

More Than the Consumer Eye Can See: Guerrilla Advertising From an Agency Standpoint

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Abstract

This research analyzed the viewpoints of advertising agency professionals regarding the effectiveness of guerilla advertising. Guerilla advertising is defined by the researcher as a creative, non-traditional and many times interactive type of advertising that is typically a low-budget production. This study compared guerilla advertising to traditional advertising, examined which clients guerilla advertising is most effective for and looked at the benefits of these types of campaigns. Through intensive one-on-one interviews with advertising professionals, this research found that while guerilla advertising is an effective type of advertising, it does not necessarily replace traditional advertising. It was found to be ideal for small, unestablished companies with a limited budget since the campaigns are focused on creativity at a modest cost.

I. Introduction



You are walking down the streets of Thailand and something yellow catches your eye. It's not a taxicab, but a water fountain. And what's that attached to it? Nothing other than a large bright yellow Scotch-Brite sponge that has replaced the normal drainage system, not what you expected to be attached to a water tap. You watch as all the water from the tap drains into the sponge without leaking at all. You are awestruck by its super absorbency and you rush off to tell your friends about it.

In New York, you are walking down the sidewalk and a taxi passes. Normally, you pay little attention to the traffic of taxis that whoosh past in a hurry to get somewhere. A taxi is stopped at a red light and out of the corner of your eye you see what you think is an arm hanging out of its trunk. Upon your double take, you realize it is indeed an arm, adorned in a gray suit coat with a black shirt underneath and a ring on one of the fingers



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of the hand. Your first thought is one of horror as you picture the rest of the body in the trunk, creating a mob murder scene in your head. Then you see the bumper sticker next to the arm: "The Sopranos Only on HBO." You then realize the arm is only a marketing tool—and one that caught your attention just like it was supposed to. Walking home, you ponder how you can rearrange your schedule in order to watch the season premiere of *The Sopranos*.

These campaigns are considered to be guerrilla advertising. For the purpose of this research, the definition of guerrilla advertising is based on the definition provided by J. C. Levinson in his book, *Guerrilla Marketing: Secrets for Making Big Profits from Your Small Business*, and is defined by the researcher as a creative, non-traditional and many times interactive type of advertising that is typically a low-budget production. These imaginative creations do not require placement in the usual advertising outlets making them an emerging potential alternative to traditional advertising. The creativity is the heart of the campaign rather than the budget. The whole idea is to get the consumer to interact with the product in a way that is unexpected yet memorable. The campaigns described above accomplished this exact objective: they each had the consumer interact with the brand in a non-traditional, unexpected way to make them more aware of the product. This research seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of guerrilla advertising from the standpoint of advertising agencies.

II. Literature Review

Consumer perceptions of guerrilla marketing suggest that it is an effective tool for advertising. In previous research, it has been proved that guerrilla marketing campaigns (also known as non-traditional advertising) were rated by consumers as having a higher perceived value than traditional advertising campaigns (Dahlen, Granlund, Grenros, 2009). Guerrilla marketing was first created with small, unestablished brands and companies in mind as a low-budget alternative to traditional advertising. Even with the evolution of guerrilla marketing, research has found that less known brands that used guerrilla marketing were perceived to have more valuable advertising than well-known brands using the same type of campaigns and the guerrilla marketing campaigns used by these less known brands was perceived by consumers as more valuable than their traditional advertising (Dahlen, Granlund, Grenros, 2009). Guerrilla marketing is intended to create communication between advertisers and consumers, but when consumers do not feel that advertisers are providing an adequate exchange, guerrilla marketing can actually produce negative effects, hence why it seems to be better designed for less known companies and their products (Dahlen, Granlund, Grenros, 2009). When well-known companies use guerrilla marketing campaigns, which are known for being cost efficient, the campaigns can be viewed with a lower value since they do not reveal the high-perceived expense consumers expect from these brands (Dahlen, Granlund, Grenros, 2009).

