Oracles on “Advertising”: Searching for a Definition

Jef I. Richards and Catharine M. Curran

Traditional definitions of advertising include a series of elements that distinguish the field from others. Each innovation in communication has been used for advertising, and in some way, each has changed advertising, which in turn has changed the set of elements used in its definition. However, there are or should be some essential elements that determine whether an activity is advertising. Unfortunately, a discussion identifying these elements is lacking in the marketing and advertising literature. This study is designed to begin an open discussion of what constitutes those essential elements, with the ultimate aim of constructing an improved definition of advertising. The Delphi method, originally developed for financial forecasting, is used to engage a diverse group of advertising experts in a dialogue to reconsider those elements and construct a new definition of advertising.

What Is Advertising?

Consumers tend to think virtually every form of commercial promotional activity, from concert sponsorship to telemarketing, is a form of “advertising” (Schultz 1995). Industry practitioners and academics, however, tend to distinguish certain forms of promotion as “not advertising” (Rust and Oliver 1994). Certain activities might better be classified, they suggest, as sales promotion, promotional products, direct marketing, or public relations. But even these professionals may find it challenging to pigeonhole some activities, such as word of mouth and product placement in movies. It is often stated that consumers are exposed to something like 3500 advertisements each day (e.g., Godin 1999), but that number varies by what we classify as advertising.

Over the years, advertising has been defined many ways. Industry icon Leo Burnett defined it as “selling corn flakes to people who are eating Cheerios” (Bendinger 1993, p. 60), U.S. President Calvin Coolidge called it “the life of trade” (Bradley, Daniels, and Jones 1960, p. 13), English professor S.I. Hayakawa termed it “a symbol-manipulating occupation” (Hayakawa 1964, p. 269), and media guru Marshall McLuhan referred to it as “the cave art of the twentieth century” (Fitzhenry 1993, p. 19). Although each of these undoubt edly captures some aspect of advertising’s essence, they lack sufficient precision to distinguish advertising from some other forms of speech. In contrast, textbook and dictionary definitions tend to strive for greater specificity.

In an early advertising textbook, Daniel Starch (1923, p. 5) suggested, “The simplest definition of advertising, and one that will probably meet the test of critical examination, is that advertising is selling in print.” He was referring to an oft-quoted definition coined in 1904, when John E. Kennedy told Albert D. Lasker that advertising is “salesmanship in print” (Gunther 1960, p. 58). The reference to “print,” of course, reflected the media of the time. A more modern definition, encompassing a broader range of media, can be found in the American Heritage Dictionary (2000): “The activity of attracting public attention to a product or business, as by paid announcements in the print, broadcast, or electronic media.”

Because disciplines and practices change over time, definitions may require revision. As a practice, advertising has changed radically over the years, thanks to new techniques and technologies. So the definitions we use,
and teach to students, may be out of date. But this term is so elemental to the practice that it might be taken for granted. Other than from a discussion in Schultz's (1995) piece on direct marketing, no articles about this word’s definition could be found in the advertising and marketing research journals, and just one mention was found in the trade press (Freeman 1999). Other related terms, such as “marketing” (Gronroos 1989; Kotler and Levy 1969; Lavin 1997; Lichtenhal and Beik 1984; Simms 1999), “direct marketing” (Bauer and Miglautsch 1992; Murrow and Hyman 1994; Rapp 1989; Schofield 1995; Schultz 1995), and “public relations” (Gordon 1997; Harlow 1976; Hutton 1999), have received a bit more attention.

The study presented here is designed to begin filling that gap in the field’s literature and initiate a dialogue about how “advertising” is, and might be, defined. We begin by discussing the potential value of such a dialogue.

Is This Important, or Just a Semantic Exercise?

The American Marketing Association’s (AMA) Committee on Definitions, in 1961, argued for uniformity of marketing terms, so textbook authors did not need to waste pages creating and defending their own personal definitions (Bennett 1995, p. v). Common definitions also help propagate a common language, allowing practitioners from geographically disparate locations to understand one another. But those arguments apply to all marketing terminology. A word like “advertising” is even more critical for careful circumscription, being fundamental to its own discipline. This single word delimits the profession, drawing boundaries to separate advertising from closely related fields. Without those property lines, advertising practitioners have no identifiable area of expertise. As Andreasen (1994) notes, “Careful definition of any field is important to the advancement of scholarship and the training of future researchers.”

If those lines are drawn too narrowly, the profession may be shrinking. Not too many years ago, Rust and Oliver (1994) predicted “the death of advertising” based on the growth of such disciplines as sales promotion, direct marketing, and new media at the expense of traditional advertising methods. By accepting a narrow definition that sweeps a relatively limited range of activities under the umbrella of advertising, Rust and Oliver’s (1994) prediction makes more sense than if we adopt a definition that encompasses a broad menu of marketing communication methods as subcategories of advertising.

Too broad a definition also can pose problems. By subjugating direct marketing and such as mere forms of advertising, ad practitioners would be expected to have a much broader range of knowledge and skills. It also may be demeaning to specialists in those areas and result in “turf battles.” And, of course, a broad definition might make the separate term “marketing communication” unnecessary.

The definition we use also has practical implications. It can determine what is taught in advertising courses, what is covered in advertising trade publications, and the domain of the field’s professional organizations. When a court or regulator assesses whether an activity is “advertising,” the definition applied can have far-reaching impact. For example, in Public Citizen v. F.T.C. (1989), a court had to decide whether t-shirts and other promotional products displaying tobacco logos would be restricted under the Smokeless Tobacco Act, which requires “advertising” for smokeless tobacco products to include a health warning. In the end, that court called these items “advertising,” because it defined advertising as any action to “call public attention to [a product] ... so as to arouse a desire to buy” (Public Citizen v. F.T.C. 1989, p. 1554). Definitions used by experts or that appear in textbooks often influence the outcome of legal proceedings (e.g., Thompson Medical Co. 1984).

