

“Advertising is more about manipulation than information.” Critically discuss this statement, with detailed reference to the advertising techniques used in one advertising campaign or one class of product.

The media are influential in the construction of reality for all of us living in this new world of information technology. It is from our engagements with the media how we perceive what the rest of the world is like. The media are the major means by which we construct an understanding of the lives, values and beliefs of other individuals.

Advertising is one of the most ever-present manifestations of popular culture, and yet it has seldom been examined as a form of popular culture in its own right. This essay will examine how advertising companies manipulate us, as a consumer.

At the White House one day in 1992, then President George Bush impulsively took charge of a visiting group of schoolchildren and took them on a lengthy tour of the interior. When the children finally exited, reporters immediately gathered around them and quizzed the youngsters about their special tour, and its singular guide.

“He kept going and going and going,” responded 11-year-old Lonnie Thomas, and then finding himself in the middle of an advertising slogan, he finished with- “just like an Energizer bunny” (Rosenthal, 1992, p.140.)

The Energizer bunny; are there any people left who do not carry in their minds a picture of the pink rabbit, marching everlastingly to the beat of its own bass drum? Through a mammoth and successful advertising campaign that began in 1989, the Eveready Battery Company and its advertising agencies, have managed to insert an unforgettable image of the icon into the consciousness of millions of people all over the world.

Sensing a general awareness of the Energizer bunny, young Lonnie could be assured that his characterization would be readily communicated not only to those correspondents immediately visible to him but, through them, to the millions of distant newspaper readers all over the world. Some concerned with the roles of advertising and popular culture in everyday life might be troubled with the connotation of Lonnie Thomas’

particular choice to describe his president. For Eveready, they have created, and displayed, and advanced a symbol that has perhaps rivalled other symbols and metaphors. Of all the conceivable toys that might have served their purposes, Eveready chose one that came with an extensive, and for this duty, largely useful set of links.

In many traditional cultures, the rabbit appears as a trickster, a lively role echoed in the new advertising symbol. For millennia the rabbit served as a pagan symbol of fertility, before picking up greater overlays of meaning, as it was associated with the iconography of Christianity. The symbol itself is regenerated each year with the celebration of Easter, when millions of bunny figures go on display. This history of the rabbit is exactly the sort of meaning the advertisers wanted to touch upon. Here was a powerful and ready-made symbol for them to mould and manipulate to use for their advantage.

In our modern society, rabbits are a common plaything. Young people grow up snuggling their toy bunnies, children read, or are read stories that amplify the adorability of the rabbit. Most especially is Beatrix Potter's 'Peter Rabbit', who brings to the rabbit symbol, a disregard for rules and a survivor's instinct. If 'Brer Rabbit' is read in a particular family, then the association of the rabbit with wiliness and endurance will be strengthened. All the fondness for all these childhood rabbits, all the meaning already imparted by people to the figure of the bunny, were drawn on by the creators of the Energizer bunny.

"In an act which French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1966) called bricolage (from the French word for the workman who assembles things from odds and ends)," (Fowles, 1996, p.5) the creative team working on the Energizer Bunny created it as a friendly symbol of spontaneity, rejuvenation and perseverance. The rabbit, in essence, represents the quality of being thoroughly alive. This general symbol they had to refashion into one clearly their own, signifying one specific product.

First, Energizer coloured their rabbit a shocking pink, a flamboyant colour that made their creature all the more sportive and endearing. Then, in a way that elements of a

symbol may clash, they equipped the rabbit with a pounding drum. The figure became both cute and abrasive. The drum itself echoes along the corridors of symbolism, i.e. the military drum, the parade drum, all to attract attention. The intrusiveness of the drum was no doubt intended to cut through the drone of television programming. Letting its drum do the talking for it, the rabbit was not to possess human speech and remain a toy. Also, by being mute, the Energizer Bunny minimized the chances of becoming too large a personality and overwhelming the product.

Descriptive details of the bunny have changed slightly over the years, the great change being the addition of pool thongs and dark glasses to the bunny. These further tailored the bunny, making him “cool” in addition to his other qualities. “Coolness”, is an attractive feature to the younger population of the target market (like Lonnie Thomas) and situates the bunny in a world of leisure and play, where in fact most batteries would be bought. This world of less drudgery and liberation, with pleasant activities and associations, are what Eveready wanted to be identified with.

The Energizer Bunny offered an initial indication of the relationship between advertising and popular culture. Typically, advertising draws upon popular culture’s stockpile of symbolic material (images or text or music) in an attempt to engineer new symbols with enlivened meanings. People in their culture had already accepted the older symbolic material. All advertisers can do is recondition the public’s symbols and pray that consumers will supply agreeable meanings to the new creation.

That the Energizer bunny should find popular endorsement marks it as an exception, not the rule. Contrary to apprehensions, advertising does not, and cannot, skilfully mould the symbolic landscape. Its power is limited to playing with symbolic elements, putting together new ones, and hoping against hope that they will work. It is a further comment on advertising’s limitations that, although the bunny’s prominence allowed Energizer to claim a large share of the battery market, the Duracell Company retained the lead in sales.

Bibliography

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