

## TAKING AD(VANTAGE) OF WORDS

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***Abstract:** The paper looks at how advertising, which occupies a controversial place between art and business, makes use of words to achieve its goals. It briefly discusses some of the roles of advertising and some of the meanings of words. Weasel words, buzz words and euphemisms are defined in view of their function in advertisements.*

***Key words:** advertising, weasel words, buzz words, euphemisms*

### **The many roles of advertising**

Advertising is a huge business. It is often claimed that billions of dollars are spent each year on advertising around the world. We will have to take this claim at its face value since it is hard to make a more precise estimate. The exact figures are not that important when the word goes about the power of advertising and the influence it has on us, consumers. Many industries exist exclusively thanks to the influx of money coming from advertising. TV channels, newspapers and magazines, and other media industries would differ dramatically from what they are today if they did not sell advertising space.

Advertising is a way of telling us what is available on the market. Thus we know what to buy. Plus it allows competing companies to get abreast of each other in the ruthless competition for the minds, hearts and wallets of the public. Because of these facts, companies are becoming more and more ingenious and are employing various tactics to attract our attention, make us buy, and ultimately, make more money. Sometimes these attempts involve unlawful, devious or dirty tricks.

Advertising is both a reflection of our culture and lifestyles and a major factor in changing them. New trends in fashion and technology, relationships among people and attitudes to various issues are first conveyed through advertising. We are daily being exposed to different types of advertisements and no matter if we like it or not we consciously and subconsciously absorb them. Our behavior, purchasing and political choices, social beliefs and attitudes, and even our values and emotions are influenced by advertising.

While the idea of advertising can be traced back to 3000 B.C. when Babylonian merchants advertised their goods to prospective customers by hiring people to call out the names of merchandise or place signs on front doors, contemporary advertising started in the press. Since then advertising has spread to all the existing mass media which not only have become its major tools of reaching the target audiences but have also been influenced by it. Advertisers pay the media a lot of money to have their messages published. On the one hand, this helps enhance the diversity, scope, and capacity of mass media, and gives customers a variety of low cost choices. On the other hand, this reduces the independence of mass media which become more tied down to their advertising clients.

### **The role of words in advertising**

Language is a means of communication. But it can also be a means of miscommunication. Language can deliver or imply messages, change attitudes, instill values, create emotions. Words can have an incredible and often unpredictable effect on us. They can

tell, convince, dissuade, offend, create or resolve a problem, make people love or hate.

Words are not restricted to one single meaning. Most words have several meanings, which are classified as either **denotative** or **connotative**. **Denotative** is the literal meaning of a word, the one contained in its dictionary definition. The word “home”, for example, literally means a place of residence, “a place in which an individual or a family can rest and be able to store personal property” (Wikipedia). Most words in a language have a **connotative** meaning too. It is comprised of the emotions and feelings that a word generates.

The expressiveness of language comes from the connotations of words, i.e. from the association that we make when we hear or read a word. The same words may create different feelings in different people depending on their emotional state, cultural and educational experiences, ethnicity, gender, social roles, etc. Connotations are subjective cultural and emotional correlations in addition to the denotative meaning of words and phrases. However, there is a certain similarity or overlap of the associative thinking of most people in a given culture, community, social group or age group and advertisers take advantage of this when they want to influence audiences. Advertising makes an extensive use of the connotative meanings of words in order to achieve its main goal – make people purchase particular goods mostly by manipulating their emotions.

### **Taking Advantage of Words**

Advertising is a form of art. Like painting, which utilizes colors in whatever ways the painter deems it appropriate, advertising utilizes words taking advantage of the fact that language is a means of revealing, as well as of hiding the truth. Advertising does not actually sell goods but rather dreams, images, lifestyles, and illusions. As Theodore Parker puts it, “Kodak sells film, but they don't advertise film. They advertise memories.” The ultimate aim of advertising is to sell and make a profit. When we buy a product we do not experience the same pleasure suggested in its advertisement endorsed by celebrities. In fact, when purchasing goods and services, we are not buying goods and services but advertising. One very simple reason is because advertisements exaggerate the advantages and conceal the disadvantages of the object of advertising.

Limited by the high cost of TV broadcasting time or space in printed media, advertising tries to make its messages as intense and effective as possible. For the most part it no longer forces on us information about or rational reasons for purchasing a product. In the information society almost all prospective buyers are already well informed about what to expect from merchandise. Hence, advertisers try to squeeze as many powerful appeals in an ad as possible to grab the hearts of people, hold their attention for as long as possible, and make them buy regularly. The war is waged for the hearts of the consumers.

There are numerous advertising techniques and tricks that work well in the hands of creative professionals. Among them are some specific words or the specific use of these words. Some of the types of words used in advertising that produce an effect on the audiences are weasel words, buzz words, and euphemisms. Their presence in advertisements helps create misleading or even deceitful language.

### **Weasel words**

Weasel words are particularly preferred by advertisers. According to Wikipedia, these are “words and phrases that, while communicating a vague or ambiguous claim, create an impression that something specific and meaningful has been said.” Advertising a sale as giving you “up to 50%, 75% or 80%” reduction is a making use of a weasel phrase because the recipient is misled to believe that many items will be reduced by the stated percentages. In fact, it often turns out that the discount the customer gets is a much smaller percentage on a limited number of products.

