

# AMBIENT MARKETING PRACTICES IN THE UNITED STATES: A PROFESSIONAL VIEW

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## ABSTRACT:

Although ambient communication has been of particular interest to both marketers and advertising agencies over the last several years, there is a paucity of academic research concerning ambient media usage. Academic research is limited to traditional outdoor advertising, specifically investigating billboards and outdoor and point-in-time examples of ambient success. This present study investigates the use of ambient marketing strategies by professionals in the various fields that make up marketing communication in order to fill a void in the existing literature. Overall, this study provides clarity regarding how marketing and public relations professionals (i.e. professional communicators) consider ambient media practices as a strategy for overall communication efforts. This qualitative study investigated the attitudes and feelings of marketing and public relations professionals regarding the use of ambient marketing practices. Findings stem from 39 in-depth interviews with communication professionals in the New England region of the United States. Analysis reveals a detailed picture showing that professional communicators are not completely knowledgeable about the term “ambient” but are generally knowledgeable about non-traditional types of marketing techniques. We found that the degree of attitudes, knowledge and use varied between specific disciplines within the professional communication field, and as well as between the age levels of participants. This study may form the basis for survey-based studies investigating the specific variables inherent in ambient media usage.

## KEY WORDS:

ambient marketing, traditional advertising, guerrilla marketing, out-of-home advertising, Public Relations, marketing trends

## 1 Introduction

Advertising is the world of innovative and creative ideas that help brands and businesses continue to grow by grabbing attention from consumers. Throughout the past decade the marketing strategy of guerrilla marketing, and more specifically ambient marketing, has grown throughout the United States. A primary con-

cern for many companies today regards how to connect to potential consumers: specifically how to reach their personalities, dreams and desires.<sup>1</sup> However, in an economy where attention has become the fundamental, yet more difficult first attribute, generating ideas and insights on how to draw consumers closer to the company becomes both vital and difficult for any business to be successful.<sup>2</sup>

Guerrilla marketing stems not only from the idea that advertising must get the customer's attention but also about having excellent advertising efforts support excellent products and services.<sup>3</sup>

The professional communication industries of advertising, public relations, and marketing perceive that advertising clutter has led to a decline in advertising effectiveness. Other factors contributing to this perception include extreme competition in crowded categories, greater demand regarding accountability of products, services, and organisations, as well as a proliferation of brands.<sup>4</sup>

Taken together, these factors have led to a demand for more effective advertising at lower costs.<sup>5</sup> In the United States of America alone, where digital advertising expenditures alone are over \$160 billion a year (which buys an average of 1,500 exposures per person every day, of which only fractions are remembered and fewer still in a positive way), experts estimate that financial waste regarding advertising reaches into the billions a year.<sup>6</sup> Thus, advertising executives are rethinking strategies to reach these "jaded audiences", which often leads to "radical" methods in message dissemination.<sup>7</sup>

Researchers have long documented the effect creativity has in advertising, specifically regarding its impact on consumers. While the body of literature consistently reaffirms the need for creativity, questions concerning effectiveness remain.<sup>8</sup> To this end, while developing novel and meaningful ads is still important, distinctive and unanticipated approaches that incorporate an effective surprise and carry strong message resonance are paramount for marketers.<sup>9</sup>

It should be noted that most of the literature found in scholarly research confirms the recurrent dimensions of advertising creativity, (originality or novelty)<sup>10</sup> and message relevance.<sup>11</sup> Placing advertisements in unusual places or on unusual items, indoors or outdoors has more recently been considered the key to successful communication campaigns. While all four 'P's in the marketing mix are important to the success of a communication campaign, place becomes the primary component in the hierarchy regarding guerrilla marketing and ambient marketing.

1 ROBERTS, K.: *The Lovemarks Effect, Winning in the Consumer Revolution*. New York : Powerhouse Books, 2006, p. 33.  
2 ROBERTS, K.: *The Lovemarks Effect, Winning in the Consumer Revolution*. New York : Powerhouse Books, 2006, p. 35.  
3 *What is Guerrilla Marketing*. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <<http://weburbanist.com/2008/07/01/what-is-guerrilla-marketing/>>.  
4 SRIVASTAVA, R. K., SHOCKER, A. D.: *Brand Equity: A Perspective on its Meaning and Measurement*. Cambridge, MA : Marketing Science Institute, 1991, p. 91-124; LUXTON, S., DRUMMOND, L.: What Is This Thing Called Ambient Advertising? In *Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference, Visionary Marketing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Facing the Challenge. Conference Proceedings*. Gold Coast, Australia : ANZMAC, 2000, p. 734-738.  
5 LUXTON, S., DRUMMOND, L.: What Is This Thing Called Ambient Advertising? In *Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference, Visionary Marketing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Facing the Challenge. Conference Proceedings*. Gold Coast, Australia : ANZMAC, 2000, p. 734.  
6 JAGDISH, N. S., RAJENDRA, S.: *Does Marketing Need Reform: Fresh Perspectives on the Future*. New York: Rutledge, 2015, p. 7.  
7 LUXTON, S., DRUMMOND, L.: What is this Thing Called Ambient Advertising? In *Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference, Visionary Marketing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Facing the Challenge. Conference Proceedings*. Gold Coast, Australia : ANZMAC, 2000, p. 734-738.  
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10 MERCANTI-GUÉRIN, M.: Consumers' Perception of the Creativity of Advertisements: Development of a Valid Measurement Scale. In *Recherche et Applications en Marketing*, 2008, Vol. 23, No. 4, p. 101-102.  
11 Regarding the issue of psychology of creativity and marketing communication, see FICHOVÁ, K.: *Psychology of Creativity for Marketing Communication*. Noailles : Association Amitié Franco-Slovaque, 2013, p. 102.

