

# MEDIA LITERACY

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT  
ADVERTISING

Peyton Paxson



SAMPLE PAGE

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

ISBN 978-0-8251-6512-2

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J. Weston Walch, Publisher

40 Walch Drive • Portland, ME 04103

[www.walch.com](http://www.walch.com)

Printed in the United States of America

**WALCH**  **EDUCATION**<sup>®</sup>

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## To the Teacher

THE MAGAZINE PUBLISHERS OF AMERICA tell us:

Today's teenagers reflect a diverse and complicated cross-section of attitudes, ethnicities, and perspectives. They are being bombarded by more information from more media sources than any group of teens in history. Because they've been exposed to constant advertising their entire lives, today's teens readily form brand opinions that will continue to influence their purchase decisions into their adult years.

Besides representing a new baby boom, today's teenagers have an income that enables discretionary spending. But that's not all. According to *Teen People*, teenagers' influence on purchases made by other people—such as parents and grandparents—represents an even larger amount of spending than their own.

Teenagers—the so-called Millennial Generation or Generation Y—use more media than previous generations, and they also use different media. Many advertisers have shifted their focus away from print media and television as they strive to reach teenagers. Today, advertisers seek out teenaged customers through social networking Web sites, within video games, via text messaging, and through blogs. The interactivity of new media allows advertisers to gather personal information about the teenagers who use those media and direct increasingly customized messages to them.

This revised book, part of a series on media literacy, focuses on advertising. Young people usually acknowledge the pervasiveness of advertising, but tend to deny that advertising affects them. Teenagers are especially attractive to advertisers because teenagers spend most of their income on heavily advertised consumer products and services; because they strongly influence purchasing decisions by older adults; and because teenagers are beginning to develop lifetime habits and brand loyalties. Thus, teenagers are carefully studied by the advertising industry; teenagers must respond in kind.

The guiding principle of this book is that the study of advertising can be used to teach critical-thinking skills. The units in this book provide students with information about advertising as a marketing medium, as a source of information, and as a source of social and cultural exchange.

The activities require students to describe this new information and apply it in varied exercises. Students will analyze and evaluate advertising techniques and the effect advertising has on how we identify ourselves. Ultimately, this book strives to make students more informed and more discerning consumers of advertising.

## To the Student

**ADVERTISERS WANT YOUR ATTENTION!**  
The reason is simple—advertisers want your money. The Newspaper Association of America estimates that Americans between the ages of 12 and 17 spent nearly \$179 billion in 2006. Overall, teenagers in the United States spend an average of about \$107 each week.

You are also seen by advertisers as being strongly brand-loyal. This means that you are willing to pay more for certain brands that are popular with you and your friends. Advertising research also indicates that teenagers develop purchasing habits that may continue for many years, perhaps for the rest of your life. You might feel that you personally are immune to the power of

advertising, and that you are wise to what advertisers are up to. If so, look around your home, and count how many heavily advertised products you find.

The purpose of each activity is to:

- present you with methods for evaluating the quality of the information that advertising provides
- encourage you to investigate the effect advertising has on consumers
- help you become more knowledgeable about how advertisers get your attention, what messages they want you to receive, and sometimes, what advertisers don't want you to know about advertising

The objectives of this unit are to help students:

- understand the relationship between mass production, mass marketing, and mass media
- recognize that advertising evolves as society changes
- assess the economic consequences of advertising
- understand the basic structure of the advertising industry today

#### In This Unit

**The Evolution of Advertising** asks students to discuss changes in advertising with older adults.

**The Best Class Activity in the Entire World!** helps students recognize empty promises and specious comparisons.

**The U.S Government and Advertising** has students assess the use of advertising by the federal government.

**Reach and Frequency** requires students to distinguish between different types of consumer products and the different methods of advertising used to sell them.

**Brand Loyalty and Consumer Involvement** helps students understand the role that advertising plays in creating consumer perceptions about goods in the marketplace.

