

APPENDIX

The origins of AIDA

Here's an extract from a book published in 1922. I'd like you to make a guess at who wrote it:

"A FAULTY OUTLINE

A very commonly accepted outline, enumerating the steps in advertising and selling, is the following:

Favorable attention → Interest → Desire → Action → Permanent satisfaction

There is enough truth in this five-fold slogan to make it seem a very accurate statement of what are the essential steps in a successful advertisement or sales interview. It has done, however, as much harm to the development of a science of selling as it has done good."¹

Any ideas? I'll cut to the chase. How about Edward Kellogg Strong, Professor of Psychology, Graduate School of Business, Stanford University.

Strong? What, *the* Strong? E K Strong? The guy who – according to all of the books on marketing – invented AIDA?

Yep. *Not only did Strong not invent AIDA, he neither promoted it as an acronym nor supported it as a model of buyer behavior.* Remarkable.

Kotler's *Marketing Management* (I imagine the world's bestselling marketing textbook) has attributed AIDA to Strong in its last 10 editions. In his reference to AIDA, Philip Kotler simply states: "E. K. Strong, *The Psychology of Selling*, 1925."²

Chris Fill, author of the excellent *Marketing Communications: Contexts, Strategies and Applications*, described as the "essential textbook for all Chartered Institute of Marketing Diploma students," begins his section on how advertising works with the words: "Developed by Strong (1925), the

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Aida model was designed to represent the stages that a salesperson must take a prospect through in the personal selling process.” Fill goes on to say: “An extension of the progressive staged approach advocated by Strong emerged in the early 1960s.”³

Professor Michael J Baker consistently reports that Strong was responsible for AIDA. For instance, in his *Dictionary of Marketing and Advertising* he states: “AIDA. An acronym for Attention, Interest, Desire and Action, a hierarchy-of-effects model first proposed by Strong in 1924 [sic].”⁴

Kotler – wrong. Fill – wrong. Baker – wrong. Most authors – wrong. How could this be? (And how do I know about it?)

After thinking and writing about AIDA most days for over a year, to complete this final chapter I ventured into the National Library of Scotland. There, with little ado, were produced first editions of the books in which it all began. Or rather, in which it didn’t.

The first immediate (though minor) revelation was that Strong’s much-referred-to text *The Psychology of Selling* was actually entitled *The Psychology of Selling and Advertising*.⁵ I liked that. (But why did nobody quote the title in full?)

The second was that, far from being “a roaming door-to-door salesman” as I have seen him and his peers described, Strong was, as you have already read, a professor of psychology at an eminent university. Respect.

Third – and here’s the big one – no AIDA.

Most of Strong’s efforts in *The Psychology of Selling and Advertising* are dedicated to the promulgation of his own rather curious “buying formula,” which bears little resemblance to AIDA. At no point in the 468 pages of detailed text does the acronym AIDA appear.

St. Elmo’s fire

Here’s an excerpt from *The Psychology of Selling and Advertising* that gives an insight into AIDA’s more distant origins:

“Many changes in selling procedure have of necessity been made in the past fifteen years. Among them is the growing recognition of the buyer’s point of view.

The development of the famous slogan — ‘attention, interest, desire, action, satisfaction’ — illustrates this. [Note that Strong considered it famous by 1925.] In 1898 E. St Elmo Lewis used the slogan, ‘Attract attention, maintain interest, create desire,’ in a course he was giving on advertising in Philadelphia. He writes he obtained the idea from reading the psychology of William James. Later on he added to the formula, ‘get action.’ [Stop right there! They didn’t.] About 1907, A.F. Sheldon made the further addition of ‘permanent satisfaction’ as essential to the slogan.”

So it would seem that if anyone can be credited with developing the AIDA model (though not the acronym), it is the wonderfully named E St. Elmo Lewis.⁶ Strong himself refers to the version that includes the fifth element, satisfaction, as “this slogan of Lewis and Sheldon.”