A consumer's perceived value of an advertisement is a key factor in whether or not the advertisement is deemed worthwhile enough to spend time processing. Consumers instinctively evaluate an advertisement in order to assess its exchange value, what they will gain in exchange for the effort and time of processing the ad (Ducoffe and Curlo, 2000). An advertisement believed to have a low expected advertising value is automatically skipped over while one with a high expected advertising value is deemed worth the effort it takes to process an advertisement (Ducoffe and Curlo, 2000). These perceived values have to do with the expectations of consumers for advertisers to add value to their communication, not just to effectively induce a sale (Ducoffe and Curlo, 2000). It is not always as much about the advertisement itself as it is about people assessing how they desire to spend their time and effort and what is considered a worthwhile use of this time and effort (Ducoffe and Curlo, 2000).

When consumers do not deem advertising worthwhile, such as when it is excessive, they tend to avoid it in any way they can. Speck and Elliott (1997) discovered advertising avoidance was most common for television. With the invention of new technology, such as VCRs that delete commercials while recording and remote controls designed to avoid commercials, it has become even easier for consumers to avoid television advertising (Speck and Elliott, 1997). The second most common advertising avoidance was found in entertainment magazines where consumers found the advertising to be excessive rather than in a balanced editorial-to-advertising ratio (Speck and Elliott, 1997; Ha and Litman, 1997). Ha and Litman's (1997) "study shows advertising clutter can yield diminishing and negative returns to the magazine industry" rather than boosting magazine revenue with the amount of advertisements included as might be perceived and intended.

When consumers view a magazine as having too many advertisements, they tend not to buy the magazine in order to avoid sifting through the clutter to get to the parts of the magazine they deem reason to buy it. Consumers' perceived value of individual advertisements and advertising in general declines when the amount of advertising becomes excessive (Ha and Litman, 1997).

In order for avoidance to occur, consumers must identify advertising as advertising. Researchers have found that the context of advertising (the medium chosen for its placement) affects consumers' abilities to classify the message as advertising (Dahlen and Edenius, 2007). By placing advertising in non-traditional mediums, advertisers may improve the effectiveness of their messages as consumers perceive them with more credibility and regard them with a more positive attitude since they do not readily activate a consumer's advertising schema (Dahlen and Edenius, 2007). Not only does creative media choice affect effectiveness, but it also may have positive effects on advertising and brand perceptions (Dahlen, 2005). The idea behind certain placements is to blur the boundary between the advertised message and its surrounding content making it more difficult for consumers to identify advertising as advertising as it is made less irritating and disrupting of the content (Dahlen and Edenius, 2007). Creative media choices have strength solely in their ability to surprise a consumer while still staying relevant to its advertising message (Dahlen, 2005). Dahlen (2005) suggests "a creative media choice does not necessarily mean advertising in an extreme setting, such as on an egg." Instead, it means thinking creatively and relevantly about the media selection for an advertising campaign, whatever the medium may end up being (Dahlen, 2005).

Although there has been a significant amount of research into consumer perceptions and insights about guerrilla advertising, there is a lack of research that delves into agency standpoints on guerrilla advertising campaigns. Because of this insufficiency, this research seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of guerrilla advertising from the standpoint of advertising agencies. The research seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: Is guerrilla advertising an effective alternative to traditional advertising?

RQ2: What type of client is guerrilla advertising most effective for?

RQ3: What benefits does guerrilla advertising have for its campaigners?

This research is unique in that it seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of guerrilla advertising through the eyes of a creative person rather than from the standpoint of a client (a company using this type of campaign), the standpoint of a consumer, or using statistical data to evaluate sales and branding effectiveness. This research uses qualitative data rather than quantitative data to gain participant thoughts and views (Zhou and Sloan, 2009). This study is important in educating companies and agencies on the effectiveness of guerrilla advertising campaigns in order to help them make an informed decision as to whether or not this type of advertising would be the most successful type for their company or client.