## 1.1 Advertising Influence

Despite the perception from the advertising and marketing industries that advertising effectiveness has declined, paid channels such as TV, newspapers and magazines remain trusted advertising formats.<sup>12</sup> According to the 2015 Nielsen Global Trust in Advertising Survey, which polled 30,000 online respondents in 60 countries to gauge consumer sentiment, about nineteen paid, earned and owned advertising mediums, "more than six-in-10 global respondents say they completely or somewhat trust TV ads (63 %), up one percentage point from 2013. Slightly fewer trust ads in newspapers (60 %) and magazines (58 %), which fell one and two percentage points, respectively, from two years ago." Furthermore, in 2015 Nielsen Consumer Neuroscience research revealed that success of an advertisement comes from three dimensions: "attention, conversion to long-term memory and emotional engagement." A key element in incorporating these three dimensions creatively into advertisements comes from knowing how to connect audiences with messages that deeply resonate. Research shows that "successful marketing campaigns require more than identifying the right channel for reaching consumers. It's also about delivering the right message."<sup>13</sup>

Consumer neuroscience research on learning and memory reveals best practices regarding memorability. People remember advertising content that is relatable, follows a simple and upbeat storyline, uses novel and striking imagery and makes an emotional connection with consumers. However, these best practices do not guarantee attention, let alone attachment from two problematic groups: those that show advertising fatigue, and those that avoid ads.<sup>14</sup> Advertising fatigue affects consumers who are interested in the advertisements, yet due to the large number of messages they receive in a day, are unable to process the information found in the advertisement. Therefore, due to this 'fatigue', messages are not received by the intended consumer, and therefore cannot lead to the desired action. The second group consists of people who deliberately avoid traditional advertisements. Studies by academics and industry specialists suggest that somewhere between 10-20 % of the population either actively or passively avoid ads.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, despite paying for this time or space, the psychographics and demographics sought by the advertisers are not reached.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, traditional time slots for advertising in radio and television are 30 seconds, 15 seconds, and increasing only 10 seconds of airtime.<sup>17</sup> Commercials longer than 30 seconds were originally intended to attract attention by giving marketers more time to tell stories that would appeal to viewers. However, studies have found that consumers lose attention after 45 seconds. Those TV commercials shorter than 30 seconds are created to have surprise value because they are usually over before commercial-haters can zap or zip past them.<sup>18</sup> In addition to correct dissemination and attention-getting concepts, communication efforts must be memorable.

Significant research can be found investigating how memory works in a variety of academic disciplines. For our purposes in the present research, we refer to Tulvin's findings, in which he defined the three key memory systems as: 1) semantic: knowledge based memories; 2) episodic: emotional based memories; and 3) somatic: action based memories.<sup>19</sup> An advertisement, therefore, must trigger all three separate memory

12 *Nielsen Global Online Consumer Survey, Trust in Advertising, a Global Nielsen Consumer Report 2015*. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <<http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/niensenglobal/apac/docs/reports/2015/nielsen-global-trust-in-advertising-report-september-2015.pdf>>.

13 *Nielsen Global Online Consumer Survey, Trust in Advertising, a Global Nielsen Consumer Report 2015*. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <<http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/niensenglobal/apac/docs/reports/2015/nielsen-global-trust-in-advertising-report-september-2015.pdf>>.

14 VRANICA, S.: *New Strategy Fights TV Ad Fatigue*. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <<http://iadweek.me/2015/08/18/new-strategy-fights-tv-ad-fatigue/>>; DIX, S., PHAU, I.: Television Advertising Avoidance: Advertising Research Methodology. In *Journal of Promotion Management*, 2010, Vol. 16, No. 1-2, p. 116.

15 WU, T.: *Is Ad Avoidance a Problem?* [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <<http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/is-ad-avoidance-a-problem>>.

16 STÜHMEIER, T., WENZEL, T.: Getting Beer during Commercials: Adverse Effects of Ad-avoidance. In *Information Economics and Policy*, 2011, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 5.

17 ELLIOTT, S.: *TV Commercials Adjust to a Shorter Attention Span*. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <[http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/08/business/media/tv-commercials-adjust-to-a-shorter-attention-span.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/08/business/media/tv-commercials-adjust-to-a-shorter-attention-span.html?_r=0)>.

18 ELLIOTT, S.: *TV Commercials Adjust to a Shorter Attention Span*. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <[http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/08/business/media/tv-commercials-adjust-to-a-shorter-attention-span.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/08/business/media/tv-commercials-adjust-to-a-shorter-attention-span.html?_r=0)>.

