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Taking Advertising Apart

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The Persuasion Model

“...there are no hidden persuaders. Advertising works openly, in the bare and pitiless sunlight.”

Rosser Reeves
Reality in Advertising (1961)

All of us think we know how advertising works. It's nothing very clever or special; in fact, it's dead simple. Personally, I'm certain this is why we get so angry when we hear about admen earning fat salaries and forever having expensive lunches. What they do, we think, is money for old rope.

Advertising mostly starts with a something some company wants to persuade us to buy. I say “mostly,” because occasionally we see governments advertising things they want us to *do*, but for the purposes of this book I'm going to stick to advertising for branded products or services that companies want to sell us.

Advertising like this, for commercial brands, dates back at least 2500 years (Fletcher 1999: 11). But the idea that it can be treated as part of a systematic sales activity is only about 100 years old. We know this because of St Elmo Lewis, a salesman for the National Cash Register Company. Right at the end of the nineteenth century Mr Lewis invented a four-step formula for doorstep selling:

- Get *Attention*,
- Provoke *Interest*
- Create *Desire*
- Finally, get *Action* by closing the sale.

Universally known by the acronym AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action), this led to the first formal model of advertising ever adopted (Barry & Howard 1990). Many advertisers nowadays still think this is how advertising works.

So, back to this thing the company wants to sell. The first step in the process is to try to think of some sort of message or proposition that will change our beliefs about their product and persuade us to buy it. That message needs to be something that will make us think their product works better than the competitors, or is better value, or is newer or smarter or sexier, etc. I'm sure you get the picture. The company usually devises this message in conjunction with the ad agency. Once everyone is happy that the message encapsulates all the best things they have to say about the product, they go to a couple of even more important people in the ad agency called the "creative" team (they must be important because, rather as in the popular US TV series *Mad Men*, they are paid an awful lot of money for mostly seeming to sit around and do very little).

The creative team then dreams up some daft creative idea to justify the ad agency charging the client lots of money. (I hope you'll excuse my cynicism, but I did work in advertising for a *very* long time.) Often this creative idea seems to have nothing whatsoever to do with what is being advertised, and sometimes it doesn't have much connection with the message the company wants to get over either. Anyway, once everyone is happy with the creative idea they then stick the message onto the end of it and go and make the ad. Next they put it on TV or in a newspaper or onto some other media . . . and sit back and wait for results. "Simples," as the meerkat would say.

This process is so unexceptional you might wonder why it's worth me writing a whole book about it. After all, Claude Hopkins, one of the first admen, did that back in 1923. Mr Hopkins averred then that "Advertising, once a gamble, has thus become . . . one of the safest of business ventures" (Hopkins 1998). Selling through advertising was, for Hopkins, a rational, information-based process, with no room for humor or eccentricity.

But, like all business ventures, as soon as you invent something someone comes along and tries to measure it. In this case the someone was Daniel Starch, and the measurement he introduced was to show people a copy of the newspaper with the ad in it, ask if they had read the ad, and then ask what they had "noted" about it. Starch's "Reading and Noting" system

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meant that getting us to pay attention to advertising became that much more important.

To solve this problem of lack of attention, media owners back in the 1920s decided to employ experts to write advertisements for their clients. Again, this wasn't exactly a new idea. Take for example, this quote from Richard Addison writing in the *Tatler*:

The great Art of writing Advertisements is the finding out of a proper Method to catch the Reader's Eye, without which a good thing may pass over unobserved. (Fletcher 1999: 16)

You may be surprised to learn that Addison wrote this not in 1920s, nor indeed in the 1820s, but in 1710. Three centuries ago. Only a little later, in 1759, the famous Samuel Johnson perceptively wrote:

Advertisements are now so numerous that they are very negligently perused, and it therefore becomes necessary to gain attention by a magnificence of promises, and by eloquence sometimes sublime, sometimes pathetic. (Fletcher 1999: 17)

Now you can see what the role of those creative people who sit around all day seeming to do very little is. "Negligently perusing" (i.e., not paying much attention to) ads has always been seen as the big problem for advertisers, and "eloquence" (i.e., the sort of imaginative stuff that is produced by the creative team) is supposedly the solution.