III. Method

The primary method for this research was intensive one-on-one interviews in order to collect the viewpoints and experiences of executives from traditional, full-service advertising agencies on the effectiveness of guerrilla advertising. The researcher chose agencies randomly based on convenience sampling.

The sample included agencies ranging in size from about 10 employees to 350 employees. The researcher sought to interview agencies that were of a size where employees would have worked on both traditional and guerrilla marketing campaigns in order to obtain a well-rounded view from each agency person. Choosing agencies larger than 350 employees could have led to speaking with people who work in a guerrilla marketing department in which they primarily created guerrilla marketing campaigns rather than a combination of both traditional and guerrilla advertising. Variety was a key component in choosing agencies with a range in size.

Executives at advertising agencies were contacted via email informing them that they had been chosen to participate in this research and asking if they would be interested in participating. Email correspondence was used to pinpoint a time for the interview. Six interviews were conducted via telephone due to the inability to meet in person. These interviews were conducted with professionals ranging in position, including President, Managing Partner, Account Executive, Creative Director and Senior Copywriter. This variety gave the researcher various viewpoints with regard to creating a guerrilla advertising campaign. After six interviews

were conducted, data redundancy was reached (Morrison, et al., 2002). Intensive notes were taken during each interview and responses were analyzed.

During each interview, the same general twelve questions were asked based on five topics and other questions were asked based on responses from the interviewee (See Appendix) (Morrison, et al., 2002). Each interviewee was first asked to define guerrilla advertising in order for the researcher to understand what each was referring to in his or her answers. The questions asked interviewees to articulate their views about and experiences with the specifics of guerrilla marketing and its practice in general.

IV. Findings/Results

Findings for RQ1: Is guerrilla advertising an effective alternative to traditional advertising?

Because consumers are constantly being exposed to advertising messages, they have developed a sophisticated filtering system that can pose a barrier to traditional advertising messages. Guerrilla marketing is one of the ways to break through these filters by presenting a consumer with an unexpected form of message presentation. Guerrilla advertising is intriguing, witty and clever, catching a consumer's attention in a complimentary way.

As effective as guerrilla marketing can be when used correctly and appropriately, in most cases it is not an alternative to traditional advertising, but rather a valuable addition to a traditional advertising campaign. It can be difficult to create a brand promise solely from a guerrilla standpoint (personal communication, November 15, 2010). Instead, guerrilla advertising campaigns are a place where current brands can be reinforced and expanded upon.

In the case of small brands with a small budget, a guerrilla marketing campaign can be an effective alternative to traditional advertising. For these brands, guerrilla advertising can be a solution to the problem of not having the money to run advertising as effectively in a traditional medium. Guerrilla marketing can help small brands stretch their budget efficiently, reaping the greatest results and benefits for their brand. Rather than spending their budget to run three commercial slots on television, a small company can spend their budget on a guerrilla advertising campaign that will bring their brand more awareness than those commercials since that one campaign will reach more people than those three commercials (personal communication, November 16, 2010). As one interviewee stated, "Many businesses have gone broke advertising" (personal communication, November 16, 2010). This is due to small companies thinking that in order to become a well-known brand, they must advertise like the well-known brands do. With the help of guerrilla marketing, they do not have to.

Findings for RQ2: What type of client is guerrilla advertising most effective for?

With any agency, the most effective type of campaign for a client is on a case-by-case basis, depending on the brand, budget, target audience, desired message, and product that is being advertised. Clients have to be willing to take on the risks that guerrilla marketing poses that are out of their control: mainly that of unfavorable public reactions, including confusion or misinterpretation, which lead to a failed campaign. Small brands are more likely to be willing to brave the risks of guerrilla advertising for the sole reason that the benefits outweigh the risks: they have less to lose and more to gain. For large and small brands alike, guerrilla advertising can be a successful way to break through the advertising clutter a consumer is constantly filtering (personal communications, November 15-19, 2010).

