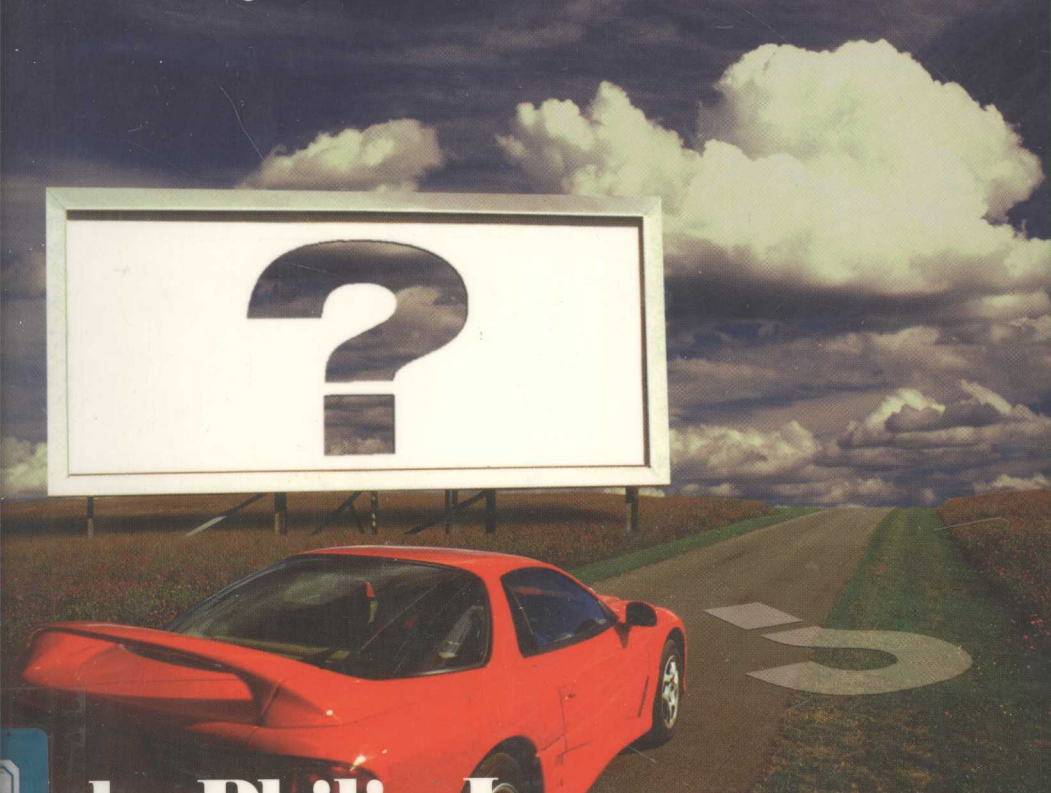


# Fables, Fashions, and Facts About Advertising

A Study of 28 Enduring Myths



John Philip Jones

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## **A Study of 28 Enduring Myths**

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**John Philip Jones**  
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# **Fables, Fashions, and Facts About Advertising**

*For Henrietta, Philip, and Mary*

## *Epigraph*

**T**he most colorful description of advertising is the one attributed to George Orwell: Advertising is the noise of the ladle banging against the swill bucket to attract the pigs.

Although Orwell's statement is a delicious piece of prose, it bears no relation to reality. Far from being an insistent call to action, advertising attracts the full attention of only small numbers of people. It is looked at very casually by the rest. And the vast majority of goods and services for which advertising is used make a modest but not totally unimportant contribution to the welfare and happiness of society. Think of toothpaste, deodorants, disposable diapers, laundry detergents, frozen foods, canned soup, telephone services, credit cards, cars, and air travel, not to speak of Smoky the Bear and how he helps prevent forest fires.

Orwell's statement is palpably wrong. Nevertheless, many people agree or at least half-agree with it. These people even include some advertising practitioners who should know better. There is equally widespread agreement with many other misconceptions that surround advertising. The subject calls for a dispassionate and objective appraisal. This is why I have written this book.

## Preface

Books about advertising in the mass media are plentiful, but their content varies greatly in quality and style. There has also been a good deal of interest in interactive communication, but this business sector is decidedly less dynamic than it appeared at the turn of the twenty-first century so that the originally intense fixation with it has not been sustained.

