

1 Introduction

People Don't Hate Advertising

They Hate Bad Advertising

Carol J. Pardun



It's easy to take shots at advertising. After all, it messes with our television programs, it clutters up our newspapers, it destroys the ecological balance on the highways with too many billboards imploring us to "See Rock City!"

But we also love advertising. We talk about our favorite Super Bowl commercials, we incorporate jingles into our everyday language, and we even place them as art in our homes. I have five ads hanging in my office from the early 1900s. I bought them on Ebay after getting into a bidding war with other ad collectors. I had them custom framed. There is no question. These five wall hangings aren't just ads. These are great ads!

Still, a lot about advertising makes us uneasy. We're just not sure why.

Advertising is a strange business. It's everywhere, so people often think they're advertising experts. But, the reality is, many people don't know that much about how ads are made, how much they cost, how they work, and how to figure out whether an ad is appropriate or deceptive – let alone legal.

It's important to think about advertising. From the money that exchanges hands, the messages that bombard us throughout the day, the politicians

who fight to regulate the messages that enter our homes, to the technology geniuses who are trying to figure out ways to better count how many advertising messages we see at home, at work, on the way to work, and every other minute in between – the more we can understand about the world of advertising, the better.

One way to learn about advertising is to begin to think critically about it. That's the focus of this book. While you undoubtedly already have some fairly strong opinions about advertising, the people who have written the essays you'll be reading want you to take a hard look at those opinions. They want to challenge your assumptions. They want you to think. You may not change your mind about a topic, but at the very least you'll have the opportunity to examine these issues from more than one perspective.

A Mirror of Society? Or an Agent of Change?

Years ago, Richard Pollay (1986) wrote a scholarly article laying out the argument about the role of advertising. It's a seminal paper and has been quoted by many advertising scholars through the years. Whenever I teach an introduction to advertising class, on the first day of class, I ask my students those two questions. Is advertising a mirror of society? Or an agent of change? The basic premise is something like this: if advertising is a mirror of society, then the advertising industry is not really to blame for all the problems associated with bad advertising. *We're to blame*. If we don't like the ads, stop watching the shows that they're on, or stop buying the products, or tell the advertising agencies that you hate their ads. But if we respond (as we might to sexy ads), then that shows advertising is only going in that direction because it's what we want. It's a reflection of our culture. We look in the mirror and we see (and have no one to blame but) ourselves.

On the other hand, perhaps advertising is an agent of change. This means that advertising can change our perspectives about a particular product and eventually contribute significantly to what we purchase. *So, if that's true, then it's advertising's fault we're the way we are*.

I remember the first time I saw an ad for a coffee bag. Wow, I thought. What a great idea. Fresh-brewed coffee, one mug at a time. I went to the grocery store and looked for the specific brand of coffee I saw in the ad that was selling this new "coffee bag." So, in some regard, this would be an example that advertising is an agent of change. Before seeing the ad I ground my own coffee beans and used a drip coffee maker. Basically, I was a coffee snob. After just one advertisement I was willing to potentially give up my coffee-brewing

habit and totally change the way I drank coffee. The only problem was that after one “dunk” I realized that this coffee was not going to taste anything at all like my more labor-intensive coffee. In fact, it wasn't even as good as some instant coffee I had tasted. The advertisement had created false hope. I may have been willing to change, but the product didn't live up to its advertising. So, even if I had been willing to accept that advertising is powerful, I had to at least pause (while taking a sip of my rather mediocre coffee) to consider the limits of advertising.

On the other hand, the first time I saw an ad for a gourmet butternut squash soup, I felt compelled to check it out. Until I saw that ad, I was a die-hard chunky tomato soup eater. I changed. Now I prefer butternut squash. I owe it all to advertising. Well, not quite. The soup is quite good – in fact, perhaps even better than the advertising promises that it is.

These might seem like silly examples, but many people through the years have argued that all sorts of ads have impacted people and persuaded them to change their buying behaviors – and ultimately change their lives – all because of the ads. Some people claim they have friends who drink vodka now simply because of those funky, art-inspired ads. Of course, they never think advertising has impacted them personally. Only others. (This is called Third Person Effect and there are whole books written on this very interesting media theory.) Many people have argued that advertising is to blame for why so many young kids smoke. You'll read more about that in chapter 5. So, there is a lot of evidence that advertising is, indeed, an agent of change.

