This article provides a summary of personal observations, practical experience, and discussions with leading professionals in the field of advertising and communications regarding how to identify a communications strategy expressed in a means-end framework and how to use the framework to develop advertising copy. It represents a set of "school-yard lessons" in applying laddering research to real communications problems. Information is organized around six thinking tools for developing a communications strategy and advertising copy. Examples are drawn from contemporary advertising campaigns.

For more than a decade, means-end theory and research techniques such as laddering (Gutman and Reynolds, 1979; Reynolds and Gutman, 1984) have been used to develop effective communications strategies for many leading corporations, industry organizations, public service groups, and political candidates. While the theory and mechanics of conducting laddering interviews and constructing descriptive maps of decision criteria, i.e., hierarchical value maps, are well documented (Gutman, 1982; Olson and Reynolds, 1983; Reynolds and Gutman, 1988; Reynolds, Westberg, and Olson, 1994), few specifics or examples have been published explaining how one can translate laddering research into a communications strategy or how a communications strategy expressed in a means-end framework can be used as a springboard for developing executive ideas.

One way to understand a means-end framework is to think of consumer decision-making as a problem-solving process. In making decisions consumers select a course of action or means to reach an objective or end. While a means can be an end, an end can also be a means. For example, in Figure 2 one can see that "on-time delivery," an end, is obtained through the "reliability" provided by an express mail delivery service, a means. However, "on-time delivery" itself is also a means to reach other ends, such as "less worry about on-the-job unknowns," "feeling more personal control," and "peace of mind." Also as shown in Figure 2, a means-end framework arranges means and ends into a network of attributes, physical and emotional consequences, and personal values or life goals. The means-end framework for viewing consumer decision-making leads to a means-end theory of communications strategy.

Generally speaking, the theory posits that communications are the most personally relevant and compelling when they make a strong link between the right set of attributes, consequences, and values.
Laddering refers to an interviewing technique that can be used to elicit means-end connections and attribute-consequence-value networks people use when making decisions about what brand to buy, what store to shop from, what issue to support, or even who to vote for. Consider, for example, a consumer that says an important distinction between express delivery services is that one service has "package tracking software" and another service does not. The researcher would then "ladder" the key distinction by asking why having "package tracking software" (means) is important to the respondent. Then the respondent is asked why the consequence "makes me look good" (end) is important to the respondent and so forth until the attribute-consequence-value chain is exhausted. The laddering interview process reveals the linkages between attributes, consequences, and values used by respondents to justify their beliefs and/or behavior.

In this paper, we suggest six strategic thinking tools that can be used alone or in combination. The first three tools have a positive orientation. The last three tools have a negative orientation. (See Figure 1.) Stated in general terms, the six strategic thinking tools are:

1. **Reinforce.** Strengthen the network of positive attributes, consequences, and values.
2. **Refocus.** Add linkages between attributes and consequences or introduce new attributes and/or consequences.
3. **Redefine.** Express a potential weakness so that it is perceived as a strength.
4. **Reframe.** Express a competitor's strength so that it is perceived as a weakness.
5. **Redirect.** Divert attention away from a competitor's strength to their weakness.
6. **Remove.** Undermine a competitor's strength by showing that the strength doesn't exist.

There are several pitfalls to sidestep when applying laddering data to developing communications strategies and advertising executions. One of the most dangerous is believing that a strategy comes directly off a hierarchical value map. Maps yielded by laddering research are the building blocks of communications strategy, but the nature and scope of the strategic goal are often determined by many external factors in addition to the laddering results. In addition to introducing six strategic thinking tools that can be used with laddering data, the purpose of this paper is to describe when and how one might use the thinking tools and to discuss several ideas regarding the strategic assessment of ads.

### Positive Tools

The first three strategic thinking tools have a positive orientation. That is, they build on areas of perceived or potential strength. Communications using a positive orientation are commonly used when advertising products and services. Persuasive advertising depends directly on emphasizing the distinctiveness of product attributes and successfully tapping into the positive connections people make between product attributes, functional outcomes, and personal needs and goals (Cartwright, 1949). Understanding a product through a consumer's viewpoint and "playing to strength" in the context of a competitive marketplace is one way to differentiate a product in a way that target audiences will find meaningful, relevant, and persuasive. Reinforce, Refocus, and Redefine are three ways we think about laddering data when developing a positive communications strategy.

