

## 6. Advertising and Change: Message, mind, medium, and mores

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For an industry that is a slavish follower of trends, advertising has an uneasy relationship with change. This is slightly surprising given that the whole purpose of our industry, its *raison d'être*, is to change people—whether it is changing their minds in terms of which brand they choose or changing their behaviour. But whilst we are very up to date on the various psychologies of change and how best to motivate people to change, our own industry has been particularly slow to do so. Watching daytime TV ads, in which a woman's happiness and social standing amongst peers is tightly linked to the cleanliness of her toilet, you could be forgiven for thinking advertising was stuck in the 1950s.

Nevertheless, advertising, like all industries, has changed and will continue to change. And the drivers of change within the advertising industry can be roughly broken down into the mind, the medium, the mores and, as always, the money. In this chapter I trace the major changes in the advertising industry and couple them with my practitioner perspective on how the advertising industry seeks to make change happen through a slightly different set of 'M's: the message, the mind, the medium and the mores.

It was the Industrial Revolution, one of the greatest changes to our society, that spawned advertising as we know it. Previously advertising had been mostly at the point of sale and/or was the realm of the grifter and snake oil salesman (there would be many who would argue that this is still the case!).

In the late nineteenth century, companies started making mass-market products. In the early twentieth century, consumer credit on smaller household goods became available. So for the first time ever we had mass-produced products and masses of people with the money to buy them (whether they could afford them or not!). We had a product, a target audience and, with the increase in national newspapers and the advent of radio, we had a medium. Where previously most advertising had been at the point of purchase or as small advertisements in local newspapers, suddenly national advertising campaigns were required, which meant that copywriters, art directors and so on were needed, and the advertising agency as we know it today was born. Total advertising spending in the United States grew from approximately \$200 million in 1880 to nearly \$3 billion in 1920.

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## The message

While many of the early advertisements were simply product benefit style advertisements, an increasing understanding of the psychology of the consumer (or how to best manipulate the mind) led to fundamental changes in the industry. Great ad men of the past like PT Barnum instinctively knew what would make people want something, but in the 1950s the relationship between advertising and psychology was formalised when advertising agencies began to use psychologists and other behavioural experts to help develop advertising campaigns.

The realisation that people were not nearly as rational as they themselves thought was perhaps one of the biggest changes in the industry. Basically, how a product makes you feel is as important as what it does. This is why, when we get a brief to write an ad, it is as much or more about the consumer insights as it is about the product.

This is particularly the case in parity products, i.e. those which have no real discernible difference between them. Tampons are an excellent example. Having spent the best part of two decades doing the advertisements for Carefree tampons, I learned that it was the visual and emotional cues that worked to change buying behaviour far more strongly than research and development features like an extra groove in the tampon. This is why nearly every advertisement for this company's product took place on a foreign beach. (Also I love to travel!)

In terms of these psychological drivers of change, Abraham Maslow's publication of his theory of human motivation had a massive impact in the industry. We still use it today. In his paper, Maslow (1943) said all human decision-making is motivated by unfulfilled needs and that people seek to satisfy their needs and desires in a certain hierarchy, known nowadays as Maslow's hierarchy. These needs could then be used as a basis for understanding why a consumer makes a decision to buy a particular product or a service.

The hierarchy of needs begins with basic life survival needs, and then the model progresses through to safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem, and finally self-actualisation. As people meet the needs at the first level, they move toward the next, then the next and so on. Think of it as a pyramid, with basic survival needs at the bottom and self-actualisation at the top. In advertising terms, the closer to the base of the pyramid you can create the need that your product answers, the more successful you can be. Volvo, for example, has created one of the world's strongest brands based on the second-level need of safety and security.

We often see entirely non-essential items marketed to meet this second-level need. The space under our kitchen sinks is full of products we do not really need but we have purchased because somehow we have bought into the marketing that they are important for the health/security of our family. If you pay attention to marketing language, you will see words that connect a product to this need like ‘Protect your family’ and ‘Don’t put your children’s health at risk’. The advertisements are usually aimed at mothers, using kids’ health as the bait. Maternal guilt is a prime motivator for advertisers. We even managed to put tampons into the security category—‘Simply no better protection’.