19 TULVING, E.: How Many Memory Systems are there? In *American Psychologist*, 1985, Vol. 40, No. 4, p. 387.

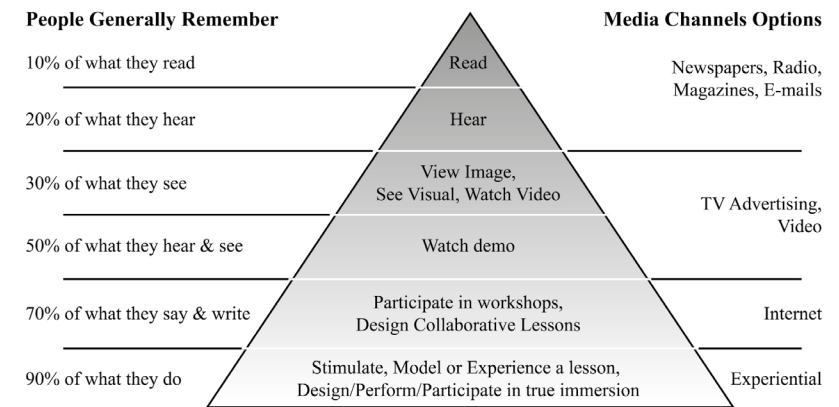
systems.<sup>20</sup> Nielsen research supports the idea that advertisements depicting real-life situations resonate most powerfully, which therefore triggers all three systems of memory.<sup>21</sup>

## 1.2 Ambient Marketing Overview

Considered part of guerrilla marketing, ambient marketing started by being a low cost approach of doing marketing in a more efficient way. However, “creativity makes this marketing strategy stand out in a world filled with passive messages” apart from guerrilla marketing strategies.<sup>22</sup> Ambient marketing utilises and demands geographical locations to determine the best location to place the advertisement for it to be successful.<sup>23</sup> The phrase “ambient marketing” was coined in 1996 by the British agency Concord Advertising, which specialised in outdoor advertising. The agency found out its clients were strongly pushing for new solutions for communication campaigns, to such an extent that the Agency was forced to seek new methods to get out the message.

“Originally known as ‘fringe media’, ambient media are communications platforms that surround us in everyday life.”<sup>24</sup> Ambient marketing is the guerrilla variant of classical outdoor advertising, placed at unusual locations in the direct social environment of the target audience.<sup>25</sup> “The distinctive feature of ambient advertising is to confront” the target audience with “incongruous stimuli in an uncommon background” to cause surprise.<sup>26</sup> When talking about advertising and ambient advertising in particular, attractiveness, ingenuity, and creativity are considered important factors. Modern consumers do not want to be imposed with pre-conditioned mass messaging.<sup>27</sup> Research has found that ambient advertising has the ability to trigger respect and curiosity within the audience, and is typically not seen as geared towards a mass audience.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps this is because in ambient media environments, the media becomes part of daily life activities and environments.<sup>29</sup> Ambient media, “also called ambient marketing, ambient advertising, street marketing” has many shapes and forms, “ranging from traditional outdoor to alternative out-of-home and guerrilla marketing”, and employs the urban landscape in ways that are generally more creative, unexpected and less expensive than traditional advertising.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, as the cone of experiential engagement illustrates (see Scheme 1), more people generally remember what they do over what they see or hear.<sup>31</sup> Thus, as ambient marketing/media provides an experience or immersion, more people remember messages presented using this strategy.

20 ROSSITER, J. R., PERCY, L.: Advertising Communication Models. In *Advances in Consumer Research*, 1985, Vol. 12, p. 510-524.  
 21 Nielsen Global Online Consumer Survey, Trust in Advertising, a Global Nielsen Consumer Report 2015. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <<http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/niensenglobal/apac/docs/reports/2015/nielsen-global-trust-in-advertising-report-september-2015.pdf>>.  
 22 SEMENESCU, S., MARTINSSON, M.: *The ‘Ambient’ Strategy to Diminish the Resistance: A Study on Ambient Advertising and the Contemporary Consumer Resistance Towards Advertising*. Lund : Lund University, 2012. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <<http://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/o.o.i.s?id=24965&postid=2835001>>; SHANKAR, A., HORTON, B.: Ambient Media: Advertising’s New Media Opportunity? In *International Journal of Advertising*, 1999, Vol. 18, No. 3, p. 4.  
 23 TURK, T., EWING, M. T., NEWTON, F. J.: Using Ambient Media to Promote HIV/AIDS Protective Behavior Change. In *International Journal of Advertising*, 2006, Vol. 25, No. 3, p. 336.  
 24 CORNELISSEN, J.: *Corporate Communications: Theory and Practice*. London : Sage, 2004, p. 182.  
 25 HUTTER, K., HOFFMANN, S.: Guerrilla Marketing: The Nature of the Concept and Propositions for Further Research. In *Asian Journal of Marketing*, 2011, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 43.  
 26 HUTTER, K., HOFFMANN, S.: Guerrilla Marketing: The Nature of the Concept and Propositions for Further Research. In *Asian Journal of Marketing*, 2011, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 43.  
 27 HOLT, D. B.: Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding. In *Journal of Consumer Research*, 2002, Vol. 29, No. 1, p. 83.  
 28 SEMENESCU, S., MARTINSSON, M.: *The ‘Ambient’ Strategy to Diminish the Resistance: A Study on Ambient Advertising and the Contemporary Consumer Resistance Towards Advertising*. Lund : Lund University, 2012. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <<http://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/o.o.i.s?id=24965&postid=2835001>>.  
 29 LUGMAYR, A. et al.: Categorization of Ambient Media Projects on Their Business Models, Innovativeness, and Characteristics – Evaluation of Nokia UBimedia MindTrek Award Projects of 2010. In *Multimedia Tools and Applications*, 2012, Vol. 66, No. 1, p. 35.  
 30 GAMBETTI, R. C., SCHULTZ, D. E.: Reshaping the Boundaries of Marketing Communication to Bond with Consumers. In *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 2015, Vol. 21, No. 1, p. 2.  
 31 DALE, E.: The Cone of Experience. In *Audiovisual Methods in Teaching*. Hinsdale, IL: Dryden Press, 1969, p. 107-135.