The definition of this word, therefore, has more than trivial implications. The next section looks at how we have defined it in recent years. If anyone has a grasp on the meaning of advertising, it should be the “experts” who write textbooks about this topic.

Definitions in Recent and Current Use

A survey of recent advertising and marketing textbooks makes it obvious there is no widely adopted definition at this time. Table 1 lists a sample of those definitions, and each is different. There are, however, certain recurring elements: (1) paid, (2) nonpersonal, (3) identified sponsor, (4) mass media, and (5) persuade or influence. Given those elements, we can capture the essence of most definitions in a single prototypical phrase (referred to subsequently as the Current Definition): Advertising is a paid nonpersonal communication from an identified sponsor, using mass media to persuade or influence an audience.

This same set of elements can be found in textbooks from decades ago (Table 2). Although this definition may have been appropriate during the Nixon Administration, many technologies and approaches devel-
Table 1
Textbook Definitions of Advertising

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertising Textbooks</th>
<th>Marketing Textbooks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The nonpersonal communication of information, usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature, about products (goods and services) or ideas by identified sponsors through various media.</td>
<td>Any paid form of nonpersonal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any paid form of nonpersonal communication about an organization, product, service, or idea by an identified sponsor.</td>
<td>The element of the marketing communications mix that is nonpersonal, paid for by an identified sponsor, and disseminated through mass channels of communication to promote the adoption of goods, services, persons, or ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A paid, mass-mediated attempt to persuade.</td>
<td>Nonpersonal communication that is paid for by an identified sponsor, and involves either mass communication via newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and other media (e.g., billboards, bus stop signage) or direct-to-consumer communication via direct mail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpersonal communication for products, services, or ideas that is paid for by an identified sponsor for the purpose of influencing an audience.</td>
<td>Impersonal, one-way mass communication about a product or organization that is paid for by a marketer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paid nonpersonal communication from an identified sponsor using mass media to persuade or influence an audience.</td>
<td>Any paid form of nonpersonal presentation of ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zikmund and d’Amico (1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>An informative or persuasive message carried by a nonpersonal medium and paid for by an identified sponsor whose organization or product is identified in some way.</td>
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</table>

Rosenfield (1997) suggests that this makes the Internet a form of direct marketing, not advertising. But most technological advancements in advertising (e.g., narrowcasting, database mining, selective binding) have contributed to making advertising more and more interpersonal, more like personal selling. If we accept Rosenfield’s (1997) argument, Rust and Oliver (1994) may be correct in asserting that “[v]irtually the whole of marketing communications will be ‘not advertising’ in the relatively near future.”

Shelly Lazarus, chairman and CEO of Ogilvy and Mather Worldwide, recently reflected on the changes wrought by the Internet and suggested it “has fundamentally changed the definition of advertising” (Freeman 1999). Keith Reinhard, chairman of DDB Worldwide, likewise reflected on the emergence of interactive methods such as the Internet, saying, “Advertising is on the threshold of a new golden age. If—and it’s a big if—if we’re willing to broaden its definition” (Reinhard 2001).

Other technological developments have aimed at making advertising more affordable. Targeting reduces cost by reducing waste, and the Internet, barter, and product placement also have cut costs in some instances. In some cases, advertisers pass the expense of advertising to someone else, making it a low- or even no-cost proposition. For example, some cooperative arrangements put the total advertising
Table 2
Older Textbook Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertising Textbooks</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bolen (1981)</td>
<td>Any controlled form of nonpersonal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor that is used to inform and persuade the selected market.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohen (1972)</td>
<td>Advertising is any paid form of nonpersonal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunn (1969)</td>
<td>Advertising is paid, nonpersonal communication through various media by business firms, nonprofit organizations and individuals who are in some way identified in the advertising message.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaufman (1980)</td>
<td>Advertising is any form of nonpersonal presentation of goods, services or ideas for action, openly paid for, by an identified sponsor.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

cost on a national brand, thereby subsidizing a local retailer. Merchandising, or putting an ad message on an article of clothing or other product, can pass ad costs to a consumer who buys that product. So the question of whether a definition need include “paid” also is problematic if we interpret “paid” to mean it is a cost to the advertiser. But if we interpret it as cost to anyone, then this element probably would encompass every marketing communication, including public relations.

Every aspect of this Current Definition is similarly vulnerable to reconsideration in light of twenty-first century practices. Of course, textbooks are not the only source of advertising definitions. Dictionaries are another source. As mentioned previously, even the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has formulated its own working definition. Several are listed in Table 3, along with three definitions previously developed through the AMA.

The AMA has a long history of developing definitions of marketing terminology, extending back to 1931 (Alexander 1960). A close look at the AMA’s early effort to define advertising, reflected in the 1960 version, reveals the likely genesis of today’s common textbook definition. That wording first appeared in the Journal of Marketing (Committee Reports 1948), and some textbooks later cited that report as their source (e.g., Cohen 1972; Jugenheimer and White 1980; Kaufman 1980). But the AMA’s most recent version strays from that approach. Some dictionaries use wording similar to the AMA’s (e.g., Rosenberg 1995), whereas others diverge significantly (e.g., Pearsall and Trumble 1996). The FTC, in contrast, uses an entirely different conception (Public Citizen v. FTC 1989).

Similar to the textbook approaches, most of the definitions retain one or more elements that deserve reexamination in light of contemporary practices. Even if an entirely new conception of advertising is unjustified, there remains the question as to which is best. Yet determining the most appropriate boundaries of advertising is an onerous task, for there exists no established, systematic method for developing such definitions.

