JURNAL KOMUNIKASI VOL 10, 1994 pp. 23-31

Unleaded Petrol Advertisements : A Survey of Users' Responses

by
Abdul Azizal Abdul Aziz
Department of Development Communication
Centre for Extension and Continuing Education
Universiti Pertanian Malaysia

Unleaded petrol is petrol with a lead content of 0.013 gm per liter or less (in comparison to leaded petrol or premium petrol which has 0.15 gm lead per liter). Lead is a chemical component used in petrol to boost the octane rating and provide lubricating and cushioning effects for the valves. But lead in large amount is dangerous. Lead dispersed into the atmosphere through the exhausts of motor vehicles can cause damage to the liver, kidney, brain and central nervous and reproductive systems. Lead also causes brain damage in small children and hampers their mental development.

The main advantage of unleaded petrol is that it reduces the amount of lead in the environment and prevents sickness and malfunctions in the human body. Unleaded petrol minimizes environmental pollution, burns cleaner and keeps the fuel injection system and other areas of the engine running at peak performance. This makes the engine lasts longer.

Despite all these advantages, sales of unleaded petrol only makeup 30 percent of the total petrol consumption in Malaysia (New Sunday Times, July 12, 1993). This consumption level needs to be improved because it is a precondition to enable vehicles to be fitted with catalytic converters. The usage of catalytic converters is the next step in the government effort to get rid of toxic emission. With catalytic converters, vehicles will reduce emission of hydrocarbons, sulphur dioxide, oxides of nitrogen and carbon monoxide.

Ignorance and rumours about poor engine performance and uneconomical consumption from using unleaded petrol are among the main reasons for the slow conversion from leaded to unleaded petrol. Some motorists claim that unleaded petrol can result in loss of "pick-up" and that they get less mileage compared with leaded petrol. Others are afraid unleaded petrol will damage their car engines. These are misperceptions. All the major oil companies have been emphasizing the point that unleaded petrol has an octane rating of 97, which is the same as premium petrol. World Formula One racing is powered by unleaded petroleum. Ayrton Senna, Alain Prost and Nigel Mansel have all taken the chequered flag on unleaded petrol (New Sunday Times, December 1, 1991).

Concerted efforts must be taken by all quarters to educate the public about the advantages and the importance of using unleaded petrol. The Malaysian government through the Department of Environment (DOE) must have educational campaigns; the oil companies must provide information to counter the negative rumours about unleaded petrol; and consumer organizations must help out in this effort by convincing motorists to use unleaded petrol. Motorists must be told that sooner or later they must use unleaded petrol when the government implement the Environmental Quality (Control of Emission from Petrol Engines and Diesel Engines) Act. This Act requires vehicles to be fitted with catalytic converters. Catalytic converters can only work with unleaded petrol. Therefore, motorists who do not use unleaded petrol cannot use catalytic converters and will be flouting the new law. This will require time to be implemented so as to enable automobile manufacturers to install all new cars with catalytic converters, and for suppliers to have adequate supply for current cars on the road to be installed with catalytic converters. For the time being, greater efforts must be taken to encourage usage of unleaded petrol.

Research Questions

The major oil companies in Malaysia have already introduced their respective brand of unleaded petrol. For example, Caltex has Techron, BP with BP Super Unleaded; Shell has Advanced Formula Shell Super Unleaded; Petronas has Primas; and Esso with Supreme Unleaded with XCL-12. They have also done promotions for their unleaded petrol brands. Among the efforts that the oil companies have done is advertising in the print and broadcast media, setting up telephone hotline for consumer queries, holding seminars for journalists, and giving incentives for users.

Since 1992 the government has subsidised the price of unleaded petrol. Even though the cost of production of unleaded petrol is 5 to 10 cent per litre more than leaded petrol, the government kept the price per litre of unleaded petrol at the same level as leaded petrol, i.e. RM 1.13 per litre (Star, 21 November, 1991).

On October 29, 1993 the Finance Minister, when presenting the 1994 budget in Parliament, announced that the price of unleaded petrol will be cut by 3 cent per litre beginning January, 1994. Unleaded petrol will then cost RM1.10 per litre as compared to leaded petrol at RM1.13. Along with the price reduction for unleaded petrol and in order to hasten the use of catalytic converters, the Finance Minister also announced the abolishment of taxes on catalytic converters. These measures taken by the government are for the protection of the environment.

