

## ADS FROM RUSSIA

By

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Advertising in Russia has witnessed rise and fall in its evolution from world recognized ad industry in pre-Revolution tsar Russia<sup>1</sup> to the years of oblivion at the time of the Soviet Union and revival after the Perestroika period (since 1985). The commercials offered here reflect the current stage of ad industry development in Russia and mostly focus on ad rhetoric. My discussion of them is partly intuitive based on long-term observation of ads in Russia, and partly objective drawing upon works of G. Hofstede, M. de Mooij, E. Hall and papers of scholars who studied different executional ad elements in national markets. The choice of commercials is primarily determined by didactic considerations, that is, how well they illustrate Russian culture. Wherever necessary I translated Russian brand names and commercial scripts into English to make it easier to comprehend.

### VALUES AND LIFESTYLE

According to the results of two surveys<sup>2</sup>, basic values of Russians are family security, friendship, a well-paid job, and social recognition. The importance of family is partly explained by economic instability and relatively low income per capita in the country. As a result, individuals' well-being and survival often depend upon support of relatives. Parents and their adult children often live in the same location, and sometimes share the same apartment. Parents help to raise grandchildren and often provide financial support for their children in early marriage life. Nepotism is popular in Russia for the same reason. Relatives with more power or influence often hire less successful relatives even if their qualification does not meet job requirements and threats of ruining business.

Friends are also very important. You can always rely on them when in need – borrow money, stay in their apartment, etc. Friendship sometimes is so strong that people decide to enter the same college or move to a new place together. They often become business partners and godparents. The importance of friends is expressed in a popular Russian proverb, "It's better to have 100 friends than 100 rubles." No wonder why Russians spend most of their free time with family and friends – celebrating birthdays or public holidays together; supporting home hockey or soccer teams, making shashlik<sup>3</sup> at dacha<sup>4</sup>, relaxing in banya<sup>5</sup>, fishing, going on vacation together or just gossiping in the kitchen. Kitchen is a "sacred" place at home: important news and secrets are first shared there.

#### 1. Lifestyle and Russian winter

The commercial *Омский Бекон* (Omski<sup>6</sup> Bacon) gives an idea of friendship and Russian lifestyle. It depicts young people having fun together in the countryside on a frosty cold day making snowmen, diving into an

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<sup>1</sup> On October 25, 1917, the Bolsheviks party led by V. Lenin toppled Tsar Nicolas II and established the power of workers and peasants. This date is officially known as the Great October Socialist Revolution.

<sup>2</sup> 1) Index of Happiness in Russia (2016), available at <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=115976>; 2) the European Social Survey of 2016, available at [http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/country.html?c=russian\\_federation](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/country.html?c=russian_federation).

<sup>3</sup> Russian analogue of US barbecue, which is cubes of skewered and grilled meat.

<sup>4</sup> Dacha is a seasonal second home outside the city used for gardening in summer time.

<sup>5</sup> Russian type of sauna

<sup>6</sup> Omsk is a city in Siberia.

ice-hole<sup>7</sup>, making a fire and eating *Омский Бекон* sausages. The commercial also provides a picture of the harsh Russian climate (eight months of winter) and typical Siberian landscape (40.0 % of the country's territory of snowy pine taiga) that contribute a lot to Russian national character and lifestyle. There is a lot more of Russia in this commercial – Russian's hilarious behavior, apartment buildings (typical living conditions), fur coats, ushankas<sup>8</sup>, and Russian cars that constantly break down.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UveSJaOhwul>

## 2. Key ad motifs

A beer brand commercial *Сибирская корона* (Siberian Crown) further discusses Russian values. It features David Dukhovny who reflects upon what his life would be like if he were Russian like his grandfather. The commercial informs about the country's achievements and people that Russians are proud of: cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin<sup>9</sup> and Peter the Great<sup>10</sup>. It also visualizes key Russian values (friends, family, Motherland) and later refers to them in the poem that David Dukhovny recites,

«I've learnt that I have a lot of relatives,  
A path, a wood, each spikelet in the field,  
A river, the sky above me – all of them are dear to me.»

