

How Anti-Smoking Advertisements Persuade: A Rhetorical Analysis of CDC's "Terrie H.'s Tip" Using Key Terms

Ge Feng

*University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK
gefeng.nottingham@gmail.com*

Abstract. Advertising, as a mature persuasive communication tool, has been proven through long-term practice and research to effectively shape audiences' attitudes and decision-making tendencies in a short period of time. With the development of digital platforms, advertising has also used targeted delivery and situation design to deliver information more accurately and effectively. Because of this, advertising is not only widely used in commercial marketing but has also gradually become a key tool in public communication, providing a feasible strategic framework for health risk communication and behavioral intervention. This article, through a detailed analysis of the 30-second "Terrie H.'s Tips" commercial from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), explores how specific message features transform audiences from initial concern to a willingness to quit smoking. The study first identified 11 key marketing terms from the advertisement and analyzed how they played a persuasive role within the commercial. Then, it examined how these key terms interacted with each other to form a continuous path from attention to trust to emotional resonance and finally to the possibility of action. Furthermore, this article identified three target audiences for the advertisement. Overall, these key marketing terms were effectively utilized in the advertisement, enhancing its impact and persuasive power. This study also put forward some improvement suggestions, including strengthening resource prompts and action calls to enhance the audience's memory and subsequent actions.

Keywords: Anti-smoking advertising, key marketing terms, persuasive effects

1. Introduction

Advertising has long been recognized as an effective persuasive tool and is widely used in business. According to Blagorazumnaia and Trifonova, advertising has become an indispensable part of a company's strategic planning and operational activities [1]. Furthermore, advertising also plays a role in public health campaigns. A notable example is the "Tips from Former Smokers" video series produced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Former smokers were invited to share their personal experiences with smoking-related illnesses, aiming to motivate viewers to quit or avoid smoking [2].

This article focuses on the 30-second advertisement, "Terrie H.'s Tips." In this commercial, smoker Terrie appears on screen and shares her personal experience. The commercial powerfully combines contrasting visuals and audio to emphasize the consequences of smoking. For example,

the advertisement shows Terrie's previously healthy image and her current voice, which has become hoarse due to illness. By relying on real people rather than professional actors, the advertisement enhances its authenticity and credibility.

This article aims to analyze how this advertisement utilizes key marketing terms to achieve persuasive effects. To be specific, it will explore 11 key terms, including attractiveness, nonverbal cues, order effects and response efficacy. Furthermore, the paper will identify the target audience for the commercial and evaluate its overall effectiveness.

The study demonstrates how even a brief message can translate emotional appeal into behavioral motivation when its persuasive elements are coherently structured. By revealing how attention, credibility, and efficacy cues interact, it contributes to improving message effectiveness in future anti-smoking initiatives.

2. Key terms analysis

The commercial employs attractiveness at the beginning. In Arief, Mustikowati, and Chrismardani's study, advertising attractiveness is defined as the capability of an advertisement to capture consumer attention [3]. In this anti-smoking advertisement, a photo of Terrie when she was young and healthy is shown. At the same time, the audience can hear her current damaged voice. This strong contrast immediately captures the audience's attention, making people focus on the message.

Once the advertisement has captured attention, it reinforces persuasion through trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is defined as consumers' perception of an influencer's honesty, sincerity, and reliability, reflecting the confidence placed in their intentions to provide credible information [4]. Terrie is a real former smoker rather than a hired actress. Her appearance makes the commercial more convincing and reliable. Viewers are more likely to believe a message when they feel that the speaker is genuine and has nothing to gain from delivering it.

Beyond credibility, the advertisement also demonstrates nonverbal cues. According to Essiz, Senyuz and Yurteri, nonverbal cues are non-verbal signals that convey emotions and intentions without words, such as facial expressions and eye contact [5]. In the advertisement, Terrie's altered appearance and voice are particularly noticeable. Even without detailed verbal explanation, these nonverbal cues highlight the damage caused by smoking.

In addition to nonverbal cues, the commercial reflects source credibility through similarity. Terrie represents an ordinary person, someone who could be similar to the audience in age, background, or lifestyle. This perceived similarity allows the audience to identify with her story more easily, thereby increasing the persuasive power of the commercial.

The advertisement also communicates perceived severity. Perceived severity refers to individuals' assessment of how serious a health threat is, particularly regarding its potential to cause severe illness and pain as well as its negative impact on daily social and economic activities [6]. Even though the commercial does not name a specific illness, the visual image of Terrie's condition and the sound of her voice are enough to make clear how serious the consequences of smoking can be.

The commercial also reflects the ego-defensive function of attitudes. In consumer contexts, the ego-defensive function describes how individuals form attitudes to protect their self-esteem and reduce internal conflicts, often by justifying purchase decisions [7]. In the commercial, Terrie emphasizes the personal costs of smoking by showing the numerous preparations she has to make before going out. After watching that, audiences naturally want to avoid being in the same situation.

In addition, the advertisement conveys a value-expressive function. It allows the audience to express their values of health, responsibility, and care for family by choosing not to smoke.

According to Meydiawati, Pebrianti and Ramadania, the value-expressive function of attitude refers to the tendency of individuals to use products or brands as a means of expressing their self-identity, core values, and personal beliefs [8]. In this case, the commercial promotes the idea that avoiding smoking is not just about health but also about expressing who you are and what you stand for. This gives the message additional moral and emotional strength.

