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## **Creativity: the key to creating successful advertising messages in the digital sonosphere**

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### **Abstract:**

The characteristics of the radio media have traditionally been put forward as arguments to justify the lack of creativity in radio advertising in Spain. Factors such as fragmentation of the media, the need to resort to high frequencies in the broadcast message, the format almost absolute control wedge or direct translation of texts designed to television to radio, have led to and perpetuated the idea that radio advertising is not creative. However, the sono-digital realm has become the paradigm upside down transmission and reception of audio advertising messages. Multiplication, integration and interaction of different receiving devices paint a landscape in which arise not only new consumption habits that are beginning to overtake traditional formats, but also creativity stands as an essential tool to attract attention of the "new audiences". This is one conclusion that emerges from the first phase of the study being carried out Publi-radio Research Group (Faculty of Communication Sciences - Universidad Autònoma de Barcelona), with the title: *The Digital Sonosphere as a New Space to Communicate with Young People: A Study of Listener Habits for the Development of new PSA Formats CSO2009-12236*. The project emphasizes the importance given to creativity when developing advertising products, so much so that young people who have been part of the field investigation, one of the conditions to be given to advertising is acceptable to be creative. In this new stage of digital sound-field, in which the radio loses its characteristic half-king as a transmitter of sound advertising and must coexist with other media that carry the increased potential for contact with the target. These new media have features that allow them free of the topics traditionally associated with radio advertising, but have we taken this opportunity to renew? The emergence of these new media has not been accompanied by the emergence of new advertising formulas sound. In this communication, is intended to highlight the opportunity provided by the digital sound-field enhancement factor of creativity and highlight the central role it can and should play in building future audio advertisements.

**Keywords:** creativity, sound, advertising, digital

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### **Creativity, the nucleus of advertising activity**

Creativity is undoubtedly one of the key characteristics of all activity related to advertising and the very basis of its very existence (Koslow, Sasser and Riordan, 2003). The core activity of the advertising business and the essence of the work carried out by advertising professionals is selling persuasive ideas. Advertisers turn to sector professionals for solutions to their communications dilemmas who provide them with a creative pitch for selling their products or services (Ricarte, 2000). Advertising is the only business that is built around a 'creative department' staffed by a wide range of professionals whose titles also bear the prefix 'creative'. This is not at all

surprising, as creativity is the heartbeat of advertising. Therefore, it's obvious that creativity is the most important aspect of advertising and its professional hallmark (White, 1972; Cummings, 1984; Otnes, Oviatt and Treise, 1995; Reid, King and Delorme, 1998).

The 1960s are generally considered to be the decade when advertising creativity bloomed and reached its peak. It was during this period that William Bernbach, David Ogilvy and Leo Burnett founded agencies that would become household names and legends in the field of advertising. The 'creative revolution' of the 1960s was displaced by a more scientific approach to advertising during the 1970s. The emergence and consolidation of firms with massive corporate structures and far-flung agency networks, the progressive substitution of research for intuition, a changing market environment, a shift in consumer profiles, the development of consumer intelligence, and the need for corporate advertising managers to justify their ideas to superiors are just a few of the many factors cited as causes for advertising's gradual loss of creative spark and progressive failure to come up with any new, groundbreaking advertising concepts since the golden years of the 1960s (Fox, 1985; Jones, 1992; Weilbacher, 1993). These critics claim that creativity in advertising is not what it used to be and that today's creative advertising does not live up to its name.