Of course, it was never seen as that much of a problem when advertising was restricted to newspapers. What changed everything was the arrival of commercial television in the USA in the mid 1950s. Suddenly advertising budgets were big business, and the ad agencies that designed and produced the ads likewise became big business. Commercial TV, by effectively bringing the cinema into our living rooms, revolutionized the creative opportunities open to these ad agencies. And getting people to pay attention suddenly became the focus of *everyone's* attention.

Well, it had to. Commercial TV was hugely expensive, and it only existed because of the revenue it earned from advertising, so it simply had to offer something a bit special. What it did offer was the chance for the message to be accompanied by music and movement and drama and celebrity, all those things we take for granted these days. The early viewers of TV clustered around their sets with rapt attention, much as children who have never watched TV before do now. TV advertising was an almost overnight success,

and those companies who invested in it early found their share-of-market rocketing. Of course, our infatuation with the small screen didn't last long, and that just made the role of creativity even more important.

But the overnight success of TV advertising meant it started to attract the attention of all sorts of different groups who wanted to get on the bandwagon. Among them were scientists and psychologists who thought they could make advertising significantly more persuasive by targeting it at our aspirations. They in turn excited the interest of the general public, who were concerned not with the money that could be made out of TV advertising, but with the ethics of what it might be doing to us. A confrontation became inevitable.

What sparked off this confrontation was a group known as "motivational researchers," chief of which was the psychologist Ernest Dichter. Motivational researchers attempted to analyze consumer behavior by tapping into areas such as symbol and metaphor and the Freudian unconscious. Typical of their output was a book published by the research director of the *Chicago Tribune*, Pierre Martineau in 1957. Martineau opened up the opportunity for advertisers to persuade people to buy their products not just by satisfying evident practical needs, but also by exploiting latent and incipient emotional needs – needs that in many cases people were not even aware they had.

The activities of the motivational researchers prompted publication of a book by Vance Packard, a journalist. Packard's book, *The Hidden Persuaders*, became an instant bestseller and set a hare running which is still running to this day. In the opening paragraph he wrote:

This book is an attempt to explore a strange and rather exotic new area of modern life. It is about the way many of us are being influenced and manipulated – far more than we realize – in the patterns of our daily life. Typically, these efforts take place beneath our level of awareness; so that the appeals which move us are often, in a sense, "hidden." (Packard 1957: 11)

Packard's thesis was that US advertisers were shamelessly exploiting the techniques identified by Martineau to sell us products we didn't really want. The "motivational research" with which they were probing our minds was, according to Packard, "antihumanistic": in effect, an affront to our rights as human beings.

Packard identified Martineau and Dichter as being the leading proponents of this motivational research, but implicated the entire ad industry

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in this supposed conspiracy to manipulate us. The problem he identified is summarized by his quotation of David Ogilvy:

I am astonished to find how many advertising men . . . believe that women can be persuaded by logic and argument to buy one brand in preference to another, even when the two brands are technically identical. The greater the similarity between products, the less part reason plays in brand selection. (Packard 1957: 25)

Packard felt that manipulating the customer's emotions was taking unfair advantage of them. But, curiously, it was not this that caused his book to have such impact. In his fourth chapter Packard referred to research to find out why a man repeatedly chose a certain make of car, and how under hypnosis he "was able to repeat word for word an ad he had read more than twenty years before" (Packard 1957: 41). Then, having raised our concerns about how vulnerable we are both to advertising and to mind-probing techniques such as hypnotism, he describes an experiment reported in the London *Sunday Times*. This experiment apparently took place in a New Jersey cinema and comprised pictures of ice cream being shown at a "sub-threshold" level – below the level of conscious perception. The result was a "clear and unaccountable boost in ice cream sales" (Packard 1957: 42). It was the first ever widely reported case of subliminal advertising.

We know now that the increase in ice cream sales was due to exceptionally hot weather. We also know that Packard's report was confused with a subsequent experiment set up in the same year by James Vickery, in which the phrases "Drink Coke" and "Hungry? Eat Popcorn" were exposed at 0.3 milliseconds, and supposedly increased consumption of these items by 18% and 59%, respectively.

