



THE USP CONCEPT – THE VERY END OR THE BRAND NEW START OF CREATIVITY IN ADVERTISING

V. Stanev*

Department of Marketing and International Economic Relations, Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences, Plovdiv University “Paisii Hilendarski”, Plovdiv, Bulgaria

ABSTRACT

Copi-strategy is the most popular American advertising strategy since mid-Twentieth century, which relies on the impact of reasonable and rational arguments highlighting the benefits of goods and services. Rosser Reeves is not its founder, but he remains in history as the scientist as well as the practitioner who introduced the concept of USP in his famous book “Reality in Advertising”. One of the paradoxes of advertising industry is the fact that well before the end of the 60s, at a time when Reeves emerged as a renowned guru to the field, advertising went a different way. Advertising appeal becomes sensual, attractive and extremely... creative. It attracts consumers’ attention first, and, it is only then that it informs. The question is whether all that originates from the very conclusions of Reeves himself, or whether the interpretation of his concept of the USP, namely, is able to produce what he so vehemently denied – Creativity and Originality in advertising appeal.

Key words: USP concept, Roser Reeves, creativity in the advertising, to attract the postmodern consumer.

When Bulgarian and foreign researchers cite the views of Politz, Vicary, Packard or Burnett, one important fact is often left behind. They are not only scientists, they are practitioners — managers or employees of advertising agencies. Their theories, laws and principles have been established in the social, economic and cultural context of their time, addressed to clients and competitors who criticize and praise according to their own interest, rather than to students and inquisitive readers. Media propagates direct and extramural debates, the Madison Avenue hub of ad agencies joins in too, but what shows through behind the great stir, is the eternal striving for fame, clients and money. Rosser Reeves is also a practitioner who tasted fame as early as he was 19, long before he took the lead of Ted Bates & Company advertising agency. He was a company

manager when in 1961 he wrote his book «Reality in Advertising» advancing the concept of the USP (**unique selling proposition, unique selling point**).

Today, we accept it as a stable scientific theory, ignoring the fact that a great number of Reeves' arguments are addressed to particular people and their ideas which Reeves countered to or refuted for the sake of clients themselves¹. The key message is crystal clear – our company is profitable and promising because it has discovered and applied the USP concept since the 1940s, thus increasing the number of orders from 4 to 150 million. (1).

*Correspondence to: *Velin Stanev, Department of Marketing and International Economic Relations, Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences, Plovdiv University “Paisii Hilendarski”, Plovdiv 4000, Bulgaria, 24 Tsar Asen St., GSM: +359 888 29 39 13, E-mail: velstan@yahoo.com*

¹ One of the most striking evidence is the criticism against show-window advertising. It was the time when the agencies in NY and all big cities in the USA dealing with window display arrangement prospered and earned millions of dollars. This is why Reeves wrote that show-window advertising was not advertising but merely display of merchandise asking to sell itself, unable to persuade and attract new customers.

Nevertheless, what if in criticizing originality, creativity, use of Freudism and (generally speaking) motivational drivers in the make of the advertising message Reeves himself has provoked the invasion of originality exactly by promoting the completely opposite USP concept?

What is a USP? Advertisers have always strived to discover some incantation for pinpointing those characteristics of the advertised product or service which can naturally or artificially produce a distinguishable difference on the market. (2-192) By contrast, Reeves claims that he has developed an orderly (and verified in practice) theory based on realism and the USP concept which is “a precise term, deserves a precise definition, and like Gaul, it is divided into three parts” (1-28):

1. Each advertisement must make a proposition to the consumer. Not just words, not just product puffery, not just show-window advertising. Each advertisement must say to each reader: "Buy this product, and you will get this specific benefit."
2. The proposition must be one that the competition either cannot, or does not, offer. It must be unique—either a uniqueness of the brand or a claim not otherwise made in that particular field of advertising.
3. The proposition must be so strong that it can move the mass millions, i.e., pull over new customers to your product.