In the final scene Dukhovny proposes a toast to Russian people and their achievements, "To You! We have things we can be proud of!" The commercial makes it clear that the brand *Сибирская корона* stands in the row with Russian ballet, hockey, space and the Arctic exploration, friendship, family, and vast spaces of Motherland. These values and the country's achievements constitute motifs of many Russian ads.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KaN54hW-6g>

## 3. Status-driven purchasing behavior

Another important value, which often explains different domains of Russian's purchasing behavior, is social recognition. Russians may openly deny the importance of this value, and even judge other people who are driven by it, but subconsciously will make purchasing decisions based on what other people think of them. As a result, they give preference to high-end popular brands that contribute to their social status and enhance their significance. Extreme manifestations of this status-driven purchasing behavior are middle-class men taking loans to buy expensive SUV cars and middle-class women going shopping in Milan (Italy).

The value of social recognition partly explains the preference Russians give to well-recognized foreign brands, as their perceived quality is high. Some Russian companies capitalize on this perception offering pseudo-foreign brands made in Russia: Carlo Pazolini ('Italian' shoes), Westland and Gloria Jeans ('US' jeans), Greenfield ('English' tea), Erich Krause ('German' stationery), Jardin ('French' coffee).

The latter makes use of the foreign consumer culture positioning reflected in the French brand name, French speaking characters, and French setting. The commercial creates an atmosphere of a sophisticated lifestyle associated with France and contributes to the perceived high quality of coffee *Jardin* as part of this foreign culture.

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<sup>7</sup> Immersion into icy "blessed" waters is a traditional ritual observed by Russians on Epiphany Day (January 19) to celebrate the birth and baptism of Jesus. Bathing is believed to have healing powers.

<sup>8</sup> Traditional winter fur hat with ear flaps

<sup>9</sup> The first human to journey into outer space (1961)

<sup>10</sup> Peter the Great – Russian tsar (1682-1696) whose reforms made a lasting impact on Russia.

Barista (addressing the lady): "L'Art de Vivre" (The art of life) is a wonderful book, but you will not succeed if you try to learn this art without coffee.  
Girl: Why not?  
Barista: The real art is enjoying coffee every moment. In books you will only read about it. Taste this life. And mostly important – enjoy it!  
VO: Coffee *Jardin*. Every moment is unique!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1CxcPkHKnc>

## CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

Russia is a high-context culture based on Edward Hall's information contextuality concept. It means that ad messages tend to be implicit and ambiguous with communicators relying on non-verbal behavior, the physical setting, social circumstances and the nature of interpersonal relationships.

Russia scores high on Power Distance (93), Uncertainty Avoidance (95) and Long-term Orientation (80); and relatively low on Individualism (39) and Masculinity (36).

### 4. Advertising style

Product information in Russian ads is often delivered indirectly through visuals, symbols, and associations. For example, a commercial promoting chocolate brand *Сударушка*<sup>11</sup> draws upon associations with a popular Russian holiday Maslenitsa<sup>12</sup> famous for its bright attires, hilarious entertainment, towers of pancakes and other traditional treats. The confectioner's voice-over compares the wealth and abundance of the holiday with abundance and high quality of ingredients that go into the chocolate – *perfectly selected nuts, juicy raisins, and great milk chocolate*. He also plays around the brand name *Сударушка* by using it with respect to his female companion, "My Sudarushka will also like it."