The origin of weasel words derives from the egg-eating animals weasels. They suck the inside of the egg leaving only the shell which looks perfectly all right to the observer while it is actually empty. Weasel words and phrases are, in this sense, emptied of meaning. They are widespread in advertising and marketing, whose goal is to impress and attract people rather than invite them to think carefully and rationally about something. Some of the most commonly used weasel words are *helps, supports, fights, acts, seems, looks like, is like, better, up to, at least, more than, virtually, nine out of ten*, etc. Advertisers find them convenient and useful in two ways – by making claims that appear to be true and by protecting them from criticism or legal redress. They change the meaning of a sentence without actually committing the communicator on the implied statement.

Weasel words can be any part of speech or any expression. Weasel words do not exist as a separate lexical, semantic or grammatical group. Words become weasel words by virtue of the way they are used. The shortest and perhaps the most favorite with advertisers weasel word is *if* (See Taflinger). We do not even notice that it empties the statement of its content. A lot of advertisements contain sentences such as: *If all women say it's good, then you'll like it too. Or If everybody uses (buys) it, then so should you.* They say nothing about the qualities or real advantages of the product or service.

An expression that turns out to be a weasel one when used by advertisers and not by statisticians is: *Nine out of ten housewives use this detergent/buy the new spot remover/etc. Two out of three dentists recommend this toothpaste/dental floss, etc.* The claim that others (be they specialists, experts, or people like us) like, buy or prefer a product cannot be verified and is used to attribute to the advertised object the quality of being exceptional or best in its category.

### **Buzz words**

According to Wikipedia, “a **buzzword** (also **fashion word** and **vogue word**) is a term of art or technical jargon that has begun to see use in the wider society outside of its originally narrow technical context by nonspecialists who use the term vaguely or imprecisely”. Such words are often used incorrectly and/or ostentatiously, to impact the audience in an obscure or premeditated way, to impress, beguile, and manipulate it .

Advertising is determined, among other factors, by social circumstances. Whatever happens in society inevitably finds its way into advertising which leads the way in disseminating trends, vogues, global changes or concerns. There are words which become emblematic of the latest developments in society. Some such words are *organic, natural, green, techno, ecological*, etc. In recent years these words have been excessively used and misused by advertisers to create the often misleading impression that the promoted commodities are healthy, natural and good for the customer as well as for the environment. More often than not most goods are a far cry from the *healthy, natural* or *organic* but are made to seem so thanks to the use of these buzz words. There is little *natural* in potato chips, artificially flavored yoghurt, most cosmetics, or the vitamins we buy from pharmacies.

### **Euphemisms**

According to the *American Heritage Dictionary* euphemism is "the act or an example of substituting a mild, indirect, or vague term for one considered harsh, blunt, or offensive". Euphemisms exist in any language and their usage is determined by various factors – culture, religion, politics, gender, age, ethnicity, etc. Generally speaking euphemisms are mostly used when there is a need to discuss or refer to something that is a taboo, in bad taste, or insulting to the audience. By and large, the topics that fall into these categories are sex, human anatomy, bodily functions, death, money, etc. From the everyday uses that euphemisms have had for a long time since pagan times (when they were used in order not to anger the gods), they have

nowadays spread widely in political jargon, journalism, and advertising to become the language of political correctness. Consequently, fewer people are aware that, outside polite talk, euphemisms are what they are – the language of pretense, avoidance, disguise, and deception.

Taflinger (1996) finds the etymology of the word euphemism “an interesting case in point” because its translation from Greek means "to lie". He says that “we can see that euphemism is a euphemism for euphemism (you tell a lie to cover up the fact that telling a lie is lying).”

Crisp (1984) rightly observes: "**Euphemisms** are not, as many young people think, useless verbiage for that which can and should be said bluntly; they are like secret agents on a delicate mission, they must airily pass by a stinking mess with barely so much as a nod of the head. Euphemisms are unpleasant truths wearing diplomatic cologne."

Euphemisms abound in advertisements featuring sanitary towels, tampons, medication for indigestion, products removing bad breath, items we use in the toilet, etc.

### Conclusion

On the one hand, there are those who believe that advertising is a form of art. Like poetry and painting, its purpose is to influence the audience by sharpening its perceptions and inducing emotional responses through involving the senses that are at its disposal. Advertising intends to seduce, persuade, and change minds and images. It uses language to create illusions and make people daydream because such is the purpose of art. On the other hand, there are those who say that advertising is a business. Like any other business its primary objective is to make profit, in this case, by helping other businesses make profit.

Given its complex syncretic nature advertising will continue to be the butt of criticism coming from opponents and the object of praise coming from supporters. What can reconcile to some extent the disparate views of its advantages and disadvantages is an ethical approach on the part of all involved in ordering, making, and disseminating advertisements. The informed consumer choices of the advertisements that get through people's rational, emotional, educational and other 'filters' will reduce the negative effects of the too aggressive, manipulative, or offensive advertising.

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