Guerrilla advertising campaigns are typically low-budget endeavors focusing more on the creative work than the medium, making them ideal for small brands with a small budget. These small brands can use guerrilla marketing campaigns in place of traditional advertising campaigns as a way to either save money or to more resourcefully use their money (personal communications, November 15-19, 2010).

Guerrilla advertising can be effective for large, established brands, but is more of a risk for these brands than for small, unestablished brands. Established brands are expected to advertise with traditional mediums and to continue campaigning in the same way with a similar message. It is tradition. Guerrilla marketing can be an effective way to re-launch a product in a different light or to paint the entire brand in a

different light, especially if it has been portrayed in the same way for a significant amount of time. This type of campaign can break the tradition, giving a brand a new angle and positive energy that traditional advertising is not capable of offering. An effective guerrilla marketing campaign for a larger brand reaps significant benefits. Because of how memorable such a campaign is, if a guerrilla marketing campaign for a large brand fails, this can take a brand on a negative downward spiral. This is why guerrilla campaigns for large brands must be carefully crafted keeping the brand message consistent and keeping appropriateness in mind (personal communications, November 15-19, 2010).

Findings for RQ3: What benefits does guerrilla advertising have for its campaigners?

The main benefit guerrilla advertising beholds for its campaigners is brand awareness. This is one of the reasons this type of campaign is ideal for small, unestablished brands. It gives the brand the opportunity to make a strong, positive reputation for itself in a memorable fashion (personal communications, November 15-19, 2010).

Social media has brought a whole new meaning to the idea of spreading news by “word of mouth.” With the introduction of social media, news travels even faster than before. This includes successful guerrilla advertising campaigns that are on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook for others to see creating a “buzz” about the campaign making it even more noteworthy. With social media, consumers who cannot experience the campaign firsthand can witness it secondhand with the reactions of consumers who have experienced it (personal communications, November 15-19, 2010).

Guerrilla marketing gives a brand energy that traditional media cannot offer. Guerrilla campaigns leave an impression on consumers that many traditional media and advertisements cannot rival. This is especially due to the ability of guerrilla advertising to break down barriers consumers have created to filter traditional advertising messages and actually get inside a consumer’s mind in order to make a lasting impression with the new and exciting ideas these campaigns pose to their consumers (personal communications, November 15-19, 2010).

V. Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that the effectiveness of a guerrilla advertising campaign is best defined by a boost in brand recognition and positive communication feedback among consumers both by in the digital space and by word of mouth, with the Internet providing the most accessible way to judge effectiveness. A boost in sales and return on investment are the most measurable indicators of effectiveness, but many times these indicators may not be immediate.

The study showed that while guerrilla marketing is an effective campaigning strategy, in most situations it is not a replacement for traditional advertising. Unless used for a small brand that cannot afford to effectively advertise traditionally, guerrilla advertising is considered a beneficial supplement to a traditional advertising campaign.

The most effective guerrilla marketing campaigns are those that are simple with a single-minded message placed appropriately. When creating a campaign that will convey a message in an unexpected way, agencies need to be aware of the importance of trying to accomplish a narrowly defined agenda. It is important to note not only how to draw the most attention to a brand, but how to do this in a way that is deemed tasteful and appropriate by all audiences, not just the target audience. By taking these factors into consideration, agencies can be confident in the campaigns having a very small risk of complete failure or catastrophe.

Guerrilla marketing is effective for both large and small brands, but clients with small brands are more willing to partake in these types of campaigns because for them the benefits outweigh the risks. A successful guerrilla advertising campaign gives both large and small brands the benefit of brand awareness in a more memorable way than traditional advertising. For large brands, guerrilla campaigns are effective adjuncts to traditional campaigns in order to reinforce an already established campaign message. For example, in the case of Tide, the television message was reinforced when the Tide trucks with washing machines were sent out and the consumers were given the opportunity to wash their clothes in the trucks using Tide in order to experience the laundry detergent’s effectiveness without having to buy the product in order to test it.

The effectiveness of guerrilla advertising campaigns is difficult to measure, even in terms of sales.