Vickery later admitted this was a hoax publicity stunt for his new Subliminal Projection Company (Boese 2002). We also know from numerous experiments that subliminal advertising – messages repeatedly exposed at a frequency below around 40 milliseconds – does not have any powerful enduring effect on our behavior and certainly is not able to exert a long-term influence on our choice of brands. But, as I said earlier, the hare had been set running, and it still runs today. Despite subliminal advertising being banned in the UK and USA from 1958, as recently as the 2000 US presidential election the newspapers were filled with a story concerning a TV ad aimed at the Democratic Party candidate (Al Gore) by the Republican Party candidate (George W. Bush), in which the word "rat" had supposedly been inserted subliminally (Heath 2001: 11).

Going back to 1957, the effect of Packard's book on the advertising industry was galvanic. It was a time when conspiracy theories concerning communism were rife, and admen not surprisingly made strenuous attempts to deny what Packard had supposedly revealed. Rosser Reeves, chairman of the Ted Bates ad agency and probably America's most influential admen of this era, made his views clear in his book *Reality in Advertising*. In a chapter entitled "The Freudian Hoax" he wrote (in capitals, to emphasize the point):

THERE ARE NO HIDDEN PERSUADERS. ADVERTISING WORKS OPENLY, IN THE BARE AND PITILESS SUNLIGHT. (Reeves 1961: 121)

Reeves was a great believer in honesty in advertising, and his tirade is symptomatic of a widespread belief amongst admen that all they were doing was pursuing the honest trade of conveying persuasive messages to the general public, and that there was nothing whatsoever underhand about their business. As recently as 1999 a leading practitioner wrote in *Advertising Age* that advertising was nothing more than "one-way communication: creating and sending messages" (Duncan & Moriarty 1999: 44). What could possibly be wrong with that?

Of course, creating and sending messages is one thing. In the same way that advertisers up until the end of the 1950s were fixated by getting us to pay attention, advertisers from the 1960s onwards were equally fixated by another task. Getting us to *remember* what we paid attention to.

Reeves was well aware of the importance of this. In his book he stated "The consumer tends to remember just one thing from an advertisement – one strong claim, or one strong concept" (Reeves 1961: 34). To solve this problem he invented the USP (Unique Selling Promise) the "one thing that would make people buy your product," and the USP is still referred to in the manuals of nearly all leading marketing companies. But, although the USP remains in common parlance, Rosser Reeves' name nowadays is almost unknown. A far better-known name is that of Gordon Brown.

Some say Gordon Brown has been the most influential figure in the whole history of advertising. That's not because he made ads, or wrote ads, or because he ran an advertising agency, but because he was the co-founder of the UK research company Millward Brown. And Millward Brown's ad tracking system was responsible for popularizing the use of brand name prompted ad awareness as a research tool for measuring advertising effectiveness all over the world.

How did this come about? Well, Gordon Brown realized that genuine spontaneous recall of advertising was of little value in a world in which

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advertising was becoming commonplace. Aside from anything else, people were being exposed to so many ads that they were finding it harder and harder to recall them. So Brown devised a more sensitive question for ascertaining recall: “We show a list of brands and ask ‘which of these brands . . . have you seen advertised on television recently?’” (Brown 1985: 57). This measure of brand name prompted ad awareness was coupled with a subsequent question in which people were asked what “details” they could recall about the ad. Together, these two measures encouraged a rather simplistic view of advertising effectiveness to develop. For example, Brown describes an ad that failed to achieve high recall as “a disaster” and one that did achieve high recall “a triumph” (Brown 1985: 57). The result, of course, was that creativity, originally invented in order to make us pay attention to advertising, became tasked also with making us recall both the message and ideally some part of the advertising that delivered it.

So that is the persuasion model. According to most people in the industry, advertising is about communicating simple rationally persuasive messages that change our beliefs and make us buy the product. Creativity is about getting us to attend to these messages, because high attention results in higher recall. Creativity is also about putting something clever or unusual in the ad, because that will increase the chances of some part of the ad being recalled as well. There is no deception, no clever trickery, and no manipulation. Everything is open and above board.

