‘bafflegab’ – the often incomprehensible content of academic papers that require translation, especially for practitioners. These identify three important issues. First, practitioners, unlike academics, do not enjoy free access to all reputable published journals. Also, as evidenced by Armstrong’s book, literature reviews are extremely time consuming and require a disciplined framework if they are to deliver real insight from a body of knowledge. Second, many journals do not welcome replication studies in submissions, thus limiting the development of knowledge. However, as the author underlines, wherever possible ‘persuasive advertising’ relies on studies that have been replicated – citing a fall in replication studies by over half in marketing journals in the 1990s, leading to only 1% of findings in this field having been successfully replicated. Maybe we need a ‘Journal of Replication Studies in Marketing’ to fill this gap? Finally, academics often appear to be more interested in communicating with their peers than ensuring that their findings are digestible by practitioners and help them make better-informed decisions.

The author also cautions readers that ‘Only a small percentage of relevant studies in advertising look at behaviour.’ In their dataMINE analysis referred to above, Binet and Field advise marketers to take less notice of intermediate measures of effectiveness (e.g. intention to buy) and rely more on metrics such as market share and cash-flow impacts. However, Armstrong uses a meta-analysis study to demonstrate that intentions and behaviour do correlate.

At the heart of the book are the ten principles that the author identified as contributing to persuasive advertising. These cover the role of: Information, Influence, Emotion, Mere exposure, Overcoming resistance, Acceptance, Message, Attention, Still media and Motion media. Each of these principles is then subdivided. For example, Information contains sections headed Benefits, News, Product, Price, Distribution. The full breakdown is shown as a ‘Principles map’ at the end of the main text to help readers find their way through the book. In fact, I’m sure that many readers will use this as a ‘directory’ of advertising principles, dipping into the various sec-
tions to help them understand what contributes to effectiveness in a given scenario. You will also find at the end of each main chapter a checklist of factors for each sub-section. Again, taking the first principle, Information, under the sub-section Benefits you will see two factors that lead to persuasiveness: ‘Describe specific, meaningful benefits’ and ‘Communicate a unique selling proposition (USP)’. But this is far from a dry, cold analysis of the evidence. The chapters are littered with quotes and little tests of the readers’ perceptions – for example, within the sub-section headed ‘Guilt’ within the chapter on Emotion, the author asks readers to think about the type of advertising campaign that would lead people to use seat belts in the back seats of automobiles. Not all the examples demonstrate success – there are several examples of failed campaigns to underline particular points.

The fact it is based on ‘principles’ is important. These are in general channel neutral, although the author refers to channel-based evidence where necessary. However, I’m sure many readers will ask how relevant these principles might be in a digital age. Two years ago I listened to Drayton Bird giving a keynote address at an MRS/Research ‘Data Matters’ conference. Bird demonstrated, with copious examples, how the principles of direct marketing, developed in an age where the main channels were direct mail or off-the-page, were as relevant now in developing digital advertising using the internet as the channel to market as they were when first established. This is a book describing the principles underlying effective communication: how to engage with consumers; how to overcome their prejudices and pre-conceptions; how to develop compelling messages; where information helps potential customers make a decision and how to present it within an advertisement, etc. These are often universal truths, but ignored in practice – often to the detriment of a campaign’s potential effectiveness. As Armstrong comments in Appendix A in the section headed ‘Are some studies too old?’, the principles tend to remain constant over time, but the depressing fact is how quickly the original research establishing this in the past gets forgotten. However, there is no doubt that the current body of knowledge will increasingly include evidence based on experiences from the digital world, together with the results from applying to advertising development the advances in knowledge about human behaviour emerging from neuroscience.

I’m also sure that some readers will find gaps in the references, and some may raise an eyebrow about using two collaborative authors that might bring their particular proprietary methods to the fore, and it could be argued that the Ipsos ASI method used for testing TV advertisements, described in Appendix C, which I’m sure many readers are familiar with, is not the only available methodology. However, this has provided the author with access to the Ipsos ASI test database as a key source of evidence for advertising in this medium. Also, this is not a book for those wishing to read about how to evaluate advertising. This is not what the book is about – Armstrong devotes only a very short chapter to this topic, so readers interested in this field need to look elsewhere. However, none of these points detracts from the value of Armstrong’s work.
In the chapter on ‘Resistance’, under the subheading ‘Present an offer from a new perspective’, Armstrong provides as an example ‘The book you are reading now, for example, contains 194 advertising principles. The price will appear as a bargain if the customer thinks about the price per principle, each of which can yield substantial returns.’ I couldn’t resist the temptation to see what this bargain might be. At the time of writing this review, Amazon was offering the book at £50, thus valuing each principle at 25.78p! Bearing in mind the extensive research that underpins the author’s findings, and the 14 years spent in compiling the evidence and distilling it into a 387-page book, I believe it provides excellent value for money.

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