#### Prescription Drugs and Advertising

allows students to evaluate the consequences that the heavy advertising of products has on consumer prices.

**Commercial Speech** introduces students to the tension between a business's freedom of speech and social concerns about advertising.

**Advertising and Pseudo-Events** introduces students to one form of stealth marketing frequently used by advertisers.

**OCCASIONALLY, WE SEE** advertisements that promote a category of product rather than a specific brand. For example, the “Got Milk?” advertisements are paid for by many milk companies and do not advertise a particular brand of milk. These types of advertisements are rare, however. Most advertisements are for particular brands of products. Branding, as identified by a name (such as Pepsi) or a **logo** (a symbol, such as the Nike swoosh), has been around for many years. However, branding did not become common until the late 1800s. Before that time, products were often sold generically, which means without a brand. A shopper in the mid-1800s would go to the store and simply ask for sugar, instead of asking for a particular brand of sugar.

The industrial revolution of the 1800s brought mass manufacturing of both products and packaging. New machines allowed companies to make hundreds of items in the same time it took to make a single item only a few years before. Since manufacturers could now mass-produce products, there was a need to mass-market those products.

The marketing business has four primary concerns, usually called the Four *P*'s: product, price, place, and promotion.

*Product* is the item sold, whether a tangible good (for example, a candy bar) or an intangible service (having your clothes cleaned by a dry cleaner). Today most goods are sold in packages. The package is practical (it holds the product), and it also identifies the brand of that product. Just as mass manufacturing allows for the faster and cheaper manufacturing of products, it also allows for the faster and cheaper manufacturing of boxes, bags, cans, and bottles to contain those products.

*Price* means the cost of the product—if the maker of a product charges too little, it will lose money on each product sold. Too low a price also might scare away some consumers, who believe the product must be of very poor quality if sold at too low a price. If the maker of a product charges too much, it will drive away people who might otherwise buy the product. In the late 1800s, as new machines made it easier to make products, the products became cheaper to make as the speed of machines made the manufacturing process more efficient. The products could be sold at lower prices. As a result, many manufacturers were able to sell products as different as sewing machines and shoes to people who either had not been able to afford them before, or who had not bought them as frequently as they now could.

*Place* includes distributing the product—getting the product from the manufacturer to the consumer. Distribution improved greatly in the late 1800s, as American railroads rapidly expanded. This allowed a manufacturer of a product on the West Coast of the United States to sell its products on the East Coast, and vice versa. For the first time, a manufacturer could have a truly national market for its products. (Some food products, such as iceberg lettuce, were specifically developed so that they could be transported by rail across the country without spoiling.) Today, place includes such issues as making certain that a consumer can obtain a product quickly and conveniently. The Internet has greatly expanded advertisers' sense of place, as one can shop online with sellers all over the world.

*Promotion* focuses on advertising, the subject of this book. In order to create

## Unit 1: The History of Advertising

### Ad Buzz (continued)

a mass market for their mass-produced products, manufacturers began to advertise in magazines and newspapers, creating the first mass media. Mass media (*media* is the plural of *medium*) are designed to get a lot of information transmitted to a lot of people, usually as quickly as possible. Just as mechanization had made it easier and cheaper to make products and their packaging, improvements in printing technology made it easier to print relatively inexpensive newspapers and magazines, which rely on advertisements to make a profit.

Early advertisements were relatively simple and did little “selling.” Many of these advertisements were called tombstones, because they were nothing more than a few words on a rectangle or a square, just like a grave marker in a cemetery. They often just told consumers that a product existed and asked consumers to buy it. For example, a newspaper advertisement from the 1890s might simply say, “Please try Jones’s Biscuits.” In the early 1900s, advertisers realized that they had to compete more aggressively against each other, and instead of creating their own advertising, many advertisers began to seek help of advertising agencies.