While striving to promote his own “buying formula,” Strong did recognize the impact of the Lewis–Sheldon model. He wrote that it “has had a very profound effect upon the selling world” and that “the formula has caused order to come out of chaos.” Writing in 1925, he acknowledged that the “majority of books and articles since 1907 have endorsed the slogan in one form or another.”

Nevertheless, ending the section, he commented somewhat hopefully: “Judging from a perusal of recent literature, interest in this theory is dying out to some extent.”

AIDA rules the waves

Today, it’s no exaggeration to say that AIDA is probably the single most widely used model in the world of marketing, advertising, and selling. Marketing textbooks — academic or practical — that do not make significant reference to AIDA are few and far between. AIDA is right up there with the SWOT analysis, the 4Ps, the 80:20 principle, the PLC curve, the Boston Box, Maslow’s hierarchy, Tom Peters’ MBWA (management by walking about), and Rosser Reeves’ USP (the unique selling point, which incidentally wasn’t his either).⁷

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AIDA is used by marketing professors and by the greenest of greenhorn sales representatives. It spans the highbrow and the vernacular. And it's a true brand name.

Modern writers who ignore AIDA are a scarce breed, and those who decry it positive rarities. Among these is Chris Fill, who comments:

"Through time, a variety of models have been presented, each of which attempts to describe how advertising works. Aida and sequential models, such as the hierarchy of effects approach, were for a long time the received wisdom in this area. Now they are regarded as quaint but out-of-date, for a number of hard hitting reasons."

Fill goes on to suggest that the new view of advertising is that it should be regarded as a means of defending customers' purchase decisions and for protecting markets, not building them. This is the so-called "weak theory of advertising." I have some sympathy with this view, but only for a tiny minority of marketing communications (i.e. some television advertising campaigns, of the non-launch variety). This, of course, is not how most marketers spend most of their communication efforts.

Perhaps it's because I began my career in sales, and before that found myself selling pictures (and before that "windfall" apples and pears), that I can't avoid the conclusion that if you make the effort to do some "marketing" you should expect it to have some effect. Else why bother?

Marketing can work... does work. Likewise AIDA.

Indeed, the challenge facing the critics of AIDA (and I include myself here) is that attention → interest → desire → action is intuitively right and anyone in business can see that. Add to which AIDA is easy to remember, and therefore *it actually gets used*.

AIDA's antagonists claim that it is too simplistic, that it ignores a whole range of influences – psychological, cultural, environmental – and that the buying process is far too strung out and complex to be described by such a rudimentary model of behavior. But I think that's being ingenuous. No sensible marketer expects a customer to trip automatically through the

steps of AIDA once their attention has been triggered. The marketer knows it's an unrelenting battle from beginning to end. AIDA just happens to be an elegantly effective weapon, whether for honing a simple piece of advertising copy, or for guiding a detailed analysis of a comprehensive long-term marketing communications program.

So my vote is to keep AIDA. For most marketing communications, AIDA *nearly* works. Use it in the fashion of NEW AIDA, with intuitive salesmanship, and it *really* works.

AIDA: What the writers wrote

Here is a selection of quotes about AIDA, many of which you can find in the business section of your local bookshop or library. Some, of course, are factually wrong and others – starting with Strong – rather disparaging. Nevertheless, they are all testament to AIDA's great staying power.

"There is enough truth in this... slogan to make it seem a very accurate statement of what are the essential steps in a successful advertisement or sales interview. It has done, however, as much harm to the development of a science of selling as it has done good."

E K Strong, The Psychology of Selling Life Insurance, Harper and Brothers, 1922.

"Judging from a perusal of recent literature, interest in this theory is dying out to some extent."

E K Strong, The Psychology of Selling and Advertising, McGraw-Hill, 1925.

"Developed by Strong (1925), the AIDA model was designed to represent the stages that a salesperson must take a prospect through in the selling process. Now [it] is regarded as quaint but out of date."

Chris Fill, Marketing Communications, Prentice Hall Europe, 1999.

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“AIDA is probably the oldest acronym in marketing. It is the best and will never change.”

Derrick White, Close More Sales, Management Books 2000, 2001.

