



The Art of Advertising

there's more to it than you might think

When it comes to selling, you can't go past advertising. No matter what's on offer or how good it is - breakfast cereal, cars, houses, floor-mops - without commercial hype, no-one will buy if they don't know it exists. Remember the snake-oil salesman in the western movies? Townsfolk saw his wagon the instant it rolled in - how could they miss it, decorated as it was with advertisements for his dubious products. They'd listen to his patter about the miracle in a little bottle which could cure aches and pains, heel wounds and was guaranteed to grow hair on a billiard ball. It probably reeked, tasted foul and did none of the things the flashy dude claimed, but people bought it anyway because he knew their weak points and how to exploit them. That's the essence of advertising - see a market, pick the targets and shoot them straight in the heart, no quarter!

We are the ones in their sights and during the course of any day we will be hit many times, often without even realising. The advertisers know how to catch our attention as we drive along the freeway, duck into the store for a carton of milk, or simply glance through the daily newspaper. The obscene amount of money that goes into producing this hype is entirely justified because it snares the attention of the consumer and brings in the bucks. That's always assuming they've used the right bait and presented it in a way that simply can't be ignored. To achieve this, they've studied us in depth - who we are, what we need, how we think, when and where we will be at our most vulnerable.

Supermarkets are the classic selling arena. By their existence alone, much of the hard work is already done because people only go there to spend money. There will always be a few who come in out of the heat and wander along the freezer section just to cool off. Despite the fact that they had no intention of buying, they might still be tempted to pick up a little something on their way out, maybe a candy bar that catches their eye and tickles a fancy, one they didn't have before they came in. The manager anticipated that and catered for it, setting up a few self-serve dispensers right next to the checkout which everyone leaving has to pass. It's a popular spot for impulse-buying, and lucrative in more ways than one. Not only do the store-owners profit from the sales, but they actually charge manufacturers and suppliers who wish their goods to be placed in these all-too-obvious areas. The same applies to other premium sections like the end of aisles, ideal for those point-of-sale displays that confront customers before they've even started their shopping. The rows of shelving are another consideration - what will the buyer see first? Anywhere that is eye-height and easy-grab is prized by suppliers and they don't mind paying for the space. In fact, if they choose not to, their products will be relegated up or down on the racks where they are hard to reach and not easily glimpsed, reducing sales potential.

Simply being in a convenient position isn't always enough. Even shoppers in a rush won't necessarily fill their trolleys with items from the middle shelves just because they are handy. They look for labels and packaging of familiar brands they've had before and trust. Names like Kelloggs, Cadbury and Heinz are household words, renowned for quality. *Now* they are, but when they first appeared donkey's years ago they were just another packet or can. Since then, millions have been invested in advertising to get them known and immediately recognisable as worth buying. Despite achieving popularity, much more continues to be outlaid to keep them in the public eye and give them an edge over their rivals.

Commercials are everywhere and, in the main, the best ones are the simplest, perhaps an image of the actual packet, or a brand name that has been seen so often that anyone can recognise it at a glance. Even children who can't yet read know a Mars wrapper on sight and what it contains. Once people are indoctrinated by frequent exposure, a single word in a particular style triggers

that same image in their memory. They don't have to be up close to know how it's spelt and what it refers to - the familiar style and colours tell them that from a distance. And if they are in the market for a certain type of product, the brand name which has become synonymous with it is the one that will come to mind first. Icons take this selling tool to a higher level. Hype to promote them has been so intense that even words have become unnecessary. See the familiar "tick" on sports gear and you know it's Nike. There's a double bonus here - free advertising by people who bought the clothing and walk around showing off the symbol on their T shirt and joggers. Same with that large stylised yellow "M" in the distance declaring there is a McDonalds underneath. Busy shoppers might have registered it briefly, then pushed it to the back of their minds while negotiating the precinct carpark; but there'll be a reminder in waste bins or carelessly tossed on the ground - paper cups and bags bearing the iconic symbol - and seeing this in passing might just excite their taste buds to the point where Maccas is their next port of call. All this from a fleeting image.