In advertising, creativity must be tempered by a certain amount of pragmatism. Creativity pressed into the service of advertising takes on an instrumental value that deprives it of the total artistic freedom enjoyed by other artistic pursuits whose purpose is to serve as a form of expression or self-expression. Creativity devoted to advertising purposes is not free of restraints; it is conditioned by a series of factors related to the product or service to be promoted, the target public to which the advertising will be directed, the objectives set out for a specific campaign, the market or environment in which the advertising message will be launched, the communications efforts previous carried out by the competition for the same product or brand, and the budget established for the project. While it is true that these factors rein in creativity by ruling out certain ideas as unsuitable, they also provide a road map for channelling ideas in an increasingly complex, turbulent and saturated marketplace. It is more difficult to come up with products that have a competitive edge today. Although some may have differentiating features, these tend to be short-lived and cannot be counted upon to give them a sustained exclusivity relative to their competitors. Today's marketplace has ceased to be an arena where products compete for the public's favour; it is now a psychological battle in which claims to exclusivity are difficult to make and persuasion must be employed to convince consumers to purchase one brand rather than another (Weilbacher, 2003). This environment justifies a renewed emphasis on creativity in advertising, as creativity is the only means of differentiating products and services and imbuing them with a unique personality. Creativity facilitates the articulation of a dialogue, helps forge an emotional connection between seller and consumer and makes brands interesting and exciting (Reid, King and DeLorme, 1998). It is also essential to the periodic reinvention of products and brands that is necessary to give them a fresh image in the mind of the consumer (Dahlén, Rosengren and Törn, 2008) and save them from becoming predictable and boring—one of the greatest perils that threaten brand names and products, especially the most consolidated ones (Machleit, Allen and Madden, 1993). Creativity, therefore, is the tool that allows us to differentiate brands and what they offer in a saturated, international mass market awash in products and services that all appear to be alike. Kirmani and Rao (2000) point out that marketing signals become key confidence drivers in situations in which consumers find themselves overwhelmed by the array of products and services available to the point that they cannot evaluate them all before making purchasing decisions. According to these authors, a firm's investment in advertising serves a reference of quality for customers who link advertisers' financial commitments to back their products with a greater commitment on the part of these companies to the consumers who buy them (perceived in terms of such intangibles as a commitment to quality, truth in advertising and fulfilment of advertising promises). Along the same lines, other authors stress the importance of consumers' perceptions of the brand and how they experience it. A powerful, intense and intriguing advertising campaign can influence consumers' brand perceptions and a

high level of creativity is required to create advertising that is powerful, intense and intriguing—in other words, effective (Till and Baack, 2005; Koslow, Sasser and Riordan, 2003; Stone, Besser and Lewis, 2000).

Advertising effectiveness and creativity have not always been viewed as going hand in hand. In fact, creative advertising and effective advertising have long been considered two different things—perceptions that have undoubtedly grown out of the differing positions and interests of the principal players in advertising: advertisers, account directors and creative professionals. While the ambition of the first group is prioritising advertising objectives for their services and products, the goal of the third group is to use advertising as a vehicle for showcasing their skills and their aesthetic values and as a means of promoting their professional careers (Hirschman, 1989). Advertising festivals, the Cannes Lion Festival being the prime example, celebrate the aspirations of the latter group. Events such as the Cannes festival do not dole out awards for campaigns or advertising elements on the basis of their effectiveness, but rather on the basis of their creativity (nevertheless, in Cannes Lions 2011 edition, a new award was added: creative effectiveness lions. This award pretends to honour creativity which has shown a measurable and proven impact on a client's business). They are celebrations of creativity for the creators of advertising and provide advertising for the advertising business. In some cases, the work on view at a festival has only been released as legitimate advertising for the brief period required to comply with festival regulations, and industry insiders are well aware of the insertion of 'scam ads'—pieces created specifically for submission to festivals. Against this backdrop, the inevitable question of priorities arises: What is more important—functionality or creativity? As previously mentioned, the instrumentality of advertising creativity distinguishes it from other artistic creativity. Advertising creativity must fulfil objectives established by others (El-Murad and West, 2004). Therefore, we can reasonably say that in the field of advertising, effectiveness and creativity must function in mutual recursive harmony: creativity is required to make advertising effective (Kover, Goldberg and James, 1995) and advertising cannot be considered creative if it is not useful and effective (Amabile, 1983; Mumford and Gustafson, 1988). Kover (1995) is of the opinion that creativity is effectiveness. From this perspective, creativity not only gives a message an aesthetic quality; in today's advertising environment, it also constitutes an essential component of brand survival. The difficulty lies in determining what is creative and what is not; advertising professionals and consumers have different ways of perceiving and judging creativity (Kover, Goldberg and James, 1995), and creative professionals working in the sector have never agreed on this point (Young, 2000).

