

Essay 1 – Unrevised

This is the original essay at its draft stage. Work through the essays on this site to see how it can be improved.

'Advertisers seek only to ensure that consumers make informed choices.' *Discuss.*

Most advertising executives are willing to defend their profession by arguing that all they are doing is informing the public and in doing so protecting the democratic freedoms of individuals, in particular their freedom of choice. To a certain extent, of course, this is true: without advertising we would be less informed about new developments in technology, in fashion and in medical advances. Even government warnings about the dangers at work and in the home depend upon advertisements. But the key to this is the claim that this is the 'only' thing they do, when most of the public suspect their paramount concern is to manipulate consumers into buying products that they may not want or need.

As this suggests, at least part of the advertiser's role is to provide consumers and the public with information. But this goes to the heart of what we mean by an 'advertisement'. Few of us would doubt that in some sense a railway timetable is an advertisement, after all it is telling the customer what is for sale and how to buy it. Yet there are no catchy jingles urging you to 'Let the train take the strain.' Nor are there any persuasive messages offering to let children travel free if the parents take the whole family to the beach. It is simply informative: it gives you information on the routes and the stations the train will stop at on the way; it tells you the departure and arrival times; and it tells you on what platform you can find the train.

Given this, it might not be unreasonable to conclude that advertisements can, after all, be purely informative. Yet we still might be right in thinking suspiciously that behind all this information lies a covert message intended to persuade us that we ought to travel by train because it is more convenient, efficient and less stressful than the alternatives. We could argue that by putting out this sort of information the intentions of the managers of the train companies are not just to give us information, but to so impress us with their efficiency and the convenience of travelling by train, that we will travel this way more frequently.

A small sign nailed to a village tree announcing where and when the local village fete will take place might be giving just information, but beneath it lies a covert message, an appeal to people, who might be reading it, to come along and support local causes in their fund raising activities. The information may just be the surface appearance. What matters is the underlying intention of those who wrote the advertisement – to persuade us to adopt a certain course of action.

The statement in the question seems to be right at least in one respect. It is possible to argue that almost all advertisements, with the exception of a few, are informative, indeed, as we have already seen, some appear to be wholly concerned with this, although government bodies releasing warnings about smoking or the use of domestic fire alarms, are clearly intent on changing our behaviour, they are still concerned to give the public what they believe is vital information.

The same can be said of many commercial companies. Although their intention is to persuade us to buy their products, they are an important provenance of information about new products and technology, like computer equipment and software, new developments in digital technology, and the latest improvements in telecommunications, like smart phones. Other advertisements are a source of information on the latest designs in fashion or in equipment, like washing machines, dishwashers and microwaves, that we use every day.

The question appears to go too far in arguing that informing the consumer is the 'only' thing that advertisers do. They may give us information on the latest technology, but they are also covertly suggesting that we cannot afford not to keep up with the latest developments. Similarly, while they inform us of the latest designs in fashions and household equipment, they are also persuading us that we cannot afford to let ourselves be left behind by our friends and neighbours, who will be clamouring for these products.

And, of course, in most of the advertisements we see in our papers or on television these messages are not the subtle, covert subtext of a simple statement of information. Indeed, if we cannot free ourselves of their influence, most of us can, at least, recognise the different strategies employed overtly by advertisers to manipulate our thinking and shape the choices we make.

They will tell you, if you are thinking of making a purchase, what is good about their product, but pretermit any evidence that suggests it is not all that they claim it to be. An advertising company will tell you that the car they are promoting accelerates from 0 to 60kph in just six seconds, but they are likely to omit to tell you that recent research has revealed that it has an alarming tendency to rust severely within five years of purchase. Similarly, a manufacturer of computer printers might be keen to tell you that theirs is the most advanced printer on the market, but be really nervous about telling you that their print cartridges cost on average five times as much as any other printer.

We are probably all aware of examples of advertisers using comments and information taken out of context to promote their product, particularly when they are taken from reports that are critical of it. A report from a consumer association might heavily criticise a product for one reason or another, but if it contains just a single sentence of praise, this is likely to find its way into promotional literature. A publisher or a theatre promoter is likely to comb through an unfavourable review looking carefully for any isolated expression of a favourable comment that can be used to promote the book or play they are producing.

However, advertisers have developed still more effective forms of manipulation for the consumer, particularly in their exploitation of the sex, status and prejudices of the consumer. As our understanding of the psychology of the individual has grown so too has the advertiser's capacity to tap into our deepest motivations by associating their product with our strong feelings, desires and prejudices they can by-pass our reason, short circuiting our ability to make conscious choices. Cars, clothes, perfume, even alcohol are all promoted by associating them in the consumer's mind with sexual desires. The advertiser works to establish a close contiguity between driving a certain car, wearing a certain perfume and drinking a certain drink, and a full, active social and sexual life.

In the same way our desire for status and our respect for authority have bestowed on advertisers an effective way of deceptively taking advantage of our feelings to promote all manner of products. For

example, our respect for the authority of science has convinced many advertisers that the only way of promoting washing machines, vacuum cleaners, dishwashers or detergents is to have a figure dressed in a laboratory coat, supposedly putting the product through rigorous tests and declaring authoritatively that it is the most successful product of its kind on the market. The same strategy can be extended to popular and respected public figures. Sportsmen and women, and TV personalities have, in their time, sold anything from mobile phones, health drinks and clothes to deodorants and shampoos.

So, rather than promoting consumers' freedom to choose, this appears to do quite the opposite. By appealing to their strong tastes and feelings advertisers successfully by-pass consumers' reason and their capacity to make rational choices. The most successful form of this has been subliminal manipulation, where messages have been recorded onto sound tracks at low speeds. These can only be picked up by the subconscious, when the tape is played at normal speed, without individuals knowing that they have been manipulated. The same can be achieved visually by inserting isolated frames into a reel of film to suggest and stimulate certain behaviour.

In one experiment in the 1970s managers in some US supermarkets recorded subliminal messages onto the music played throughout the store in order to reduce shoplifting. Messages, like 'I will not steal', 'I will be honest', were so successful in altering behaviour that shoplifting fell by 30% in a matter of weeks. If the same strategy were to be employed to improve the turnover of the store or to promote a certain range of products, this would amount to a serious invasion of the individual's freedom to choose.

But in fact most advertisers do not have to go to these lengths to switch off the thinking process. It is enough just to appeal to a convincing, though distorted, picture of what is taken for common-sense or accepted values in our societies. Archetypal characters and scenarios are created to evoke predictable responses that advertisers believe we will all share. Those promoting slimming products try to convince us that everyone wants and desires to be slim, that it is associated with success, and that if you are overweight this is a sign of social failure and self-indulgence. We are induced to believe that for most people, if dishes come out of the dishwasher unclean or the kitchen floor is not spotless, these are major life crises.

Appeals are made to some imagined social consensus: to 'basic' or 'shared' values, it is assumed we all want to drive the latest and fastest car on the road and our lives will be unfulfilled unless we have a 'multi-valve engine' and 'ABS braking' and to sustain these appeals myths have to be created by the media. It is thought we are all in a desperate race to keep up with our neighbours and that we fret endlessly about what people will say if they see us out in last year's fashions. We are all expected to share the myth that the average housewife is constantly paranoid about the whiteness of her wash and the cleanliness of her floors.

In the light of these arguments it would not be unreasonable to conclude that advertisers do indeed have, as one of their main intentions, the aim of informing consumers in order to promote their freedom of choice. If some are inclined to abuse their position, this is, of course, regrettable, but it is at least preferable to the alternative of government manipulation.