It is tantamount to subliminal advertising, the practice of implanting a suggestive image in a flash, often less than a single second. It's there and gone so quickly that a person thinks it was their own idea. Believing this, they guess there must be a reason for it, a liking or desire that suddenly popped into their head. Then, they only need to glimpse somewhere that sells whatever they seemingly yearn and there's every chance they'll stop off and buy one. The value of subliminal images was recognised years ago and was frequently used in cinemas. It was easy enough to slip in a frame or two into the movie, seeing as there were sixteen of them for each second of film. It was the reason a number of patrons would rise from their seats in unison because they all had a sudden, inexplicable urge to buy an ice cream. Once authorities realised the unfair power of this suggestive implantation, its use was banned; but enforcement was an impossibility. Could you imagine how long it would take to scan every single frame of even one movie? Knowing this, many unscrupulous advertisers would have simply grinned and carried on regardless. Maybe they still do.

With the advent of television the floodgates were opened and consumers could be mercilessly attacked in their own homes. Early commercials were pretty boring and just put across the best points of a product, very briefly because air-time was costly. From then on, TV stations learned quickly about the financial potential of ads and set about researching the viewing public's habits so that they could benefit. They worked out when most people tuned in, what their preferences were likely to be based on the programmes they watched and, in particular, which members of the family had the most influence in the group with respect to buying. Like the prized spots in the supermarket, TV channels charged more for commercial breaks during prime adult time, and included that special window when children would be in front of the box. This demographic, it was discovered, was heaven-sent. Kids are born snake-oil salesmen and are the frequent targets in the must-have game. Ads for toys, junk-food, even cars are aired when children are glued to the screen, and the way they are made specifically appeals to the younger set - put a kid or two in the clip and young viewers will identify with it immediately. That's clever, by-passing the parents and going straight to the in-house manipulators who will never let it rest until they've got what they want - what the advertisers encourage them to want.

How insidious, you might think. It's pretty low, exploiting the innocent and naive. Youngsters don't have the experience to know when they are being sucked in - but we do...? Of course we do: that's why we have the DVD so that we can record programmes and fast-forward through the commercials. On occasions, however, snippets are noticed while the ad-break is flicking through - a distinctive car badge, a couple of blokes drinking beer (a glimpse of the label on the bottle tells us which brand); and - what was that? - a boat plus a fishing rod and reel... We hit the pause button and rewind, just to watch a particular advertisement that caught our attention. Will we buy, won't we? Somebody will, maybe many, fast-forwarders just like us; and the ploy's paid off. We talked earlier about icons, fleeting images easily recognised that attract. All are there, and although some may seem to have nothing whatever to do with the product, they grab us anyway - a group of pretty girls in bikinis, a well-known personality, a preview of a forthcoming series-return, those pictures that cause us to pause and look. It doesn't matter what, nor how relevant, just so long as we take a few moments to focus. The brand name of the product will be there somewhere, and once seen it is in our memory, to be refreshed whenever we encounter the familiar logo again. Why did I mention the station primer for the "coming soon" series? After all, it

was only advertising itself. But now we know it's coming back, we'll keep watching until we find out when, just so that we don't miss it. Neither will we miss the commercials during each episode, even though we'll fast-forward through them as usual - flash, flash, in our heads - brand names, logos, shapes, colours, constantly repeated, seemingly forgettable; until we catch sight of them next time we go shopping.

Makers of video commercials are very aware of our fondness for drama, comedy, sex and they use it well. There are those clips spruiking a product while telling a little story, usually tongue-in-cheek. We tend to watch these because, like the programme they've interrupted, they are entertaining in their own right. Worked into the thirty-second mini-show will be a name, maybe an icon or logo, and although we watched it all the way through because it was simply enjoyable, like it or not, the message has sunk in. Occasionally, however, the ad company is a bit over-subtle and the message is buried so deeply that it is missed altogether. We love the commercial and always have a good laugh over it; but, for the life of us, we haven't a clue what it's supposed to be selling. Or maybe that's just another gimmick. The oversight nags at us, so we actually wait for the commercial to appear, just to find out what it was advertising. Slam dunk!

So, from time to time, the smart guys may appear to slip up, but I seriously doubt they do. They know us better than we know ourselves, they see us coming and definitely have no intention of giving us an even break. They can't afford to: their clients are desperate for our money; and, as the ones encouraging us to spend, the advertising agents want their cut. We should be grateful, really, being kept in the know, as it were. Fortunately we are intelligent individuals, so regarding what to buy and when, that remains our choice and ours alone. Hmm...?

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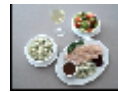
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