In Search of a Method

Finding the best definition is not an empirical exercise. Experiments cannot reveal which is “truth,” and survey results vary widely, depending on who is surveyed (e.g., creatives, account executives, outdoor specialists, consumers).

When Sir James A.H. Murray led development of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), in the late 1800s, he had volunteers collect a variety of quotations using a particular word, taken from literature, and then allowed one or more editors to derive the definition from the word’s use in those quotations (Winchester 1998). That approach is still used in dictionary development today. The result tends to rely on the judgment of one or, at most, a few authors. This means the definition of “advertising” in most dictionaries probably is crafted by professional lexicographers rather than by a person knowledgeable about advertising. Their definitions normally draw from common usage of the word, not technical or precision use, and reflect consumers’ rather than professionals’ viewpoints. In addition, the OED approach defines a word by its normative use rather than by how it should be defined, the purpose of the current study. The OED method, though well-established, is not a good fit for the present purpose.

Unlike general dictionaries, most definitions in Tables 1 and 3 were crafted by authors with advertising-related expertise. They undoubtedly looked to pre-existing definitions when developing their own, but
### Table 3: Other Definitions of Advertising

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>American Marketing Association</strong></td>
<td>The placement of announcements and persuasive messages in time or space purchased in any of the mass media by business firms, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and individuals who seek to inform and/or persuade members of a particular target market or audience about their products, services, organizations, or ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bennett (1995)</td>
<td>Paid, nonpersonal communication through various media by business firms, nonprofit organizations, and individuals who are in some way identified in the advertising message and who hope to inform and/or persuade members of a particular audience; include communication of products, services, institutions, and ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexander (1960)</td>
<td>Any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dictionaries</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graham (1952)</td>
<td>The nonpersonal communication of a sales message to actual or potential purchasers by a person or organization selling a product or service, delivered through a paid medium for the purpose of influencing the buying behavior of those purchasers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearsall and Trumble (1996)</td>
<td>The practice of influencing people through public media in order to promote sales of products and services or promote political or other messages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosenberg (1995)</td>
<td>A paid-for nonpersonal presentation or promotion of goods, services, and/or ideas. It is usually paid for by an identifiable sponsor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toffler and Imber (1994)</td>
<td>Paid form of a nonpersonal message communicated through the various media by industry, business firms, nonprofit organizations, or individuals. Advertising is persuasive and informational and is designed to influence the purchasing behavior and/or thought patterns of the audience. Advertising is a marketing tool and may be used in combination with other marketing tools, such as sales promotions, personal selling tactics, or publicity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urdang (1992)</td>
<td>A marketing process which uses advertisements directed to prospects as a means of meeting marketing objectives: as a marketing tool, advertising is uniquely able to reliably and quickly deliver consistent messages, efficiently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webster's College Dictionary (1997)</td>
<td>The act or practice of offering goods or services to the public through announcements in the media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Citizen v. FTC (1989)</td>
<td>Advertising involves any action to &quot;call public attention to [a product] ... so as to arouse a desire to buy.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, most were crafted by sole authors. Even the AMA, which typically appoints committees to develop its dictionaries, relegates groups of words to each committee member. This method suffers from the fact that each definition represents a single perspective. Articles in the marketing literature that attempt to define terms often rely on the authors' own opinions, too. New definitions for "direct marketing" were proposed by Bauer and Miglautsch (1992) and Murrow and Hyman (1994). Both definitions resulted from
the authors' opinions of, and biases regarding, what should and should not constitute a description of the field. As a result, the Bauer and Miglautsch proposal was sharply criticized as far too narrow (Schofield 1995). The inherent bias in any sole-authored approach makes it a target for criticism. Even Noah Webster, creator of Webster's Dictionary, has been highly criticized for tainting his dictionary with definitions colored by his conservative Christian orientation (Green 1996).

A better solution would be to tap the expertise of various advertising and marketing experts. A simple survey has limitations, however, because respondents have no opportunity to learn of one another's opinions and reflect on counterarguments. Methods that would bring experts together in a focus group or brainstorming fashion could resolve that problem, but they are expensive and pose potentially serious scheduling difficulties, especially when dealing with highly esteemed experts who have many demands on their time. Yet another weakness of this "group-think" process is the lack of anonymity. One person's respect or dislike of another can cause him or her to alter a response, rather than provide his or her true opinion. It also can result in collusion among participants.

Finding a method that overcomes these deficiencies was a major obstacle. The Internet, in addition to being the impetus behind this reexamination of advertising's definition, proved to be part of the answer to this dilemma.

A Modified Delphi Method

The Delphi Method was developed about 40 years ago at the Rand Corporation to forecast financial and technological trends (Buckley 1995; Dalkey and Helmer 1963). This method brings together a group of experts, via multi-wave survey, with the goal of reaching a consensus. The method's name was taken from the Oracle of Delphi in Greek mythology, who could predict future events. The typical Delphi study involves recruiting participants, sending them a questionnaire, analyzing results, sending a follow-up questionnaire, analyzing those results, and sending a final questionnaire. Three waves are common (Jain 1985-86). Historically, these studies have been conducted by mail.

A modified version—we chose to call the Online Delphi Data-collection (ODD) method—differs from the normal Delphi procedure in two ways. It adapts the method to the process of definition development, and it uses the Internet as the medium of information exchange.

The Experts

A panel of true experts was needed, representing some diversity of perspective. Because there was no objectively ideal means of creating this panel, we decided to invite a wide selection of highly regarded experts. It was established a priori that, to keep the process manageable, the panel should be composed of 10–20 members.