**Reinforce.** The most obvious
communications strategy is simply to reinforce existing linkages between a product's distinctive attributes and the associated customer-relevant consequences and values. One would do this in order to grow and take ownership of a particular buying orientation within a market. Coca-Cola is particularly adept at keeping ownership of a significant portion of the teenage market for carbonated soft drinks by reinforcing existing linkages between the unique taste and refreshment of Coca-Cola and feelings of improved mood, doing one's best, acceptance, and self-esteem. In a very successful ad, "Skysurfer," a teenage skysurfer is riding in a small plane and wants a drink of Coca-Cola, but the ice chest is empty. On the desert below he sees a building with Coca-Cola painted on its roof. To the amazement of his friends, he jumps out of the plane, skysurfs, then parachutes down to the "country store" where he is joined and admired by several attractive young women and skysurfing friends. The message—the unique cola taste and superior refreshment of Coca-Cola gets you to do great things, gives you what you need to be your best, and brings young people together in a positive way. The creative team reinforces the linkages between the taste and refreshment of Coca-Cola and the higher-level consequences associated with drinking Coca-Cola. Moreover, the ad is particularly strong in reinforcing existing attribute-consequence-value linkages because Coca-Cola is shown as the catalyst for satisfying important and personally relevant goals.

Making the product "a hero" is different than making it a catalyst. Assessments of several hundred ads have shown that making the product a catalyst is a much more powerful way to reinforce existing attribute-consequence-value linkages than by just making the product a hero. Consider the ad "Special Delivery." In this ad a young female Australian rock star orders a
Figure 3
Voter Decision-Making Map: Reagan-Bush '84

VALUES
- Better America
- Preserve World Peace
- Future More Secure
- Handle Future Problems

PSYCHOSOCIAL CONSEQUENCES
- Cares about People
- More Opportunity
- Inspires Confidence in White House

FUNCTIONAL CONSEQUENCES
- Economic Recovery
- Balanced Budget
- Strong Leadership

ATTRIBUTES
- Social Security
- Reduce Poverty
- Fair Taxes
- Reduce Waste
- Decisive
- MX Missile

Adapted from Fiedler and Bahner (1985).

pizza. The young man receiving the order, recognizing the rock star's voice, decides to take along a couple of Cokes when making the special delivery to the hotel where the singer is staying. The teenage boy cleverly avoids security and other barriers to successfully deliver the pizza. He then is able to live out a personal fantasy and share a Coca-Cola with the young star. The action in the ad is created by the young man's desire to meet and be accepted by the rock star. One could say that the product becomes the hero by allowing the young man to share a few moments with the singer, but the young woman creates the action. She is the catalyst for satisfying the young man's key psychosocial needs, not the drink. As a result, even though it generates substantial ad affect, "Special Delivery" does not reinforce key communication linkages and does not successfully generate product affect or stimulate purchase intentions.

Refocus. Beginning with its introduction into the marketplace, Federal Express has found ways to make distinctions between itself and its competitors. As competitors have responded to remove the distinctions, Federal Express has refocused customers by adding linkages between attributes and consequences or by introducing new attributes and/or consequences to maintain their product differentiation. For example, consider the attribute "package tracking software" shown in Figure 2. The attribute was added into the network of decision-making criteria to distinguish Federal Express from its competitors. The creative challenge is to convinc-
ingly link the new attribute into the higher-level reasons for selecting an overnight package delivery service.

Two ads, the first called "Applause" and the second called "Gotcha" both call to our attention that Federal Express tracking software is a distinctive product attribute. The ads also show how the same distinguishing attribute can be made personally relevant to two groups of people with very different life goals. The first ad "Applause" is directed at administrative staff, i.e., facilitators of overnight delivery service who seek self-esteem by making a positive impression on supervisors and coworkers. The ad shows a large open room filled with many workers. In this setting, all your coworkers know about your mistakes and your successes. It is a typical workday and an irritable manager charges into the room and starts yelling, "Martha, that takes and your successes. It is a setting is a high-rise office with senior staff members surrounding the key decision maker for a business deal. The executive decision maker murmurs, "I know. Say we didn't get the package." (Phone rings.) The staff member answers, "Martha." Martha replies, "Tom, did you get our package?" "Gee, it never got here," answers Tom. To which Martha remarks, "Really . . . (Announcer: Tracking software from Federal Express.) . . . It was delivered to your place at 9:22 a.m." Tom retorts with, "Oh, probably stuck in the mail room." "No," says Martha, "it was signed for by your partner Brian." (Announcer: Now you can track packages right from your computer at your desk.) After an embarrassing pause, Tom responds, "Oh, that package . . . we can negotiate a deal if you . . ." The ad shows how the "tracking software" tool gives executives the upper hand in the marketplace and, consequently, satisfies their desire for winning and personal accomplishment. Parenthetically, Federal Express replaced its "tracking software" campaign when a competitor, UPS, started advertising their own version of tracking software.