This commercial also exemplifies the use of elaborate verbal style typical for high-context cultures of moderate to strong uncertainty avoidance like Russia. It is characterized by rich, expressive language manifested in metaphors (*towers of pancakes, mountains of treats*), long arrays of adjectives (*intense rich taste*), flowery expressions (*generous amount*), proverbs, repetitions, and synonyms (*wealth, rich; plenty, great amount*). From stylistic perspective, epithets, hyperbole, and personification are most popular tropes in Russian ads.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhroKvy8u\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhroKvy8u_Q)

Another example of indirect communication style is a chocolate brand commercial *Вдохновение* (Inspiration). It starts with portrayal of a famous Russian ballet dancer Nikolai Tsiskaridze and a close-up of the chocolate bar *Вдохновение*. Inspired by the taste of the chocolate the ballet dancer and his partner beautifully perform to classical opera music in front of the Bolshoi Theatre. The commercial plays around the brand name developing associations between the inspiring quality of the chocolate and inspiring ballet performance. In the final scene we see the product packshot with the ballet dancers depicted on the package. The voice-over sums up, "Inspiration is above all."

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LI\\_MqiDuR0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LI_MqiDuR0)

### 5. Overused words

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<sup>11</sup> Sudarushka – a polite and affectionate form of address to a woman used in the Russian empire.

<sup>12</sup> Maslenitsa is an Eastern Slavic religious and folk sun-festival with origins in the pagan tradition that celebrates the imminent end of the winter during the last week before Great Lent. The most characteristic food of Maslenitsa is bliny, which are thin pancakes made from butter, eggs, and milk.

In general, Russian people tend to exaggerate things and embellish facts. For that reason they are very suspicious and disbelieving. This attitude to information manifests in frequent use of words 'really' and 'true (genuine)'. Each time Russians share information; they use these words as if trying to convince other people that what they say is true – 'I really saw it', 'it is really genuine emerald'. Advertising does the same assuring consumers of *genuine mayonnaise of the first pressed oil, or really genuine bitter chocolate, or really genuine Italian leather shoes*.

*Taste* is one more overused word in ads promoting food and beverages. Juice, tea, drinking water, sausage, pasta, milk must be delicious. The fact can be explained by high Uncertainty Avoidance index in Russia. Cigarettes, alcohol, sweets are perfect ways to reduce anxiety. Consumption of sweets is really high in the country. Russians treat themselves to sweets on a regular basis without any occasion, just because they '*want to eat something sweet*'. Whatever the reason, *delicious* with respect to food and beverages is a safe and effective adjective, like in the commercial, promoting Роллтон broth with its slogan – *It is more delicious this way!*

**Mom (shopping):** Every day I try to treat my family to homemade, quality, and mostly important – delicious lunch. I am confident in the result with Rollton broth. There are more vegetables, flavored greens, and spices in new Rollton. They make my lunch zesty and enjoyable for the family.

**Son (kissing mom):** Very, very delicious!

**Mom:** And the reward is my family's gratitude. Rollton. It is more delicious this way.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjYUm\\_zDdws](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjYUm_zDdws)

## ADVERTISING FORMS

Indirect communication style and emotional bonds with consumers as the ultimate ad goal determine the choice of advertising forms in Russia. Most commercials remind of a one-act play with its plot development and characters. The product is skillfully embedded into a plot, and usually helps to solve a problem or satisfy an existing need. Presenters seldom inform consumers directly about product benefits like it often happens in US commercials. This approach is considered to be boring and too obvious in its intention to sell a product. Russian consumers mostly look for entertainment in ads. The level of realism in commercials may vary from a natural representation of real life with an open ending (slice-of-life), much-exaggerated situation (theatrical drama) to the imagination form with its make-believe world, film and video techniques.

Competitive advertising is not an attractive ad form in Russia as it is considered to be too aggressive. As a result, the brand is often compared with an unidentified product (brand X) or a product category.

### 6. Drama

Below is a script of *Мегафон* (Megafon)<sup>13</sup> commercial promoting 4G Internet service. The commercial depicts thoughtful middle-aged neighbors taking care of a young married couple, the Frolovs, who have just bought a dacha. The neighbors share seedlings, a recipe of canned pickles, and fish catch in return for 4G high-speed Internet that the Frolovs share with them. The neighbors' desire to help the Frolovs looks comical as they pursue different goals as evidenced by their activities – boating, playing badminton, and relaxing in a hammock. The brand slogan "Megafon. Really Close" plays around close relationships with the neighbors and good quality Internet coverage of the neighborhood provided by *Мегафон*. The commercial takes the theatrical drama form as relationships between the neighbors and the Frolovs are much exaggerated.