Reeves concept is rooted in two laws of A. Politz who Reeves calls “one of the biggest advertising experts in America”. The first one states that advertising boosts sales of good products and accelerates the failure of bad ones. That is to say that by focusing on qualities which the product itself lacks, the advertising message helps consumers to quickly find out the discrepancy. Hence, the second one: advertising which highlights a microscopic feature of a product which consumers are practically unable to identify makes the absence of such feature even more conspicuous and triggers product failure. If a car can drive 200 kilometers with 10 litres fuel, this is an exceptionally economic car and it is not necessary to look for other pinpoint of the message. This is a USP and it is it that will stay embedded in the minds of the customers. The groundbreaking observation of Reeves is that consumers memorize just one thing from the

advertising message – a strong motive or a claim. The advertising message may contain 15 important aspects of the product, but consumers tend to concentrate on just one of them or they will integrate all these 15 aspects into one unitary whole. It is necessary to pick and highlight that particular intrinsic feature, that real quality and advantage which distinguishes the product or the service from all competitors. It should be the meaningful point of focus that integrates all advertisement components. Reeves claims that heightened penetration of a brand (a product or a service) in consumers' memory by means of more sophisticated advertising tools (messages with a USP) tends to force out penetration of competitive brands.

If the advertising of your brand of soap (for example) disappears from the mind of the consumers, it means that it was replaced by a competitive soap brand and vice versa – just like scales work. His rule is: **similar products force out similar products**. And if this conviction of Reeves looks rather controversial for beseeching the human brain as a drawer with a precisely defined receptivity, it is far from being the only one. Another disputable conviction – obviously entirely intended for the clients and competitors of the time and in contradiction to the marketing logic, **is that the success of advertising campaign should not be always judged by the subsequent sales**. According to Reeves, there are dozens of variables (bad product, inadequate price, insufficient purchasing power, poor distribution, low advertising budget, a new and better product, outwitting competitor, etc.) which can raise or drop sales and advertising is just one of them.

This is why advertising should be distinguished from product distribution, prices and the remaining trade operations. Another firm conviction of Reeves states that **advertising is a science and it is governed by principles**. If this is true, why should it be impossible to measure advertising efficiency by the sales? In fact, in his book Reeves led fierce verbal war against competitors on other battlefronts, too. The second one is against those who advocate that advertising is an art, and the third one – against

the invasion of psychologists². According to Reeves, advertising is a science. Indeed, it has started as an art form but in art there are no principles, and advertising is governed precisely by principles. Scientists trust only what they weigh, measure, calculate and observe unlike the majority of advertisers who trust ghosts, listen to voodoo drums and whisper magic incantations. Yet another theory in sheer contrast with contemporary marketing views states that **advertising message should remain unchanged for the time it is working**. According to Reeves, a campaign based on USP will never wear out unless the product itself becomes outmoded. The saying goes that once a key client asked the legend why he had 700 employees when no one had ever changed his advertisement. Reeves responded that those 700 employees detained the advertising department to change his advertising (3-51)². Penetration of the USP in the consumer mind can be reached only by repetitive, one and the same advertisement. Those who claim that when a particular commercial wears out the new one will bring a new life to the product are in big and costly mistake. If the advertisement is replaced or reduced, the level of penetration drops down. Reeves compares repetitive advertising to a tree. If you cut the grass around and make it breath freely, it will begin to grow into a giant tree resistant to the most fearsome storms. An interesting fact is that the rational minded Reeves who ceaselessly advocates scientific principles resorts quite frequently to poetic comparisons and abundant historic and mythological references in his book – rather extrinsic to a guru of the American copy-strategy school based (according to Jacques Seguela) on the rational assertion of the advantages of the

offered product, reasonable motives and the influence of skillful wording (4). Seguela, however, identified three flaws in the said strategy. It has turned out to be restricting, chained by imagination and engaged traders and artists in constant war. The second disadvantage can be sought in its purely rational approach and the attempts to reduce communication with the audience to simple technology, to make it an exact science because if advertisements were capable of accurate quantitative expressions like the mathematical equations, that would once and for all put an end to the unbearable risks of the profession through guaranteed results. The third flaw identified by Seguela was in its materialism – because if the cult of consumption disappeared, the entire product religion will also collapse.

