

Advertising and persuasion

The insidious power of subliminal advertising is more and more evident. This kind of advertising is based on two basic techniques: allowing words to flash, during commercials, which are not consciously seen but still have strong impact on our mind; and using the “testimonial”, celebrities who guarantee the brand thanks to their fame. The result is: if Mister or Miss so-and-so uses this product it means that it’s a good product, so you are tempted to buy it! It seems to me that advertising is really dangerous and we should not to underestimate it.

Firstly, advertisers study the target so as to create advertisements and commercials which are as near as possible to people’s likings and needs. This is because a lots of studies about how our mind reacts to persuasion, have shown that we are persuaded only to do things that we have already heard about; this means that our memory filters out what is believed to be unnecessary or “immoral” for us. With regard to this, the writer D. Kitsons¹ recognised the stages of the mind of the buyer as ”attention, interest, desire, confidence, decision, action and satisfaction”; therefore the “victim” is, first of all, interested to the product (first filter), then he/she will desire the product (second filter) and finally he/she will buy it.

When advertisers have found out what our drives and ambitions are and what our fears are, they use these elements and play with them so as to propose them to us in a smart and moral way.

Moreover, the images in advertising play an important role in the act of persuasion. In fact, when the buyer choses to buy a particular kind of jeans or perfume, it is not just because he really wants that product, but because he wants to express something that is connected to the message of the advertisement of that brand as well.

Incidentally, Wilson Bryan Key, expert in psychology and communication theory, has studied the countless cases of subliminal advertisements, and he has recognized, for example, a

¹ http://targetmarket.org/terge_11.htm
<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Sections/advert01.html>.

battered skull in a Bacardi drink or images of death and sex in ice cubes in drinks' advertisements. He reckons that ads are particularly dangerous because they are done to be perceived in less than one second. Advertisers calculate that our primary sensory input is visual perception because we have over 130 million receptors in less than one square inch of optic nerves in our retina. So images, words, colours are structured in order to be captured by our unconscious mind by the time we have turned the page of the magazine. And, even though a period of time may have passed since you have seen a particular advertisement, you still have its message hidden in your head. This means that we have two kind of memory: the conscious memory, that is what we remember, and the subconscious memory, that is what we have recorded in our mind but we are not aware of. The latter works only if stimulated by something (a colour, a sound, a smell) which recalls something else. Hence advertisers use subliminal messages to stimulate subconscious memory and perception. Subliminal means "below threshold", something which stays under and beyond the line of consciousness. Therefore, subliminal perception is when someone sees or ears something even if he does not realize it. A part of his brain knows something, in general connected with sex and violence taboos, that the conscious mind does not know, or better, does not "want" to know.

In any event, there are different types of subliminal strategies depending on the medium through which the advertisements' messages are passed. For example, in printed advertisements techniques like "embedding" or "double entendre" are used. With the first one, images or words (in general the idea of "SEX" is the most popular) are hidden in the form of another, i.e. the female torso that you can see in the diet Coke can. Instead, the second one is a technique which plays with the possible meanings of the words and of the images, which usually tend to have sexual connotations.

Needless to say, despite the fact that the majority part of people thinks that this kind of hidden persuasion is not so dangerous, I strongly believe that there are many ways to control and manipulate our life, and that our lifestyle is influenced by standards imposed by advertisements,

whether we like or not. Accordingly, this kind of advertising is an unethical and a harmful technique.