Although there is a general consensus that advertising creativity has gradually declined since the 1960s, recent changes in the advertising landscape, especially those brought on by the development of new technologies, seem to point to new era for creative advertising. Advertising as it has been traditionally understood is losing ground, greatly due to the fact that traditional media have lost their status as the ideal vehicles for transmitting advertising messages. Younger generations of consumers have turned their backs on conventional media in favour of Internet media platforms. With digitisation, the media are now omnipresent, portable, much more personal than before and offer consumers contents they can choose 'à la carte'. These features and 'the Internet of things' (a phrase originally coined by Kevin Ashton that has come to mean mass interconnectivity) have greatly accelerated this trend. Internet, which offers access to a world of communication possibilities including videos, television programmes and series, music, radio programming and films, is emerging as the new dominant media. In the analogue world, each medium was bound to a single reception device (television to a television set and radio to the radio receiver). In contrast, the digital world offers an extraordinary freedom of choice. Thanks to the digital revolution, music is now available through a transistor radio, a mobile phone, a PC, a laptop, an iPod or a tablet device (and the list goes on). This new landscape implies a major paradigm shift in the codes of advertising. The twentieth-century concept called 'advertising' is steadily giving way to a more twenty-first century concept referred to as 'communication'. Today, one talks less of advertising ideas and more about communication ideas: surprising, fresh original ideas that exploit the characteristics of how and where they are presented in order

to optimise its impact on the consumer. The campaign launched for Tipp-ex on YouTube is a good example of this new idea-based concept of product promotion.<sup>1</sup> The digital environment presents new opportunities for creativity to regain a central role in advertising communications—a protagonism that it never should have lost.

One of the arguments most frequently used to categorise radio as a second division advertising medium has been radio advertising's lack of creativity. Nevertheless, in the same way that the integration and interactivity of electronic digital devices are now seen as generating new opportunities to transmit and receive content, the multiple reception channels that digital technology now offers could be viewed as vehicles for converting sound into an important tool for the 'comeback' of advertising creativity. In a context abounding with new ways of accessing content and new media consumer habits, a new paradigm is emerging that could be denominated as the *sono-esfera digital* (digital sonosphere). This digital sonosphere opens new horizons for creativity, not only in the transmission of radio messages, but also in the transmission of audio messages. The concept of a digital sonosphere envisions the configuration of a new space for the creation and reception of audio messages that goes beyond the limits of devices normally associated with this purpose. Technological convergence is liberating the message from the medium and giving rise to a digital sonosphere - an auditory and audible environment that surrounds us like a dynamic and flexible aural interface - a generic acoustic space (Barbeito and Fajula, 2009).

### **Thinking beyond mere radio advertising and embracing *sound* advertising**

Radio has suffered decades of ostracism in the shadow of the omnipresent magic of the image, a situation traceable in large part to the popularity of television. All of the players in advertising have contributed to this state of affairs. Advertisers, who have little knowledge of the medium, consider radio less prestigious than other media and think that investing in radio advertising would be a waste of their money. Media planners could convince them otherwise, but they are equally unfamiliar with the medium, look to television to guarantee larger margins and don't want to spend time educating the client about radio advertising when television advertising sells itself. They may even reach the point of ruling out radio advertising altogether and not even mentioning it as an option to the client.

In spite of the fact that radio has a significant level of penetration in Spain (56.9%, ranking second after television), and although the crisis has actually improved its position relative to other media in terms of media spending, it continues to come in fourth when market shares of all advertising media are compared. According to Infoadex, radio advertising expenditure totalled 548.5 million in 2010, a mere 9.4% of the national total spent on conventional media advertising.