The next disputable claim of Reeves from a marketing point of view states that addressing advertisements to a limited group of consumers is a blunder. Dispersion, in Reeves' view, is the most important principle for mass-consumption products. He pleads that it is better to reach larger audience less often than reach smaller audience more frequently, thus, in practice, refuting the results from a research initiated decades earlier proving that the consumer is not singular form any more; that the age of mass production is replaced by the age of mass consumption where differences between consumers become increasingly apparent and they divide into groups of interest, act similarly on the basis of various definable signs. In 1961, Reeves seemed to refuse to accept the new times and their rules. As Robinson put it, Reeves built his entire theory on the basis of the advertising world until the end of the 50s. (3) The problem is that in the next decades, the focus is shifted from the product to the consumers. In postmodern times a man is what he consumes, wears and buys! Consumption is a field of self-expression and self-assessment which others can judge and estimate in the same way. Individual consumption is a demonstration of belonging to a particular social, economic, educational status and while there is still a direct link between consumption, class and profession, in modern society it has grown weaker (5). While in the modern project differences between consumers are determined mainly by their income, differences in taste of postmodern consumers are not obligatory proportional to income or

² One of his supporters on the third battlefield, at that many years later, (1998) is Jeffrey Robinson. Yet, he claims that advertising is art and it will remain such until somebody invents a magical black box with buttons that will trigger in us the overwhelming desire to buy things that we do not plan to buy, we do not know that we want to buy and we have never wanted to buy. Then we will be able to predict and even to guarantee results. Certainly, (especially in the age of the Internet and the 24/7 Facebook enchainment) this black box will be invented, but “nobody has found it yet. Art can not guarantee results. Only science can. Advertising is not a science. At least not yet. (3-13)”.

educational differences. The new goal is to overcome the barrier of limited demand for the sake of constant increase of sales (6). The philosophy of postmodern times is to give up any restrictions on consumer desires. Postmodern morality is to release oneself from any cultural and rational restraints of desire for the sake of infinite incrementalism and infinite consumption. Shopping is the new hormone of happiness and its slogan states: *I buy, therefore I am!*

According to Robinson, this new world creates a vacuum which shows the in-depth psychological research. However, in 1961 Reeves apparently fails to perceive it, let alone understand that it is an archenemy of **psychologists in advertising**, although it is exactly they who claim to be representatives of science which Reeves valued so highly. Reeves rejected Freudian tricks and highly educated people (in advertising industry) who talked about Freudian complexes, hidden motivations, subconscious persuasion, psychiatric depth testing, analytical profiles, etc. Their echo surrounded numerous conferences every day and too many agencies tried to attract customers by the phallic symbol of a big car or cigarettes.

Reeves argues that instead of peering into the dark waters of cryptic motives, advertisers should rather choose proved desires - people want to be fit, to have healthy and beautiful teeth, to be loved and respected, to earn money and buy beautiful homes, to succeed in their job and to be secure in their old age. This is the “stuff and substance” of Reeves' realism.

Another typical proposition (also negated by the science) in Reeves theory is **the validation of the power of words in the advertising message** held in an open dispute with his contemporary Martino from Chicago Tribune who deems visual symbols to be more important than words, have a quicker and immediate effect on the mind, do not require mental efforts, create emotions, and what is more important, he claimed that Americans had a deep distrust for skillfully worded advertisements because the average individual was not skilled enough with words and failed to recognize himself as an object of the advertising message. To support his views, Reeves claimed that meaningful verbal claims are “keystones” but he also recognized the importance of the visual image to illuminate