A major effort to inform consumers about the virtues and the need to use unleaded petrol undertaken by oil companies is advertising. A large portion of the advertisements are in the newspapers. Since the beginning of

September 1993, the oil companies have started advertising heavily in newspapers. Almost everyday we can see unleaded petrol advertisements of various sizes and colours in the major dailies in Malaysia. The trend of using newspaper to advertise unleaded petrol was started by Caltex and was later followed by BP, and Shell. Esso and Mobil have followed suit. Such abundance in newspaper advertisements of unleaded petrol is still continuing.

What is the outcome of these advertisements? Does the public notice these advertisements? What is the public perception of these advertisements? Do these advertisements increase the public's knowledge about unleaded petrol? Can the public use information from these advertisements to help convince other motorists who are not using unleaded petrol to start using it? These are the questions that are asked in this study.

Method

This study is based on a survey questionnaire that was administered to 105 users of unleaded petrol in the Klang Valley in October 1993. The respondents were motorists who stop to refuel for unleaded petrol at a BP, Caltex or a Shell petrol station in various locations in Petaling Jaya. Petaling Jaya was chosen because it is a progressive suburban/satellite town for Kuala Lumpur. It is a middle to upper class community which is assumed to have high exposure to newspapers and awareness of environmental issues.

BP, Caltex and Shell were chosen for this study because they were the oil companies that advertised their unleaded petrol in the newspapers throughout the month of September 1993. Esso and Mobil only began advertising their unleaded petrol in October. Therefore they are not included in the study. Meanwhile Petronas, albeit having the most petrol stations in the country (around 260 stations) and sell "Primas" brand unleaded petrol, did not then advertise in the newspapers. Thirty five respondents were randomly chosen among motorists that came to refuel for unleaded petrol at each petrol station. Data were collected at the petrol stations by 3 groups of interviewers. A group comprising of 5 interviewers was assigned to each petrol station. The data collection began at 10 in the morning. Each team took approximately 4 hours to complete interviewing 35 respondents. Sunday was chosen to conduct the interview in order to overcome the constraint of time that might be faced by the respondents. The interview teams reported that they obtained full cooperation from the respondents.

Findings

The respondents were quite candid in their responses to the questions posed to them. When they were asked whether they would purchase the particular brand of unleaded petrol they were using based on the advertisements, slightly more than half answered they would not. This can be seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Desire to purchase based on the advertisements

	BP		Caltex		Shell		Total	
	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)
Yes	40	38.1	50	47.62	50	47.62	140	44.45
No	65	61.9	55	52.38	55	52.38	175	55.55

Although the difference between those who said no and those who said yes to purchasing the unleaded petrol based on the advertisements is small, the findings still indicate that more respondents perceived the advertisements as not powerful enough to influence and persuade them.

The respondents were then asked specifically about the features of the advertisements that they liked and disliked. In general, the respondents liked the advertisements for their pictures or illustrations, and colours. The copy or words in the advertisements seemed to be less important. For the BP advertisement, the main attraction was colour. The green colour used by BP was a strong reminder about the importance of the environment. In the case of Caltex and Shell the pictures were important. Caltex with its space shuttle illustration created the image of modernity and sophistication. It also sent the message to motorists that Caltex's Techron is a powerful and futuristic unleaded petrol. When motorists use Techron their vehicles will get great "pick-up". The Shell advertisement had a washing machine to illustrate that New Advance Formula Shell Super Unleaded will keep the car engine clean. The petrol will clean all parts of the engine just as efficiently as a washing machine. See Table 2 for details.

TABLE 2: Features in the advertisements that respondents liked

	BP		Caltex		Shell		Total	
	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)
Picture	32	30.47	53	50.48	35	33.33	120	38.09
Colour	42	40.0	5	4.77	25	23.81	72	22.86
Design	4	3.80	4	3.80	5	4.77	13	4.13
Copy	0	0	6	5.72	2	1.90	8	2.54
No comment	27	25.73	37	35.23	38	36.19	120	32.38

As to features that respondents disliked advertisements, 67.3% had no comment. A low 32.7% of the respondents reported disliking certain features of the advertisements. In the BP advertisement, the features that were not liked were the copy (14 respondents) and picture (13 respondents). The respondents disliked BP's picture or illustration of the alphabet "100%" which

was said to be not attractive. The copy explaining the "100%" was difficult to understand. Did the 100% guarantee mean that the company will give a free engine analysis if it was proven that their petrol had caused problems to the vehicle? New Straits Times on October 5, 1993 quoted the Principal Assistant Director, Enforcement Division, Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affair, as saying that the free engine analysis will only be given provided motorists have been using BP's unleaded petrol and if it is found that the product had caused damage to the engine. Motorists would also be subjected to an interview to determine if they qualify for the service. This, according to the Principal Assistant Director, was not stated in the advertisements but in pamphlets available at BP petrol stations.