A total of 23 invitations was mailed to well-known agency executives, presidents of professional organizations, government regulators, and respected academics. Attempts were made to include as broad a range of perspectives as possible, so those invited represented not only the agency perspective, but also the client perspective and those specializing in direct marketing, e-commerce, out-of-home media, promotional products, and, to gain a wider perspective, marketing. Even those coming from an agency background represented a variety of specialties (e.g., creative, management), as well as both large and small agencies. The extent of diversity was limited only by the restricted panel size.

Sixteen of those invited agreed to participate. Those not included either failed to respond to the invitation or indicated their time was too limited to participate. One expressed a willingness to be included but refused to use e-mail, requiring a significant deviation from the adopted research method, so she was not included. Before the first wave of data was collected, two panelists dropped out because of time commitments. In the end, the panel was composed of 14 members, listed in Table 4. Each offered significant qualifications as true experts in advertising and/or marketing. In the midst of the study, 1 of the 14 panelists dropped out, for a total attrition rate of just 7%.

The Procedure

The study began in December 1999, with the final responses received in May 2000. Each panelist was assigned a respondent number, to ensure anonymity, and all reference to individual participants used these numbers. In total, three brief questionnaires were sent to panelists, all via e-mail. In most cases, they responded by e-mail, with a few by fax.

Following the first wave, a brief summary of the responses was prepared, and a private Web page listed all verbatim responses identified only by respondent numbers. Panelists then received a second questionnaire, the summary, and a Web link to the verbatim. This allowed them to view the opinions of all panelists. Responses from that questionnaire were prepared in a similar manner, and a third questionnaire was sent with links to both a summary and verbatims from the second wave. On receiving all the final responses, a follow-up e-mail disclosed the identities of their fellow participants.
Table 4
Delphi Panelists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Qualifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arnold M. Barban</td>
<td>Former president of the American Academy of Advertising, former chairman of the Advertising and Public Relations Department at the University of Alabama, former head of the Department of Advertising at the University of Illinois, and author of many books and articles on topics of marketing communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Bell</td>
<td>Chairman and CEO of True North Communications, chairman of the Advertising Educational Foundation, former CEO of Bozell Worldwide, recent past chairman of American Association of Advertising Agencies, and twice Chairman of the Advertising Federation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les Carlson</td>
<td>Marketing professor at Clemson University, has served as member of the editorial boards of the <em>Journal of Public Policy &amp; Marketing</em>, the <em>Journal of Consumer Affairs</em>, the <em>Journal of Consumer and Marketing Research</em>, the <em>Journal of Marketing Education</em>, the <em>Journal of Advertising</em>, the <em>Journal of Business Research</em>, the <em>Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice</em>, and the <em>Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising</em>. He is former editor of the <em>Journal of Advertising</em> and author of one book and numerous articles on topics of marketing communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rance Crain</td>
<td>President and editor-in-chief of <em>Advertising Age</em> magazine, as well as <em>Crain's Chicago Business</em>, <em>Crain's New York Business</em>, and <em>Electronic Media</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff Goodby</td>
<td>Principal and creative director for Goodby Silverstein and Partners, San Francisco, and <em>Adweek's</em> Creative Director of the Year in 1990, 1992, and 1994.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Leckenby</td>
<td>Advertising professor and Everett D. Collier Centennial Chair in Communication, former president of the American Academy of Advertising, former chairman of the Advertising Department at The University of Texas, author of many books and articles on topics of marketing communication, and coeditor of the <em>Journal of Interactive Advertising</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard A. LeFurgy</td>
<td>Chairman of the Internet Advertising Bureau and first chairman of the FAST Steering Committee, director of an interactive advertising agency, and a general partner at WaldenVC, a venture capital fund that focuses on Internet advertising, ecommerce, entertainment, and education. He also has served as senior vice president of advertising at ESPN/ABC News Internet Ventures, formerly was executive vice president and senior partner of N.W. Ayer &amp; Partners in New York, and currently is on the boards of the Advertising Research Foundation and the Advertising Educational Foundation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas W. Leigh</td>
<td>Emily H. and Charles M. Tanner, Jr. Chair and associate professor of Marketing at the University of Georgia, former president of the American Marketing Association's Academic Council, and member of the editorial boards of the <em>Journal of Marketing</em>, the <em>Journal of Advertising</em>, the <em>Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing</em>, the <em>Marketing Education Review</em>, the <em>Journal of Service Marketing</em>, the <em>Competitive Intelligence Review</em>, and the <em>Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles S. Madden</td>
<td>Vice president of Baylor University, member of the editorial boards of the <em>Journal of Empirical Generalisations in Marketing Science</em> and the <em>Journal of Marketing Education</em>, member of the World Marketing Association Council, as well as former chairman of the board of the American Marketing Association and past president of the Southern Marketing Association.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claude R. Martin, Jr.</td>
<td>Isadore and Leon Winkelman Professor of Retail Marketing at the University of Michigan, coeditor of the <em>Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising</em>, member of the editorial review boards of the <em>Journal of Advertising</em> and the <em>European Journal of Innovation Management</em>, and former member of the National Advertising Review Board.</td>
</tr>
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(continued)
Table 4 (continued)
Delphi Panelists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Qualifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ivan Preston</td>
<td>Former president of the American Academy of Advertising, professor emeritus of the University of Wisconsin School of Journalism and Mass Communication, author of many books and articles on topics of marketing communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallace S. Snyder</td>
<td>President and CEO of the American Advertising Federation and former attorney for the Federal Trade Commission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roscoe B. Starek</td>
<td>Senior vice president of the Direct Marketing Association and former Commissioner of the Federal Trade Commission.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The First Wave

The Delphi method produces dissent, so not all viewpoints of individual panel members are reflected in the final outcome. Although the goal is "consensus," Buckley (1995) notes, "Where no agreement develops the Delphi still helps clarify the issue, crystallize the reasoning process, and increase the accuracy of participants' understanding of the position of others."