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<sup>13</sup> Leading cell service operator in Russia

**Woman** (knocking at the window): Neighbors!

**VO:** During their first visit to dacha the Frolovs were immediately surrounded by their neighbors' care. Everyone is happy to share with them fish catch, seedlings, and even a signature recipe of canned pickles. It is not surprising, as the Frolovs are sharing the Internet with all their neighbors. 4G Router of high-speed Internet is perfect for everyone. Megafon. Really close.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjtQzqEc4yA>

## 7. Imagination form

*Ма́йскуй Ча́й* (May Tea) commercial makes use of the imagination format with film techniques. It brings spectators to noble and refined atmosphere of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian gentry. The commercial visualizes an allusion to Alexander Pushkin's novel in verse «Euvgene Onegin», in particular, stanza 37 that describes an evening ritual of tea drinking. Spectators see A. Pushkin<sup>14</sup> who is watching Olga (key novel character) serving tea. He poeticizes the ritual influenced by her beauty. The voice-over recites his verse while it is being composed. The brand name appears at the end of the commercial, "Alexander Pushkin. Russian classics. May Tea. We have things to be proud of. We have things to love." Thanks to proximity of *Pushkin* and *May Tea* in the phrase, the latter is perceived as one of the traditions Russians are proud of.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mdLIUhMXTI>

## 8. Cartoons

The cartoon subform is also popular in Russian commercials. Typical are animated characters from Russian folk tales and epos. One of them is Dobrynya<sup>15</sup>, a folk hero who is an embodiment of strength, courage, and unbending spirit. He saves the country from dark forces and kvass<sup>16</sup> *Добрыня (Dobrynya)* helps him in it.

**Archer:** Dobrynya, we have been attacked.

**Dobrynya:** By whom?

**Archer:** By dark forces.

**Dobrynya:** Don't worry. I'll serve them out yet.

**VO** (as soon as Dobrynya drinks kvass): Bread kvass gives heroic strength, peace at home, and unbending spirit. Kvass Dobrynya.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ryckm7Nni1o>

## 9. Lifestyle Transfer

The lifestyle transfer form is aimed at generating associations with aspirational reference groups that Russians would like to be part of. Given a high score of Power Distance in Russia, these reference groups are often people with a higher social status. Accordingly, commercials try to make consumers believe that product purchase will get them close to the desired social status, and provide social recognition. Lifestyle ads make use of well-groomed and fashionably dressed ad characters surrounded by attributes of status and power – SUV cars, villas, golf courses, yacht clubs, expensive restaurants, and downtowns of the world mega cities.

<sup>14</sup> The greatest Russian poet and the founder of modern Russian literature (1799-1837).

<sup>15</sup> The name 'Dobrynya' is derived from an adjective 'dobryi' which means 'kind'.

<sup>16</sup> Kvass is a traditional [Slavic fermented](#) beverage commonly made from [rye bread](#), known in many Eastern European countries and especially in Ukraine and Russia as [black bread](#).

*Greenfield* tea commercial features a middle-class well-groomed lady in an upscale apartment enjoying inexpensive tea (upper end of low price segment).

**VO:** To be impeccable is high art. We, women, have mastered this art perfectly. And only we know the price of it and how important to have a good rest, a rest with Greenfield tea. It will give you strength and a good mood. Greenfield. Does not change the world, it changes your mood.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIMMctFE-FQ>

## GENDER-ROLE PORTRAYALS

Russia is a feminine culture that stands for values of modesty, quality of life, relationships, and caring for the weak and the small. Gender roles overlap in the country: women can be providers in the family, whereas men can take care of children and do some household chores – cook, wash the dishes, go shopping.

