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FEAR APPROACH IN ADVERTISING MAY NOT WORK, EXPERT SAYS

A lot of advertising dollars of both commercial firms and government agencies go down the drain due to mis-targeted messages, an expert in marketing and social psychology said today.

"We have seen a lot of wasted efforts by well-meaning people who are doing things only based on their own intuition," said Prof. Richard Bagozzi, of the University of Michigan, at the Chinese University of Hong Kong's 30th Anniversary Lecture.

A commonly-used "fear appeal" approach in advertisements -- which, for instance, preaches the importance of teeth-brushing by stressing the negative consequences of tooth decay and gum disease -- does not work all the time, he said.

Quoting his research on public service advertisements designed to combat child abuse, Prof. Bagozzi noted that by manipulating different levels of fear in communicating the messages, "dreadful" ads -- which induced high level of fear -- were found to be less persuasive than those which conveyed intermediate levels of fear.

"Extreme fear seemed to inhibit information processing and lead to a rejection of the conclusions in the communication," he said. Intermediate levels of negative emotions and empathy are the key psychological reactions to stimulate.

As politicians, business firms and governments increasingly use advertisements to influence the public, it makes sense to try to better understand the psychological processes behind the communication, and whether these actually influence people's behaviour, he added.

The United States spent some HK\$550 billion on advertising in 1991, while last year's advertising spending in Hong Kong came to HK\$9.3 billion.

Prof. Bagozzi has been conducting basic research into the psychological processes of consumers, sales forces and the customer-salesman relationships. His study concerning blood donation -- which pinpointed physical pain, immediate internal sickness, delayed costs and altruistic reasons as the four crucial considerations of donors -- had helped to fine-tuned the Red Cross's campaign in the United States.

Bone marrow transplant is one of the many subjects the marketing professor is focusing on. In collaboration with Prof. Lee Kam Hon of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Prof. Frances Van Loo of the University of California at Berkeley, Prof. Bagozzi is investigating what motivates or prevents people from the act of donation.

"There is a big shortage of donors in the U.S., especially among ethnic minorities who are grossly under-represented in terms of percentages in donation. This makes it difficult to find a match for leukaemia patients in the minority groups," he said.

The study will compare the difference in motivations among Hong Kong people, Chinese-Americans and other Americans in the U.S.

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