These data reflect the paradox of radio's status in the advertising sector. On one hand, it's appreciated for its almost unlimited capacity for expression; on the other hand, it is perceived to have failed to fully exploit this capacity. Radio's drawbacks, such as its inability to incorporate imagery, its rigid format and its low profit margins - not to mention creative professionals' own lack of knowledge of the language of radio - have led them to concede it merely complementary roles in advertising campaigns. Nevertheless, radio has also been defended for the advantages the medium offers, such as its capacity to evoke sound images, strong power of suggestion, credibility, penetration and coverage. This type of tit-for-tat discourse on radio advertising is nothing new and shows no sign of improving in the near future. 'Analysts and pundits have continued to pound radio for its lack of creativity in both recently published literature on the subject and in relevant forums that have taken up radio advertising issues. This lack of creativity is habitually blamed on the fact that despite its high level of penetration (...), radio is used only as a complementary media in advertising campaigns and that campaigns continue to be designed specifically for the press and television' (Balsebre *et al.* 2006: 26).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://youtu.be/4ba1BqJ4S2M>

The standard procedure for incorporating radio into a multimedia advertising campaign is to lift a voice track of a previously produced television commercial and run it as a radio spot. When a radio advertisement used as a part of a larger campaign is created from scratch, the text almost invariably determines the format. In most cases, sound effects, silence or music are patched in without much thought or not used at all. These practices are examples of a chronic underutilisation of resources that could be used to engage the imagination and emotions of the radio listener. Whereas television images are blatantly explicit, the subtlety of audio messages activates the individual imagination and memory of each listener. Radio advertising has the inherent power to personalise messages: every listener interprets a given radio message through the filter of his or her personal experience, making each contact with an individual listener special and unique.

One of the most frequent excuses that advertising professionals give for not devoting more creativity to radio advertising is the time constraint inherent to radio formats. They claim that a 30-second time slot is insufficient to flesh out an explicative narrative and fall back on the position that the only thing clients want is a short, comprehensive description of what they wish to sell. Radio is thereby robbed of the opportunity to create vibrant mental images and is relegated to the mundane role of providing basic information.

"Radio advertising in Spain needs to be more innovative. The sector needs to experiment with new formats designed to stimulate radio listeners' senses and emotions and, more importantly, it needs to break with traditional, conservative formulas for transmitting advertising content. Given radio's unlimited power of suggestion, this should be a relatively easy task. Radio's wide repertoire of means of expression is capable of recreating images in listeners' minds through the medium of sound, synching with their motivations, creating an impact, stimulating emotions and sparking sensations that generate positive attitudes towards whatever is being advertised." (Perona, 2007: 241)

It is possible that the problem is not so much the format itself but how it is utilised. We have traditionally understood advertising formats (for our present purposes radio formats) as being fixed and invariable, a perception that has led to a resistance to new approaches. In radio, formats and the space for creativity they allow for are inextricably bound to specific time slots and a given method of codification, just as traditional newspapers are bound to paper and ink. Two ways of boosting the creativity of radio advertising are emerging: moving beyond humour and 'slice of life' gimmicks to reach the listener, and looking for alternative forms of transmitting radio advertising that avoid typical spot and sales pitch formats. New communication technologies could give rise to novel instruments and tools that foster new forms of consumption that are easily exploitable by radio. Internet, mobile phones and other mobile devices such as MP3 and tablets have opened up new possibilities to receive radio messages, which today should be perceived as sound messages. Characteristics such as unidirectionality, sequentiality and ephemerality once restricted the transmission and appeal of radio messages.

"Traditional radio falls into a category of mass communications with audiences of hundreds of thousands of collective listeners. Cyber radio offers the option of individual access freed from a designated time frame. It belongs to the realm of individual communications and stresses the relationship between the content provider and the individual listener. It also provides a means of interactivity, not only between the content provider and the individual consumer but also between consumers, creating virtual user communities" (Cebrián Herreros, 2008: 26).

Radio on demand, downloads, blogs and social networks give users the opportunity to choose, store and share content however, whenever and wherever they please. Anyone can create his or her own completely unique personal audio library.

These technological breakthroughs allow individuals to create their own personal universes of sound - private auditory worlds that seamlessly reflect their requirements and tastes at any given moment. According to Michael Bull, the personalised soundtracks users listen to in their private bubble worlds spark emotions and are capable of modifying users' perceptions of the outside world and their environments. This is the concept of a personal universe of sound - a privatised 'sonosphere' made possible by the digital environment.

