



NRC Publications Archive Archives des publications du CNRC

Advertising or Education? The Distinctions Are Starting to Blur Downes, Stephen; Neal, L.

NRC Publications Record / Notice d'Archives des publications de CNRC:
<https://nrc-publications.canada.ca/eng/view/object/?id=78a576d1-cb94-480c-a668-fe9130c868a8>
<https://publications-cnrc.canada.ca/fra/voir/objet/?id=78a576d1-cb94-480c-a668-fe9130c868a8>

Access and use of this website and the material on it are subject to the Terms and Conditions set forth at
<https://nrc-publications.canada.ca/eng/copyright>
READ THESE TERMS AND CONDITIONS CAREFULLY BEFORE USING THIS WEBSITE.

L'accès à ce site Web et l'utilisation de son contenu sont assujettis aux conditions présentées dans le site
<https://publications-cnrc.canada.ca/fra/droits>
LISEZ CES CONDITIONS ATTENTIVEMENT AVANT D'UTILISER CE SITE WEB.

Questions? Contact the NRC Publications Archive team at
PublicationsArchive-ArchivesPublications@nrc-cnrc.gc.ca. If you wish to email the authors directly, please see the
first page of the publication for their contact information.

Vous avez des questions? Nous pouvons vous aider. Pour communiquer directement avec un auteur, consultez la
première page de la revue dans laquelle son article a été publié afin de trouver ses coordonnées. Si vous n'arrivez
pas à les repérer, communiquez avec nous à PublicationsArchive-ArchivesPublications@nrc-cnrc.gc.ca.





National Research
Council Canada

Conseil national
de recherches Canada

Institute for
Information Technology

Institut de technologie
de l'information

NRC - CNRC

Advertising or Education? The Distinctions Are Starting to Blur *

Downes, S., Neal, L.
February 2008

* published in eLearn Magazine. February 2008. NRC 49913.

Copyright 2008 by
National Research Council of Canada

Permission is granted to quote short excerpts and to reproduce figures and tables
from this report, provided that the source of such material is fully acknowledged.

Advertising or Education? The Distinctions Are Starting to Blur

By Stephen Downes and Lisa Neal

It can be a fine line that distinguishes advertising from education. Each seeks to modify beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors through the timely presentation of information. Each seeks to engage the viewer, to address a particular need, to pose a solution to a problem.

Successful advertising, like successful learning, is remembered. The jingle plays in our memory (link to <http://www.elearnmag.org/subpage.cfm?section=opinion&article=90-1>), the brand jumps off the store shelf, and the phone number springs to mind when it's time to call for a pizza.

Sometimes it is nearly impossible to tell the difference between education and advertising. Take, for example, the message that plays when you call a business or service. Generally you're stuck listening to music that you would not normally add to your playlist, to say the least. With a speakerphone or wireless headset, it is easy to do something else while waiting. But instead, some companies make it a teachable moment.

At least one medical center we know plays the "Health News Network" for those waiting on the phone. One can learn about the signs of diabetes and the advantages of early detection, anxiety disorders and their symptoms, what a heart attack feels like, and other medical information. Each snippet ends with a phone number to learn more, get a physician referral, or join a support group. Ultimately it was advertising, but the emphasis was on good information.

The principles that make these messages successful are the same, whether they're instances of education or advertising. Over the course of a typical waiting period, the "Health News Network" is repeated a few times. As we know, this can aid learning. It is also effective advertising—which is why the typical ad repeats the brand being advertised three times in fifteen seconds.

Learning is most effective when it is situated within an authentic context. Anyone who is calling a medical center has a health concern, or has a loved one with a health concern, and is likely to be a receptive audience. Similarly, advertisers are forever trying to target their message to exactly the right audience.

Advertising and education are so similar we might wonder what separates them at all. It is well worth making distinctions between the two, especially for those developing learning content.

One way is to consider the ethics of "teaching" to a captive audience, especially if the learning is involuntary. In some cases, it doesn't matter whether the person views an advertisement or a learning segment. Both are appropriate during television programs, for example, and both are tolerated in environments where there is little else to do and the audience is captive, such as public transportation, elevators, and grocery store check-out

lines.

But in other cases, the ethics of advertising become more questionable. We might wonder about a driving school that pitches its lessons to people on hold during calls to the license bureau. During emergency calls, while advice and recommendations are desired, a plug for Uncle Stan's Tiny Heart Pills would be ill advised. With the advent of mobile devices, making appropriate use of teachable moments becomes crucial.

The more a person needs the information being presented, the less appropriate it is to offer advertising in place of education. This is because, typically, the primary purpose of education is to benefit the learner, while the usual beneficiary of advertising is the advertiser.

Stephen Downes is Senior Researcher, National Research Council Canada, and Lisa Neal (link to lisaneal.com) is Editor-in-Chief of eLearn Magazine.