Redefine and Reframe. In the domain of political campaigns and public issues it is often important to redefine a potential weakness so that it is perceived as a strength and reframe a competitor's strength so that it is perceived as a weakness. The two approaches for influencing public opinion are particularly powerful when used in combination. Consider the situation shown in Figure 3. When formulating President Ronald Reagan's reelection strategy, his political advisors were looking for opportunities to show Reagan's association with "strengthening the military" in a positive light. On the other hand, they were also looking for opportunities to undermine Mondale's ownership of "arms control leading to world peace." The strategic goal is to build on Reagan's key strengths, "decisive" and "gets things done," which voters translated into "strong leadership," and make a connection between strong leadership, strong military, and world peace. In short, Reagan's strong military is redefined to mean a decreased chance of war, and Mondale's arms control is reframed to mean an increased chance of war.

The creative team was tasked to show that building a strong military is the only logical way to prepare for lasting peace. In a simple and effective ad called "Bear," a bear walks through the woods to confront, finally, a man face-to-face. With the sound of a beating heart in the background the announcer reads, "There is a bear in the woods. For some people the bear is easy to see. Others don't see it at all. Some people say the bear is tame. Others say it is vicious and dangerous. Since no one can really be sure who's right, isn't it smart to be as strong as a bear? If there is a bear?"

Working against the same strategic goals, the creative team provided evidence of how Reagan's strong leadership qualities of "decisive" and "gets things done" were linked to world peace through strengthening the military. The ad shows happy, carefree children playing and, at one point, standing on a porch
next to a gently waving American flag. The scene is followed by a soundbite and video clip of President Reagan addressing an audience. In the voiceover, President Reagan says, "We've faced two world wars, a war in Korea, then Vietnam. And I know this. I want our children never to have to face another. A president's most important job is to secure peace, not just now but for the lifetimes of our children. But it takes a strong America to build a peace that lasts. And I believe with all my heart that working together we have made America stronger and prouder and more secure today. And now we can work for a lasting peace for our children and children to come.

Peace is the highest aspiration of the American people. Today America is prepared for peace. We will negotiate for it. Sacrifice for it. We will not surrender for it now or forever." The ad also used the tagline, "President Reagan ... Leadership that's working."

For a consumer product example of how to redefine a potential weakness so that it is perceived as a strength consider the problems with selling carbonated soft drinks in Japan. Japan probably represents the most complex beverage market in the world. Competing in the market is difficult and as one Japanese commentator once observed, a bottled cola drink looks just like one more bottle of soy sauce. Moreover, in Japan, carbonation is often linked to bad health. What rational or emotional appeal could gain attention and then convince Japanese consumers to drink a beverage that looks like soy sauce and that they feel could be unhealthy? The creative assignment is to show that the cola taste and carbonation are refreshing, make people more productive, and can result in a significant accomplishment for a team working together. In an ad called "Session," Japanese television viewers watch a "live" recording in which a team of young people with a somewhat older and more experienced director is recording a song promoting Coca-Cola. The ad is upbeat, youthful, and quick paced. The session, however, is not going well until the director has everyone drink a round of ice-cold Coca-Cola. In addition to being ice-cold, the carbonation and unique cola taste are shown as creating refreshment, an energy lift, and ultimately group achievement as the team enthusiastically records the Coca-Cola jingle. "Session" redefines the potential weaknesses of color and carbonation to be sources of unique taste and energy. Unique taste and energy are made relevant by showing they give rise to group accomplishment.

Negative Tools

The thinking tools Reframe, Redirect, and Remove have a negative orientation and are used to attack strengths or vulnerabilities of competitors. Communications using a negative orientation are frequently used in political campaigns, but from time to time surface in consumer advertising. We discussed the Reframe thinking tool in the previous section because it is often most effective when used in combination with the Redirect thinking tool. The remaining thinking tools can have a very negative tone. Over the last several years negative ads have come to dominate the communications campaigns of local, regional, and national political candidates, presumably because of their success in getting candidates elected. The techniques increasingly are being applied in high-stakes consumer markets. The battle between MCI and AT&T long-distance telephone service is an example of this approach in the domain of consumer marketing.