Most advertising books are attractively presented. Many are descriptive manuals for use in classrooms or for self-improvement; others are affectionate memoirs written by people who have spent careers in the business; yet others are propaganda for fashionable theories. I believe that there is a real need for a different type of work. This should not be written as a “how to” text or as a vehicle for war stories or as a sales pitch, but it should be a book that concentrates solely on describing how advertising works as revealed by the best research available.

For more than twenty years, I have taught graduate and upper-level undergraduate students in a highly selective communications school in a large independent university. My students have taken majors in advertising, in other communications disciplines, and in management (with an emphasis on marketing). This book, *Fables, Fashions, and Facts About Advertising* (FFFAA for short), has been planned with my own professional needs in mind. These needs are typical of professors in a similar position to mine in the many communications and business schools in the United States and abroad.

Students, even in highly selective schools, are no longer passionate readers. They do not read for pleasure; they read for duty, and this is not

an inspiring experience. “Dumbing down” is a defeatist principle, and it has negative side effects. I have tried very hard to write a book that students will read without drudgery. Much of my teaching uses the principles of *Action Learning*, which I am convinced is the most productive method for teaching marketing and advertising. This is not a new technique but it is practiced surprisingly rarely in the United States. A footnote on *Action Learning* appears as a conclusion in the information about the author at the end of this volume. I hope that *FFFAA* will be particularly suitable for this teaching method.

This volume should also be very useful to the tens of thousands of businesspeople whose careers are directly or (more commonly) indirectly concerned with advertising. I see these people as working for manufacturing and service corporations, marketing and selling organizations, advertising agencies, media planning and buying companies, and the media themselves. Some members of the public are interested in advertising in a general way, but very few books on the subject have reached out to this nonspecialist audience. I hope this book might do better, because I have taken great pains to make it well informed but understandable.

Advertising has one unusual feature that has compelled me to use a special device to begin each chapter. This feature is strikingly obvious to people who have firsthand knowledge of the business, but it sometimes amazes people who do not. *We know less about the actual workings of advertising than about the workings of any other business activity that swallows so much money.* Until quite a late stage in the history of the advertising industry—about 1960—we knew virtually nothing. There was even some doubt about whether advertising worked at all.

In the absence of facts, it is not surprising that theories were thought up to fill the vacuum. These were soon developed into doctrines that became widely followed. These were fables that became fashions—fables like the Hierarchy of Effects, the Unique Selling Proposition and Usage-Pull, the Slice of Life, the cumulative effect of repetition, Impact Scheduling, Effective Frequency, Adstock and Half-Life, Day-After-Recall testing, advertising cut-through, and others. Note the vigor of these concepts. The words themselves seem to signal a strong, confident, successful business. The reality of advertising is quite different, as readers will see from the discussions of advertising effectiveness in this book.

These theories came from a fusion of common sense and imagination, supported by market research (but not all of it very good research).



Such theories caught on fast, because advertising agencies and advertisers were thirsting for guidance to help them with the difficult tasks of producing advertising ideas and also evaluating them before large dollar sums were committed. The path from fable to fashion was unimpeded, and the theories that emerged became instantly popular, although there was a turnover as more fashionable theories ousted less fashionable ones. This process continues. Not many of these theories have ever been subjected to harsh scrutiny based on factual knowledge, mainly because not much factual knowledge was available—at least not until relatively recently.

This book, as the title indicates, is devoted partly to a study of these advertising fables and fashions. Each chapter begins with one or two examples that relate to the topic of the chapter. However, the real meat is *facts*, to help evaluate these fables and fashions objectively, and to illustrate their occasional incompleteness, inadequacy, and in some cases total wrongheadedness. Each chapter then attempts to describe one aspect of how advertising *really* works.

The twenty chapters in this book are relatively short, and they do not contain footnotes, endnotes, tables or figures, or statistical diagrams. But everything in this volume is underpinned with facts, and I have tried hard to ensure that these are accurate, well founded, and correctly interpreted. They are mostly, although not all, in the public domain. Chapter 20, “The Expanding Universe of Information,” gives full details of the publications where most of these facts can be found, and the books and articles listed there include notes that refer to yet additional (mainly specialist) sources. The chapter goes into great detail, and I have written it in such a way that it is easy for readers to refer to the published sources that support everything I say in this book. The separate Bibliography of 107 items and the detailed Glossary will also help. I myself have spent many years in the advertising business, but I have resisted the temptation to use my personal opinions as evidence to defend or refute any theory—unless these are strongly rooted in empirical experience.