There was, indeed, substantial disagreement regarding some issues. Because this study generated a voluminous amount of qualitative data, it is impossible to fully represent every panelist's position. For any result presented, a panelist may strongly disagree. Consequently, we attempt to shield panelists' identities regarding specific quotes, except when express permission was granted or panelists requested they be named. As one panel member protested, "No don't quote me by name. No telling what kind of stupid things I've said!"

The Need for a New Definition.
To ascertain whether they felt a new definition was needed, panelists first were provided the Current Definition ("Advertising is a paid nonpersonal communication from an identified sponsor, using mass media to persuade or influence an audience") and asked:

1. Is this definition adequate, or does it need to be changed?
2. If changes are needed, which attributes of the definition should remain in the new definition, and why? By attribute we mean mass mediated, paid, etc.
3. Which attributes should be removed from the definition, and why?
4. Please make a list of everything (you can think of) that IS advertising. For example, should sales promotions, shelf screamers, race car sponsorships, etc., be included?
5. Please make a list of everything you feel should NOT be considered advertising.

There was virtual unanimity that change is needed, though a couple of responses would qualify more as "maybe." Others were more definite. One remarked, "Not adequate. Needs to be changed. This is just one form of advertising." Another said, "Parts of the definition are adequate, yet other aspects should be changed." And one pointed out it is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to reduce a definition of such a complex concept to a single sentence. He suggested the best approach might be to include a series of footnote qualifications explaining each element's meaning and exceptions.

From that very first question, panelists began offering alternative definitions of their own invention.
Throughout the study, five were submitted, shown in Table 5. This illustrates the diversity of thinking and serves as some evidence of panelists' involvement in the process. Some of these present modest changes to the Current Definition, whereas others wholly supplant it. As might be anticipated, given the panel's breadth, responses to the second and third questions varied greatly. Their opinions about each attribute are discussed next.

Paid. Panelists generally felt this element must be retained. One panel member said, "[P]aid... and communication may be the only sacred cows." This was far from clear-cut, however. One member opined, "What about Ad Council and other PSAs, as well as 'free' offers made by media to attract future business?" Overall, though, the panel seemed to accept "paid" as needed to set advertising apart from other forms of communication, particularly public relations. Although public relations is not cost-free for a company, the media vehicle is not being paid. Ivan Preston felt this term helps separate ads that originate out-
Table 5
Panelists’ Proposed Definitions

1 Advertising is an event, image, or perception that affects the way we feel about a particular product. Sometimes advertising is planned; sometimes it is inadvertent, and happens serendipitously. Sometimes it is paid for; sometimes it is not. Sometimes it happens in a mass market way; sometimes it happens quite personally and individually. Always, it changes or tries to change the perceptions of the beholder.

2 Advertising consists of messages in the media, created and paid for by identified sources outside the media, to persuade recipients to buy goods and services or to carry out any other desired actions. (Note: this definition included several qualifying footnotes.)

3 Advertising is informative or persuasive impersonal communication that is sponsored and purchased by an identifiable entity for purposes of influencing the cognitions, attitudes, or behaviors of an individual or a target audience.

4 Advertising is communication from a known or unknown sponsor to persuade or influence an audience.

5 Advertising is a paid nonpersonal communication from an identified sponsor to persuade or influence an audience.

side the vehicle from news and entertainment generated by people within the media vehicle. This suggests, of course, that a vehicle’s promotions in its own publication, such as a television network’s promotion of upcoming shows, would not constitute “advertising.” And this time or space generally is “paid” by forfeit of the income that would be obtained from outside advertisers.

As with any definition, the problem is that the words composing it must likewise be well defined. The Delphi panel seemed most comfortable with a broad definition of “paid.” Several participants mentioned barter as the equivalent of payment. The inclusion of “paid” sparked enough discussion, though, that a follow-up question was asked in a later round to clarify these issues.

Nonpersonal. There was nearly universal agreement that this attribute is dispensable. This opinion was driven, in part, by Internet methods and recent trends toward more “one-to-one” marketing. One panelist nominated this term for deletion, “since it is merely a reflection of where we’ve been in the past and doesn’t leave room for the future, where mass customization of messages based on media context and user history drives a more personalized message.” Another said, “Nonpersonal’ should be removed because advertising can be very effective by being intensely personal.”

In contrast, one panelist felt the term “nonpersonal” referred not to a personalized message, but rather to physical proximity between speaker and consumer, as in personal selling. This would suggest narrowly targeted messages, tailored to the personal wants and needs of a consumer, could still be called “nonpersonal.” However, this same panelist opted to strike “nonpersonal” as redundant, arguing “media” connotes the lack of interpersonal contact. A couple of members argued for retention of “nonpersonal.” They felt all advertising, even if narrowly tailored, is part of an effort to reach a mass audience and cannot be construed as “personal,” but this clearly was a minority view.

Identified Sponsor. In the first round, this term was subject to very little agreement. This led to more discussion in the second round.

Mass Media. This element was recommended for deletion. It wasn’t the “media” part that raised questions, but rather the “mass” aspect. Some panelists thought it redundant, with “media” implying a message that reaches multiple recipients. But again, the principal concern was advertising that narrowly targets, such as direct mail and e-mail. One comment captures both these sentiments:

Note I have not used the term “mass media” because it’s redundant. Also, dropping the word “mass” enables us to avoid implying that the messages are mass messages when it’s long since become easy to personalize them, as with the direct mail that says “Dear Mr. Richards.” I don’t think the definition of advertising is the place to make that point, but I just want to avoid emphasizing the idea of “mass” at a time when messages and the media are getting less massy.