“[AIDA] was found to be the most widely quoted [model] in a range of current British, American and French textbooks.”

M J Baker, Marketing: Theory and Practice, Macmillan Press, 1983.

“Having defined the desired audience response, the communicator moves to developing an effective message. Ideally the message should get attention, hold interest, arouse desire, and obtain action (AIDA model). In practice, few messages take the consumer all the way from awareness through purchase, but the AIDA framework suggests the desirable qualities.”

Philip Kotler, Marketing Management, 11th Edition, Prentice Hall, 2003.

“Understanding the buying process is critical because it will lead to the possible routes to reach buyers. The buying process includes all the steps that a person takes leading to a purchase. It is called the adoption process and the problem-solving process by some academics. Some researchers call it a Learn/Feel/Do process. Others call it AIDA for Attention, Interest, Desire, Action.”

Steven Silburger, The 10-Day MBA, Piatkus, 2001.

“Over the years many advertising writers have developed copy formulas for structuring ads, commercials, and sales letters. The best known of these formulas is AIDA – which stands for Attention, Interest, Desire, Action.”

Robert W Bly, The Copywriter’s Handbook, Henry Holt, 1990.

“Adoption as a process over time has been understood by marketing scholars for a long time. An early conceptualization of this process was called AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action). Alternative

conceptualizations of this process use different terminology but are attempts to describe the same process.”

J F Engel, R D Blackwell, and P W Miniard, Consumer Behaviour, Dryden Press, 1990.

“The structure of an ad follows a proven outline. An effective... ad will get attention, build interest, create desire, motivate action, make sales. You will see this abbreviated more concisely as the AIDA formula.”

Sarah White and John Woods, Do-It-Yourself Advertising, Adams Media, 1997.

“This formula is variously known as AIDA or AIDCA. If you want to remember it, then recall the name of the opera by Verdi.”

Drayton Bird, Commonsense Direct Marketing, Kogan Page, 2000.

“The formula is derived from salesmen in America, at the turn of the century, who found they could achieve higher sales levels if they followed such a formula during their sales visits. It wasn’t long before advertising copywriters picked up the formula and adopted it for their own purposes.”

John Watson, Successful Creativity in Direct Marketing, Institute of Direct Marketing, 1993.

“The acronym AIDCA stands for the key words Attention, Interest, Desire, Conviction and Action. These are the five stages that you should lead your prospective customer through in sequence to maximize the chances of a successful sale.”

Robert Heller, Selling Successfully, Dorling Kindersley, 1999.

“The... model has been traced back to Plato’s elements of the human soul – reasonable, spiritive, appetitive... Marketers have developed a number of variants... of the... model... starting with Strong’s AIDA (1924)[sic].”

M J Baker, Marketing: An Introductory Text, Macmillan Education, 1984.

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“At the turn of the last century, a roaming door-to-door salesman came up with the AIDA structure to maximise sales on his rounds.... AIDA is still relevant today for all direct marketers as a way of engaging our audience.”

Daren Kay, The A to Z of Copywriting, brandrepublic.com, 2003.

“This well-used formula helps in the overall planning of an advertisement, and is particularly applicable to the hard-selling advertisement.”

Frank Jefkins, Advertising, Prentice Hall, 2000.

“It is necessary to recognise that AIDA and its kin will remain the implicit conceptual underpinnings of present-day practice until marketing academics are able to produce a better model which practitioners can understand and are willing to use.”

M J Baker, The Marketing Book, Butterworth-Heinemann, 2003.

“In 1898 E. St Elmo Lewis used the slogan, ‘Attract attention, maintain interest, create desire,’ in a course he was giving on advertising in Philadelphia. He writes he obtained the idea from reading the psychology of William James. Later on he added to the formula, ‘get action.’”

E K Strong, The Psychology of Selling and Advertising, McGraw-Hill, 1925.

“Man is a credulous animal, and must believe in something; in the absence of good grounds for belief, he will be satisfied with bad ones.”

Bertrand Russell, Unpopular Essays (1950), Routledge, 1995.