Scheme 1: Experiential Engagement

Source: Experiential Engagement. [online]. [2015-12-30]. Available at: <<http://image.slidesharecdn.com/unlockingxm-whitenotes-100526195311-phpapp01/95/unlocking-the-power-of-experiential-marketing-white-notes-17-728.jpg?cb=1274921328>>.

Unusual locations are a defining characteristic for ambient advertising. However, ‘unusual locations’ lose their differential with repetition and over time. Therefore, what may be considered ambient today may not be considered that tomorrow due to the audience’s growing familiarity with any given location.<sup>32</sup> Ambient media is also argued to follow Marshall McLuhan’s notion that the medium is the message.<sup>33</sup> Ambient advertising, and by extension ambient media, extends the human senses of sight, hearing, touch, and smell to generate ideas, and emotions as well as new perception and new experiences.<sup>34</sup> Ambient media engages people and leaves a distinct imprint in the consumer’s mind.<sup>35</sup> The consumer connects this experience and the feelings stirred up during the experience, with the brand. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, ambient efforts “reach consumers in places and at times when their advertising consciousness is deactivated.”<sup>36</sup>

Because of the overlap with outdoor advertising, and the fleeting nature of the experience, and what is considered new and unique over time, the specific concept of ambient marketing can be difficult to define. While the practice uses outdoor media and therefore can be considered as traditional out-of-home advertising, it also implements unconventional placements way beyond traditional media avenues. Problems arriving at a clear definition of ambient media also comes from the decidedly non-media focus of many ambient activities; such as painted sidewalks, the colour of water in the pool in front of the cinema, organising sham street processions and demonstrations, protests or the public eye-catching choreography of flash mobs.<sup>37</sup> What is clear is that ambient efforts are non-conventional, new and surprising ideas that create an instantaneous connection which resonates with the audience and generates immediate buzz and viral activity.<sup>38</sup> Ambient marketing is more than simply a way to approach advertising. It is a way of thinking. With ambient marketing, everything is an advertising stage, therefore there are no limits regarding where a message can be placed.

32 LUXTON, S., DRUMMOND, L.: What is This Thing Called ‘Ambient Advertising’? In *Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference, Visionary Marketing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Facing the Challenge. Conference Proceedings*. Gold Coast, Australia : ANZMAC, 2000, p. 735.  
 33 MCLUHAN, M.: *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man*. Berkley: Ginko Press, 2003, p. 25.  
 34 LUGMAYR, A. et al.: Semantic Ambient Media – An Introduction. In *Multimedia Tools and Applications*, 2009, Vol. 44, No. 3, p. 338.  
 35 GAMBETTI, R. C.: Ambient Communication: How to Engage Consumers in Urban Touch-Points. In *California Management Review*, 2010, Vol. 52, No. 3, p. 34-51.  
 36 GAMBETTI, R. C.: Ambient Communication: How to Engage Consumers in Urban Touch-Points. In *California Management Review*, 2010, Vol. 52, No. 3, p. 35.  
 37 SERAZIO, M.: *Your Ad Here: The Cool Sell of Guerrilla Marketing*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Pennsylvania : University of Pennsylvania, 2010, p. 40. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <<http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1320&context=e-dissertations>>.  
 38 *How to Get Creative with Ambient Campaigns*. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <<http://www.ambientmediaw.com/wordpress/?tag=guerrilla-marketing>>.

In addition, many times the use of ambient marketing provides less financial contributions than traditional marketing. However, with new technologies, such as LED technology, high quality sound editing, and creative modern architectural designs, ambient alternatives can be more costly than, in many cases, the most expensive traditional outlets.<sup>39</sup>

### 1.3 Ambient Marketing Specialties

Ambient marketing naturally ties into public relations activities, which usually require less a financial commitment. In addition to the low cost of entry, the novelty of ambient media often times lends the communication effort a mainstream media mention, providing added credibility to the campaign or event. This additional level of credibility, commonly called third party credibility, reinforces public relations efforts in general.

Ambient advertising differs from traditional media primarily because it is impossible to ignore. This is because, as mentioned before, ambient marketing assumes that virtually every space is a potential carrier, which can be used for presentation of thoughts, ideas or products. Thus, as a form of communication, ambient media/marketing when adequately prepared is extremely effective.

Ambient marketing has many noted differentiators from both traditional and other non-traditional forms of media. Luxton and Drummond list several, too numerous to list for our purposes here; however, three are prudent to note.<sup>40</sup> To begin with, ambient is considered more engaging than out-of-home and hence has less financial waste. Ambient also draws upon incomplete message more than out-of-home. This is because the uncommon component inherent in the use of ambient raises the level of interest in consumers and hence increases their willingness to expend cognitive effort to process message.<sup>41</sup> The third key differentiator regards selective exposure. What this means is that consumers tend to notice advertisements for the brands they buy and avoid those brands they do not consider. However, this selective exposure happens much less often with ambient strategies because ambient media cannot be easily ignored.

Several factors have driven expansion of ambient media: high engagement, specific targeting options, proximity to point-of-sale, measurable impact and cost effectiveness.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, overall exposure to and measurable recall of this media “is growing as individuals spend more time commuting to work, walking in urban areas, waiting in transit hubs, and shopping at retail outlets.”<sup>43</sup> However, to be effective, three principles should be considered when planning ambient techniques. Proximity is important. Ambient efforts must be located where the target audience lives and/or spends their time.