In Caltex's case, respondents disliked the colour (15 respondents) and picture (14 respondents) in the advertisements. The colour used was a glowing orange red and this was said as too striking and hot, and might create anxiety among those who saw it. The picture of the space shuttle was commented as too far-fetched to equate with a car engine. A space shuttle seemed too sophisticated and beyond comparison with a car engine.

Some respondents disliked Shell's picture or illustration which depicted a New Improved Super Shell unleaded petrol acted like a washing machine. Their car engines would not be treated gently. These respondents worried what would happen to their car engines if they used New Improved Super Shell unleaded petrol.

TABLE 3: Features in the advertisements that respondents disliked

	BP		Caltex		Shell		Total	
	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)
Picture	13	12.38	14	13.34	17	16.19	44	13.97
Colour	4	3.81	15	14.29	25	6.67	26	8.25
Design	7	6.67	0	0	5	0	7	2.22
Copy	14	13.34	9	9	2	2.86	26	2.54
No comment	67	63.80	67	63.80	38	74.28	212	67.31

Next, the study asked respondents their reasons for using unleaded petrol. These reason are shown in Table 4. Most respondents cited protection of the environment (41 respondents), brand loyalty (17 respondents), influence by the government and other sources (16 respondents), and unleaded petrol is clean (14 respondents) as reasons for using unleaded petrol. A large number of respondents appreciated the importance of using unleaded petrol to help protect the environment (39%). This is especially so with BP users. About 62.86 percent (22 respondents) of BP users gave environmental protection as their main reason for using unleaded petrol. Brand loyalty

also influenced respondents to continue using their brands' unleaded petrol. Among the three oil companies, Caltex has the highest brand loyalist.

TABLE 4: Reasons for using unleaded petrol

Reasons	BP (f)	Caltex (f)	Shell (f)	Total (f)
Protect the environment	22	12	17	41
Brand loyalty	4	8	5	17
Influence of government/others	9	0	7	16
Unleaded petrol is clean	0	9	5	14
Convenient location	0	1	6	7
Power	0	3	1	4
Campaign	0	0	2	2
Reduce noise	0	0	1	1
New product	0	0	1	1
Well-known product	0	1	0	1
No comment	0	1	0	1

The respondents were also asked to suggest ways to convince others to use unleaded petrol. Their responses showed that protecting the environment will be their main rallying point (44.76 percent of total respondents), followed by campaign (19.05 percent of respondents), unleaded petrol has power (16.19 percent of respondents), and other responses. An astonishing finding is that 15 respondents said that it is no concern of theirs to convince others to use unleaded petrol. They did not care if others did not use unleaded petrol.

TABLE 5: Ways to convince people to use unleaded petrol

Ways	BP (f)	Caltex (f)	Shell (f)	Total (f)
Protect the environment	28	14	5	47
Campaign	0	0	20	20
Unleaded petrol has power	0	15	2	17
Lower price of unleaded petrol	0	0	3	3
Retailers give gifts	2	0	0	2
Ban leaded petrol	0	0	1	1
Not my concern	5	6	4	15

Respondents' media use was also enquired. Respondents were asked if they have seen the unleaded petrol advertisements in newspapers prior to

the research. Almost all respondents (98) have seen these advertisements before except for 8 respondents. This indicates that these advertisements have high visibility among newspaper readers.

TABLE 6: Respondents' exposure to advertisements prior to research

	BP (f)	Caltex (f)	Shell (f)	Total (f)
Yes	31	35	31	97
No	4	0	4	8

Following that, respondents were asked in which newspaper they saw the advertisements. A total of 138 recalled New Straits Times. This is followed by Berita Harian with 70 recalls, The Star with 69 recalls, Utusan Malaysia with 20 recalls, Nanyang Siang Pau with 8 recalls, and The Malay Mail with 3 recalls. This also shows that affluent Malaysians, i.e. those in the middle and upper income groups, are exposed to the major national dailies.