The choice of gender for prominent ad characters often depends on product type. Male models usually advertise typical male products (alcohol, electronics, finance, automobile). For some female products (mostly food and drinks) both male and female models can play prominent characters. Product type doesn't impact the gender of voice-overs. In most cases preference is given to male voice-overs as they are perceived as more convincing and credible than female voices.

### 10. Understanding women

Women in Russia are expected to be modest and wise and let their spouses think that they are real providers and those who make final and important decisions in the family. There is a famous saying in this regard, "Husband is the head, and wife is the neck. The head looks in the direction of the neck's turn."

On the whole, Russian wives are very sympathetic and understanding. They often accept their husbands' failures. Mayonnaise *Слобода* commercial perfectly exemplifies the role of Russian women in a family. We see mom and two little daughters in a car, waiting for dad who is fixing a garage door. One of the girls asks mom if she loves her husband despite the fact that he is not strong and affluent. The woman replies affirmatively and gets the girls' approval, "It is good that you love him. Otherwise he would be alone."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45AAOyjHY7I>

**Girl 1:** Mom, do you love father?

**Mom:** Yes

**Girl 1:** Even if he is not strong?

**Mom:** Yes

**Girl 1:** Yes, he is not strong, and not rich.

**Girl 2** (Giggles)

**Mom:** Yes, he is not very rich.

**Girl 1:** Then it is very good that you love him.

**Girl 2:** Otherwise he would be alone.

**Girls** (Giggle)

**VO:** Mayonnaise Sloboda. For those who got married successfully.

### 11. Tender men

Men in Russia are tender and affectionate. It is well depicted in baby food commercial *Фрутоняня* (Fruit Nanny). The commercial is set in the apartment of a young married couple. In the middle of the night their baby

starts crying and the dad gets up to calm the baby down. He is very tender with the baby and thoughtful of his wife trying not to wake her up. He sings a quiet song to the baby while giving it *Фрутоняня*. The commercial ends with mom waking up in the morning and seeing her husband and baby sleeping soundly on the floor. The voice-over comments, "Фрутоняня. To help mom ... and dad."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GZFc3EXkbo>

## 12. Relational roles

Ad characters (both men and women) are primarily depicted through relational roles: spouses, parents, lovers, and partners. Even celebrities are often portrayed through relationships. It is obvious in *MTC* commercial that features a popular Russian TV and movie star – Dmitri Nagiev. He presents *MTC* Tablet Online service and testifies about its effects in a funny way through "complicated" relationships with his girl friend.

**Nagiev:** Maybe we'll go to my place. My new TV series will be on soon.  
**Girl:** Cool! But we might be late. Let's watch here.  
**Nagiev** (irritated): *MTC* Tablet Online. It is Internet in a tablet for only 5 rubles a day. Always helpful!  
**Girl:** We'll watch soccer after your series.  
**Nagiev:** Now I know what it means 'to blow off'\*. I wonder if you would take a thermos if I invited you for a cup of coffee.  
**Girl:** What?  
**Nagiev:** Nothing.  
**Girl:** And we'll watch soccer after the series.  
**Nagiev:** Of course, we have nothing else to do, do we?  
\*Russian equivalent for 'blow off' is derived from the noun 'soccer'.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQ6Ds39cAWo>

## CELEBRITIES

Celebrities are not popular in Russian ads, as being individually distinctive is not encouraged in this culture. They act with other characters without demonstrating or endorsing a product, or giving a testimonial. In those rare occasions when celebrities do testify or endorse a product, they do it indirectly, in an entertaining form or through associations and drama. Voice-over usually accompanies their play providing information on the product and its effects.

## 13. Maria Sharapova and celebrity transfer

In the commercial below a famous Russian tennis player Maria Sharapova promotes *Samsung Galaxy La Fleur* smart phone. She creates an image of beautiful flowers on the apartment wall with exact and strong blows of her tennis racquet. The created flowers are the exact copy of the image on her smart phone screen. The beautiful flower image is associated with Sharapova, and her strong blows – with Samsung powerful device. All together they manifest in the slogan, "Samsung Galaxy La Fleur. Strength of Beauty."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOL8qFwZLAA>

## 14. Olga Shelest and animation

*Orbit* commercial features a famous TV hostess, Olga Shelest, who has a talk with animated food crumbs (FC). She gets rid of them with a chewing gum Orbit.



