



Friends



BEANED BY THE SALES PITCH

Confronting the Menace of Marketing

By Patrick O'Hannigan

The poster hangs in the window of a Carpinteria, California beauty salon painted in faux-Japanese style. A dewy young woman in a formal dress and flawless makeup glances over her shoulder while leaning forward in front of a stone wall. Has the camera caught her escaping from an unseen but presumably handsome stranger? Text on the poster enjoins passersby to "See how beautiful hair begins," but the model's dark brown mane is an afterthought, because her dress and pose offer an eyeful of cleavage, not hair. Neither the photo nor its caption reveals the advertised product as a hair restorative made by a company in Georgia.

Beautiful hair is the least of the issues at stake here. Throughout North America, where our ancestors once engaged in seasonal cycles of planting and harvesting, we now mark the passage of time with more passive and pertinent signposts like the fall TV season, the spring fashion, and the summer movie. Society has changed, and marketing is dangerous.

Few people know the difference between advertising and marketing. Fewer still avoid blurring the line between marketing and everything else. Marketing in the colloquial sense has become not just a tool for product promotion or the study of consumer tastes, but a mode of thinking to which people everywhere default. This change in how we view the world devalues us, diminishes our capacity for wonder, and makes us dumber.

How we got where we are now

Marketing works on the premise that ideas matter. In this it mirrors our government, which evolved from notions like "no taxation without representation," and at least theoretically "derives [its] just powers from the consent of the governed." Primitive marketing spurred people westward in search of gold, land, or fresh starts. As an engine of progress, however, marketing has a mixed record. One of the more piquant details in *The Grapes of Wrath* is John Steinbeck's observation of Dust Bowl families drawn to California by handbills that promised jobs in the Golden State. What the hopeful migrants found was not what they expected.

On the plus side, marketing mixed Hoover Dam with organized crime to turn an arid desert landscape into Las Vegas. At approximately the same time (1946), an American nuclear bomb test cratered Bikini, an obscure atoll in the Marshall Islands. Newsreel cameras captured the spectacular explosion. In an early instance of "image is everything," designer Louis Reard reasoned that the decimated atoll had a potentially profitable cachet. When his swimsuit named for the atoll premiered in Paris a few days later, it atomized the competition.

Aided by television, the marketing imperative gradually spawned sound bites, bumper stickers, and reverent appreciation for the wisdom of four out of five dentists surveyed. In 1976, it gave us the pet rock. Marketing's more recent gifts to the world include the infomercial, the spin doctor, the socially conscious credit card, and that keychain with ambition, the virtual pet.

American consumers are now so jaded by the plethora of choices available to them that marketing usually relies on hyperbole and obfuscation to drive sales. It is not enough to tout the usefulness of a product, because utility alone can't guarantee a place in consumer consciousness. To draw attention to products and services, marketing must in some way annoy the people it targets. If you have ever smirked at the way *Sports Illustrated* justifies its annual swimsuit issue, or heard an air horn disrupt the performance of a Brahms lullaby, you have an intuitive grasp of the essence of marketing.

Why TV deserves a second glance

Television remains marketing's weapon of choice even as Web sites sprout like mushrooms after a spring rain. Its sensory impact and ubiquity make TV the perfect medium by which to whet people's appetites. Years before he turned from grainy footage of angst-ridden models to testimonials on the virtues of gentleman's perfume, Calvin Klein sold jeans by having Brooke Shields assure us that nothing came between her and her Calvins.

Because it is not as strongly linked to sexuality, advertising outside the fashion industry often escapes the withering criticism directed that way. But any industry can exploit innocence, and nearly every industry does. Scores of bakeries claim "the best buns in town," winking as they do. Meanwhile, children sell everything from diapers to tires. Anna Paquin is today an Oscar-winning teenage actress. A few years ago, she peddled long-distance service in commercials for MCI.

By asking U.S. consumers to choose their telephone service on the recommendation of a nine-year-old from Australia who had never paid a phone bill, MCI's campaign showed disdain for expertise. It was another salvo in the tradition of bogus populism that turned humorist Tom Bodett into the poet laureate of Motel Six, and placed multinational petroleum products corporations like Chevron in an eco-friendly light. One could combine the intellectually bankrupt ad campaigns of this tradition and still make sense of them ("Do people really leave the light on for you at Motel Six? People Do.")

