

Ads We Love & Hate (and love to hate)

We either love them or hate them. And often we don't even understand them. Advertising messages have worked their way into the American culture – influencing and shaping our tastes in ways that few stop to realize.

Recently we note the occurrence of quirky, esoteric advertising messages that don't seem to make sense. These include the offbeat “Uncomfortable With Fish?” TV ads for Mrs. Paul frozen fish products. The spots show an ugly fish (not a cute, cartoon version) in everyday settings -- on a swing set, on a racketball court, and so forth. The voice-over poses the thought-provoking question: “Uncomfortable with fish?” Now, make the leap here: we acknowledge that you're probably fishphobic, but get over it because Mrs. Paul's fish is already breaded, easy to prepare, and oh-so-tasty.

For those of us with more refined, sophisticated tastes in commercial messages, consider the Dove soap pH comparison commercial that uses metallic music and very little voiceover. My friend, a graphic artist, describes it as “David Lynch-like” commercial fare. Memorable and awe-inspiring.

A NASCAR fan I know says she likes the new stuff pushing NAPA Auto Parts. NASCAR stars Michael Waltrip and Dale Earnhardt, Jr. are seated in the back of a non-descript car, playing with all the switches & controls. In one spot, the two -- seen in close-up inside the car -- are visibly freezing. We realize in the next long shot that there's no reason for them to be cold – they're parked on a tropical beach, but the superior (over-the-top!) NAPA air conditioning system has simulated an icy winter storm inside the car.

Then there's the new “two-guys-sitting-at-the-drive-thru at Sonic” spots. Two young men have what can only be described as a mundane conversation about what they're planning to order and other things. It's all very low-key and slightly voyeuristic in that the audience is privy to their private, meaningless, run-on conversation that just quietly dies off.

Sometimes, advertising that doesn't hit you over the head with an overt message just doesn't make sense to us. The spots are so quirky and offbeat, they serve as attention-grabbers. Author James Twitchell, a college professor who has made the study of advertising's impact on our modern culture his life's work, calls it “dog whistle” advertising. It's “dog whistle” because, like a real dog whistle whose high-pitched frequency can only be heard by canines, only a few appreciate it or “get” it. The rest of us are fascinated, but not unlike *The Emperor's New Clothes* we pretend to understand (not wanting to appear unhip), when we actually don't.

Then there are the beloved, sleep-inducing animal advertising icons that have been infused into our American culture. These include the herd of forlorn sheep, put out of the counting business by comfy Serta mattresses; the super-competent, but lovable, Geico gecko whose work ethic and overall zest for life provides a model for us all. Perhaps the best-known and most successful character of all is the inimitable AFLAC Duck, now

available for purchase in a plush duck version. Less popular today, but still hanging in there is the tireless, drum-beating, Energizer Bunny. Note that despite the enormous popularity of this little pink mammal, a survey conducted several years back showed that few were exactly sure which brand of batteries he represents. (This led to the wise decision to add the bunny's picture to all in-store Energizer Battery displays and packages.)

I personally love the inspired, fairytale quality of the Walgreen's campaign, "A Place Called Perfect." Here is an idealized, dreamlike spot, not on any map, where nothing ever goes wrong and no material lack exists. Following this idea, Walgreen's tells us in its ads that although we may all *wish* to inhabit "A Place Called Perfect," the real world has lots of needs and wishes that Walgreen's can easily fulfill because of its massive inventory and seeming opening hours of operation.

Some other interesting, and therefore effective, advertising campaigns of late include:

- The peculiar, bald-headed geezer promoting Six Flags
- The hard-boiled detective, film noir pieces that promote Flonase, a popular nasal spray
- The anti-AOL Net Zero campaign where thousands of AOL users publicly defect
- The MasterCard "priceless" campaign that just keeps getting better
- The Spy vs, Spy Mountain Dew campaign featuring that stealthy pair from MAD Magazine

What are some of your favorite or most annoying ad campaigns, both print and broadcast? Let me hear from you and we'll report on the results in a future "Marketing Matters." Keep in mind that national broadcast campaigns, which are produced in film form (not video), cost from \$50K up to half a million dollars to produce with hundreds of thousands more committed to media placement. Locally-produced spots are in a different category altogether.