The term “mass” itself is difficult to define. As one participant noted, it seems to exclude small circulation/reach vehicles. It is not clear how large an audience is needed to meet that criterion. The panel’s sense was that this word is vague and superfluous. “Media,” though, seemed acceptable to all.

Persuade or Influence. “Persuade” was preferred over “influence.” Using both was deemed unnecessary. One member offered, “[P]erhaps the word ‘per-
suade' alone is adequate, but if multiple words are used, I'd suggest adding 'inform' which is the aim of much advertising; my preference at this stage of this project would be 'inform and persuade' because I feel 'persuade' includes 'influence.'” As a counterpoint, though, another participant remarked, “Informing someone can be sufficient to persuade them to engage in some type of desired response.” His example was an announcement listing church service times, which might be sufficient to persuade someone to attend. Other panelists saw no need to add “inform.” One of these experts preferred the original wording, and another questioned whether either is needed in this era of relationship building, but most opted for “persuade” as the best choice. At the same time, some added that a target of that persuasion, in the form of a call to action, should be included.

Relationship with Other Marketing Communications. Round 1 raised some areas of broad agreement, as well as divergent opinions. But it is important to remember that Delphi studies are designed not only as an endgame, but also to identify disagreement and clarify the issues. Although panelists agreed the Current Definition is inadequate, there were stark differences in their answers to questions 4 and 5 about what is and is not advertising. Practitioners and academicians took very different views, with the former making comments like, “Everything that in any way promotes the brand name is advertising, including the company's stock symbol,” and “[I]t is rather difficult to tell the differences between advertising and art.” In contrast, the academicians tended to itemize what they believed fell inside or outside advertising, placing most traditional media, Web promotions, point of purchase, and some sponsorships (e.g., race cars) inside the definition, but distinguishing categories such as sales promotion, direct marketing, and public relations as “not advertising.” And some careful distinctions were drawn; for example, “Pure sponsorship as opposed to advertising of that sponsorship” is not advertising.

In Round 2, it was necessary to clarify how far the panel was willing to go in redefining advertising. Obviously, there was a large gap in viewpoints. The area of direct marketing seemed especially troublesome, with some panelists subsuming it into advertising and others seeing it as distinct.

The Second Wave

Round 2 included the following questions:

1. Is personalized e-mail, designed to sell a product or service, a form of advertising or is it direct marketing? What is the difference between advertising and direct marketing?
2. If the source, sponsor, or brand is not identified, can it be advertising? Why?
3. Under what circumstances do logos qualify as advertising? When they aren't advertising, what are they? Public Relations?
4. Does packaging ever qualify as advertising? When?
5. The previous definition had five main elements: paid, nonpersonal, identified sponsor, mass media, and persuade or influence. You eliminated some elements, and agreed that advertising is “paid” and “persuades.” But, clearly, paid persuasive communication would include more than just advertising (e.g., many books). What other elements, if any, should be included in a definition of advertising?

Direct Marketing. The first question caused some consternation on the panel. There emerged some interesting conceptions of direct marketing and its relationship with advertising, especially for Web-based efforts. Three views of direct marketing emerged from the responses. One saw direct marketing as a medium and advertising as the message. This view was typified by the remark, “Direct marketing is a delivery vehicle. Advertising is what is delivered.” A second group saw direct marketing as a separate, but somewhat overlapping, category, as represented by, “A persuasive effort may be both of them at once, but it also may be either one of them without the other.” A third school of thought saw the two on a path of convergence, making it pointless to distinguish between them, such as, “Sorry to muddy the waters, but I see very little difference between advertising and direct marketing.” Most panelists believed personalized e-mail was both direct marketing and advertising. One remarked, “Online advertising and personalized email both provide a feedback mechanism, so they are both advertising and direct marketing,” and another said, “Email done for commercial purposes is like direct mail, just through a different medium.”

Obviously, online interactivity is causing some reconsideration of the lines between marketing communication categories. The second question in this round also was somewhat troublesome to the panel. In the first round there was little agreement regarding “identified sponsor,” so it was further addressed in Round 2.

Identified Sponsor. Some panel members were emphatic that this was a crucial component. Comments included, “I believe the sponsor must be identified for it
to be advertising. Otherwise, it would be some form of public relations activity," and "Since advertising is paid communication, the identification of the source is imperative." More than one panelist argued advertising's persuasive purpose cannot be realized unless the sponsor's identity is revealed to the audience.

Others disagreed it should be kept. For example:

I think that the "known source" component has long since been irrelevant. I think the intended effect is more important than the source effect.

Case in point – No, I really meant those commandments – God. I am pretty sure that God didn't place those ads.

Someone paid for the billboards, of course, but the sponsor's identity never was disclosed to the audience. News reports revealed the ads were financed by someone who desired anonymity (Trausch 1999). By requiring an "identified sponsor," such billboards cannot be called advertising.

Teaser ads, designed to grab attention and generate curiosity by omitting the product or manufacturer name, caused much discussion. In general, though, panelists agreed "a teaser ad is always followed eventually, even if after several intervening steps, by the final form that does make the identification."

Two of them described a lack of sponsor identification as "a tactic of the overall campaign that will identify the sponsor at a later point in time." Therefore, when defining a teaser as an advertisement, the whole campaign had to be considered, not just the single ad.

A couple of panelists agreed with the need to disclose identity but had trouble with the word "sponsor." One recommended substituting "source" for "sponsor" as a broader and more flexible term, encompassing more than just the person or company financing the ad.