I also did the first advertising campaign for Barely There Pantyliners (if you are a female creative in an ad agency and there’s a feminine hygiene brief, it lands on *your* desk, no matter what). Pantyliners were unusual in that they were a brand new category of product. We had to create a need from scratch. In the end I used an old adage and modernised it. ‘My grandmother said you should always wear fresh underwear in case you get hit by a bus. I (as she looks at a cute guy) can think of a much better reason.’ Basically, protect yourself from feminine odour in case you get lucky. A stretch perhaps, but it was Johnson & Johnson’s most effective advertisement in the world that year.

When physiological and safety needs are fulfilled, the person can move up to the third level of needs in Maslow’s model, the social need—belonging. Human beings have an innate need to be emotionally involved. We need relationships, whether that is as a couple or as a social group. We need to love and be loved. The explosion and profitability of dating sites is testament to how powerful this need is. In fact, the success of social media is based on this. Marketing to teenagers often uses this need because the need to fit in, to belong, is particularly high at that age. The eternal advertising mainstay is ‘buy this and you will be loved’.

The next level in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is the need for esteem. People want and need to be respected and we need to feel good about ourselves. And this is where much advertising lives, often because we are selling products that people really do not need. L’Oréal’s ‘Because you’re worth it’ is the perfect example.

And then finally, at the top of the triangle, is the need for self-actualisation. Very little advertising leverages this higher order need except perhaps universities and various Buddhist courses!

One of the more interesting examples demonstrating the pitfalls of employing Maslow’s hierarchy without thinking it through was in trying to reduce the road toll. In the 1980s, advertising agencies on the Roads and Traffic Account were doing amazing, gut-wrenching, incredibly graphic advertisements in

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which young guys died as a consequence of speeding on the roads. They were highly awarded advertisements, and every creative wanted to work on them. There was just one small problem. They did not work.

They used the base level of Maslow's hierarchy, survival, as the motivator to change behaviour, which on paper makes absolute sense, until you delve into the psychology of the target audience. Young guys are uniquely unmotivated by fear of death. They simply think it will not happen to them. They feel invincible, so the advertisements did not work for them. And what was equally interesting was that there was no flow-on effect into the rest of the community either, because the advertisements were so horrific that people literally looked away rather than watch. This was an essential lesson for the advertising industry—if the fear factor is so high, people self-protect by tuning out, so absolute fear is no good at changing behaviour.

We finally realised that what did work for our young men with a death wish was far higher up Maslow's hierarchy but far more motivating for them—the fear of not belonging. And this is why the 'little pinkie' advertisement has been a far greater success.<sup>1</sup> Death does not work to change their behaviour, but fear of belittlement by their friends does.

## The mind

As well as the messaging itself, one of the great changes in advertising is a greater understanding of how stimulus works on the mind. The beautiful, long copy advertisements of the 1950s and 60s are long gone, because they were not effective. They were based on the assumption that people spend time reading and thinking about advertisements. They do not. And we discovered that the last thing an advertisement should do was actually encourage rational thought. It was not just that rational, deliberative thought was not an effective driver of purchase. We discovered something far worse. Encouraging consumers to *think* actually reduced the chance of getting them to buy.

And so the power of visuals was born. During the 1960s, the visual image started to supplant text as our primary mode of communication. Today, if you flick through a magazine, almost all the advertisements have a big picture and few words. You would think this would make my job as a writer easier, but it does not. It means you have to communicate the same information in far fewer words.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqWO7fzwSLM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqWO7fzwSLM).

But the reason we use visuals is because images work so differently from words. Pictures circumvent consumers' critical thought. Visuals are registered before you have had time to analyse them, so they become truth in your head, even when they are not. Seeing is believing even if what you are believing in is a fantasy—which is the other reason why images work better than words, because we fantasise in pictures. In advertising, a picture really is worth a thousand words. In fact, advertisements went from 15 per cent mainly pictorial in 1978 to 40 per cent by 1988.

This understanding of the power of visuals also gave rise to the importance of the logo. A lot of people think of a logo as a brand. I often get clients saying they want to change their branding, when in fact all they want is a new logo and somehow they think that will do. It will not, and is the reason why most rebranding exercises fail. If you truly want to change a company, changing the logo simply will not work. Like anything, change works best when you start from the centre and work your way out.

A logo is only a shortcut to a brand. This visual representation of the brand (rather than a straight brand name) allowed consumers to remain engaged in the visual processing of the advertisement, without having to switch to verbal processing. Logos also transcend language barriers so there are cost efficiencies, which is an important thing in an increasingly global marketplace.