the central concept. However, he held that the Chinese sages who claimed that “*One picture is worth thousands words*” were wrong. Indeed, words vs visual symbols is an old dispute and both sides have their strong arguments. Although he is taking the middle position, Reeves does support words.³ Faith in the power of verbal message brings us to another rather controversial opinion of Reeves – **consumers are rational**. The USP can be a combination of words, illustration, a mix of both and many other things, but if it does exist in the message, consumers will find it out. In other words, the USP message will make consumers take intentional decisions by making conscious considerations on the individual and relative values of a given product, and on the probability for their actual implementation. After logical processing, they will reach to a rational judgment that will provoke the action sought by the whole advertising chain. It is exactly the rationality of consumers which Zaltman disputes calling its various dimensions – the big marketing fallacies. (7, 7-13). The first and most important one is that consumers think in a well-reasoned or rational linear way. Rational decisions are an exception rather than a principle. The process of choosing is relatively automatic, originates from the consumer's habits and other subconscious forces. Furthermore, it is greatly influenced by the social and physical context of the consumer. Emotions and reasoning are processed by separate structures in the brain that produce a

³ One of proponents is the Bulgarian professor Zdravko Raychev, who shared the express conviction that men think by means of words. Gerald Zaltman offers an interesting opinion rebutting marketers' views that human thoughts are shaped by words as completely wrong. People do not think with words, the activation of nerve cells or neurons precedes thought formation and the activities of the brain, including verbalization. It turns out that these brain regions become active much later after we make a subconscious choice to present a thought in our mind or make it public by means of verbal language. If this is true, Reeves' concept of the USP is entirely refuted because the conviction that consumers think by means of words lead marketers into thinking that they can inject their messages and position the brand, the product or the service in the mind of consumers as if it was a white canvas which can be painted at their own whim as long as they can find a sufficiently clever way to do it. (7, 14-15).

combined impact on human behaviour. However, that part of the brain dealing with sensations – the older of the two in evolutionary terms – is usually the first one that produces an effect on the consumer thinking and behaviour. The second fallacy is the claim that consumers can readily explain their thinking and behaviour based on the presumption that reasoning in its larger part is carried out in the realm of the consciousness. According to Zaltman, however, “rather than guiding or controlling behaviour consciousness seems mainly to make sense of behaviour after it is executed” (7-10). The third fallacy is the claim that consumers are able to describe their emotions. But they are subconscious and one needs special probing techniques which are rarely used in practice to make them emerge on the surface. Another fallacy exposed by Zaltman is that consumer's memories accurately represent their experiences. Memory does not work like a camera, capturing every detail of an experience. Rather, memories are creative and susceptible to influences which constantly change.

Our memories can be creative, but in his book Reeves has drawn creativity and originality to fierce criticism, declaring them to be the most dangerous words in advertising. Originality ruined a number of advertisers because nobody could clearly define it. Some deem it as freshness, others as style, liveliness, fantasy, difference – only colorful and attractive words as if taken by a schoolbook but completely useless and nonsensical, even worse – dangerous. Strangely enough, Reeves does not negate creativity and originality, on the contrary, he recognizes them as intrinsic qualities of an advertising professional, but the way he discusses originality is rather unusual. According to Reeves, originality can not be wild, free and unfettered. Rather, it should be tamed by the advertising function itself, to be cultivated and restricted to a completely different objective – finding and presenting the USP of the product or the service in the advertising message in Reeves' view are the real yardstick of creative power. The ingenuity of the author can be used in the invention of a good USP which can be designed from a variety of visual and verbal components. According to Reeves, the writer must make the product itself interesting. This is the ultimate in advertising originality – everything else, he explains, is devising tricks which lowers rather

than raises the efficiency of advertising. Hence, his definition for advertising states “advertising is the art of getting a unique selling proposition into the heads of the most people at the lowest possible cost” (1-70).