Redirect. The objective of this tool is to divert attention away from a competitor's strength to their weakness. Laddering data identify competitive strengths, weaknesses, and the higher-level feelings and goals that make them personally relevant. Again consider the decision-making map shown in Figure 3. Michael Dukakis, like other Democratic presidential candidates before and since, is positioned as a person who creates opportunity for the common man and woman. They champion rights for women, the elderly, and the working class. For at least a decade they have made health-care reform and protection of the environment an issue. The ownership of this area by Democratic candidates is so complete and long-lived that it would be difficult for a Republican presidential candidate to successfully compete using a similar positioning. As an alternative, Republican political strategists for the Bush/Quayle campaign redirected attention away from the traditional strengths of Democratic candidates to areas in which they are traditionally weak—military strength.

Consider an ad created for the Bush/Quayle presidential campaign called "Tank Ride." Michael Dukakis looks juvenile and foolish as he takes a "joy ride" in a tank. With his superimposed words scrolling up the screen, the announcer reads, "Michael Dukakis has opposed virtually every defense system we developed. He opposed new aircraft carriers. He opposed
anti-satellite weapons. He opposed four missile systems, including the Pershing Two missile deployment. Dukakis opposed the Stealth Bomber and a ground emergency warning system against nuclear attack. He even criticized our rescue mission to Grenada and our strike on Libya. And now he wants to be our Commander-in-Chief. America can’t afford that risk.” The ad had high levels of recall and pictured Dukakis as a weak, almost childish leader. People, particularly older Americans who had voted Republican in the previous election, had a hard time getting the image out of their minds even though Dukakis is the epitome of the American dream, personal courage, and fortitude, having grown up in a hardworking immigrant family, working his way through college, and finishing in the top 100 runners in the Boston Marathon.

**Remove.** The tool *Remove* is the most extreme approach to negative positioning. It operates by undermining a competitor’s strength by showing the strength doesn’t exist. As mentioned above, Democratic candidates are positioned as people who create opportunity for the common man and woman. They care about the public. Consequently, one effective approach for a political strategist to take is to show that a Democratic candidate does not care, thereby undermining his political foothold.

As an example consider the classic negative ad “Willie Horton.” The ad undermines the concepts and linkages of the political map traditionally owned by Democrats. It destroys any sense that Dukakis cares about people. “Willie Horton” has a very simple execution. Pictures of President Bush and Michael Dukakis are shown side by side. Words are superimposed as the announcer reads, “Bush and Dukakis on crime.” A picture of Bush is shown. The announcer says, “Bush supports the death penalty for first degree murderers.” A picture of Dukakis is shown. The announcer continues, “Dukakis not only opposes the death penalty, he allowed first degree murderers to have weekend passes from prison.” A picture of Willie Horton is shown. The announcer reads, “One was Willie Horton who murdered a boy in a robbery stabbing him nineteen times. Despite a life sentence Horton received ten weekend passes from prison. Horton fled, kidnaping a young couple, stabbing the man and repeatedly raping his girlfriend.” A picture of Dukakis is shown. The announcer finishes, “Weekend prison passes. Dukakis on crime.”

The key to using the *Remove* tool with laddering data is to work under the rule that “If I cannot own a particular positive perceptual orientation neither will my opponent.” Negative communications campaigns appear to be very effective. However, in the long-term it is hard to know whether the American public will start to resent or become desensitized to such all-out attacks on competitors.

**Strategic Ad Assessment**

When an ad works, marketers have a hard time determining whether the ad delivers a great execution of a mediocre concept, a mediocre execution of a great concept, or a great execution of a great concept. Copy testing does not provide a framework to explain the mechanism underlying the failure or success of an ad and, therefore, does not make successful advertising campaigns more predictable and reproducible or unsuccessful campaigns more avoidable. Gaining a strategically based understanding of a successful advertising campaign is critically important. Consequently, we recommend that strategic assessments of ads be conducted on existing ads as well as on “animatic ads” before finished ads are produced.

Reynolds and Gengler (1991) report that strategic assessments of ads at the animatic stage and at the finished stage yield very consistent results. In fact, they observe that differences between animatic and finished ad assessments only occur when the finished ad contains unique properties the animatic ad cannot capture, such as the screen presence of a celebrity endorser. Strategic ad assessments can make production and media dollars more productive by turning off bad executions before they are produced and improving good executions before they are produced and aired. Such assessments provide the building blocks for gaining an ever-improving long-term understand-
ing of target audiences and how to communicate with them effectively.