People do not often buy a product or a logo, they buy a brand. And a brand is essentially the relationship you (the seller) have with your consumer—how they *feel* about you. It is who you are, what you offer, how that offer is experienced and exists as much internally as externally in a company. Basically, it is a promise kept. 'Keeping on brand' has been an advertising catchphrase ever since the 1960s. And the intangible value of brand equity is considered a quantifiable amount. Companies with strong brands are worth more on the stock market. And brands are properties to be protected. Not just brand names but brand properties are trademarked, like Cadbury purple and the Coca-Cola font.

Psychology has continued to drive change in advertising. Many agencies are now investing serious money in neuropsychology, which involves basically hooking people up to machines and watching brain patterns to see how advertising affects us in a physiological way. That is because even when we asked people in research groups why they buy one particular brand over another, they would give us answers that were simply not being reflected in the actual data, and we realised that people are not always themselves aware of what changes their own behaviour. By skipping the conscious and going straight to the unconscious, we can get a truer idea. There are a whole lot of ethical questions raised over this, of course, but if you think change and advertising have an uneasy relationship, the relationship of ethics and advertising is somewhat worse.

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## The medium

The medium has also been one of advertising's great drivers of change. The changes in the medium created by technological advancements have necessarily dictated changes in advertising. The printing press and the rise of national newspapers led to the first print advertising. This was followed by radio with its famous soap operas—radio drama sponsored by cleaning products from Proctor and Gamble's range.

Then came TV and with it the bigger budget big brand advertisements. In the US, the year 1948 is considered the year television advertisements came into their own, not the least because for the first time, enough people owned TVs to make it financially worthwhile to advertise on them. The first television advertising was the 'one sponsor per show' style, e.g. The Colgate Hour. The stations and advertising agencies realised that selling blocks of time in shows to multiple sponsors meant multiple streams of revenue per show, and the 'ad break' as we now know it was born. By the time television came to Australia in 1956, the format of TV ads had begun to be well established.

By the early 1970s the remote control was in nearly every household and the video recorder was gaining popularity. This meant advertisers had to work harder to engage audiences who could now mute, change channels or fast forward an ad. Previously a big enough media spend meant people saw your ads whether they were good or not but suddenly the entertainment value of an advertisement—the engagement—rose in importance. And the 'idea' became king. An advertisement had to have an idea created from a 'unique selling proposition' to cut through the clutter.

Since then, there has been an ongoing tussle between advertising agencies and clients over how much entertainment (i.e. the idea) versus how much 'boring product stuff' there should be. Creatives like myself are forever trying to convince clients (quite rightly) that no one is actually obliged to look at their advertisement, which means that they really have to make it entertaining. And clients are forever pointing out (quite rightly) that a really entertaining advertisement that says nothing about why people should buy the product is a waste of money. The holy grail is, of course, an idea that entertains but is built around the product benefit that answers an emotional need.

Another change has been in the growing number of channels on which you can potentially reach your target. When I started in advertising, people used to watch one of three channels, listen to one of a handful of analogue radio stations, and read one or two newspapers. Even though we did not know much about them (beyond basic demographic information), we at least knew where to reach them, and they were pretty much a captive audience.

The advent of pay TV meant that consumers split themselves up according to viewing habits, which was a double-edged sword for us because whilst it meant we could target more accurately, it also meant that the audience was more fragmented and therefore harder to reach. Basically, although the content of TV advertisements has changed to reflect societal changes, and although there have been some technological changes, and increased demographic information about target audiences, the basic TV advertisement format remains the same mass interruption model of advertising that was there when I started.

The internet changed everything.

My first agency had two computers in the library connected to the internet on which we could do research. Within a few years we were all connected. It helped that we had Malcolm Turnbull's Ozemail as a client. But for a few years, we still tried to do banner advertisements (the usually rectangular ads at the top of many websites) pretty much as print advertisements online.

Gradually we realised that this medium required a completely different way of thinking to drive consumer change, particularly once the social network began, and everyone in the advertising industry went around with either gloom or glee on their faces, depending on the level of their digital capability. 'Interruption is dead, long live engagement'. Soon every agency boasted a digital department filled with hipsters in low-slung pants who walked around the agency saying wisely, 'It's all about starting a conversation' and 'You have to build your communities'.