When charisma like Bodett's won't close a sale by itself, good scripts help. Unfortunately, because advertisers know that slogans lodge more firmly in memory when they evoke feelings, companies routinely ignore people's minds, and talented writers subvert the language they love. In a recent TV season, ABC told us that TV was "good," CBS welcomed us "home," and NBC declared that we "must" watch its programs. Since TV cannot really be described as moral, social, and coercive, we must conclude that the public posture of all three networks was and is deliberately irrational. Although the influence of the big three networks has declined in recent years, their younger rivals abuse common sense with the same enthusiasm. Adspeak maims coherent thought no matter where it comes from.

Consider the venerable Volkswagen slogan, "Drivers Wanted." What else would a car company want? Houseplants ignore street signs, and dogs prefer passenger seats. Only drivers will do. The ad campaign built on "Drivers Wanted" is polished but otherwise unremarkable. Harmless? Hardly. Its bland exterior hides much: what looks like a car commercial is actually a banana split for your imagination.

Think of the banana as your mind. Once the sight and sound of a sports car downshifting on a mountain road has removed its protectively cynical peel, the banana is easily halved. Three propositions are then scooped into the cavity formed by the split: First, driving ought to be an epic experience. Second, Volkswagen owners are among the few who dare to tame the open road. Third, ordinary commutes are for people in lesser vehicles. Serious flaws in all three propositions escape conscious notice because they melt so smoothly together into one slogan. The cars themselves sit like a cherry atop this melange, couched in the whipped cream of "remarkable" leasing options.

If the culinary metaphor sounds farfetched, remember that wads of research money are spent on national advertising campaigns, and commercials never convey only one message. Furthermore, Volkswagen -- the company successfully touting its new Beetle as something "reverse engineered from a UFO" -- has a long history of effective advertising.

The mind-numbing character of modern marketing is not confined to its primary artifacts. Andrew Cunanan's 1997 killing spree apparently met American newscast criteria for a "reign of terror" because it crossed state lines and included the murder of a well-known fashion designer. But if Cunanan engineered a reign of terror, how then do we describe state-sponsored genocide?

Where the chickens come home to roost

When American English absorbs body blows for the sake of sales (or ratings, which in TV are first cousins to sales), we all suffer. As George Orwell noted in his timeless essay, "Politics and the English Language," once language becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, "the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts."

Assume for the sake of argument that the United States is now a nation in decline. Only a zealot would trace that condition to widespread use of periods on sentences that in less-jaded times finished with exclamation points. It is foolish to decry the acceptance of N-I-T-E and L-I-T-E as variant spellings for "night" and "light." But writers and thinkers can affirm with Orwell that "the decline of language must ultimately have political and economic causes."

About those causes: one problem with marketing is that as it attains sophistication, it turns predatory. An artist friend describes this velvet-and-steel dichotomy as "teddy bears with knives." Advertising, because it stimulates desire and asks us to act, is "potentially more dangerous than any other art form," says philosopher Susan Josephson. To put it another way: in the marketing game, consumers are deer, and every day is open season. Sales volume goes to companies with keen eyes and big guns.

A simple test demonstrates the breadth of marketing's tentacled reach: When you hear the word "rocky," what comes to mind? Chances are it's not hiking terrain, but the movie that made Sylvester Stallone a star. Marketing did that to you and millions more like you. Welcome to popular culture.

Martha Stewart, Michael Jordan, and Shaquille O'Neal mark ours as the age of the one-person conglomerate. Two of these people are professional athletes and one calls herself a lifestyle consultant,

but each of them is, at bottom, an entertainer. They are conglomerates in part because entertainment is easy to market. Not for nothing were the ancient Romans pacified with bread and circuses. In the apt phrase of Father Benedict Groeschel, a Catholic monk of medieval sensibilities, "we are a society dominated by minstrels."

Sadly, the minstrels' work is never done. Since marketing requires raw material with which to arrest our attention before it can influence our purchasing, it brands everything. Reality must be bar-coded, either literally or figuratively. Every public utterance is spun. Young brands are shepherded to maturity by flocks of patent lawyers, while trademarks and copyrights accumulate like dots in a pointillist painting. Through sheer volume, they create a fundamentally dehumanizing portrait of human life itself as a commodity.