Another principle in successful ambient media/marketing activities is that the place (physical location) must be considered with three different, but equally important reference points: 1) actual physical location, 2) what the location means to consumers, and 3) how location relates to the product. Timing must also be considered, as ambient efforts work best when the consumers are not too busy, or distracted to notice their surroundings. These three key principles are considered in tandem with the innovative, controversial or humorous idea.<sup>44</sup>

39 DAHLÉN, M., GRANLUND, A., GRENROS, M.: The Consumer-perceived Value of Nontraditional Media: Effects of Brand Reputation, Appropriateness and Expense. In *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 2006, Vol. 26, No. 3, p. 35.

40 LUXTON, S., DRUMMOND, L.: What is This Thing Called ‘Ambient Advertising’? In *Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference, Visionary Marketing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Facing the Challenge. Conference Proceedings*. Gold Coast, Australia: ANZMAC, 2000, p. 736.

41 LUXTON, S., DRUMMOND, L.: What is This Thing Called Ambient Advertising? In *Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference, Visionary Marketing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Facing the Challenge. Conference Proceedings*. Gold Coast, Australia: ANZMAC, 2000, p. 736.

42 GAMBETTI, R. C.: Ambient Communication: How to Engage Consumers in Urban Touch-Points. In *California Management Review*, 2010, Vol. 52, No. 3, p. 39.

43 GAMBETTI, R. C.: Ambient Communication: How to Engage Consumers in Urban Touch-Points. In *California Management Review*, 2010, Vol. 52, No. 3, p. 39.

44 HATALSKA, N.: *Niestandardowe formy promocji*. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <[http://www.hatalska.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/N.Hatalska\\_NiestandardoweFormyPromocji\\_MarketingIRynek2002.pdf](http://www.hatalska.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/N.Hatalska_NiestandardoweFormyPromocji_MarketingIRynek2002.pdf)>.

Despite increased ambient media/marketing use as shown in the number of entries found in blogs, corporate websites and industry publications concerning the practice, little current academic literature is available. Existing academic research is limited to “traditional outdoor advertising literature on billboards and outdoor and point-in-time examples of ambient success.”<sup>45</sup> Therefore, this present study investigates the use of ambient marketing strategies by professionals in the various fields that make up marketing communication in order to fill a void in the existing literature.

### 1.4 Current Research Parameters

Overall, the goal of this research was to gain a better understanding of how marketing and public relations professionals (i.e. professional communicators) consider ambient media practices as a strategy for overall communication offers. Previous studies investigating the value of ambient communication from the consumer perspective, found “advertising communicated through congruent nontraditional (ambient) media enhance consumer perception of advertising value, as compared to advertising placed in traditional or incongruent non-traditional (non-ambient) media.”<sup>46</sup>

Other studies focus on studying and analysing ambient media to gain an understanding towards the types of products and services that employ ambient media strategies.<sup>47</sup> While there is a paucity of academic research concerning attitudes of professional communicators regarding ambient media as a viable approach, consumer research into ambient media in Germany in 2014 reveals that 25 % of respondents fully agreed that ambient media produces mass attention.<sup>48</sup>

However, that same study found that ambient media advertising is not considered “easy to control and manage”, nor is it “reliable”.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, only 20 % of respondents reported that ambient media is “accepted by the audience”.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the current study is set out to investigate ambient media use and attitudes towards the practice in professional communication by media and marketing professionals. Our specific research questions were as follows:

- RQ<sub>1</sub> What are the general attitudes towards the idea of ambient media within communication professionals?
- RQ<sub>2</sub> What sector of professional communications employs ambient marketing strategies?
- RQ<sub>3</sub> What role does location play in communication campaigns across the professional communication disciplines?

## 2 Research Method

Before starting the research, we assessed what strategy would best fit our overall research question, which regarded how professional communicators working in advertising, marketing and public relations firms view the practice of ambient media. Because existing research underscored a strong theoretical framework, this study employed an abductive approach to the research.

45 GAMBETTI, R. C., SCHULTZ, D. E.: Reshaping the Boundaries of Marketing Communication to Bond with Consumers. In *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 2015, Vol. 21, No. 1, p. 3.

46 ROSENGREN, S., MODIG, R., DAHLÉN, M.: The Value of Ambient Communication from a Consumer Perspective. In *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 2015, Vol. 21, No. 1, p. 20-32.

47 PONINTHAWONG, C.: Analysis of the Ambient Media Approach of Advertisement Samples from the Adman Awards & Symposium under the Category of Outdoor & Ambience. In *International Journal of Social, Behavioral, Educational, Economic, Business and Industrial Engineering*, 2012, Vol. 6, No. 11, p. 3173-3176.

48 *How Much Do You Agree with the Following Statements about Ambient Media? Ambient Media Advertising*. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <<http://www.statista.com/statistics/398286/ambient-media-customer-opinion-germany/>>.

49 *How Much Do You Agree with the Following Statements about Ambient Media? Ambient Media Advertising*. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <<http://www.statista.com/statistics/398286/ambient-media-customer-opinion-germany/>>.

50 *How Much Do You Agree with the Following Statements about Ambient Media? Ambient Media Advertising*. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <<http://www.statista.com/statistics/398286/ambient-media-customer-opinion-germany/>>.

This approach covers both practical reasoning and scientific inquiry, and allows the theoretical framework to assist us in exploring ambient media use within the professional communication environment.<sup>51</sup>

Interviews were determined to be the best approach to this study since the objective was to investigate attitudes and feelings of respondents to determine the dominant views of ambient media/marketing. This study used semi-structured, in-depth interview techniques, which provided the researchers with the opportunity to probe for more details. It was important for interviewers to be responsive to the emerging data and have the ability to modify the approach while conducting the research.

