Camouflage Can Be Made to Do Double Work

WILLIAM S. RUBENS

Does the money spent to camouflage a study have to be wasted? NBC recently found that camouflage can be made to pay its way.

Camouflage is an indispensable methodological tool in survey research. Since survey research deals with relationships between variables, we want to be sure that any relationships we find are not “put there” by respondents who slant their answers because they know what we are looking for. Camouflage is the device used to minimize such bias by preventing respondents from focusing in advance on what the researcher wants to know.

One problem with camouflage is that it is expensive: every additional item costs. But we have found that, with proper planning, the camouflage items can be made to do double duty and pay their own way.

Background of NBC’s Research

In 1969, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) undertook a longitudinal panel study to shed light on the factors underlying aggressive behavior among young people. We wanted to find out the effects that viewing television programs with “violent” content might have on antisocial behavior and attitudes.

The importance of such an effort had been underlined, shortly before the NBC study was announced, at hearings of the President’s Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. These hearings pointed up the need for meaningful research on this subject and urged the television industry to spur the development and undertaking of such research.

NBC recently completed the fieldwork for its study, spanning nearly a four-year period. We are in the process of tabulating and organizing our data base for analysis, and hope to start publishing the results of our findings in 1975.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR.
William S. Rubens is vice president, research and corporate planning, National Broadcasting Company, New York City.
Fortunately, we were able to get some benefit from the study even before obtaining final results on the issue of television and aggression. We owe this benefit in large part to efforts we had to make to draw the attention of sample teenagers away from the study’s primary focus.

The Need for Camouflage in the NBC Study

In a panel study such as this one, it is essential to camouflage the purpose of the study from the respondents and frequently even from the interviewers. Since a panel study involves interviewing the same people over and over again, the chances are greater that respondents will learn of the study’s purpose and try to be “helpful”—by giving you the kinds of answers that they think you want about particular issues.

To prevent our respondents—teenage boys—from concluding that we were searching for possible links between television exposure and aggressive behavior, we described the study’s purpose more broadly, explaining that we were trying to find out what boys their age are really like—what they think, feel, and do.

Because the teenagers realized that we wanted to know all about them and their world, we were able to ask a wide variety of questions bearing on these issues without arousing their hostility or antagonism. This made it possible to include a number of variables that would be helpful in the analyses, and also to increase the chances that the camouflage material could be made to do double duty.

We asked questions about many areas in which we had secondary interest: about relations with peers and with parents; about the use of other media besides television, such as newspapers and comic books; about sexual behavior and attitudes; about leisure-time activities; about self-image; about attitudes on morality; and others. But we did not become fully aware of the significance of this camouflage until after our study had started, when a new issue involving television heated up.

Camouflage Permits Additional Analyses

The new issue was: “Is there a link between drug abuse and the advertising of over-the-counter drugs on television?” This question was explored in a hearing before the Consumer Subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Commerce held in September 1970, just before our second wave of interviews.

At that time there was virtually no evidence available on this issue. There was, however, strong concern about potential side effects of exposure to drug advertising on television. For example, the subcommittee chairman, Senator Frank Moss, said in his opening statement: “The message, in sum, is clear and shocking: certain kinds of advertising stand accused of seducing the young to drug dependency and creating vulnerability to drug abuse.”

Here we were sitting with a million-dollar study on violence. One of the camouflage questions we had been asking our teenage boys was about their use of illegal drugs. Since Wave I had just been completed, we were able to examine the data in our study on drug usage to determine whether meaningful information could be developed on this subject. By Wave II, we were able to include additional questions getting at knowledge and use of over-the-counter drugs as well.

Since one aspect of the study focused on television exposure, we already had extensive data about what programs the teenage boys watched. All we had to do, then, was determine whether over-the-counter drugs were advertised on these programs, and we would automatically have a measure of each boy’s potential exposure to drug advertising on television. We could then see whether such exposure was a factor in the use of proprietary and illegal drugs.

On each succeeding wave we sharpened our questions about drug use and built in additional questions, such as one to get at a boy’s attitude of “readiness” to take over-the-counter drugs.

Camouflage Pays Off

The Results

On June 1, 1974, Ron Milavsky, Director of Social Research for NBC, presented a paper at the American Association for Public Opinion Research on “Television Exposure and Proprietary and Illegal Drug Use.” This paper was based on data covering drug use and exposure to drug advertising at five measurement points over a three-year period. The question addressed was: “Does drug advertising on television influence illegal drug use by teenage boys?”

The Findings

First, in searching for the direct effects of television, we found that the more drug advertising the boys were exposed to on television, the more they used the proprietary drugs advertised on television. However, this relationship is a weak one and may or may not indicate that the advertising is responsible. (Drug advertising is not directed at teenage boys.)
Second, contrary to what had been the popular hypothesis, we found an inverse relationship between exposure to drug advertising on television and use of illegal drugs. The heavier this exposure to television ads, the less was the use of illegal drugs such as marijuana, heroin and cocaine, amphetamines, and LSD. Here again, television may be responsible for the low usage, but we feel it is more likely that factors unrelated to television—like some component of a boy’s personality structure or his activity pattern—are responsible for both below-average exposure to television and above-average use of illegal drugs.

Next, we turned to checking for any indirect links between exposure and illegal drug use. One such chain examined was as follows: advertising exposure leads to the use of over-the-counter drugs, and use of over-the-counter drugs leads to use of illegal drugs. This, essentially, was Senator Moss’s hypothesis.