Nevertheless, these private sonospheres are not impenetrable. These listeners immersed in their own individual environments may seem to be disconnected, but they are not isolated. This permeability allows us to

develop formulas for reaching different specific advertising targets at any time and in any location as an insider in the listener's space: as ambient sound, from the macro-sonosphere, or in his or her individual sonosphere. It can open the doors wide open for the creation of new radio advertising formats. It is our belief that the digital sonosphere represents fertile territory for a new wave of novel and innovative audio advertising.

The digital sonosphere displaces radio as the sole transmitter of audio advertisements and gives any device with Internet connection the status of being a media for transmitting information or sound-based advertising messages. In the digital sonosphere, the message is separate from the medium. The idea - in reality, an idea-concept - will be able to adopt different forms according to the media utilised for its transmission. Furthermore, the message itself will 'seek out' the best mechanisms to reach and impact a target audience. The digital sonosphere will free the message from its submission to the medium and accentuate the singularity of what it transmits. The message will find its way to the listeners wherever they are. However, we must familiarise ourselves with the audience in order to know the parameters around which this sonosphere will be constructed. It was to discover these parameters that the Publi-radio research group set out to gain insight into how young people configure their 'auditory bubbles', how their media habits differ from the habits of prior generations and how 'digital natives' incorporate the latest technology into their daily listening practices. These questions and others have formed the agenda of an I+D+i project undertaken by the Publi-radio research group under the title 'La sono-esfera digital como nuevo entorno de recepción de mensajes sonoros entre los jóvenes. Estudio de los hábitos de escucha para el desarrollo de nuevos formatos de publicidad institucional' (The Digital Sonosphere as a New Space to Communicate with Young People: A Study of Listener Habits for the Development of new PSA Formats CSO2009-12236) funded by the Spanish Ministry for Science and Innovation.

Although we are still engaged in the first phase of this research project, we have been able to draw some conclusions regarding the concept of a digital sonosphere, including its principal characteristics and how new media that operate within its paradigms are delivering advertising messages to young audiences. We considered three variables while developing the term *sono-esfera digital* (digital sonosphere) to describe the new aural space in which young people move: the scenario created by the convergence of digital media, the multiplicity of devices that can be used to receive audio messages and that have broken radio's monopoly as the sole transmitter and receiver of messages composed exclusively of aural content, and young people's consumption habits related to new media.

During the first phase of research, two focus groups were convened to identify the new media that made up the digital sonosphere and their principal characteristics. The feedback provided by these groups will be used during the second phase, which will include a survey designed to generate quantitative data to complement the qualitative data obtained in the first phase.<sup>2</sup>

The voices behind the statistics provide valuable insight into these three objects of our study. The extracts from material gathered from the second focus group provided below illustrate these young people's opinions concerning media and reveal their strong desire for a different approach to radio advertising. When comparing television and radio advertising, they think television advertising spots and campaigns are more creative than radio spots and campaigns.

*'Radio advertising has to change radically—now.'*

*'I believe that if there was more creative and out-of-the-box thinking going on (in reference to creativity in radio advertising) it would be enough, because advertising is also meant to entertain.'*

*'I like the kind of advertising that grabs you right from the beginning'*

*'There are television commercials that make you want to sit and watch them because they're really cool, like ads for Coca-Cola, for example. They grab your attention and you end up watching them. This type of advertising*

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<sup>2</sup> The first focus group was convened in May 2010 and was comprised of university students between the ages of 20 and 23. This served as a preliminary trial to establish key concepts related to the digital sonosphere that would be used when a second focus group was convened in October 2010.

*doesn't bother you. I suppose that if radio ran this type of advertising—creativity-wise—it would pay off because good advertising would catch people's attention.'*

It's also interesting to note what these young people perceive as the reasons for the low production quality of radio advertising. Among other factors, they blame advertising agencies' lack of interest in this type of advertising:

*'It can't be that difficult. There are a lot of creative professionals in Spain. I think that radio is definitely underrated. No client (advertiser) walks into an agency and says, "I want to advertise on the radio".'*

The participants in the focus group also complained that the same kind of message was used over and over again to promote almost any kind of product. They pointed out that this cookie cutter approach to advertising resulted in a glut of undifferentiated, boring spots that all sounded the same.