**Assessment Guidelines.** To assess the fit between communications strategy and advertising execution, the content of the desired communications elements, relative weight among elements, and desired executional effect must be prespecified. There are several published examples of how one can apply the MECCAS model to assessing communications strategy (Reynolds and Gengler, 1991; Reynolds and Craddock, 1988; Reynolds and Gengler, 1991; Reynolds and Rochon, 1991). However, beyond the mechanics outlined in these previous papers, there are several simple and practical rules-of-thumb to keep in mind when devising a system to strategically assess advertising.

First, the biggest hazard of using laddering data to formally specify and assess a communications strategy is allowing the ads themselves to rely too heavily on using words to make their points. When it comes to communications and the spoken word, more is often less. It is estimated that less than 20 percent of what gets communicated in our society is verbal (Zaltman and Coulter, 1995). Perhaps people simply do not have the patience to listen to a lot of advertising copy since, in general, advertising is not considered by consumers to be a very credible information source because of the marketer's vested interest in selling the product (Assael, 1987).

Advertisers cannot depend on copy alone to persuade consumers. In fact, too much copy can get in the way of an effective ad. In today's society, it appears as though the more an ad relies on images and music to convey its message, the more persuasive the ad will be. This may put ad agencies in a difficult position when working with the MECCAS model. On the one hand, the creative group wants to put together what they think will be a persuasive ad; on the other, they may want to include copy speaking directly to the MECCAS framework to show their work is "on-strategy." However, such problems can be avoided if one remembers the goal of the advertising is to effectively communicate and link the key strategic concepts and not necessarily to use the exact words specifying the communications strategy or, for that matter, use any words at all.

Another serious and frustrating problem is the tendency of respondents to become "advertising experts." One way to address this issue is to show several ads together, one after another, then ask about the impact, content, and communications characteristics of the ads. Having respondents compare several ads, two at a time, may also be effective. Moreover, a laboratory setting for conducting ad assessments may help because one viewing of an ad often is not enough for researchers to gather all the information needed to understand how the ad works.

An ad assessment should also provide a foundation for learning how to make better advertising executions in the future. Consequently, the success of the executional framework in showing key points and creating the right mood must be measured. In addition, one may want to measure shifts in viewer attitudes toward the product, behavioral intentions, and how well viewers like the ad so that these factors can be related back to specific communications and executional elements.

**Strategic Assessment of Competitive Advertising.** Working on your own advertising is often so personally involving that it is easy to overlook the opportunity to learn more about competitors and how to position your product in the competitive environment by conducting a strategic assessment of competitive advertising. Assessments of competitive advertising bring out the strengths and weaknesses of competitors in the marketplace. Moreover, these assessments can clarify the nature of the target audiences being addressed by competitors and the perceptual or buying orientations into which they try to tap. Taking the time to look critically at and understand competitive advertising and positioning strategies can be among the most effective ways to leverage laddering data into an effective communications strategy that builds on strength, stresses defensible points of product differentiation, and frames the consumer decision-making process in a way that creates competitive advantage.

The first step in assessing competitive advertising is expressing the content and executional elements of competitive ads in the MECCAS framework. An assessment can then be conducted with respondents evaluating a set of competitive ads along with your own ads. In addition, similar to drawing a sample when gathering laddering data, the sample for a competitive ad assessment should be targeted to include people with differing buying orientations, product preferences, and usage patterns. 

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LADDERING DATA
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THOMAS J. REYNOLDS is president and chief executive officer of Wirthlin-Reynolds, a marketing and communications strategy consulting company. He is also currently a partner and chief marketing strategist for Richmont Corporation, a private merchant bank. He has served as a professor in the Graduate School of Management and as Director of Marketing Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas where he was recently named Professor Emeritus. He has published more than 50 articles on the development and implementation of values-based strategy. As a consultant he has worked with over 40 corporations in over 20 countries operating on marketing strategy problems including such companies as Procter & Gamble, Coca-Cola, AT&T, Intel, and Mary Kay Cosmetics.

DAVID B. WHITLARK is an assistant professor in the marketing department at the Marriott School of Management, Brigham Young University. He has spent the last two years on leave from the university as a research and media consultant for The Wirthlin Group working with many Fortune 500 companies, industry associations, charitable organizations, advertising agencies, and public relations firms. He holds a doctorate from the University of Virginia, an MBA from Cornell University, and attended post-doctoral classes in psychological measurement and scaling at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. He has published numerous academic articles in the areas of marketing research, forecasting, consumer behavior, and marketing strategy.

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