

ADVERTISING AS COMMUNICATION

Gillian Dyer



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For my parents, Bertram and Gwen Dyer

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

This series of books on different aspects of communication is designed to meet the needs of the growing number of students coming to study this subject for the first time. The authors are experienced teachers or lecturers who are committed to bridging the gap between the huge body of research available to the more advanced student, and what the new student actually needs to get him started on his studies.

Probably the most characteristic feature of communication is its diversity: it ranges from the mass media and popular culture, through language to individual and social behaviour. But it identifies links and a coherence within this diversity. The series will reflect the structure of its subject. Some books will be general, basic works that seek to establish theories and methods of study applicable to a wide range of material; others will apply these theories and methods to the study of one particular topic. But even these topic-centred books will relate to each other, as well as to the more general ones. One particular topic, such as advertising or news or language, can only be understood as an example of communication when it is related to, and differentiated from, all the other topics that go to make up this diverse subject.

The series, then, has two main aims, both closely connected. The first is to introduce readers to the most important results of contemporary research into communication together with the theories that seek to explain it. The second is to equip them with appropriate

methods of study and investigation which they will be able to apply directly to their everyday experience of communication.

If readers can write better essays, produce better projects and pass more exams as a result of reading these books I shall be very satisfied; but if they gain a new insight into how communication shapes and informs our social life, how it articulates and creates our experience of industrial society, then I shall be delighted. Communication is too often taken for granted when it should be taken to pieces.

John Fiske

PREFACE

This book is meant to provide some basic ideas, concepts and material for the study of advertising. It draws on work from a number of fields but revolves around the core concept of communication. Much of the book is in the form of a survey of existing material, and the second half in particular deals with questions of method and how to study advertisements rather than with extended examples of analysis. I hope that this provides enough groundwork for readers to pursue some of the issues raised in more depth, and especially to 'decode' one of the most ubiquitous and tenacious forms of communication and ideology in society. Advertising influences our thoughts, feelings and lives; we need to be aware of how it operates and equip ourselves with information and ideas on how far we think it a necessary and useful form of social communication. I hope this book contributes in some way to that project and will help people become more aware of the images and values perpetuated by advertising, and the forms and structures which carry and determine what they mean.

I would like to thank Julie Staniforth and Christine Barker for their excellent typing, a number of friends and colleagues who have helped with suggestions and ideas for this book, in particular Helen Baehr and David Child for their involvement and support. Clare Richardson kindly lent the newspapers from which the announcements in chapter 1 were taken. Tim Bell of D'Arcy MacManus and Masius, and George Harrison of the History of Advertising Trust, also provided help with historical material and went to a great deal

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Gillian Dyer
1982

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INTRODUCTION

Every day and for most of our lives we see and hear many advertisements. Even if you don't read a newspaper or watch television, and walk around the streets with your eyes down, you will find it impossible to avoid some form of publicity, even if it's only a trade display at a local store, uninvited handbills pushed through the letter box or cards displayed in the window of the corner newsagent. We usually take advertisements for granted because they are so pervasive, but many people, not least among them the advertisers themselves, claim that they are one of the most important influences in our lives. Not only do advertisements sell goods and services, they are commodities themselves, 'the most ubiquitous form in which we encounter commercial photography', according to a critic of advertising, Judith Williamson (1978, p. 57). In a sense advertising is the 'official art' of the advanced industrial nations of the west. It fills our newspapers and is plastered all over the urban environment; it is a highly organized institution, involving many artists, writers and film directors, and comprises a large proportion of the output of the mass media. It also influences the policies and the appearance of the media and makes them of central importance to the economy. Advertisements advance and perpetuate the ideas and values which are indispensable to a particular economy system. Advertisers want us to buy things, use them, throw them away and buy replacements in a cycle of continuous and conspicuous consumption.

Some advertisements are silly, inaccurate, misleading, or just plain

irritating. On the other hand, we have probably all had occasion to say 'That's a good advertisement'. They can be skilfully designed and produced, very attractive, entertaining and funny. But we should not lose sight of their ideological function, which is linked to their economic function, nor of the real messages that lie behind their superficial gloss.

The primary function of advertising is, we are told, to introduce a wide range of consumer goods to the public and thus to support the free market economy, but this is clearly not its only role; over the years it has become more and more involved in the manipulation of social values and attitudes, and less concerned with the communication of essential information about goods and services. In this respect it could be argued that advertising nowadays fulfils a function traditionally met by art or religion. Some critics of advertising have even suggested that it operates in the same way as myths in primitive societies, providing people with simple stories and explanations in which values and ideals are conveyed and through which people can organize their thoughts and experiences and come to make sense of the world they live in. Varda Langholz Leymore, in her book *The Hidden Myth* (1975) argues that like myth, advertising reinforces accepted modes of behaviour and acts as an anxiety-reducing mechanism resolving contradictions in a complex or confusing society. She remarks, 'To the constant nagging dilemmas of the human condition, advertising gives a simple solution . . . [It] simultaneously provokes anxiety and resolves it' (p. 156). In a similar vein Raymond Williams (1980) has called advertising 'the magic system, . . . a highly organized and professional system of magical inducements and satisfactions functionally very similar to magical systems in simpler societies but rather strangely co-existent with highly developed scientific technology' (p. 185). And the critic Fred Inglis (1972) describes the advertiser as a modern-day shaman whose 'anonymous vantage in society permits him to articulate a novel magic which offers to meet the familiar pains of a particular society and history, to soften or sharpen ambition, bitterness, solitude, lust, failure and rapacity' (p. 78).

What is advertising?

In its simplest sense the word 'advertising' means 'drawing attention to something', or notifying or informing somebody of something. You can advertise by word of mouth, quite informally and locally, and without incurring great expense. But if you want to inform a

large number of people about something, you might need to advertise in the more familiar sense of the word, by public announcement. If you put up a notice in a local newsagent's shop (preferably near a bus stop), design a poster or buy some space in a local newspaper, you are likely to attract the attention of more people to the information you wish to communicate than if you simply pass the word around friends and neighbours. You could go further and distribute leaflets as well, get someone to carry a placard around, even broadcast on local radio or organize a publicity stunt. However, you might not be content simply to convey certain facts, such as, for example:

For sale: four 6-week-old kittens

Contact M. James Tel. 324810

and leave it at that. You might wish to add a bit of emphasis to your message by proclaiming:

Adorable, fluffy kittens (house-trained) need a good home. Black and white. An opportunity not to be missed. Phone 342810. Hurry, only a few left!

There is a certain temptation, if we have anything to say or something to sell, to draw attention to our notice by exaggerating the facts or appealing to people's emotions:

Troubles at home? Marriage under strain?
These kittens will change your life, and
will bring joy and peace to your family.

And this is of course where all the controversy about advertising arises.

People who criticise advertising in its current form argue that advertisements create false wants and encourage the production and consumption of things that are incompatible with the fulfilment of genuine and urgent human needs. Advertising, it is claimed, is an irrational system which appeals to our emotions and to anti-social feelings which have nothing to do with the goods on offer. Advertisements usually suggest that private acquisition is the only avenue to social success and happiness — they define private acquisition and competitiveness as a primary goal in life, at the expense of less tangible rewards like better health care and social services. The consumer economy is said to divert funds from socially useful and human needs and make us greedy, materialistic and wasteful.

On the other hand, those who defend advertising say that it is