If this is the case – that all advertising is trying to do it to deliver a simple persuasive message, and all creativity is trying to do is make us pay attention and recall that message – then we, the general public, can rest easy in our beds, because if we forget or choose to ignore the advertising message, then the advertising should have no effect on us.

But I believe this persuasion model is misleading. I’m not saying that advertising can’t or doesn’t persuade us, because occasionally it does. But if this really is all advertising does then the “message-less” O2 advertising would have been a total flop. And so would the advertising in the following case study for the launch of the Renault Clio.

Renault Clio Case Study

Back in 1992 the UK had a recession caused by inflation and currency problems. It so happened that the car manufacturer Renault had scheduled exactly this time to launch its new flagship small car, the Clio. What Renault

believed made the Clio special was that it combined the sort of luxury finish you get in a big car with the practical maneuverability you get in a small car. Nothing very new or exciting in that, but it was the best they could come up with.

Renault appointed their long-term ad agency, Publicis, to think up some advertising for this new car. Publicis came up with a wacky creative idea featuring a couple of French aristocrats – a father and daughter – driving around the countryside flirting with their lovers. Apparently Renault hated this stereotypical portrayal of the French. At the time most people in the UK thought the French drove dangerously, so UK car ads tended not to be set in France. Especially you didn't show French aristocrats, when the car was clearly a low price model targeted at ordinary members of the general public. So Renault instructed Publicis to make an ad that was very simple and told people that the Renault Clio was small and practical and luxurious.

I believe this ad ran for about 3 months, and sales of the car were disastrous. The story goes that Renault decided that because of the recession they were never going to sell many Clios anyway, so Publicis might just as well make their original ad and run that.

This ad opened with the two French aristos sitting in the sun on deckchairs outside their chateau. The father (Papa) appears to doze off, and his pretty young daughter (Nicole), once she is satisfied he is asleep, sneaks off, gets into her Renault Clio (watched indulgently by the chauffeur), and whizzes off to meet her boyfriend. But Papa is not asleep. As soon as he sees his daughter drive off he summons the chauffeur to bring his own Renault Clio, and then (to the evident annoyance of the chauffeur who obviously thinks he should be driving him) drives off himself to meet his own lover, bearing a beautiful bunch of red roses.

While this is happening a reassuringly mellow male voice-over tells us: "You may be looking for a car that's small and practical, but you still want a car that feels luxurious. Well now you've found it. Because while the Clio is certainly small, it's perfectly formed."

We cut to Nicole returning some time later to find Papa supposedly still asleep. She sits down saying innocently "Papa?" to which Papa replies equally innocently "Nicole?" Finally, we cut to the car and the male voice simply says "The new Renault Clio."

A sweet and rather silly ad, you might say. Let's analyze it according to the traditional ad industry persuasion model. The message (small car practicality with big car luxury) is clearly explained in the voice-over, and is nicely illustrated by having both Papa and Nicole evidently enjoying

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driving their cars. The inclusion of the romantic liaisons and the flirting gets the viewer's attention, and if we pay attention to things, we supposedly remember them better. So the creative idea should mean the message is well recalled. Obvious, when you think about it.

The Renault Clio launch was carefully monitored, as was the performance of the advertising. Once the new advertising kicked in the launch became a spectacular success. In the first year alone the Clio exceeded its ambitious sales targets by 32%, and achieved a 7% share of the small car market. In a comprehensive review of the launch, the brand's success was directly attributed to the advertising, which ran for another 6 years and was calculated to have earned Renault some £59 million in additional revenue over this period (Chandy & Thursby Pelham 1993). In fact, the Clio is regarded by the UK motor trade as being the most successful small car launch *ever* in the UK, despite there being a recession. And everyone remembered the advertising; in fact, at the time, people used to comment on how frequently it was on air and how annoying it was.

The only problem is this. When the researchers asked people what they could recall about the advertising, *nobody* could recall the supposedly persuasive message about "small car practicality and big car luxury." Nor did anyone believe that the Clio possessed these attributes. The only thing anyone could remember about the advertising was Papa and Nicole and their flirting.

So how is it that the launch was such a success, when no one could recall the message? Evidently the idea that advertising is just about persuasive message transmission isn't the full story. There must be something else going on.