Art of penetration! Advertising was supposed to be a science, wasn't it? What kind of art is Reeves talking about? The three big roads to Rome are the metaphors Reeves employs to convey the three key (realistic) methods to the perfect advertisement. The first one is the unique selling proposal; the second is the product itself because a gifted product is mightier than a gifted pen. The third approach is tactical – if the product can not be changed, you can tell the public something about the product which has never been revealed before. The grain of salt in realism and the principles of finding and presenting the USP in the advertising message is shown in the case studies Reeves describes from his own practice. In a beer advertisement he proclaimed that the bottles of that particular company were sterilized with steam. In another advertising campaign of a tooth paste he emphasized on the fact that while other tooth pastes cleaned your teeth, that particular one also cleaned your breath. In a tobacco commercial he pointed out that the tobacco is dried. **This raises the logical question – where is the unique quality or advantage of the product itself which the advertiser skillfully discovers and creatively highlights according to the principles of realism? Where is the irresistible proposition? The answer is – there is no such, only the story is unique.** All bottles are sterilized with steam, every toothpaste refreshes your breath, the tobacco in all cigarettes is dried, but Reeves made out a USP telling the consumers about something that has never been given prominence before. In 1954, John J. McNamara, president and chairman of „M&M Candies” went into Reeves office complaining that the sales of his candies were going down although he had already spent a lot of money in advertising. Reeves opened the package, spilled some candies on his desk and noticed that those were the only chocolates with sugar coating on the market. Then he created the following “soaked in realism” USP: „M&M Candies melt in your mouth, not in your hand” (3-51). Obviously, Reeves' realism is a quite variable and creative concept provided that in his opinion supporters of creativity and originality in advertising were

sinfully transgressing the profession by claiming that: advertising (not the product) must compete with a tremendous number of other advertising messages, therefore advertising (not the product) must get attention and be different. The realism of Reeves is **veracity for the sake of truth**, not flamboyant tricks, but carefully designed or verbalized fixings and claims concentrated on one particular and specific feature of the product or the service. Reeve's realism is in the art to spot the uniqueness in normality, to elicit the unexpected feature in something very familiar, and to affirm the benefits of that psychological, material, or prestigious feature of the advertised product. (8). This line of thoughts can help us go even further. A large number of goods are (or seem to be) identical (soap, bread, salt, beer, washing powder, etc.). In this case 'realists' in advertising should find out and make prominent those differences between the products or their usage which have never been revealed before. In such cases, as Reeves suggested, the product should be changed or improved according to a specially tailored USP which will bring benefit to both consumers and producers. Hence, a USP can be stimulating to product improvement. However, this is not what actually happens in practice and it is not necessary because we have the second principle proposed by Reeves (the proposition must be one that the competition either cannot, or does not, offer. It must be unique – either a uniqueness of the brand or a claim not otherwise made in that particular field of advertising). If it is impossible to change the product or it is not necessary to do so, then the advertiser should tell a story about the product that nobody has ever heard before! In this case the USP reflects not only the product but also its acknowledgement. That is to say that **if there is nothing unique in the product or the difference is minuscule and insignificant, we must tell a unique story** which is entirely in the realm of creativity and originality. The role of the USP is thus transmitted to the unique story, the unique advertising appeal which in the times of brand personification (product personification in general) and transformed consumers is more than obligatory. For instance, if the big challenge for the advertisers is to create the perfect slogan, it seems that the most functional solution is to find the USP, build it in one sentence or a phrase, and make it a slogan. In this way, something that began life as a USP slogan may soon be integrated in the lexicon of real life, living a life on its own even outside its advertising context, yet always reminding about its natural advertising origin regardless of the social context of the particular

usage (“Men know why”, “This is your voice”, “Connecting people”). Sometimes the good slogan can turn the small brand into a big one exactly because it has a creative and original USP (9).

