

44. PSYCHOLOGY OF ADVERTISING

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Psychology in advertising has long been used as an effective means to sell a product or service. Understanding the underlying concepts that affect human psychology can help a company better sell their product or alternatively can help a consumer understand marketing strategies that get them to buy products.

We live in a world of advertising. It is a world of our making, of course. We don't like to pay the full price of things, so we allow other people to pay part of that price in exchange for letting them pass a message to us. So, we open up the pages of our favorite magazine, and there are glossy ads for clothes, shoes, cars, or beer. We turn on the television, and smiling faces on television try to sell us soup, toothpaste, candy, and politicians.

The reason that we accept all this advertising is that we assume that we can tune most of it out. If we don't pay attention to the ads, then they won't have that much of an affect on our behavior. Sure, the makers of commercials can try to jack up the volume, but at least we have the right to look away.

We usually assume that advertising functions mostly to tell us about the properties of a product. A particular detergent might advertise that it gets stains out better than competitors, that it smells good, and that it leaves clothes feeling fresh. We believe that these properties are ones that will help us to choose the detergent we want to buy.

However, ads also do other things. One thing they do is to take a product and to put it next to lots of other things that we already feel positively about. For example, an ad for detergent may have fresh flowers, cute babies, and sunshine in it. All of these things are ones that we probably feel pretty good about already. And repeatedly showing the detergent along with other things that we feel good about can make us feel good about the detergent, too. This transfer of our feelings from one set of items to another is called affective conditioning (the word affect means feelings).

The most powerful effect of advertising is just to create a good feeling about a product by surrounding it with other things that you like. It is also important to point out that affective conditioning is most effective when you don't realize that it is happening. That is, trying to pay less attention to the ads you see on TV and in magazines may actually make this type of advertising more effective.

So, why do we choose things just because we feel good about them? The world is a busy place. It is hard for us to feel confident that we have all of the objective facts about anything, whether it is products, people, or choices of things to do. The feelings we have are often a good marker of what is safe to do and what is likely to turn out well. If we have to make a choice, and one of the options just feels good to us, then we are likely to go with the one that feels good.

Most of the time, of course, that is a good idea. Often, we feel good about something because we have had positive experiences with it in the past. The problem is that we allow advertisers to have access to our mental world. They have paid for the opportunity to slip information to us about what feels good. That information ultimately affects the way we make choices, whether we know it or not.

What must be borne in mind is that advertising cannot force anyone to do anything. The most it can do is make a product attractive. The decision to buy or not to buy is up to the consumer. But the more attractive the product seems, the better the chance the consumer may buy. Nonetheless, our intelligence can counter the subconscious blandishments of advertising, if we are aware of those blandishments, where they came from, and how they work.

Still, the use of psychological appeals takes advantage of the millions of years of evolution and the effects of those millions of years on our minds and our behavior. And that behavior is to buy.

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