Clients listened to their advertising agencies and ploughed millions of dollars into online campaigns, and then learnt the hard way that engagement without persuasion is, for an advertiser, an utter waste of money. One of the most famous examples of this was Pepsi, who in 2010 decided to withdraw all money from traditional media and plough it into a social marketing campaign. The campaign rang all the bells, with 80 million votes registered, nearly 3.5 million 'likes' on the Pepsi Facebook page and almost 60,000 followers on Twitter. The only problem was that it did not sell Pepsi. It failed to change behaviour. Pepsi lost 5 per cent of market share in one year and, for the first time ever, dropped from being the number two soft drink in the US.

What had been forgotten was everything that Maslow had taught us, along with the importance of a creative idea. You can know everything about your target audience, but unless you motivate them to purchase with creativity and an answerable need, it is money wasted. In fact, one online experiment used blank banner advertisements (banners with nothing at all in them) and they

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still scored higher click-through rates (i.e. the rates at which people click on an advertisement, supposedly to purchase or find out more information) than micro-targeted Facebook ads.

That is not to say everyone gets it wrong. Companies like Red Bull quickly changed their offering from simply selling energy drinks to creating their own online and offline content, and companies who set themselves up to sell online have done very well too, though many retailers still struggle with online for a whole plethora of reasons. Nonetheless the times they are a-changing—the new media is here and that is where the consumers are, so that is where the advertisers have to be. Smart, agile companies are making it work.

## The mores

The other massive way the internet has changed advertising is that for the first time the consumer truly had power, and the ability to talk back. Many brands, so quick to embrace new media, have been burnt. The 'hashtag' has become the 'bashtag' enough times to scare even the bravest companies off Twitter. Formerly, if customers were unhappy with a product or service, they wrote a letter to the company and complained to their ten closest friends. Now they can tell hundreds of thousands of people in real time. If anything, the internet has meant many advertisers had to lift their game in terms of the quality of their products and services.

For the first time in history there is also an asset value, not just a moral value, in ethical corporate behaviour. The companies themselves have had to become advertisements for their products. Companies can no longer make happy bouncy TV ads while they act like corporate bastards behind closed doors. The massive availability of information online about companies means they can be judged, and are judged, on their corporate behaviour.

As societal mores change, these are of course reflected in the advertising. But to some, advertising plays a bigger, more sinister, active role as the agent of unwanted and evil change, for example: 'Junk food ads are making our kids fat!' and 'Advertising with unrealistic body sizes is causing anorexia.'

To some, advertising is the cause of all society's ills, while others say it simply reflects changes that are happening. The truth, as always, lies between the two. Advertising does reflect society but it is never a true reflection. We airbrush truth to be more persuasive, distorting reality along the way. This of course has an effect on the way we see ourselves. It is churlish of advertisers to say we are not responsible for negative changes in our society because 'it's just advertising' and 'everyone knows ads aren't real', when literally billions of dollars are spent

on working out better ways to change people's behaviour—to change their minds, to change their purchasing decisions, to change how they feel about their lives and what might make them happier.

While many of the changes are part of the bigger picture (or bigger problem!), other changes in advertising reflect changes for good in our society. The portrayal of women in advertising, for example, is certainly better than it was, and we now see a broader range of cultures in our advertising. Although sometimes I know that feels a bit 'politically correct' and trite, in casting for advertisements we have to tick cultural boxes.

Advertising has also copped a lot of flak for its sexualisation. The truth is that sex sells. It always has, because we are hardwired to notice sexual content. Certainly what are considered acceptable levels of sexiness now are very different from 50 years ago, but that is a societal trend. A hundred years ago, an ankle was considered sexually arousing; nowadays it is a breast. This is a trend reflected through all forms of media and in society at large. A look at *Video Hits* on a Saturday morning shows far more sexual images than advertising generally does, certainly advertising that has a family classification.

The law has also changed things. We simply cannot make the types of claims the snake oil salesman got away with. So these days much of our craft and effort goes into implying all the same things without actually saying them. If you really think about it, a claim like 'No other tampon gives you better protection' simply means it is a parity product, but we have made it sound like a superior product. And now every claim we make has to be qualified. The threat of a lawsuit by competitors and consumers means asterisk usage (where an asterisk is linked to a qualifying statement at the bottom of the ad, usually in small typefont) has increased dramatically.

As we continue to learn more about how to manipulate the mind, as technology continues to change the mediums we use, and as society's mores change to reflect the times, one thing will never change. Somewhere, somehow, advertisers will always be trying to sell you something.

## Reference

Maslow, AH (1943) A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review* 50: 370–96.

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