Now, at this point, you're thinking: the answer's clear. It's both! Advertising must be both a mirror of society *and* an agent of change. That's right, of course. But it's way more interesting – and instructive – to stick to one side or the other. That's what I make my students do. When I ask the questions on the first day of class, they typically start out answering the expected “both.” I ask them to explain. The answers are not very interesting. After a few minutes of trying to give an “on the one hand/on the other hand” answer, they give up, shrug their shoulders and say, “Well, it just is. I don't know why.”

Then I'll tell them they have to choose a side. Each student must vote one way or the other. I have the “mirror of society” people move to one side of the classroom and the “agent of change” people move to the other side. Then I'll ask them to tell me why they are on the left (or right) side of the room. Finally, the answers start getting interesting. My students are really starting to think. They're starting to get passionate about the issue. They're starting to form an opinion. They're learning.

That's what this book is about. It's about examining the controversies, thinking about the consequences of perspectives, and then choosing a side.

Intuitively we already know that both sides have merits, but we end up learning more about *both* sides if we're willing to argue *one* side. Even if we argue a side we don't actually believe, we can come to appreciate the other side of the argument and learn more about our own convictions.

There are a number of fine books on the market that deal with the impact of advertising on society. What is different about this book is that it is organized by "controversies and consequences." I've asked a number of advertising experts to write essays about a controversial topic – but to write the essay from only one perspective. I found that as I read the essays I would be persuaded by the first argument – and then persuaded by the second argument. With the essays side by side, it becomes easier to see that these topics are complex and not to be dismissed easily.

The idea for this book came out of a class I taught when I was a faculty member at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 2005. I had my students conduct research and debates about these very topics. I put them into teams without considering what their personal views were about a particular topic. In fact, if I knew they felt one way, I would try to put them on the opposite team. After researching the topic and trying to develop a strong argument, they would begin to see that the "other side" also had a point. Over the course of the semester, they came to understand that there is more than one way to look at just about everything that has to do with advertising – and many other socially oriented subjects.

Some of the authors of these essays feel very strongly about a particular topic. They have written with passion about a topic they feel passionate about. Ivan Preston is a good example of this kind of writer. He has spent his entire academic career writing about the dangers of puffery in advertising. He has re-articulated this compelling argument in the essay found in chapter 11. However, some of the authors climbed out on a limb and decided to try looking at the issue from a perspective that is not what they believe. They did it because I asked them to. But I hope they also did it because it opened up the issue to them in a new way. Jef Richards is a good example of this. He has written extensively about the dangers of regulating tobacco advertising, yet in chapter 5 in this book he was willing to explore the idea that the government has not done enough. As you can imagine, for the writers like Jef and others in this book who were willing to step over to the other side for a bit, this is a gutsy move for an academic. To them, I'd like to say a hearty "Thank you!" for entering into the spirit of the book.

I'd also like to thank my students from that class way back in 2005. It was the very last class I taught at UNC – and the students wholeheartedly embraced the notion of thinking more deeply about controversial issues. In

their quest to find answers, they helped me become a student again. Every one of those 40 students helped me to think more critically about advertising. How well did they do? *You decide.*

Ideas to get you thinking . . .

- 1 Make a list of everything you could change about advertising if you could. How different would the world look if you had the power to adopt every change you wrote down? Would it be a better world? Why or why not?
- 2 If you could create one law about advertising, what would it be? Why?

If you'd like to read more . . .

- Berger, A. (2007). *Ads, fads, and consumer culture: Advertising's impact on American character and society*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Sheehan, K. B. (2003). *Controversies in contemporary advertising*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Shrum, L. J. (2004). *The psychology of entertainment media: Blurring the lines between entertainment and persuasion*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

References

- Pollay, R. W. (1986). The distorted mirror: Reflections on the unintended consequences of advertising. *Journal of Marketing* 50(April), 18–36.