We found that although advertising might lead to use of proprietary drugs, the essential link was missing: use of the kind of proprietary drugs that are advertised on television does not lead to illegal drug use. This was true whether we looked for such a link at any given time or whether we used the panel feature and looked for earlier television exposure leading to subsequent illegal drug use.

We also considered indirect linkages by examining whether exposure to proprietary drug advertising led to an attitude of “readiness” to take proprietary drugs (i.e., the “pill-popping syndrome”), with this attitude then leading to use of illegal drugs. In this analysis we found that the attitude of “readiness” to take proprietary drugs was indeed related to use of illegal drugs (and of proprietary drugs as well), but exposure to television drug advertising did not seem to be responsible in any way for that attitude.

At this stage in the analysis, our findings do not support the contention that television drug advertising leads teenagers to take illegal drugs—either directly or indirectly. To the contrary, they indicate that the heavy viewer of drug advertising on television is less likely to use illegal drugs than is the light viewer. As far as we know, this was the first published information, documented by solid research, on television watching and drug behavior.

Double Success of Camouflage

This is such an important analysis that one can easily lose sight of the fact that such items were inserted in the questionnaire to do double duty. In addition to being interesting in their own right, they were there to prevent respondents from focusing on the major issue of the study—television and aggressive behavior. The question, then, is whether the camouflage worked with regard to its original purpose.

Did Our Camouflage Achieve Its Original Purpose?

To answer this question, we took one additional step. We reasoned that the camouflage could be said to be effective if the boys we sampled were not aware of the study’s principal focus. The best way to find out what the boys thought was to ask them. So we did.

The boys had been told (many of them on five separate occasions) that we were going to write a book based on their answers to the questionnaires they had been completing. At the end of the very last wave the boys were asked what they thought would be in the book. Their responses revealed that only 3 of the 400 boys thought both television and aggression would be treated in the book. Eleven boys mentioned television alone, and 14 boys mentioned just aggression. Most boys either simply said that they didn’t know, or made some general remark such as: “The book will be about what boys our age are really like,” or “it will be mostly statistics used for teaching purposes.” One boy wanted, “to see how clean-cut American kids would turn into ‘freaks’. ” One interesting side-light: those who thought the book would be about drug behavior outnumbered those who believed it would be about television by 36 to 14. That’s pretty effective camouflage.

Camouflage and the Respondent’s “Right to Know”

Since we told our boys the study was a broad-based examination of their behavior, we feel our use of camouflage was proper. But the value of camouflage in questionnaire design may sometimes be in conflict with the recently raised issue of the respondent’s “right to know.” The purpose of camouflage—keeping from the respondent the reason for the study—is to avoid introducing bias into the study. Telling the purpose of the study in advance frequently does just this and can distort the findings. Even if the respondent tries to give honest answers, the very fact that he is “focusing” directly on the issue that you are trying to get at puts him in the role of an expert, or critic. In this case, the respondent might find himself giving “institutionalized,” rather than personal, answers. Hence bias is introduced.
The issue for the researcher is how to avoid bias and also avoid being in conflict with the ethical issues raised by advocates of the need for disclosure. I believe this issue ought to be confronted and discussed more fully by researchers in conference and in the literature.

---

Copy Testing in a Competitive Environment

VALENTINE APPEL AND BABETTE JACKSON

A cooperative research effort has produced a workable and cost-saving method of pretesting advertising copy in rough form. Val Appel and Babette Jackson describe the procedure used to develop and test this effective new method.

This article describes research undertaken by Dancer-Fitzgerald-Sample and other advertising agencies and their clients. The objective was to develop a forced exposure procedure for measuring the persuasive value of advertising copy.

The Competitive Environment Test (CET) that resulted is quite simple, and consists of four essential steps:

1. Qualified respondents (qualified because they use a particular product category) are shown three competitive brands and asked to express their relative preference by dividing ten points among the brands. One is the test brand, for which advertising will be evaluated, and the other two are competitive brands.
2. The respondents are shown advertising for each brand.
3. The respondents are asked to express their relative preference, again by dividing ten points among the three brands.
4. The persuasiveness of the commercial (the pre-post change) is then calculated by subtracting the number of points assigned to the test brand before advertising exposure from the number of points assigned after advertising exposure.

In addition, depending upon the requirements of the test, the respondent may be asked to recall the content of the advertising, to rate the advertised brands on a number of attributes, etc.

Admittedly, the procedure is not a novel one. What is unusual is the careful effort, and the agency/advertiser cooperation, that went into the testing of the procedure before it was adopted.

Selection of the Scaling Method

It was understood, from the beginning, that some type of constant sum scale, in which ten points would be divided among several brands, would be used. Accordingly, the first step was a factorial design experiment in which fourteen variations of the constant sum were tested. The constant sum three-brand/three-commercial/pre-post procedure, described at the beginning of this article, proved to be more responsive to attitude shifts than any of the other alternatives studied.

Reliability of Discrimination

The next step was to assure that the procedure chosen could reliably discriminate between different television commercials for the same brand. Some assurance was also required that such discrimination would be predictive of differences in sales performance in the marketplace. Accordingly, two brands, Brand X and Brand Y, representing

---

• ABOUT THE AUTHORS.
Valentine Appel is president, AHF Marketing Research, Inc., New York City.
Babette Jackson is senior vice president and director of research, Dancer-Fitzgerald-Sample, Inc., New York City.