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Advertising

This is the fourth paper given at the recent VI Symposium on Communicating the Christian Faith Today (22 May, 1976). The author, viewing the matter from his own psychological slant, analyses the development of advertising in recent decades. He draws attention to the parallel with preaching; both approaches calling for some sort of an action on the part of those addressed. He concludes that Christians have often tended to appeal to the same motives as advertisers, forgetting that in the NT God positively commands repentance.

Historically, this change in behaviour used to be brought about by advertising that was *proclamation*. It was born with the invention of print — print being, as McLuhan and Fiore (1965) say, "a ditto device", a method of taking the old word-of-mouth village-wide gossip and transforming it into new print-bound nationwide communications. Such mass-produced proclamations gave the impression of manufacturers 'blowing their own trumpets', and led to advertisements being called 'puffs'. Thomas Carlyle (1843) referred to them as "that all-deafening blast of puffery" when he commented as follows:-

We take it for granted, the most rigorous of us, that all men who have made anything are expected and entitled to make the loudest possible proclamation of it, and call upon a discerning public to reward them for it" — "Nature requires no man to make proclamation of his doings and hat-makings; Nature forbids all men to make such. There is not a man or hat-maker born into the world but feels, or has felt, that he is degrading himself if he speak of his excellences and prowesses, and supremacy in his craft; his inmost heart says to him, 'Leave thy friends to speak of these; if possible thy enemies to speak of these; but at all events, thy friends!' He feels that he is already a poor braggart; fast hastening to be a falsity and speaker of the Untruth.

Bragging it may have been, but 'puffery' made products well-known and brought in better sales. ("Good morning. Have you used Pears' Soap?" became such a habit of speech that Stock Exchange men of the 1890's are reported to have refused to greet each other for fear of arousing the complementary question — see Turner, 1952).

As proclamation-advertising increased in volume, with different brands of similar products engaging in competition, moves were made 'to distinguish one's own product from one's competitors'. Into advertisements, therefore, came claims to indicate difference from, superiority over, other like goods (as witness the fantastic claims made on behalf of quack medicines, increasingly from the Great Plague until the nineteenth century when legislative curbs were introduced). Proclamation was superseded by *persuasion*.

As persuasion-advertising grew more and yet more in volume, consumer attitudes hardened to the point of cynicism towards almost all claims made for products. A method was required to break through this self-protective cynicism; a way of advertising was needed which was actually persuasion, but had the innocuous appearance of proclamation; — the *ambiguous* advertisement. It is this sort of thing that Dichter (1964) has in mind:—

We have a mental habit of seeing an advertisement as a kind of bulletin, a statement to the public ... about a product and its various characteristics. In reality, tests show that consumers tend to respond to advertisements as if they were a form of word-of-mouth communication. Because of their deep need for sincere and reliable human guidance, they cannot help seeing an advertisement as an interpersonal communication from the people who make a product to the people who buy it.

In a sense, the desire is for re-creating a past situation, where the shoemaker, the tailor, the grocer-around-the-corner gave information and friendly advice based upon personal knowledge of the consumer and his or her family and their needs and means. Such an intimate relationship created a feeling of trust and security, and reduced the confusions of 'cold commercialism'.

It is when the consumer feels that an advertisement is intended more as a sales tool than as information and guidance that he feels threatened, that he rejects the advertising claim, that he turns for a solution of his buying problem to word-of-mouth. It is when he feels that an advertiser speaks to him as a friend, an unbiased authority, or uses other positive psychological approaches in creating the atmosphere of word-of-mouth, that he will relax and tend to accept the recommendation.

Such ambiguous advertisements — persuasion successfully masquerading as proclamation — have been generated from at least two mainstream influences in twentieth century psychology: the Psychoanalytic and the Pavlovian approaches. An advertisement based on psychoanalytic thinking will most likely present an innocent view of the product concerned, with some slight twist that satisfies hypothesised hidden needs of the consumer, that supplies a goal for motivation of which the owner is unaware. For example, the long-standing Embassy cigarettes poster is often described by smokers as honest publicity — it simply portrays a pack and a cigarette, plus caption. However, the blueish smoke haze in which they are enveloped fits exactly the basic tenets of Marcovitz' (1969) theory that heavy smoking is a respiratory addiction to consumption, resurrection and powerful visualisation of the smoke itself.

