Chapter 13

Historical Transformation of Unique Selling Proposition (USP) in Advertising Narration

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, historical transformation of unique selling proposition (USP) concept will be examined. The significance and the functions of it will be analyzed in building a positive attitude towards the brand and ultimately the brand recall in advertising narration. In advertising history, the roots of USP date back to reason-why advertising concept proposed by John E. Kennedy, who went on to explain that advertising should give prospects reasons why they should buy the product being advertised and why it was a better buy than competing products. Later, Claude C. Hopkins believed that advertising should be built around a single selling point and developed the preemptive claim technique establishing a product’s uniqueness. Hopkins’s pre-emptive claim later became USP in the hands of Rosser Reeves. Even today, Hopkins’s rules are a staple of marketing textbooks and the foundation of millions of advertisement campaigns. The term USP has been enhanced by the concept of a positioning statement, which was popularized by the marketing professionals and authors Al Ries and Jack Trout.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, historical transformation of Unique Selling Proposition (USP) concept will be examined, the significance and the functions of it will be analyzed in building a positive attitude towards the brand and ultimately the brand recall in advertising narration. The roots of USP date back to ‘reason-why advertising’ concept proposed by legendary Copywriter John E. Kennedy, who went on to explain that advertising should give prospects reasons why they should buy the product being advertised and why it was a better buy than competing products or alternatives. In advertising history.

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Later, the supreme master of direct response copywriting Claude C. Hopkins believed that advertising should be built around a single selling point. He developed the ‘preemptive claim’ technique, which established a product’s uniqueness. For each product, he tried to find a unique factor that set it apart from its rivals. Hopkins called this the ‘pre-emptive claim’. Later, in the hands of Rosser Reeves, it became the ‘Unique Selling Proposition (USP)’. Reeves pushed the idea to an extreme, turning each USP into a simple slogan with repetitive ads (Tungate, 2007, p.16, 26).

A unique selling proposition (USP) is the statement that refers to the unique benefit proposed by a company, service, product or brand that enables it to differ from its competitors. A clearly articulated USP is often an integral part of a company’s branding strategy. It can be a very powerful tool in shaping and focusing on marketing objectives to position the brand and the products of the company successfully apart from the competition. A USP tries to communicate a unique benefit of products or services to consumers, helps it to stay memorable in consumer’s minds and forms a positive impression (Markus, 2017).

In the first part of this chapter, historical transformation of USP has been examined. In the second part, the concept of USP has been defined and the later parts the most popular unique selling propositions, the major functions of a well-formulated USP have been explained.

HISTORICAL TRANSFORMATION OF USP

A prominent advertising executive Albert Lasker (1880-1952), with the help of advertising and marketing legends John E. Kennedy (1864-1928) and Claude C. Hopkins (1886-1932) established modern advertising, as it’s known today. In the 1900s, basing on ‘direct response’ and ‘scientific advertising,’ they established the copywriter as crucial to advertising agency operations (Sivulka, 2012, p.103). Lasker’s creative and powerful use of ‘reason-why’ advertising to inject ideas and arguments into advertising campaigns had a profound impact on modern advertising. They were the precursors of the consumer-centered ‘unique selling proposition’ approach that dominates the industry today (Cruikshank & Schultz, 2010, preface). The ‘pre-emptive claim’ or ‘unique factor’ of product later became the ‘Unique Selling Proposition’ (USP) in the hands of Rosser Reeves (1910-1984). Even today, these rules are a staple of marketing textbooks and the foundation of millions of advertisement campaigns (Basal, 2017, pp. 39-46).

From ‘Reason-Why Advertising’ to ‘Preemptive Claim’

In advertising history, the roots of USP date back to ‘Reason-Why Advertising’ approach proposed by legendary copywriter John E. Kennedy, who went on to explain that advertising should give prospects reasons why they should buy the product being advertised and why it was a better buy than competing products or alternatives uses of the consumer’s limited budget (Kennedy, 2014, pp. 7-10). This new advertising approach shifted the focus of advertisements to sales arguments designed to overcome any consumer resistance (Schorman, 2008, pp. 181-219). It was the ‘hard-sell style’ advertising copy, which was in sharp to contrast to simple brand-name identification selling the product name to the public.

In the 1900s, reason-why practitioners John E. Kennedy, Albert Lasker, and Claud Hopkins established the copywriter as crucial to advertising agency operations (Sivulka, 2012, p. 103). ‘Reason-why’ copy was actually the norm for advertising of all types until the emergence of television in the years following World War II. (Jones, 2002, p. 4). Specifically, advances in print media and direct mail in the
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