As people tromping daily through the din of commerce, our capacity for wonder is strained by unrelenting and increasingly strident attempts to gain our attention. No business is immune to these incursions. Evidence of what it now takes to rouse our overburdened senses from their workaday torpor can be found even in the no-nonsense precincts of law enforcement, where police cars are routinely festooned with more lights than jumbo jets.

All of this has implications even for other species. Wildlife biologists know that studies of large carnivores win more funding than studies of small herbivores. This is solely because bears and wolves have a stronger grip on the public imagination than butterflies and banana slugs. As Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote in his amusing review of *The Edge*: "What makes this traditional tale of men trying to survive in the Alaskan wilderness worthwhile is the on-screen rivalry between Anthony Hopkins and Bart the Bear, two consummate professionals who hold nothing back." Interestingly, Alec Baldwin, who had more screen time than Bart the Bear, received only passing mention in Turan's review.

How technology serves marketing

I work in the computer software industry, where companies like Microsoft are routinely reviled for releasing products that require more memory to run than their still-serviceable predecessors do. The phenomenon is known as "bloatware." In the words of *HotWired* columnist Simson Garfinkel, bloatware exists for the very good reason that "user self-sufficiency is incompatible with sustained corporate profits." The primary directive of marketing departments in software companies is to obscure this truth. In one well-known example, Microsoft asks, "Where do you want to go today?" without hinting that, as a software user, wherever you want to go probably requires exorbitant amounts of your time, money, and patience.

Like the astronauts in *2001: A Space Odyssey* who fell victim to their HAL 9000 computer, we've become hostage to our own technology. From supermarkets recording which items we buy, to credit card companies tracking what services we use, information collection--a prerequisite for successful marketing--is on the rise. Much data is gathered in the name of "customization," a perceived good meant to combat "direct mail fatigue" by ensuring that our time is not wasted by products or services we might not appreciate. With better databases, you won't get mail meant for your neighbors.

Unfortunately, customization is not always the benign service it purports to be. For our grandparents, telephone bills were means to an end: more cash in phone company coffers. Technology has since made billing so customizable that what were once collection agents are now one-to-one marketing tools by which companies attempt to provide "value-added" service. Say you live in Wisconsin and purchase a guide to New York using a credit card. If your purchase information is routed to a database that flags zip

codes for promotional purposes, your next phone bill could include an advertisement for discount travel insurance, in case you bought that guide because you were planning a trip.

Similar technology sustains the members-only supermarket club that sells groceries at reasonable prices. Of course, it also tells people poring over checkout data that Chocolate Frosted Sugar Bombs must be displayed where I can find them, rather than between the dried fruit and the charcoal briquettes. Supermarkets entice consumers unwilling to join yet another club by arranging for discounts at neighboring businesses. In theory, everybody wins. In practice, participating merchants increase their public profiles while individuals open more windows into their private lives. Like so many of the other tools used to monitor our activities anonymously, purchase tracking eliminates the privilege of self-disclosure. If, as we once said, you are what you eat, then when I know what you eat, I know who you are. I don't need you to tell me.

Even if you do not succumb to paranoia about how much of your personal data has been appropriated for commercial use, marketing's claim to saving consumers' time is disingenuous at best. You could be riding the ten-speed you bought last week if you weren't distracted by the trial issue of *Cycling* magazine that appeared in your mailbox days later. Yet marketers congratulate themselves for customizing your data, simply because no one at the clearinghouse accidentally sent you a gift subscription to *Soldier of Fortune*.

The biggest problem with the better targeting approach is that the information glut that David Shenk calls "data smog" results largely from modern marketing. Gathering data in the name of shielding us from the onslaught of more data makes as much sense as carpeting the bathrooms in a bus terminal. But people who want to stem the marketing tide rather than finding ways to channel it are laughed off the country club green.

Purchase tracking, image building, and the cultivation of a commodity-based outlook are inextricably linked to each other. The exploitation of innocence, the subversion of discourse, and the ubiquity of marketing messages all conspire to encourage what Vicki Robin and John de Graaf call "affluenza," the virus of over-consumption, which itself is an affront to human dignity. Our aspirations have multiplied as speedily as the claims on our attention. Where ancient Greeks contented themselves with the Olympian ideals of "faster, higher, stronger," we've added colors like "younger," "hipper," and "richer" to our cultural palette. We almost always mistake these qualities for ends, not means.