## 2.1 Interview Protocol

Interviews were conducted by telephone after an initial email was sent inquiring about professional communicators' interest in participating. A consent form was completed and returned to the researchers via email along with confirmation of date and time. Each interview began with basic demographic and general questions about advertising designed to understand individual's communication patterns and get a base line for respondent's experience in the field while attempting to create a relationship between the interviewer and interviewee.

Before conducting the interviews, we piloted the questionnaire to twelve professors of communication and marketing. During our pilot interviews we realised that many times, the reason why had to be probed more fully. Therefore, in the present research we used broad questions in order to elicit a more detailed and rich data set to analyse. The interview questions were the same for each interview in order to collect parallel data, yet left room for additional probing when the researcher thought it prudent.

Participants answered a series of questions concerning their daily tasks at their occupation, concepts of traditional marketing and non-traditional marketing and their opinions on how professional communication fields may use ambient media/marketing and/or guerrilla marketing techniques.

We probed to see what factors were involved in their determinations regarding ambient and guerrilla marketing techniques, and clarified when necessary.

Each interview lasted 30-45 minutes, and the audio was recorded via laptop to be coded and analysed. We used Scribe Express to transcribe each interview into a data file, and then coded the data into distinct concepts and categories, which formed the basic units of analysis. After we completed the basic categorical coding, a thematic analysis was performed focusing on salient themes relevant to the aims of this research study.

## 2.2 Sampling Method

This study used a simple random sample of advertising, marketing and public relation agencies. We randomly choose 25 agencies/firms per state, for 100 agencies. The states that were included in this study were Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York and Connecticut.

Participants were all marketing, advertising and public relations professionals from the New England region in the United States whose occupation titles ranged from Account Executive, Account Supervisor or Vice-President. We excluded the titles of Account Coordinator and Assistant Account Executive because these titles are traditionally entry-level positions, and we wanted more 'seasoned' participants.

Each participant's response was kept strictly confidential, and digital data was stored in secure computer files, in a locked office. Participants were notified that their answers would not be affiliated with their name or company/organisation.

51 SVENNEVIG, J.: *Abduction as a Methodological Approach to the Study of Spoken Interaction*. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <<http://home.bi.no/a0210593/Abduction%20as%20a%20methodological%20.pdf>>.

## 2.3 Sampling Size

Our study reached out to 300 professionals from 100 organisations, assuming that the sampling rate would be low. We held this expectation because research has shown that in North America, response rates have decline through the years with the lowest level found from studies involving top management or organisational representatives.<sup>52</sup> We received 123 responses back, and conducted interviews with 39 respondents, for a 32 % response rate. The final number of participants, collected and analysed is supported by significant research suggesting a good sample consists of around thirty participants. "This medium size subject pool offers the advantage of penetrating beyond a very small number of people without imposing the hardship of endless data gathering."<sup>53</sup> Specifically regarding social research, research suggests that the minimum number of interviews "needs to be between twenty and thirty for an interview-based qualitative study to be published."<sup>54</sup>

## 2.4 Category Construction

The basis units of analysis were formed from the first level of coding. From the basic categories, we were able to apply a thematic analysis focusing on salient themes relevant to the aims of this article. In doing this, we began with general demographic and psychographic information to frame our analysis in order to determine any patterns within the data. Themes were developed in a circular fashion as a number of pre-existing notions and theories were already present as a lens from which to analyse the data. These initial themes were derived from reflections upon a review of literature and methodological tools.

Three major groups of codes relevant to the purpose of this study were identified after transcribing the interviews:

1. **Terminology:** the different words used in the field, meanings and connotations.
2. **Location:** where to reach consumers from the perspective of different focus areas in the wide field of professional communication.
3. **Limits of practice:** what limits may exist in using ambient strategies regarding brand development; how and why non-traditional techniques may or may not work.

## 3 Findings

In part due to the strict titles found in the professional communication fields of advertising, marketing and public relations, and in part to the 'burn out' nature of the creative industries, our respondents had on average time six years in the job.<sup>55</sup> Each of the interviewees held the title of Account Executive, Account Supervisor or Vice-President. The interviewees averaged six years in the professional communication field. The fields of the creative industries that include professional communications are comprised of young executives, and our sample reflected this.<sup>56</sup> Fifty-five percent (n = 39) of the participants were between the ages of 24 and 30 while 45 % of participants were between the ages 31 and 55. The gender of respondents were slightly more female (56 %) then male (44 %), with the older demographics reporting their gender as male more often than the younger, more female group.

52 BARUCH, Y.: Response Rate in Academic Studies – A Comparative Analysis. In *Human Relations*, 1999, Vol. 52, No. 4, p. 423.

53 BAKER, S. E., EDWARDS, R.: *How Many Qualitative Interviews Is Enough?* [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <[http://eprints.nerm.ac.uk/2273/4/how\\_many\\_interviews.pdf](http://eprints.nerm.ac.uk/2273/4/how_many_interviews.pdf)>.

54 WARREN, C. A. B.: Qualitative Interviewing. In GUBRIUM, J. F., HOLSTEIN, J. A. (eds.): *Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002, p. 132; BRYMAN, A.: *Social Research Methods*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 425.

55 McGUINNESS, M.: *Is Burnout Inevitable in the Creative Industries? Wishful Thinking, Creative Coaching and Training*. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <<http://www.wishfulthinking.co.uk/2009/10/19/burnout-creative-industries/>>.