Today, most of the advertisements you see are created by advertising agencies. These firms are composed of specialized professionals; some agencies have hundreds of employees. Advertising agency personnel include copywriters, who write the words that are read in a print advertisement or spoken in a radio or television advertisement. Commercial artists design the “look” of advertisements, choose the type of lettering that is used, the colors used, and so forth.

Advertising researchers try to determine what types of messages and images are most effective in selling the different types of products advertised. Advertising buyers decide which publications and broadcast media to advertise in, and negotiate prices for that advertising.

Professional advertising agencies do not merely announce that a product is for sale; they try to give us a “reason why” we should buy the advertised product. Some of these reasons why seem obvious, such as when a laundry detergent is advertised as getting your clothes clean. Some of these reasons why seem more subtle. For example, look at an advertisement for a soft drink like Pepsi or Sprite, and try to determine what reason the advertisement gives you for buying the product.

Through the early part of the last century, advertising usually took the form of words on paper, whether in a magazine, a newspaper, a mailing, or a point-of-purchase display. In the 1920s, commercial radio became available as a new advertising medium, and television followed 20 years later. It was not until the 1990s that the next important advertising medium arose—the Internet. These different types of media are discussed in different sections of this book.

It is important to note that each of these media—magazines, newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet—rely heavily on advertisers to make money. The consumer only partially pays for the cost of providing these media.

The media charge advertisers for advertising based on space or time. This means that print and Internet advertising

## Unit 1: The History of Advertising

### Ad Buzz (continued)

prices are based on how large the advertisement is; television and radio advertising prices are based on how long the advertisement is. The price of advertising is also based on how many people will see the advertisement. For example, a one-page advertisement in a newspaper that 1,000 people read will usually be much less expensive than the same-sized advertisement in a newspaper read by millions of people. A 30-second advertisement that plays on a television channel at 3 A.M. (when most of us are sleeping) will be much less expensive than a 30-second advertisement shown during a popular program at 8 P.M. Independent organizations measure the number of readers of print media (called readership), the number of listeners of radio (listenership), or number of viewers of television (viewership) in order to provide reliable information to advertisers. This way, advertisers know how many people they're paying to reach.

Advertising changes as the media change. Teenagers watch less television than most other age groups do. Advertisers know this, and today they pursue the teen market through advertisements that appear on online social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook, in video games, and in text messaging.

With the increase in the number of advertisers and advertising media over time, it has become harder and harder for individual advertisers to break through the clutter and get (and keep) our attention. As a result, advertisers are constantly looking

for and experimenting with new ways to get us to buy their products. One thing has not changed—advertisers still try to make us think we need or want whatever it is they are trying to sell.



**Somewhere West of Laramie**

**S**OMEWHERE west of Laramie there's a broncho-busting, steer-roping girl who knows what I'm talking about.

She can tell what a sassy pony, that's a cross between greased lightning and the place where it hits, can do with eleven hundred pounds of steel and action when he's going high, wide and handsome.

The truth is—the Playboy was built for her.

Built for the lass whose face is brown with the sun when the day is done of revel and romp and race.

She loves the cross of the wild and the tame.

There's a savor of links about that car—of laughter and lilt and light—a hint of old loves—and saddle and quirt. It's a brawny thing—yet a graceful thing for the sweep o' the Avenue.

Step into the Playboy when the hour grows dull with things gone dead and stale.

Then start for the land of real living with the spirit of the lass who rides, lean and rangy, into the red horizon of a Wyoming twilight.

**JORDAN**  
JORDAN MOTOR CAR COMPANY, Flint, Michigan, U.S.A.

This 1923 advertisement for the Jordan Playboy automobile appealed to a desire among some car buyers for adventure rather than mere transportation. Although this advertisement was ahead of its time, its approach is common in automobile advertising today.



## Unit 1: The History of Advertising

### Activity 2: The Best Class Activity in the Entire World! *(continued)*

Product	Example of puffery	Why is this puffery?
Snapple	"Made from the Best Stuff on Earth"	The word <i>best</i> is a matter of personal opinion that cannot be measured. The word <i>stuff</i> is vague.

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