Such considerations, however, radically depart from another conservative position of Reeves, namely that if a product (service, brand, etc.) with a USP competes with an equally advertised similar product, the better product will win in the long run. Sooner or later, the moment of truth will come! So far so good, but what if only the association induced by the respective advertisement is unique? Who is going to win in this case? Obviously it is the product with the more creative and original advertisement according to the USP principles (as a unique advertising tool) because the USP should be exclusive not only with respect to the product (brand, service, etc.) but also with respect to the advertising appeal itself. Once again we have come to what Reeves denies but practically imparts in his USP of **similar products and services: advertising (not the product) competes with a tremendous number of other advertisements, therefore advertising (not the product) must get attention and be different!**

The “classic theory” of Reeves is misleading in yet another classic assumption. According to Reeves, any product that is worth buying is worth paying attention to as well. Therefore, it is not necessary to shock or entertain consumers in order to draw their attention to the product. Rather, we can simply state the striking rational USP. But how will the consumer hear about it, see it or read it? How will it stand out among the hundreds and thousands of advertising offerings peeping out from billboards, citylights, vinyl panels, party walls, mega screens, painted buses, radio stations, television, newspapers, magazines, mail and email?

Practically speaking, all of us – the consumers - have been inherently deprived of the opportunity to see and test the advertising products or services themselves, no matter if it is washing powder, cough syrup or laser hair removal. We can judge them solely by what we have seen or heard in the commercials and in its replication in the process of secondary communication. What we see and hear in the mass media, in the public space, even in the domestic and collegial communication is not the goods and services themselves, but their images – artificially designed advertising images which generate and satisfy specific interests. Advertising itself is a product, the image of the product or the service is a commercial product with a specific value – often **the price does not depend on the**

quality and specifics of the product but on the quality and specifics of image it has created. Furthermore, the higher the efficiency of the image, the higher the price.

What we see on the market is not the prototype but its image created by the advertisement or PR (10).

In the abundance of advertising messages addressed to a presumably more fragmented consumer, who is in fact increasingly becoming a uniform mass consumer of one and the same globally distributed and globally advertised products and services, a thriving tendency, hinted by Reeves and his concept of the USP, yet firmly denied by him, has been making its way for decades now: if there is nothing unique in the product or service to be advertised, make the advertising message unique. In view of the great number of commercials in one astronomical hour in the prime time of any TV channel, the only chance a particular advertisement has to get your attention is its uniqueness. It is not necessary to go so far as to understand what is being advertised. What matters is that the advertisement has managed to impress you. If it has really impressed you as a mass cultural artifact, even if it is completely fictional, but entertaining, amusing, adapting and instructing according to the mass cultural artistic laws, you will be eager to see it over and over again, share it with friends and discuss how “cool” it is until you inevitably find out what is being advertised. But if it fails to capture your attention, there are no reasonable or rational drivers, even the most domesticated and originally presented ones that can make you pay attention to it. To those who think that such interpretation is too simplistic, it is worth reminding that albeit rejected, criticized or supplemented, one of the basic formulas for the level of advertising impact on the mind of the recipient is **AIDA** (known since 1896) – (**A**ttention, **I**nterest, **D**esire, **A**ction) along with its extended versions **AIDMA** (**M**otive) and **AIDMAA** (**A**ction **A**gain). The advertisement needs to be capable of attracting the attention of a potential consumer – by arbitrary or non-arbitrary methods, even shocking methods, even if the object of advertising seems to be noted quite incidentally without additional instructions. Then we go to the interest. Perception in some people could be emotional, in others analytical, associative,

objective, etc. Emotions and sensations can raise a desire that motivates action (11). Attracting the attention of the consumer is a focal point also in the ACCA model and it is the only way leading to that particular level of informational awareness preceding the perception of the arguments, attitude, persuasion and motivation to provoke action and action again in models like **4A and DIBABA**, even in the classic marketing model **DAGMAR** proposed by Russel Colley based on his four-step tree of objectives. The important thing is that the communication act begins only after the communicator has drawn the attention of the consumer (12). This is not an end in itself, this is the only chance to arouse interest, desire, motive for action, action, action again. At least the first two events are inherently connected with the creative originality and ingenuity of the advertising message which also determines the efficiency of the appeal itself.

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