This in-depth 'motivational research' approach is less popular today (Collins & Montgomery, 1969; Cannon, 1973), and has given way to an increase in the less mysterious advertising based on Pavlovian psychology. This attempts to transfer the already-formed response to a particular stimulus onto a new stimulus — the advertised product. Just as dogs can be trained to salivate at the sound of a bell rather than to the expectancy of food, so young men may be taught to give the disarming response, 'Mmmmmmmmmmm....', not to the young lady but to the product beside her.

Such an approach can also be used in reverse. A dog will respond to electric shock by the self-preservative, anxiety-reducing action of breaking the circuit. (Solomon and Brush, 1956, taught dogs to jump a barrier into the non-electrified part of their cage.) This action can then be conditioned onto a signal preceding the electric shock rather than the shock itself. Similarly, smokers may be urged to avoid contracting lung cancer by quitting smoking, the signal for cancer of the lung being (the thought of) cigarettes.

The course of the antismoking campaign publicity illustrates fairly accurately, much of the above described development of advertising; but it also mirrors somewhat uncannily the trend of Christian evangelism to the present time. The antismoking message in the UK started in the late 1950's as a proclamation of Early Death through Smoking. This statement of statistical association was then followed up by various attempts at persuasion. (Don't waste your life, What about those you leave behind?, You can't scrub your lungs clean, and so on) away from future disaster. The negative consequences (of which cigarettes are the signal and to the threat of which quitting is the response) were then altered from the long-term future to those of the present-day: coughing, phlegm, festering impurities in the lungs. Then they became less medical, more down-to-earth (bad breath, odourous clothes, and other social unacceptabilities). Presently, the campaign focusses on what smokers

miss by not quitting, and the good things gained by stopping ("The moment you stop smoking, your lungs begin to heal", backed by a glorious photograph of bounding dog and joyful family charging through a meadow is a recent Scottish example). Thus, proclamation was succeeded by persuasion, which was firstly 'in reverse' about the future, then about the present, and finally we have a positive Pavlovian approach.

Similarly the message presented as 'the gospel' once consisted of a proclamation of facts. Efforts to persuade unbelievers of its truth then shifted in the direction of stressing the unpleasant consequences of unbelief, sometimes improving on the Scriptural account of them (for instance, in the awful paintings of Bosch). In the twentieth century, the emphasis shifted to the negative consequences experienced in the present (boredom, existential uncertainty, loneliness, immediate evil results of sinning); and thence further, to the positive things of the Christian life as incentives to receive the gospel (purpose in life, the love of God, heaven, peace, happiness, gain a Friend).

Hazards involved in 'advertising' the Gospel

The inherent danger of all persuasive advertising, whether blatant or ambiguous, is that consumers will become rapidly disillusioned with the product if its advertised claims are not authenticated in practice. In our example above, this is certainly the single biggest problem of the antismoking campaign. A smoker on first exposure to its publicity may well attempt to quit, hoping to avoid the consequences of continuing or gain the incentives to stop. Then he fails to give up, and into the bargain experiences both private and public humiliation in finding cigarettes his master, with consequent drop in self-esteem. His personal prediction in committing himself to giving up was of success: it has been disconfirmed. These factors lead him increasingly to disillusionment, such that the campaign publicity loses all credibility for him. Subsequent exposures to its advertisements find him well and truly conditioned not to notice them, not to take action; and in this he is reinforced by the maintenance of his dignity and self-esteem. Nonresponse is rewarded proportionally to the amount of antismoking publicity thrust upon him - and just as with the avoidance response of Solomon & Brush's dogs (above), this avoidance response is extremely resistant to extinction.

In tragically similar manner, disillusioned people who responded initially to claims made on behalf of the gospel rather than to the gospel itself (which is a command, not an optional recommendation; imperative rather than incentive - Acts 17:30; for example) are reinforced in their present non-response proportionally to their subsequent re-exposure to such gospel 'advertising'.

In conclusion

Does an examination of the development of advertising afford useful lessons for communicating the Christian faith today? As a cautionary tale, yes it does. If nothing else, it counsels one back to the exhortation of Jeremiah 6:16, to "ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein". But let us heed the sequel — "They said, we will not walk therein". Applying this to ourselves; if we insist on following the technique of the advertiser, may we not expect an increasingly disillusioned public for each new evangelistic campaign?

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*The quotation from Dichter (1964) is used with the permission of the publishers, Messrs. McGraw-Hill Book Co. NY.