
Product Liability

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My job is to open my students' eyes about the commercial manipulation of their lives. America's most sophisticated industry is not military technology; it is advertising.

Advertising is memorialized in the charm it exerts over us all. Its applications concuss our culture and frame all our references. To copywriters, the public's trust is itself a product. Their doubt is therefore product liability. Making us, especially youth, believe in snake oil and the countless embodiments thereof. We are merely a potential meal ticket to the peddlers of Madison Avenue.

Radio hooks brains. As a game played against myself (perhaps more like a practical joke), I listened to the most popular "talk radio" stations in New York. From their advertisements, I believed I could tap into the collective mind and finger the pulse of the common man. By the genius of advertising, sensible apathy can be reset as desire of false necessities. It is Madison Avenue that has prepared the Syllabus of the New Age.

Miracles, such as making wise people suspend disbelief and become foolish consumers, are possible only by divine intervention. Heaven's throne obviously is occupied by a marketer, not a god. He makes our perceptions heel. He can make reality out of the impossible and reality itself out of the question. Here is a sampling of advertisements currently saturating the airwaves:

- 1) A marine biologist, taking a breather from a scuba dive amongst clownfish in ocean waters graced with oil refinery rigs, praises the Shell Oil Company for its leadership role in protecting the ecology.
- 2) The Philip Morris Company, purveyors of cancer sticks since the Silent Screen days, still pushes its smokes while at the same time sponsoring public service

- announcements hammering away at their own death-dealing stock-in-trade. The voice-over sounds like a nurturing soccer mom. (I predict that Johns Mansville will shortly underwrite a joint pitch from a physician in partnership with a bistro owner, acclaiming asbestos as delicious and nutritionally-balanced)
- 3) Straddling the airwaves are numerous appeals to the entrepreneurial spirit. One of them is a thinly veiled inducement to tax evasion. In the spirit of Yankee rugged individualism, it urges listeners to incorporate themselves, even if they're not in business, in tax-friendly Nevada.
 - 4) Several plain folks, none sounding too bright, tell you how they sent their money, as one of millions, to learn the secret way to achieve feverish affluence by working an hour or two a day for a few months.
 - 5) An impresario squeals about how you can get your share of the billions of ludicrous, indiscriminate free grants the federal government squanders.
 - 6) Life-Extension Potions have never died out as an advertising staple.
 - 7) The FDA recently withdrew the drug Vioxx. Many lawyers have volunteered to litigate on behalf of people whom they have talked into being injured parties. More lawyers, probably, than the sum of Vioxx pills ever sold.
 - 8) Junk politics enjoys some top billing and makes juicy sound bites. Many go beyond the sniping so integral to the electoral season. For instance, "Coalition for Smaller Government calls for the head of CBS anchor Dan Rather."

To hear really sincere piano arpeggios nowadays, you need go no further than the musical background to the plethora of cancer treatment commercials on the radio. The music is of the "generic soothing" genre. Between high noon and sunset on a slow Thursday, I tallied eight different kinds of malignancies and a baker's dozen of physician - capitalists pitching to kiss those tumors good-bye.

Like flowers, advertisements come in perennials and annuals. Some issues stick around just long enough for advocates to codify and distort them in paid airtime. When the tax-free status of Native-American casinos in New York State was in jeopardy, an actor with a tear in his voice could be heard above "America the Beautiful," pleading that the IRS should honor treaties as per the American Way. Nobility is not the stuff of sarcasm, but this radio appeal was hardly noble.

"Talk Radio" is the heir to Victorian carnivals. Only the kinds of malaise and balms have changed. They tout diets for hair proliferation, supplements for intimate potency, eczema panaceas, and hormone boosters with pseudo-scientific rings to the names, as made up by meticulous market research. House calls now come in the form of an actual medical doctor who moonlights as a radio host. With a compound of passion and

feigned professional aloofness, he pushes vitamins without stating the obvious fact that he is being paid for his imprimatur.

"Where there are fools there is hope." If a creator of advertisements spray-painted this throughout the land, he would be more prophet than graffiti vandal, foretelling the already existing.

Are students fit to draw their own conclusions from the propaganda of Madison Avenue? One of my scholars, who's been around the block, referred to the new fad of naming stadiums and concert halls after merger and acquisition attorneys and deep-pocketed corporations when he asked me, "Does New York Hospital really have a Key Food Autopsy Theater?"

A sense of absurdity is the surest and safest deterrent to victimhood in the marketplace. Unfortunately, consumers of ideas often bond to the marketers who exploit them, much as kidnapping victims might to their abductors.

And now, a word from my sponsor.