

Advertising: What is it? from Advertising Association Handbook 1983

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Almost as many claims have been made about advertising as advertising makes about products. A small selection might include:

Advertising is an evil service

Advertising exploits human inadequacy

Advertising is wasteful

Advertising is the mainspring of the economy

Advertising prevents small, enterprising companies from breaking out into established markets

Advertising is a force for change

A moment's reflection is enough to make one realise that each of these statements, favourable or unfavourable alike, is a generalisation directly equivalent to statements such as 'Television makes children violent'.

Some TV *programmes* may make children violent. Some may help them learn to read. Some *advertisements* may be wasteful, or prevent small companies from entering new markets; but as the following examples show clearly, not all advertisements can possibly have these effects.

Advertising is simply an available channel of communication. It is available, at a price, to everyone, and allows people to make contact with one or more people for an almost infinite number of different ends. Advertisements are the message that advertising carries, in an attempt to achieve those ends.

The almost infinite number of users, uses, aims, purposes, motives, audiences, media and methods makes the question 'What is advertising?' peculiarly difficult to answer. The sign outside a church naming next Sunday's preacher is an advertisement. 'Locally Grown Strawberries' is an advertisement.

'We need 175 Mountain Commandos'

'Rights Issue'

'Chairman's Statement'

'Lost Budgerigar'

'Labour isn't working'

'Confessions of a Pop Performer (X)'

'Britain Will *Win* With Labour'

'Broad-minded, Midland-based males seeks Mature Relationship(s)'

'Could You manage an Off-Licence?'

'Save it!'

'Cats Will Die unless we continue to help them'

They're all advertisements and they're all part of advertising.

The nearest I can get to a definition which encompasses all these possible differences and permutations is: '*any paid-for communication intended to inform and/or influence one or more people*'.

First: 'paid for'. An advertisement that is not paid for is not an advertisement, though its costs may be minimal and the payment may not be to a media owner.

Second: 'communication'. Every advertisement is attempting to bridge a gap between a sender and one or more potential receivers. That bridge is a form of communication. To buy a 16-sheet poster site and leave it absolutely blank is not to advertise. There must, in other words, be content as well as medium.

Third: 'intended'. Not all advertisements 'work', in the sense of achieving their desired objectives; but they are nonetheless part of advertising.

Fourth: 'inform and/or influence'. The purely informative advertisement might be rare and the distinction between information and persuasion may be difficult to draw (what about 'Gratuities Not Included' on the British Rail breakfast bill, for example?), but an advertisement does not have to set out to influence either attitude or behaviour in order to qualify.

And finally: 'one or more people'. All advertisements are addressed to people: sometimes one (Gypsy. Am back. Call soon. Lollipop), and sometimes millions (Don't Waste Water).

Some years ago, a lady in Dulwich decided she no longer needed her second-hand electric riding camel, so she decided to buy space in *The Times*. This space was filled with an advertisement which in turn was read by one or more other people, previously unknown to the lady of Dulwich, who happened to want a second-hand electric riding camel and were all prepared to pay £400 o. n. o to get one. The lucky applicant was happy; the lady from Dulwich was happy; *The Times* was happy; The Times readers were happy (since the insertion cost helped to pay for their newspaper); and the second hand electric riding camel found itself once more both wanted and useful.

Exactly the same simple principle applies to the Department of Energy, when they want us all to conserve energy; to Prudential, when they want to recruit personnel for their pensions and administration departments; to the Home Office, when they want us to keep matches away from children; to a foreign government that believes itself misunderstood and wants to put its own case; and to Heinz, when they want to make it clear the virtues of their baby foods to millions of parents they have never met.

All those advertisers have just this in common: they want to achieve something, they choose advertising as one means of achieving it. How they use that advertising, the advertisements

themselves, varies enormously in style, intent, format, price, size and medium. And whether or not they are as satisfied with the results of their expenditure as the lady from Dulwich only they will know. So to attempt to identify some general purpose or effect in those advertisements is manifestly absurd.

'Is advertising wasteful?' is a non-question, since 'Are advertisements wasteful?' can be answered only by the person who paid for each one, and sometimes not even then.

Was the Dulwich lady's advertisement wasteful? Demonstrably not. (Alas, the cost-effectiveness of many advertisements is much less easy to demonstrate). But it would have been wasteful had her electric riding camel rotted away in its Dulwich attic, unknown to all those who were longing to acquire it. In other words, it would have been wasteful not to advertise.

By substituting 'advertisements' for 'advertising', equivalent points can be made about all the statements at the beginning of this chapter, and many more besides.

Do advertisements prevent small, enterprising companies from breaking into established markets? Ask Polaroid or Bernard Matthews.

Are advertisements a force for change? Ask the manufacturers of those brand leaders which have continued to lead their markets for 30, 40 years or more.

Advertising, as such, can do absolutely nothing. It's simply there, waiting to be used. Advertisements, in theory, can do practically everything: introduce the new, confirm the old, congratulate the existing buyers/users/consumers/employees, or attempt to convert them. Advertisements can, and do, encourage consumption and encourage thrift, and advocate a vote for any number of competing brands, companies or political parties.

Television, as we have already seen, suffers from the same semantic confusion. Like advertising, it is simply an available channel of communication: there are cameras, transmitters and receivers. And how can these inoffensive and inanimate pieces of hardware conceivably, of themselves, encourage violence? (Except, of course, by failing to function.)

It's both legitimate and healthy to question the effect of television *programmes*, just as it is to continue to question the effect of certain *advertisements*, but to suggest that *advertising* does this or that *television* does that, is nonsense.

In fact, one of the few commercially available channels of communication not to suffer from this confusion between the container and the thing contained is the telephone system. Some consumers use the telephone system to sell insurance policies; some to call the plumber; some to say 'How are you?'; some to get in touch with the Samaritans; and some, no doubt, to arrange for the collection of a new consignment of hard drugs. And some unhappy subscribers use the telephone for heavy breathing heavily down and saying 'knickers'. Again, the same channel of communication is being used for an infinite number of different effects, including, sadly, so undeniable abuses.

But because no-one ever confuses the telephone system with the telephone conversations we have, so far at least, been spared the suggestion that radical reforms and controls are required in order to

prevent one man in a raincoat saying 'knickers', however understandably distressed the receiver of that message might be.

The distinction between advertising and advertisements is clear, and it's been made many times before by many people. Yet somehow it always seems to get forgotten in the heat of the commercial, social and political thundering.

This handbook seeks, among other things, to spell out in some detail the diversity of the industry so often though as one homogenous whole, as witnessed by the phrases of the 'advertising is . . .' sort. It seeks to show the great diversity of the media and the great diversity of types of advertiser. It attempts to spell out the role of the advertising agency in producing effective advertising. It touches on the role of advertising and the economy, on some sensitive issues in advertising, on advertising controls, and on public attitudes to advertising.

As co-editor, my one great hope for this book is that having looked at even part of it, the reader again will never again feel inclined to say 'advertising is . . .'.