*'I think the worst thing about advertising is that often they take the attitude: "It's okay to use the same format for Danacol, Danone, Actimel or any other brand of yoghurt". This strikes me as pathetic. It shows a complete lack of creativity. They don't even bother to think about it.'*

Radio advertising's frequent reliance on stereotypes that don't reflect young people's image of themselves is another turn-off for youth audiences; they don't connect with advertising that they can't identify with:

*I wish they'd get over their obsession with rap music and that type of thing. You know what I mean? It's annoying. They have the strangest stereotypical ideas about young people. (This comment was in reference to government public service announcement campaigns directed to young audiences.)*

The data obtained from these focus groups will be analysed during the second phase of the research project. However, we can broadly state that radio consumption coexists with other forms of media consumption brought about by the introduction of mobile technology, that mobile technology (which offers portability and accommodates users' predilection for multitasking) is fostering new habits of consumption, and that the intrinsic characteristics of mobile phones and the wide range of listening possibilities they offer have made them the devices *par excellence* of the digital sonosphere. The results of the first phase of the project also clearly indicate that listeners consider current radio advertising to be uncreative. Such criticism implies that radio advertising is also poorly received by its audience—a status quo that is not apt to change unless new advertising formulas are developed for radio or changes are made in the way that advertising messages are produced for this medium.

## Conclusions

Creativity is the heart and soul of advertising work and its differentiating asset. With advertising's adoption of 'scientific' criteria in the 1970s, its role has been increasingly undervalued. Nevertheless, the nascent digital sonosphere, which provides a new environment for the creation and reception of communications messages, will give creativity a chance to prove its worth.

Creativity is what builds brand value, differentiates a product or services from others in the market and gives it a unique personality, and enables the articulation of a dialogue and emotional ties between the brand and consumers. Whereas conventional media have transmitted one-dimensional brand images directed at mass audiences, the new digital environment permits individuals to appropriate a brand and what it represents. In the new digital paradigm, there are as many images of a brand as there are consumers receiving the advertising message that promotes it. As the number of mobile reception devices increases, so do the possibilities for advertising messages to reach and engage a greater number of consumers anytime and anywhere.

Advertising has become a battle of perceptions; it must go beyond positioning the brand in the consumers' minds to create emotional bonds between the brand and consumers. Needless to say, sound is a protagonist in the territory of human emotions. The semantic and aesthetic values of music, the nonverbal traits that are a part of the aesthetics of phonetic expression (rhythm, timbre, intensity, tone, etc.), sound effects, and

silence facilitate the generation of sound images; well employed, they can make a positive contribution to the creative process and enhance brand recall. In short, they construct a brand's personality and link it to given values - factors basic to its survival and brand life.

The emergence of the digital sonosphere furthers the objectives of creativity. Its arrival marks the configuration of a new creative landscape that can be very fertile for the growth of new advertising formats that employ sound. Furthermore, the individuality that this new environment inherently fosters is enabling users to create their own individual universes of sound, intensifying and radicalising the personalisation of the type of messages they receive.

It became clear during the preliminary phase of this research on youth media habits and the digital sonosphere carried out by the Publiradio research group that the advertising sector has not taken advantage of the characteristics of the new media environment to create new formulas for advertising that employs sound as a medium. The shift from radio advertising to 'sound' advertising has been merely rhetorical - a case of old wine in new bottles. The form and content of radio advertising remain unchanged. Radio advertising has been traditionally resistant to change and sound advertising seems to be heading down the same road.

The study also revealed that young people place a high value on creativity and view it as an essential element of messages directed to them. It is therefore clear that the advertising sector must embrace creativity and develop new communications formats and formulas that will break the vicious downward cycle that is progressively leaving advertising using sound as a medium on the sidelines of the advertising game.

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