56 WHITEMAN, R.: *The Average Age of a Creative Is 28, While the Average New Car Buyer Is 56 – That's a Problem*. [online]. [2015-12-20]. Available at: <<http://www.mediapost.com/publications/article/260078/the-average-age-of-a-creative-is-28-while-the-ave.html>>.

### 3.1 General Framing Measures

To provide a frame from which to analyse the findings regarding ambient media practices, we asked respondents what their favourite thing was about working in their respective fields. We found a difference between those working in public relations, advertising and marketing. In public relations, the most common words appearing were “storytelling”, “public opinion”, “making a difference”, and “never boring”.

However, in the marketing and advertising fields, participants’ answers were more varied. Overall, they all stated “measurable”, “brainstorming”, and “always something new to learn” in addition to “seldom boring”. Whereas, participants in the marketing fields mentioned “user generated content” and “screens” more frequently than those working in advertising. These terms did not appear in the conversations between researchers and public relations professionals. These differences were of key importance when collectively framing the responses of each industry professional’s opinion on ambient media.

Analysis revealed that our sample leaned more heavily towards the public relations discipline (39 %). The disciplines of advertising and marketing had 33 % and 28 %, respectively. Analysis showed that while this distinction frames the discussion in places, overall what discipline the participant worked in did not make a noticeable difference when aggregating the results.

### 3.2 Attitudes towards Ambient Media

Attitudes towards ambient media uses varied among age groups and among the professional fields. To fully understand the attitudes of professional communicators, it is prudent to discuss our findings relating to the terminology used surrounding the idea of ambient media. While 83 % of participants believed they knew what the terms ambient media/marketing meant, the majority of their definitions were incorrect. In addition, 39 % (n = 32) of those who initially said they knew what the terms were, admitted several minutes later that they really had no idea what “ambient” meant. Twenty-three percent of those participants, who admitted they did not really know what ambient marketing was, reported thinking that they indeed had heard the term before. To further clarify, we asked them about the term “guerrilla marketing”. Ninety-nine percent of our participants had heard of the term, yet 22 % did not know where the term originated. The majority of those who did not know where the term came from were a younger demographic. Our analysis reveals that the younger respondents believed the term “guerrilla marketing” was old-fashioned. Perhaps the most interesting response was: “Guerrilla marketing came from old school PR professionals who had champagne taste on a beer budget.”

Older participants not only understood the term guerrilla marketing’s meaning, but could both explain where it came from and how it is used. Generally, all participants from this older demographic believed that the term is difficult to define, but related it to promotional techniques that are unconventional, unexpected, and allows for consumer interaction. The most concise response was: “It’s a state of mind, something unexpected. It is not anything resembling traditional advertising using traditional media.”

Other key term used by the majority of participants to define guerrilla marketing included “cheap”, “creative-thinking” and “cautious”. One response related all three concepts: “It allows creativity thinking and is cheap to execute, but you need to be cautious in using it without adequate planning.... things can go wrong.” Because the concept of guerrilla marketing involves consumer interaction, several respondents held lukewarm attitudes towards the practice, because: “The nature of a guerrilla campaign tends to attract attention, and this sometimes affects firm relationships with cities and other public administrations.”

Three participants referenced a Boston guerrilla marketing effort that attracted significant negative attention. In 2007, flashing LED circuit boards were quietly installed around the city of Boston to promote a new animated series, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*. However, the objects were mistaken for explosive devices, causing citywide panic as bomb squads were brought in to examine and remove the unknown devices. The installers were arrested for the hoax, and later released with charges dropped.

Overall, 45 % of our sample believed guerrilla marketing to be quite successful as a strategy, and the attitudes towards the concept of guerrilla marketing ranged from positive to neutral with all participants who

understood the practice admitting it works well specifically regarding consumer engagement. However, when participants were asked to define the difference between ambient marketing and guerrilla marketing, 78 % of the participants used the word “passive” to describing the difference.

During the interview, participants looked at a photograph taken from a McDonald’s ambient marketing effort. This effort painted a crosswalk yellow instead of white and added the McDonald’s french-fry container below it. This image was positioned to stand out from other food vendors at an event in Switzerland. Eighty-nine percent of the participants thought it was a “clever” and “great way” to promote the brand. The remaining 11 % did not understand how the sidewalk art engaged consumers, or how it could be measured for impact.

Our participants all held positive attitudes towards persuasive communication creating stronger consumer involvement. An older male participant who stated that he had no idea what ambient marketing was, and truly disliked the field of public relations responded that: “Direct response advertisements always work best in my opinion.” The majority (85 %) of responses regarding direct consumer involvement involved location as a key consideration.

### 3.3 The Role of Location in Ambient Marketing

All participants (n = 39) agreed that it is important to know how (language) to target the audience, as well as where to place the information (location). One female participant stated when being asked how her company targets messaging: “You have to know where your audience is located in order to zero in on them. You also have to know the external environment your audience is within.” When the participants were asked if location matters to employ successful ambient/guerrilla marketing techniques, 90 % of participants said yes. Some of the responses were “yes, it impacts levels of exposure”, “location always matters”, and “of course, location or placement matters in all marketing efforts”.

While the location matters in general, many people mentioned it in conjunction with “publicity”, “news value”, and “news coverage”. Our analysis suggests that while directly reaching customers is a primary concern, and thus location is paramount, location must also be chosen with news values and publicity in mind. Participants overwhelmingly mentioned the extra value to brands that comes from the publicity stemming from news coverage. What was not clear in the analysis, and which will be discussed in the discussion section, concerns which concept – location or publicity – is most important to ambient media/marketing efforts. However, while location and resulting publicity were important concepts to emerge from the analysis, there were several limits to ambient media/marketing that were discussed by participants in our interviews.