To ensure that the threat message translates into action, the advertisement highlights response efficacy. Response efficacy refers to individuals' belief that protective actions are effective in mitigating or eliminating a potential threat [9]. At the end of the commercial, the CDC provides the quitline and website, showing that there is a practical and effective solution. This tells the audience that smoking-related harms can be avoided if they take the recommended action. By including a clear and credible response option, the advertisement assures the audience that change is possible.

Along with response efficacy, the advertisement also encourages self-efficacy. By presenting real resources such as the quitline, the advertisement implies that individuals are capable of quitting smoking if they seek support. According to van Ooijen, Segijn and Oprea, self-efficacy refers to individuals' belief in their own ability and skills to carry out the necessary actions to protect their privacy [9]. Audiences are more likely to take action when they believe they have the ability to succeed.

The commercial further provides a utilitarian function by giving the audience practical and usable information. The utilitarian function of attitude refers to consumers' focus on the practical value and usefulness of a product or activity, emphasizing efficiency, task completion, and the reduction of time and effort [10]. The quitline and website are not abstract ideas but real services that can directly help people quit smoking. This makes the advertisement more practical, as it offers immediate value to the audience.

Finally, the advertisement makes use of order effects in its structure. Order effects are defined as changes in judgments or decisions that occur because sequential tasks are presented in different orders [11]. This commercial begins with a highly emotional message through Terrie's image and voice and ends with the quitline information as a solution. This sequence is crucial: by creating a sense of threat first and then offering a solution. This ensures that fear does not easily overwhelm the audience but rather guides them towards constructive action.

In summary, the advertisement's persuasion can be understood as a gradual process that moves the audience from attention to action. It first captures attention through the sharp visual and auditory contrast between Terrie's former and current image, drawing viewers into the message and highlighting the seriousness of smoking-related harm. Then it establishes trust through Terrie's authenticity and perceived similarity, which make her story both credible and relatable. As the message unfolds, emotional resonance grows through nonverbal cues and depictions of illness, transforming abstract risk into a deeply felt concern linked to personal values such as health and family care. Finally, efficacy information, including the quitline and website, provides clear solutions and conveys a sense of belief, turning fear into motivation. By structuring these persuasive elements in sequence, the advertisement effectively guides viewers from awareness and empathy toward readiness for action.

3. Target audience

The primary target audience of the CDC's "Terrie H.'s Tips" commercial is adult smokers. These individuals are directly at risk of experiencing the kinds of health consequences shown in the commercial. By presenting Terrie's altered voice and appearance, the advertisement forces current smokers to confront the potential outcomes of their habit.

Another group of the target audience consists of teenagers who might be tempted to start smoking. The use of shocking and emotional imagery works to discourage smoking initiation by highlighting the long-term costs. In this commercial, the inclusion of the quitline and website provides practical guidance, which is important for both current and potential smokers.

This advertisement also serves as a kind of indirect warning to the families of smokers. These audiences may be encouraged to support their loved ones in quitting by recognizing the severity of the consequences presented in the advertisement.

The impact of Terrie H.'s Tips extends beyond individual persuasion to broader psychological and social outcomes. On the psychological level, the advertisement triggers a strong emotional response by showing the actual consequences of smoking to the audience. The contrast between Terrie's past health and her current condition triggers fear and empathy, which together enhance the memory of the information and the perceived personal risk. This emotional engagement also boosts the credibility of the information, as audiences believe that this story is both true and urgent. A recent study also supports this pattern, indicating that appeals based on fear conveyed by real-life people are particularly effective in shaping attitudes and behaviors [12].

In addition to influencing individual behavior, persuasive public health advertisements also play a significant role in shaping collective beliefs and health norms. Numerous studies have shown that health-related advertisements can effectively change public attitudes, enhance knowledge, and promote a sense of shared social responsibility. Athey et al. found that advertisements can not only serve as persuasive tools at the individual level but also as a structural intervention to help build a more health-conscious social environment [13]. In this context, Terrie H.'s Tips extends their influence beyond direct emotional engagement, encouraging societies to view quitting smoking not only as an individual decision but also as a common moral commitment that contributes to the collective well-being.

4. Conclusion

The Terrie H.'s Tips commercial demonstrates strong overall effectiveness as a piece of public health communication. Through its sharp visual and auditory contrast, it immediately captures attention and conveys the seriousness of smoking-related harm. The authenticity of Terrie's personal image builds trust and makes the message more relatable, while her altered appearance and damaged voice create a powerful emotional impact that encourages empathy and reflection. By linking the fear of illness with shared values such as health, responsibility, and care for loved ones, the advertisement transforms emotional discomfort into a sense of moral awareness and personal relevance. Furthermore, the inclusion of practical resources, such as the national quitline and website, helps turn concern into action by showing that quitting is both possible and supported. This structure allows the advertisement to balance emotional appeal with actionable guidance, ensuring that its message resonates both cognitively and emotionally.

Despite these strengths, the commercial could still be improved. The quitline and website appear only once at the end, which may limit recall and reduce follow-through. Repeating this information in the middle, or emphasizing it visually, could strengthen memory and make it easier for viewers to take the next step. Providing subtle cues or reminders throughout the advertisement might further enhance engagement and reinforce the message's practical relevance. Moreover, future campaigns could consider tailoring emotional intensity to different audience segments, ensuring that fear motivates rather than discourages behavioral change.

Overall, this analysis shows that carefully structured persuasive elements can make even a thirty-second advertisement both memorable and actionable. By integrating credibility, emotion, and

efficacy, Terrie H.'s Tips offers valuable insight into how concise health messages can effectively guide audiences from awareness to intention. It also provides useful implications for future campaign design, emphasizing the importance of reinforcing resource visibility, maintaining emotional balance, and transforming awareness into sustained behavioral commitment.

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