**FC 1:** We are improvising today.  
**FC 2:** U-u, we simply keep silence. Nobody likes when women chat a lot.  
**Olga:** By the way, I am the boss here. You can go.  
**FC 1:** Didn't we have fun together?  
**Olga:** Bye, my sweetheart!  
**FC 1:** I am staying.  
**VO:** Say 'good-bye' to food crumbs!  
**Olga:** Take them away!  
**VO:** For fresh breath and clean teeth eat, drink, and chew Orbit!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zpTxPB1S-4>

## 15. Nikolai Valuev and celebrity transfer

In this commercial Nikolai Valuev, a Russian professional boxer, promotes MTC 'honest' tariff. He does it indirectly by sharing an honest story about his fears during the champion fight in 2005. The commercial is aimed at developing strong associations between the honest boxer and MTC honest services.

**NV:** Have I ever experienced fear?! Frankly speaking – yes. It was before the champion fight in 2005. I had been preparing for it for 12 years, and was afraid to lose. But you know, I am not ashamed of my feelings. I am honest with you and with myself.  
**VO:** Honest tariff with Super MTS. 0 rubles inside the network with the first second without subscription fee. We are honest. Check it yourself!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pmlmquXnNQ>

## 16. Celebrity portrayals

Big egos and showing off are not encouraged in Russia. Russian consumers appreciate when celebrities downplay their success and put on an image of a buddy, one of the guys. That's why celebrities are often belittled or even ridiculed in ads. The formula of a successful male celebrity includes cheerfulness, good sense of humor, friendliness, and modesty. Strength also works well if it is combined with kindness and reliability, not aggression. A good example is Nikolai Valuev, whose heroic appearance (213 m height, 150kg weight) is combined with kindness and trustworthiness. The contrast is really amusing! The ad below says, "100 rubles for beautiful eyes!"





A successful female celebrity should be charming, good-humored, modest, and friendly. Sexuality is perceived as inoffensive and funny if it is combined with these traits. The ad campaign promoting ice-cream Экзо is a case. It features Anna Semenovich, a former competitive ice dancer, Russian singer, actress, and model. It capitalizes on her popularity and downplays her success by deliberately overdoing her forms in order to generate associations with the product – “Экзо. Say Hello to Fruits.”



## 17. Federal Law on Advertising Alcohol

Russia has well-known and persistent stereotypes of vodka drinking. Russians willingly support these stereotypes (*Manly man drink*), though in fact their drinking habits are slowly evolving thanks to globalization and westernization of tastes. More and more middle- and upper-middle class Russians give preference to wine.

Federal Law on Advertising, article 21<sup>17</sup>, has a lot of restrictions on content and dissemination of alcohol advertising. Advertising of beer and spirits is banned in all media and Internet, and only allowed at the points of sale and as part of sales promotions. Exceptions are beer, wine and sparkling wine made in Russia: advertising of beer is allowed on TV during sports events, and wine – on TV and over the radio from 11:00 pm till 7:00 am. These amendments to the Federal Law were accepted before the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi 2014. They also allow portrayals of people and animals (including animated images) otherwise forbidden in ads. The commercial promoting Russian beer Baltika 7 exemplifies the law. It contains images of Sochi and text appealing to Russian fans to take part in a sales promotion event, “Baltika is an official beer supplier of the Olympics in Sochi. In 2014 the world will see beautiful and modern Russia. Show this image of your country to the world together with Baltika 7 and become a Russian representative in London. Baltika 7 – Discover Sochi in London! Details at [www.baltika7.ru](http://www.baltika7.ru).”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQeiOvr0tWc>

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.assessor.ru/zakon/zoreklame/21/>