

# Chapter 28

## Sounds of Web Advertising

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### ABSTRACT

*Sound seems to be a neglected issue in the study of web ads. Web advertising is predominantly regarded as visual phenomena—commercial messages, as for instance banner ads that we watch, read, and eventually click on—but only rarely as something that we listen to. The present chapter presents an overview of the auditory dimensions in web advertising: Which kinds of sounds do we hear in web ads? What are the conditions and functions of sound in web ads? Moreover, the chapter proposes a theoretical framework in order to analyse the communicative functions of sound in web advertising. The main argument is that an understanding of the auditory dimensions in web advertising must include a reflection on the hypertextual settings of the web ad as well as a perspective on how users engage with web content.*

### INTRODUCTION

The shouting of the medieval public crier (Dyer 1982, 15) and similar historical instances of commercial announcements (e.g. Bridge 1921) illustrate a long auditory tradition of advertising. In advertising as we know it today, sound seems flourishing and—from a communicative point of view—indispensable in commercial messages in mass communication media such as radio and television (Graakjær & Jantzen 2009a). However,

when it comes to web advertising, one is often met with ‘sounds of silence’ as we will demonstrate empirically below. In a way, research on sounds in web advertising corresponds to this state of affairs, and only a few contributions have dealt considerably with the subject matter (e.g. Jackson & Fulberg 2003, Tsang 2007).

‘Silent sounds’ have been considered in studies of language in printed advertising (e.g. Myers 1994, Cook 2001) in terms of prosody, rhythm, and rhyme. Likewise, language in web advertising is interestingly demonstrated to have a pronounced spoken characteristic—and thereby

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implies sound. As pointed out by Janoschka (2004), written language in web ads typically plays on face-to-face communication as a means to involve the user: “The use of linguistic features that are typically found in spoken conversations (...) is particularly striking in online advertising interaction. This conceptual orality (...) reflects the affinity between language use and the conception of web ads found in the new communication medium. Characterized by the Web’s technical interactivity, the way in which language is utilized in online advertising can create the impression of interpersonal communication and communicative immediacy” (Janoschka 2004, 130). Following Janoschka, the conceptual oral character of the web ad serves as a schema or mental model of how the user is supposed to interact. For instance, a directly addressed question needs an answer; a request must be followed by an act, etc. In this way, the use of language is seen in correspondence to the possibility to interact and thereby ‘to answer’.

Thus, sound in web ads is verbally put into play in various ways. First of all, sound appears as implied and invited in the constructed communicative interaction. But sound is also seen as a reference in the communicated address, e.g. imperatives implying sound (‘*Turn up the volume*’, ‘*Listen*’) and icons indicating sound, e.g. notes, loudspeakers, and play-buttons.

Also visually, web ads sometimes *look* like having sound (see Mass 2002 for a comparable observation regarding printed ads) and ‘silent sounds’ appear affiliated to visual expressions in various ways. Sound can be implied as a synaesthetic<sup>1</sup> accompaniment—or a kind of ‘muted’ sound—to the visually highlighted expression of the text (cf. typography and graphics like capitals, bold, italics, underlining, coloured text, etc.), and because such visual means of expressions can be experienced as ‘noisy’, ‘invoking’, or ‘calling’, they are affiliated with auditory conditions. In relation to animated graphics, sound can be experienced in text or visual objects that are looping in sequences. Visiting a website that hosts many

animated ads, as for instance an online newspaper, may very well entail a ‘noisy’ experience, partly due to the abundance of advertising messages featured next to the editorial content, and partly because of the different rhythms of the animated ads which, in an overall view of the website, will probably seem to swing unsystematically. The expression of the specific ad is not necessarily ‘noisy’, though, and it can appear rather ‘rhythmical’ and ‘musical’. Furthermore, sound associations can arise as ‘muted’ sound from animated objects that are normally associated with sound as for instance animated cars and moving pictures of people seen talking.

In this regard, web advertising is accompanied by many ‘silent sounds’. But what about the real and heard sounds of web advertising? In the following, we will concentrate on the sounds of web ads that we actually hear. These sounds can be grouped in the following four broad categories: speech, music, incidental sounds, and sound effects. The empirical point of departure is a comprehensive material registered in a Danish context in two periods: 2004-2005 and 2008-2009. The material is analysed with the intent to specify the frequency, forms and functions of sound in web ads. In contrast to more limited scopes of previous studies (e.g. Tsang 2007), we will include different types of web ads, and we will not restrict the discussion to specific corporate brands. This allows us to give an empirically substantiated indication of ‘normality’ when it comes to the (non) presence of sounds in web ads, even though the empirical material can only hardly be considered representative of ‘web ads in general’ (more to this reservation below). As already hinted at, our findings suggest that sound is not particularly widespread. However, the registered material allows us to make a close examination of the web ads that actually *do* include sound, and the examples lead us to the proposal of an analytical framework. It is the intention that the proposed framework can provide both analysts and designers with useful insights into the (possible) appearances

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