The first wave found disagreement regarding logos and product packaging. To clarify, the second wave specifically asked whether these two promotional tools are advertising.

Logos and Packaging. Logos, they decided, can be advertising. Most respondents felt these should be considered advertising only when they help deliver a message to the consumer, an integral part of a message, or tap into consumers' memory to help them recall a message, thereby serving the persuasive purpose of advertising. A couple pointed out that a logo serves no persuasive purpose when standing alone if consumers do not recognize the brand. Explained one panelist, "There could be a symbol that five years from now will be the most famous logo in the country, but if it appeared today for the first time, all alone, it would mean nothing re the item with which it will later be associated." At the same time, two Delphi participants emphatically declared logos are always advertising, and a third agreed they are virtually always advertising. Jeff Goodby argued, "Logos and packaging are ALWAYS advertising, and people that don't treat them as such pay the price. They say things about you and your product that go far beyond the explicit." One panel member felt more comfortable placing logos into an entirely distinct category.

Packaging, on the whole, was deemed an ad medium. Again, a few thought packaging—even for generic brands—always is a form of advertising, whereas two considered it something separate from advertising. Most, however, said that so long as it carries a strategic message, such as performance claims, packaging is just another vehicle for delivering that message.

Paid Persuasive Communication. The final point addressed in Round 2 was to clarify the use of "paid" and "persuade" in the final definition. From Round 1, there were some issues raised surrounding these two words, though overall there was agreement that both were necessary components of the definition. We sought to clarify what elements of paid persuasive communication were advertising and what set advertising apart from other paid persuasive communication. As a whole, the panel felt that the one thing separating advertising from other paid communications was the "call to action." This philosophy is evident in two statements: "By persuasion we need to mean a call to action to the consumer to buy the product or service," and "A book isn't advertising, as it's generally paid for by the user. It may persuade, but the goal is generally not to motivate a purchase." So the panel suggested a call to action is needed, but defined action broadly, as "...any movement, psychological or behavioral, may be the target motivation for an ad." Ads, they felt, might seek to do something other than just move consumers to purchase, such as encouraging them to change their attitude toward a brand.

Outcome. The first two waves of the study helped clarify panelists' views and identify what they considered strengths and weaknesses of the Current Definition. Through this process, some tentative points of consensus were reached from which to propose a new and improved definition. The third and final wave of the study offered an opportunity to test that proposal.

The Third Wave: A Proposed Definition

Responses from the first two waves were evaluated and synthesized. Although there was no true con-
sus, we derived the following definition from the majority opinions described previously:

Advertising is a paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action, now or in the future.

This definition retains “paid” and “persuade,” which panelists considered important. It substitutes “identifiable” for “identified,” to accommodate the problem of teaser ads, and uses “source” instead of “sponsor,” while omitting the unnecessary word “influence.” “Mass media” is replaced by “mediated,” and “nonpersonal” is dropped. Finally, a broad call to action is added. This seemed to capture the experts’ points of agreement, with the effect of broadening the definition to encompass some activities that did not fit neatly under the previous version but still drawing some clear boundaries around activities they did not consider advertising. This new definition was presented to the panel along with questions that included the following:

1. Is the above definition one you can live with? Why or why not?
2. As a group, you felt we should keep the word “paid” in the definition. Is it really important the communication be paid, or is it “paid” just a way of being sure the message was INTENDED by the advertiser? Is “intent” a better choice of words? Or is it an issue of keeping the communication under the advertiser’s CONTROL?

Almost everyone found this definition acceptable. For example, “I believe this is fine since it includes all the current conceptions of the nature of advertising.” Only two panelists took issue with it as a whole. One continued to feel so complex a concept could not adequately be captured in a single sentence, whereas the other suggested deleting everything except, “Advertising is a communication designed to persuade the receiver to take some action, now or in the future.”

A call to action seemed unnecessary to some panelists. However, as long as it was broadly inclusive, “any take away, cognitive, affective or conative, that moves a potential customer toward an action or behavior relevant to the advertiser,” most seemed comfortable keeping this element.

“Paid” was seen by some as a substitute for advertiser “intent” and by others as meaning the communication remains under the advertiser’s “control.” Some felt “paid” was the necessary choice. One Delphi member put it succinctly, “It is important to keep paid in the definition to exclude public relations.” Another said, “Paid is critical to me.” Jeff Goodby countered:

I think “paid” is entirely arbitrary. There is a lot of advertising that isn’t paid. Think about how many times the same people who want this in the definition have said: “The best advertising is word of mouth” (and thus not paid for). It’s dumb to limit it this way.

In the end, though, there was substantial agreement that “paid” probably was the best choice of words.

There was one notable problem with the proposed definition: the word “mediated.” It was not a problem with the concept but with the word itself. One remarked, “I don’t like the word ‘mediate’ because nobody will know what it means.” As if to substantiate that point, another said, “[M]ediate isn’t a real word is it?” That sentiment was echoed by others. Although “mediated” was problematic, alternate options seem equally confusing. The phrase “conveyed through media” is one possibility, but the term “media” is commonly used to identify journalists, so this phrase might imply traditional media such as television and newspaper to the exclusion of digital media, promotional products, and so forth. “Through a medium” may connote something more mystical. No other wording seems entirely satisfactory. Consequently, we offer the following footnote to accompany that new definition:

“Mediated” communication is that which is conveyed to an audience through print, electronics, or any method other than direct person-to-person contact.

With that explanation, this definition seems to represent a consensus of opinion among most of these experts. Les Carlson reflects, “The end result is a definition that allows considerable conceptual freedom.”

