

# Should I use humor in advertising?

**Humor can undoubtedly be used very effectively in advertising. Funny ads are more likely to be enjoyable and involving, and therefore memorable, than others. But, as with all creativity, humor needs to be used with care. To be successful, it must help focus on the brand and the intended communication; otherwise, it can actually detract from the ad's effectiveness. In addition, humor works differently around the world and across different audiences — which may limit the ability of a funny ad to be used in a number of markets.**

## Do funny ads work better?

Broadly speaking, funny ads are more likely to be memorable than others. Almost half of the world's most impactful ads are humorous; whereas just 1 percent of the least impactful ads are humorous. Furthermore, humor is an emotional response, and much has been written on the importance of emotional responses to advertising.

But the effect of humor on communication is not so straightforward.

Certainly, humor can aid effective communication. For example, one ad we tested was criticized for being boring and irritating, with a joke that was just not funny. Enjoyment was below average. Our recommendation was that there was much in the ad that did work well, but that the ad needed more original humor. A new version was produced which included a more original joke at the beginning of the ad; but

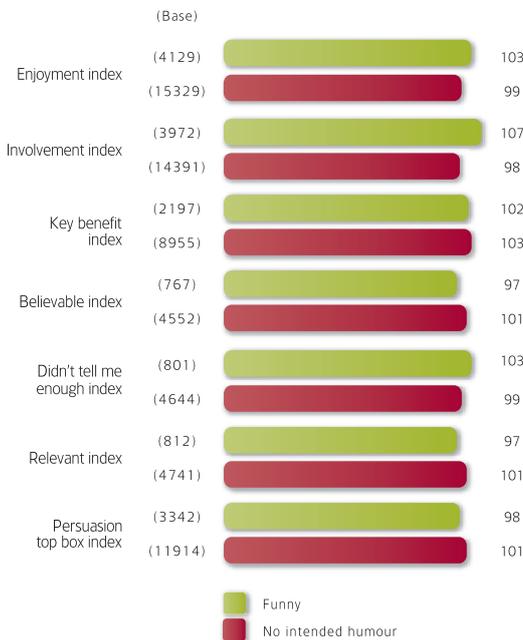
the final 15 seconds, in which the benefits of the advertised service were described, were not changed at all. The enjoyment rating improved, and so did the communication levels. The improved humor was resulting in more attention being paid to the ad overall.

But it is also possible for humor to hinder communication. When the humor is unrelated to the key message, it may “swamp” the ad, resulting in the message being lost.

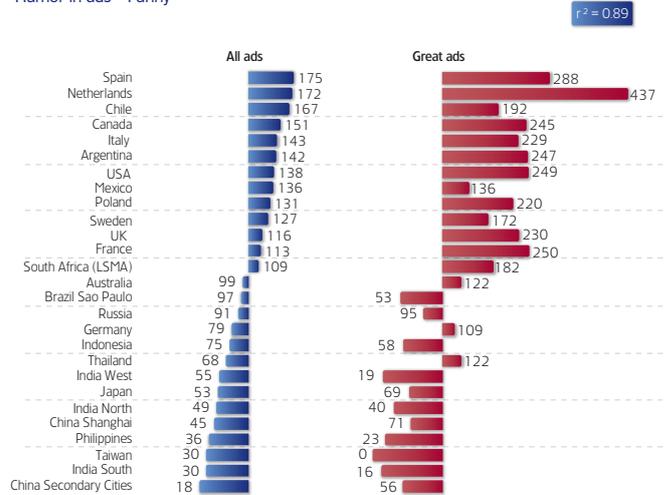
There are no rules here; each case needs to be judged on its merits, with a careful consideration of the focus of the ad. So, overall, there is no direct relationship between using humor in an ad and the ad's ability to communicate a message.

On the other hand, there is a tendency for funny ads to be seen as a little less credible and relevant — so humor has a slight negative effect on persuasion. But there are still plenty of examples of humorous ads which were also persuasive:

The effect of humor: global indices



Humor in ads - Funny



However, humor is subjective and often culturally specific. There are very few sources of humor that are found funny universally.

Several types of humor find it difficult to travel, including mockery, humor dependent on subtleties, parodies, kitsch, slapstick, off-the-wall and dark humor.

In addition, there are some specific country issues. For example, in China sarcasm is not widely appreciated; the English have a particular love of irony; in Singapore, humor based on sexuality is taboo; and images found sexy in most of Europe may be considered sexist by British women.

So, in view of all this, is it possible for humor to work across markets? We find it can, providing:

- The subject matter is universal
- The references used are universally understood (e.g. young romance, new baby)
- The subject is not offensive or taboo
- The humor is visually based, rather than relying on anything that may be lost in translation

### How well does humor travel?

For advertisers considering the use of humor, there are some important differences between countries.

In the following chart, all figures are indexed on global norms. Consumers in Spain, the Netherlands and Chile are far more likely to be exposed to funny ads than those in other countries, whereas humor is far less likely to be used in China. The column on the right shows the relative proportion of great ads (those that are both highly impactful and highly persuasive) in those countries. Overall, in countries used to a lot of humor in their advertising, humor fares particularly well; the most successful ads are even more likely to be funny, most notably in the Netherlands.

### Humor among men and women

While advertising can be seen as equally funny by both sexes, there may also be marked differences, particularly with scatological, violent or sexist humor.

In the example below, where the humor focused on body parts being pulled off, men found it distinctive, involving and interesting, whereas women considered it disturbing, unpleasant and irritating:

Huge difference in response between men and women



One form of humor that women can find particularly enjoyable is jokes at the expense of men. As an example, in Brazil, buyers of fabric conditioners tend to be traditional housewives, and humor is rarely used in the category. One ad, showing a man doing the washing while the woman relaxed watching TV, was greatly appreciated, being seen as involving, distinctive and interesting by housewives. Eighty percent found it funny.

### The right media for humor

While humor can work across all media, some media are more private and some more public — so consideration needs to be given to how your humor will be best received.

In the U.K., one ad based upon a crude joke, was aired in two adjoining regions; but in one it aired on TV, while in the other it only appeared in the cinema.

The demographic profile of respondents was similar, but those who saw it in the cinema enjoyed the ad considerably more than those who viewed it on TV — with 61 percent of the cinema viewers saying they “enjoyed the humor” compared with 52 percent of the TV viewers. Choice of media can have a substantial influence on the effect of the humor.

*Knowledge Points are drawn from the Millward Brown Knowledge Bank, consisting of our databases of 50,000 brand reports and 40,000 ads, as well as 1,000 case studies, 700 conference papers and magazine articles, and 250 Learnings documents.*

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