### 3.4 Limits of Practice for Ambient

Participants were asked to discuss what limits may exist regarding the use of ambient media/marketing strategies related to brand development. A reoccurring theme was found to involve the overuse of such strategies. While this was a common topic among and between all demographics, the opinions differed sharply. The opinions were divided almost in half, yet not along any demographics. There was also no determination regarding the type of professional communication (i.e. public relations, marketing or advertising). On the one hand, many reported that ambient marketing could be overused and that it would become commonplace enough that many consumers may not consider it “special” for long. “Just like billboards”, one argued when discussing giant mushrooms placed in New York City for the new television season of *Once Upon a Time* (ABC Network): “Why should people be surprised in the future to be walking past something like giant mushrooms? If this in-your-face marketing continues, soon people will be ignoring the ambient exhibits as they do billboards or Internet Ads.” However, about one half of the participants did not agree. One female participant said: “Being innovative and ‘cool’ will continue to be effective as long as we can do it in unique ways.”

Another respondent reported that ambient media/marketing “for the moment” will not go unnoticed: “There’s limitless creativity and space in ambient in comparison to traditional advertising and marketing strate-

gies – where we pay for certain sizes specs or time duration of ad space.” After analysing the key reasons underpinning the attitude that ambient media/marketing will *not* stop being effective, we found that common threads revolve around the ideas that these types of “stunts” cause people to pay attention, in part because they are “novel”, and in part because ambient is equated to “in-your-face” by some consumers, and immersive to others. “This type of communication strategy is effective as a spearhead concerning the marketing mix, because it provides a decisive advantage in getting the attention of consumers.” “Ambient marketing is a dynamic concept. It circumvents traditional and old methods and the creativity involved in the process provides endless opportunities.”

Overall, our analysis revealed that while ambient media/marketing may not be the term of choice, the concept of non-traditional marketing, more commonly called guerrilla marketing, is known and used in a variety of professional communication efforts. We found that 25 percent of public relation firms use ambient media/marketing, whereas 34 % of marketing firms and 37 % of advertising agencies have used such strategies. However, of all participants who answered that they had used (or their firm had used) ambient media/marketing strategies, nearly half were adamant that those strategies should not be considered for all products or organisations. Risk was a common thread among the participants who had used (or their firm had used) ambient media: “Clients that have traditional strong ‘family values’ or have a board of directors that are scared of negative publicity should be wary of using these strategies. The backlash can have a big bite.”

However, many participants who discussed risk factors, also said there were ways to mitigate this risk, and pointed towards “significant planning and prepping of executives”. Additionally, it was pointed out that non-traditional media “casts a wide net” allowing communication professionals to determine the amount of “risk acceptable to the clients” before choosing the message, approach and location.

## Discussion & Conclusion

The current study makes a conceptual contribution to the literature on ambient media/marketing communications. Although participants in our qualitative in-depth interviews were not as conversant regarding the term “ambient” as we had believed they would be, the terms they were familiar with (guerrilla and non-traditional) were a conceptual fit to ambient.

One of the most important take-a-ways from this study was that while the term ‘ambient’ can be found within industry publications, those in the field are not as aware of it as we had expected. This could be, as our study suggests, a terminology issue, or it may stem from other variables. These variables should be fleshed out in a future study. It was an interesting finding to see that the younger generation of professional communicators believe ‘guerrilla marketing’ to be an outdated term. Further research should investigate why that is, and try to predict if those same reasons may ultimately influence the future of ambient media/marketing.

Further research should also delve into whether the factors of publicity (media coverage) or location mean more to a corporation’s bottom line regarding customer interactions. While the location means that consumers are engaged in their natural habitat, and this factor does influence consumer attitudes, does it affect consumers more or less than does the third-party credibility stemming from publicity? This is perhaps the most interesting finding from this study regarding future research efforts. Such comparison can be conducted using a variety of methods, and would yield relevant and timely results for all communication industries. Findings from a study investigating impact ambient communication efforts have on consumers as compared to media coverage may have a significant impact on the future of public relation efforts specifically.

That the public relations discipline was represented statistically a bit heavier than the other two disciplines of marketing and advertising, may have impacted the discussion and the responses from those professionals more than the data analysis revealed. Future research needs to probe more deeply, into how the specific field of public relations is handling the strategy of ambient media. This would be an important distinction to consider regarding the conversation surrounding ambient media/advertising. This is because by the nature of the discipline, public relations generally does not 1) use ads as a first choice, 2) has a number of other available tools that may mimic the same consumer engagement model that ambient does and 3) has the ear of management when it comes to reputation management.

Lastly, additional research needs to be undertaken investigating the role social media plays in ambient media campaigns. Respondents mentioned social media several times, but we were unable to pinpoint how social media may influence ambient media decisions. Perhaps using a social media example in addition to a location-based ambient marketing example can jumpstart the conversation in future studies.

It should be noted that the limits of what is seen as ambient is open to negotiation, and that has not been discussed within this study. Perhaps narrowing down what ambient was would have provided more clarification regarding some of our interview questions. As this study was qualitative in design, the findings should not be generalised to a wider population. Therefore, we suggest that similar studies may be conducted in other countries and cultures in order to identify relevant variables from which to build a multinational survey. However, our hope is that the variety of professions and ages represented in this study, as well as the in-depth perceptions found towards ambient media/marketing, could not be found from a survey or a broader-based analysis.

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