I hope readers will now forgive me if I make a qualification to what I have said in this Preface. There *is* one specialist type of advertising—mail order (more generally described as direct response)—about which a great deal has been known for many decades. We can maximize the efficiency of this type of advertising by selecting the most appropriate creative and media plans through a process of running alternatives experimentally and calculating the dollar value of the business generated by each. In

1923, a book was published entitled *Scientific Advertising*, devoted to this interesting example of the advertiser's art. The author was Claude C. Hopkins, the best known advertising agency copywriter of his day.

Nevertheless, despite Hopkins's reputation, most people employed in advertising assumed and still continue to assume, without any serious research, that the lessons from direct response are in no way applicable to advertising for goods and services sold through the retail trade. This attitude on the part of supposedly responsible businesspeople is very difficult to credit. This disregard of the opportunities of using simple marketplace testing to improve the efficiency of all types of advertising—including those campaigns that account for vast dollar expenditures—is an egregious and economically profligate example of an unsupported doctrine in action: a doctrine that is still widely believed. It has done more damage than even the worst of the other fables and fashions discussed in this book.

In this Preface, I have talked more about fables and fashions than about facts. Readers will find, however, that this book is much more positive than negative. As I have already mentioned, what I am aiming to do is to describe how advertising works—or as much about how advertising works as the most up-to-date research will tell us—in order to help those people who plan to make careers in advertising or who are already directly or indirectly involved in the business. I am aiming to improve their judgment of advertising and in general to help them do their job better. We still have a long way to go before we fully understand this strange but fascinating activity, but the reader can be sure of some surprises in this book. And he or she will discover that not too many of the fables and fashions that still populate the advertising business are able to stand up to serious scrutiny.

Here are some notes on how the book is organized.

*Chapters 1, 2, and 3* describe a few important aspects of advertising's relationship to business and to the consumer.

*Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7* are devoted to the processes of planning and writing advertising campaigns.

*Chapters 8, 9, 10, and 11* are concerned with calculating the most economic advertising budget and finding the best ways to deploy this in the mass media.

*Chapters 12 and 13* reveal what we know about advertising's effect on sales—or precisely, on consumer behavior. Advertising *can* work over certain clearly defined periods—short term, medium term, and

long term—but advertising does not always have these effects, and may not work at all. Much advertising is totally wasted.

*Chapters 14, 15, and 16* discuss other types of research used to develop and evaluate advertising. These include pre-testing; and tracking studies, to follow the progress of brands. They also look at direct response: a class of advertising that produces clear lessons about effectiveness but whose relevance to other types of advertising is widely disputed. Or forgotten.

*Chapters 17, 18, and 19* review the mechanics of the advertising business, focusing on the changes that are taking place quite rapidly in how clients manage their advertising and how agencies (and other parties) create it.

*Chapter 20*, as stated earlier, gives details of the substantial battery of source material used to support the generalizations in this book. The book also has a full Bibliography and Glossary.

# Acknowledgments

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I also wish to thank other friends who have looked at large portions of the manuscript and given me their unfailingly helpful comments. In the United States, they are Beth Barnes, Mary Baumgartner Jones, Harry Clark, Allan Kuse, Robert Lauterborn, Wally O'Brien, Gerry Pollak, Jan Slater, and Anthony Viola; in the United Kingdom, Chris Baker, John Billett, Jeremy Bullmore, Philip Kitchen, Denis Lanigan, and Colin McDonald; in Australia, Michael Ewing and Max Sutherland; and in Germany, George Black. I am also grateful for the comments of three academics whose reviews of my manuscript were commissioned by the publisher.

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# Part I

## *Advertising's Relationship to Business Generally and to the Consumer*

*Five Myths:*

*"Consumers are our lifeblood, our entire reason for being."*

*"The company integrates and co-ordinates all the activities that will affect customer satisfaction; and the company achieves its profits through creating and maintaining customer satisfaction."*

*"Advertising can persuade customers to change their attitudes, beliefs, or behavior."*

*"Most products, today, are almost identical. Many clients throw two newly minted half-dollars on the table and ask us to persuade the public that one is better."*

*"Products have a limited life. . . . Most discussions of product life cycle portray the sales history of a typical brand as following an S-shaped curve. This curve is typically divided into four stages, known as introduction, growth, maturity, and decline."*