When we could profitably pose the old Latin query, "*quid ad aeternitatem?*" ("What has this got to do with eternity?"), we instead settle for the lament in a song lyric: "All I really gotta do is live and die, but I'm in a hurry and don't know why." The resulting confusion increases our likelihood of injury by sales pitch. Nevertheless, George Orwell's vision of Big Brother and Aldous Huxley's vision of a brave new world enslaved to pleasure are dismissed as quaint. Meanwhile, marketing continues to insinuate itself into our social fabric (to the point where last year's debut of plans for a "realistically proportioned" Barbie doll made headlines in "news" magazines).

What we can do for the new millennium

To be fair, the question of whether marketing is hazardous or simply Darwinian is not easily answered. We are not the ventriloquists' dummies so dear to the critics trying to save us from ourselves. But although marketing can sometimes be used for the public good, it should not be underestimated. In fact, Isaac Newton's observation that every action generates an equal and opposite reaction may apply as much to marketing as it does to physics. The evidence we've surveyed so far made a backlash against the

excesses of marketing inevitable. Pundits of every stripe are rediscovering the appeal of voluntary simplicity. How then can we fight the marketing menace, and reclaim the personal dignity not conferred by designer labels?

In his efforts to strengthen the resolve of his flock, Pope John Paul II has long decried the shortsightedness of the materialist ethos that marketing serves. He understands very well what it means to be in the world but not of it. Consequently, he urges all Christians to continually affirm the sanctity of human life. This philosophy--the antithesis of commodity-based thinking-- is rooted in the Gospel and animated in part by what John Kavanaugh called "the spirituality of cultural resistance."

Anyone resisting the dominant culture needs sustenance and armor. For the former, I recommend prayer, which apart from its other virtues lends useful perspective to worldly concerns. For the latter I recommend skepticism, a shield too little used by Christians who think it was tainted by Thomas the doubting Apostle and Pontius "What is truth?" Pilate. In a 1973 book called *The B.S. Factor* (subtitled "The Theory and Technique of Faking It in America"), Arthur Herzog documented many cases where the maxim, "caveat emptor," proved its continuing worth. In 1985, culture critic Neil Postman singled out television as the poster child of the alliance between marketing and technology, and suggested that we were in danger of amusing ourselves to death.

Examples offered by Herzog and Postman have since been supplanted by legions of others. When Oracle Corporation recently billed itself as "enabling the Information Age," the response from one wag--"Who knew the Information Age was codependent?"--warned the hearts of skeptics everywhere. Hip-deep in an era of TV newsmagazines and presidential scandals, there are good grounds to think Postman was right, especially because he wisely refrained from predicting the year of our demise.

Here, then, is the beginning of a strategy for the third millennium: In conjunction with prayer and skepticism, we should scoff publicly at attempts to blur the distinction between what we want and what we need. We should resist purchase tracking and its on-line equivalents not because we're ashamed of our buying habits, or believe in a Constitutional right to privacy, but because they rob us of the opportunity for self-disclosure, and invite a torrent of clutter into our mailboxes. We can turn down the volume, turn off the tube, and read books that are not on Oprah Winfrey's coffee table, while using cash more and credit less. If we follow Teddy Roosevelt's tongue-in-cheek advice to speak softly and carry a big stick, we are less likely to be fleeced. But we need not look solely to Roosevelt. In the words of the best and shortest sermon I ever heard, "We are called to be fools for the sake of Christ, but that doesn't mean we have to be fools, for Christ's sake!"

Will cash-starved school districts continue to make Faustian bargains with soft drink companies who use them as pawns in marketing wars? Will *Details* magazine continue to promise its subscribers cutting-edge tips on what (and who!) to do, while Kellogg's trumpets repackaging efforts with "Same cereal! New box!" labels? Given ambition, exploitation, obfuscation, hyperbole, mendacity, greed, banality, and the entire rogues' gallery of temptations to which modern marketing so frequently falls prey, the answer is a resounding yes. The better question is what are you going to do about it? If you're in Carpinteria, California, you know where to start. Look for the poster in the salon window, and remember that dignity, sensitivity, and intelligence are treasures to be safeguarded, not chips to be frittered away in search of whiter teeth, faster service, or more hair.

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