TABLE 7: Newspaper from which respondents have seen the advertisements

Newspapers	Number of Recalls			
	BP (f)	Caltex (f)	Shell (f)	Total (f)
New Straits Times	47	43	48	138
Berita Harian	24	22	24	70
The Star	22	24	23	69
Utusan Malaysia	8	5	7	20
Nanyang Siang Pau	1	4	3	8
The Malay Mail	0	3	0	3

Conclusion

Generally, the study found high exposures to the unleaded petrol advertisements among the respondents. The respondents were exposed to these advertisements through the major national dailies like New Straits Times, Berita Harian dan The Star. The high visibility of the unleaded petrol advertisements can be the starting point for a more concerted campaign to get more people to use unleaded petrol.

Although exposure to unleaded petrol advertisements is high, the desire to purchase unleaded petrol based on the advertisements is low. This

finding implies some problems with the advertisements, especially in their creative presentation. The pictures or illustrations and the colours used were considered not suitable. They created negative perceptions and interpretations about unleaded petrol. For example, the space shuttle used in Caltex's advertisement was said to be far-fetched from an automobile. Likewise the washing machine used in Shell's advertisement did not portray a gentle cleaning process. This illustration made respondents apprehensive as if their car engines would be destroyed by the unleaded petrol. The glowing red colour used in Caltex's advertisements was interpreted by the respondents to be too hot and thus difficult to handle. Respondents preferred mild, soothing, and attractive colours.

In addition, it is found that the respondents were knowledgeable about unleaded petrol. They knew the advantages of using unleaded petrol. They understood that unleaded petrol will prevent emission of lead to the atmosphere, it will not hurt the engine, and it does not lower the vehicle's power or "pick-up". Yet, they would not recommend others to purchase unleaded petrol based on the advertisements. Therefore, there is a need to improve the advertising campaign. New advertisements that are attractive, factual, but use less copy have to be created. Illustrations, pictures and colours used must correspond with the expectations of the public. It should not be something that the public cannot "compute" or relate with. These advertisements should be "hard sell," i.e. they should use facts that can convince the public. BP's attempt to provide 100 percent guarantee for users of its unleaded petrol is good, but this guarantee must be clear and achievable. It should not be deceiving. All the facts about the guarantee must be in the advertisements. "Fine point" urging the public to get details from brochure or BP's petrol dealers should be avoided. All these are deemed to be puffery and deceptions by the public leading them to disbelieve the guarantee. The oil company will only be wasting its advertising money.

Respondents reported that they disliked the copy in the unleaded petrol advertisements. This is indicative of people's refusal to read advertisement's copy. People generally believe that advertising aims to persuade them to buy things that they do not need. With this belief in their head, they try to avoid being influenced by advertisements. They refuse to read advertising copy. If they read the copy then they will be influenced to buy. Based on this logic, the oil companies should make sure that their advertisements have less copy. It will be better if the advertisement relies only on the picture illustration, colour, design, headlines and sub-headlines to "drive home" the message.

The outcome of efforts taken by oil companies to get more motorists to use unleaded petrol through advertising is dificult to measure. The effects of these advertisements, especially in adding more motorists to the list of unleaded petrol users can only be measured by the oil companies themselves through sales volume. However this does not give a clear picture of the

number of new unleaded petrol users because the increase in volume may be due to increase of consumption by present users. Therefore concerted efforts must be taken by everyone to encourage more motorists to use unleaded petrol.

This effort must be undertaken not only by the oil companies, but also the government through the relevant ministeries and agencies, media organizations and non-governmental organizations collectively. They must get together to plan and implement strategies to get all motorists to use unleaded petrol. Having all motorists using unleaded petrol will be the first step to a cleaner and healthier air for all Malaysians.

The action taken by the government to lower the price of unleaded petrol and the abolishment of import tax on catalytic converters should encourage and motivate everyone to use unleaded petrol, and later on to install catalytic converters in their cars. Eventually, Malaysians will breathe cleaner air and enjoy a healthier environment.

Bibliography

Bovee, C.L. & Arens, W.F. 1986. *Contemporary Advertising.* Second Edition, Homewood, Illinois: Irwin

Fletcher, A.D. & Bowers, T.A. 1988. *Fundamentals of Advertising Research.* Third Edition. Belmont, California: Wodsworth.

Jewler, A.J. 1985. *Creative Strategy in Advertising.* Second Edition. Belmont, California: Wodsworth.

1993. Country Facing Environmental Problem. *New Sunday Times.* September.

1991. Clearing the Air on Unleaded Fuel. *New Sunday Times,* December.

1992. 85 percent of cars in Malaysia ULG - compatible *New Sunday Times,* July.

1991. Shell to boost use of unleaded petrol. *The Star,* November.