Conclusion

Although focused on examining the need for a new definition of advertising and the development of such a new definition, this study was designed to open a dialogue among the various advertising communities. Initially, this dialogue began by identifying areas of agreement and disagreement about the existing definition, as represented by a summary definition. This initial dialogue would then form the basis for future discussion. Some observers may see the new definition as very similar to the Current Definition, and in part, this similarity may result from the negotiated nature of the final product. Yet, as was stated previously, the purpose of a Delphi study is not only to achieve consensus, but also to identify areas of disagreement. Thus, consensus was achieved in some areas and not in others.

Panelists expressed extremely divergent opinions, with some envisioning a need for great change. One
opined, for example, "Why should educators and practitioners consider advertising to be something less than consumers who see practically all commercial communication as falling under the label of 'advertising.'" Yet another panelist took virtually the opposite position: "I realize that there is an existing investment in the word 'advertising,' but isn't trying to remake the definition a bit like redefining 'fire' to mean all later discovered forms of energy?" Overall, there was general agreement on the need for a redefinition but not full agreement on what form the new definition should take.

The final definition presented here is the balance struck by the panel. Throughout the process it was clear that, though these experts agreed change was needed, they struggled to find a better way of articulating each requirement without merely substituting one set of deficiencies for another. There is little doubt, however, that the proposed definition is less narrow than the previous version. One respondent concluded, "This seems to be a significant improvement over the initial definition," primarily because of that broadened nature. The most notable changes are the removal of "nonpersonal" and "mass," which widened it to embrace the Internet. Other modifications, like changing "sponsor" to "source," also somewhat broaden the definition. Although this represents a direction that most panelists found acceptable, what the new definition does not reflect are the disagreements within the group.

Indeed, one strength of this definition not present in its predecessor is simply that the logic behind the selection of each element is more evident because the various arguments are presented here. Through analysis of panelists' disagreements, it becomes clear there are distinctions not just between academic and practitioner views of advertising, but also among the views of various practitioners. This study captures a dialogue among a diverse group of industry leaders about the fundamental elements of advertising. Such a dialogue is rare and offers a unique insight into how the various ad practitioners view their field. The panel's revision is not being offered as a fait accompli, but rather as a foil for further thought. The definition results from the minds of 14 experts rather than a single perspective, which should afford some degree of improvement over the Current Definition. It also appears to broaden advertising's scope to include new technologies, making it at least seem more contemporary.

The implication of the panelists' disagreements is simple: We cannot expect consumers to understand what is or is not advertising when the experts are unable to agree. If this field is to mature and advance, we need a better grasp of where it begins and ends. The implications of this new definition depend on its acceptance and use. It could be used as a platform for discussion, or it could serve as a uniform definition. At present, there is no standard definition of advertising used even in advertising textbooks. This study offers at least a temporary standard, pending further discussion and improvement. Starting at a common point is essential for shared understanding and the development of future definitions of advertising, as well as for definitions of related concepts.

This dialogue and the resulting definition also open the door to further discussion of the scope of advertising and its relationships with closely related concepts such as direct marketing, sales promotion, and integrated marketing communication. The boundaries separating these areas are no longer clear, if they ever were. Technologies have led to convergence of traditional media and promotional methods, putting old definitions up for review. As a discipline, the impact of this convergence on what is and is not advertising has not been fully debated. Yet advertising is a word ingrained in our lexicon and, as such, should convey a consistent meaning, at least among advertising professionals and students of advertising.

**Limitations**

As with any research project, this work has limitations. A major limitation of a Delphi-type method is that researchers frame the course of the discussion. In this case, panelists were asked to start from what we call here the Current Definition, rather than allowed to create their own conception of a definition unbounded by that previous approach. As with focus groups, however, researchers provide structure to the discussion to keep it moving in a productive direction. It is especially important when, as here, the discourse is limited to just three rounds, but the final definition might look very different if the panelists began without the Current Definition in front of them.

The study's real value was the composition of this panel, but this also may be one of its biggest weaknesses. Panel members were chosen on the basis of their level of expertise, but there are others with similarly high levels of expertise not invited or who chose not to participate. Every attempt was made to imbue the panel with as diverse a representation as possible, but there are many viewpoints that were not represented. The confined size of the panel contributed to this limitation. At the same time, overlap in expertise was not wholly avoidable, so some perspectives may have been overrepresented.
The panel format was designed to limit participants’ knowledge of their fellow panelists’ identities. Again, this may be both a strength and a weakness of the study. It was intended, in part, to limit the formation of factions or alliances among panel members. It is unknown whether any of the panelists discussed the panel outside of the study. This approach also was intended to reduce panelists’ intimidation or admiration of other members, thereby causing some to temper the expression of their true opinion. However, it is possible this anonymity actually reduced the level of debate and cross-fertilization of thought on this topic.

Three rounds is a typical Delphi study design. Three rounds also seemed to work well for the present study. However, there did seem to be wearout on the part of the panelists toward the end of the study, as responses were a bit slower coming back. But, the questions were also longer and required more thought and input from panelists. Three rounds confines the amount of information that can be collected, which in turn constrains the types of questions asked, but keeping people of such repute engaged in a research project for more than three rounds seemed unlikely. There were many directions this study could have taken, but with three rounds, it could not follow a very wide path.

This issue is too complex to explore every conceivable angle and detail with a single study, so small a sample, and within the confines of a single article. Finding the best possible definition may be impossible, but the chance of doing so improves if additional studies and open discussion follow this one. The present study should be considered only a “first cut” at finding that elusive definition. And even with additional study, it should be recognized that definitions are, by nature, dynamic. If this field should eventually reach a “final” definition, it may be time to revise it yet again.

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