The best way to measure the effectiveness is by taking note of the “buzzworthiness” (personal communications, November 16, 17, 2010) of the campaign in the digital realm on social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Campaigns can use tracking by directing their consumers to a website and tracking hits to the site, handing out coupons and tracking their use, or surveying consumers after their experience, but social media remains the best way to be able to track success.

The main concern about using guerrilla marketing is that the campaign will ultimately fail, due to misinterpretation, confusion, or inappropriateness of the placement of the message. Because of this concern, many clients are unwilling to take the risk of campaigning in this manner even though the benefits are substantial. Catastrophes in guerrilla advertising are rare. As long as the message is clear and simple, the avenue for misinterpretation and confusion is eliminated. Carefully considering what the target audience and anyone else who might come into contact with the campaign consider appropriate alleviates the chance of the campaigning being cast in a negative light. In most cases, if a guerrilla advertising campaign is unsuccessful, it is because it is not noticeable enough and it goes unmentioned. While this is an unfortunate circumstance, it poses the same risk of a traditional advertising campaign that results in nothing worthwhile. The difference is that most guerrilla campaigns are less expensive than traditional campaigns.

From an agency standpoint, guerrilla marketing campaigns are not only beneficial to the client and brand, but to the agency itself. Agencies can take credit for successful guerrilla campaigns, priding themselves on the creativity that is exerted for each of these endeavors. Successful campaigns give their agency creative credibility that traditional advertising does not, becoming just as much of a success story for the agency as it is for the client and brand.

In the future, guerrilla advertising could be considered traditional. Advertising will continue to strive to invent new, creative ways to convey messages and break through to consumers. Social media is already an important part of guerrilla advertising, especially with regard to measuring its effectiveness and creating a prime benefit to guerrilla campaigns. Because of this, guerrilla advertising has the potential to be shaped and evolved according to the development of social media and technology.

VI. Conclusion

This research found that executives in advertising agencies find guerrilla marketing to be an exciting campaigning tool for their clients. Executives see guerrilla marketing as an effective way to induce brand awareness and positive impressions of the brand. Although guerrilla marketing is found effective, it is not considered a complete alternative to traditional advertising but rather a preferred addition. Guerrilla advertising is ideal for small brands that do not have a considerable amount of money to spend on advertising. It gives these brands the opportunity to establish their brand without going beyond the reaches of their budget. Large, established brands can use guerrilla marketing efficiently as well with more significant risk to their brand, but also more significant benefits.

Limitations of this research include the use of a convenience sample of the population, a non-probabilistic sample that cannot be generalized to the whole population. The research was limited to “regional” agencies, which may or may not hold the same view on guerrilla marketing as larger or smaller agencies. The research is slightly skewed due to the participation of mostly males in the interview process.

Future research can include research about the future of guerrilla marketing and how social media and technology could potentially shape it. This could also include research on the use of guerrilla marketing from the standpoint of advertising agencies outside the United States. In later years, research similar to this study can be conducted to determine if at that point factors have changed to introduce guerrilla marketing as being able to replace traditional advertising as an effective advertising strategy for all businesses and brands rather than just small, unestablished ones.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. How would you define guerrilla marketing?
 2. What is your current point of view on guerrilla marketing? How has this view evolved? Why has it evolved?
 3. What are the risks of guerrilla marketing?
 4. What are the most important lessons you have learned about guerrilla marketing?
 5. What is the most effective guerrilla marketing campaign you have seen?
 6. What additional benefits (besides a boost in sales) does guerrilla marketing have for its campaigners?
 7. How has guerrilla marketing evolved since its start?
 8. Do you feel guerrilla advertising is beneficial for an advertising agency? Why or why not?
 9. Which clients is this campaigning most effective for?
 10. Do you feel guerrilla advertising is an effective alternative to traditional advertising? Why or why not?
 11. How are results for effectiveness measured?
 12. Where is guerrilla marketing headed?
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