

Advertising: what is it?

Most discussion about advertising's social and economic effect is conducted as though all advertising is designed, almost conspiratorially, to have a uni-directional influence. I first tried to point out the distinction between *advertising* and *advertisements* in a J. Walter Thompson London publication in 1975. I tried again when asked to write this introduction to the *Advertising Association Handbook* in 1983. (I am credited with having helped edit it; in fact, Mike Waterson did it all.) Whenever an occasion arose – and often when it didn't – I went on trying to make the distinction but have yet, to my knowledge, to convince anyone of its validity. Either I'm wrong or the continued confusion suits lazy-minded pundits. The piece contains a definition of advertising which has found its way, not always without challenge, into several standard advertising books. Winston Fletcher, probably rightly, thinks he's got a better one.

Almost as many claims have been made about advertising as advertising makes about products. A small selection might include:

- Advertising is evil
- Advertising exploits human inadequacy
- Advertising is wasteful
- Advertising is the mainspring of the economy
- Advertising prevents small, enterprising companies from breaking into established markets
- Advertising is a force for change.

A moment's reflection is enough to make one realise that each of these statements, favourable and unfavourable alike, is a generalisation directly equivalent to a statement such as 'Television makes children violent.' Some television *programmes* may make children violent; some may help them learn to read. Some *advertisements* may be wasteful; some may act

as a force for change, but as I hope to show, not all advertisements can possibly have identical effects.

Advertising is simply one of many available channels of communication. It is available, at a price, to everyone – and allows people to make contact with one or more other people for an almost infinite number of different ends. *Advertisements* are the messages that advertising carries, in an attempt to achieve those ends.

The almost infinite number of different users, uses, aims, purposes, motives, audiences, media and methods makes the question ‘What is advertising?’ peculiarly difficult to answer. The sign outside a church naming next Sunday’s preacher is an advertisement. So are these:

- Locally Grown Strawberries
- We Need 175 Mountain Commandos
- Rights Issue
- Chairman’s Statement
- Lost Budgerigar
- Labour Isn’t Working
- Confessions Of A Pop Performer (X)
- Britain Will Win With Labour
- Broad-minded Midlands-based Male Seeks Mature Relationship
- Could You Manage An Off-Licence?
- Save It!
- Cats Will Die Unless We Continue To Help Them.

These are all advertisements and they are all part of advertising.

The nearest I can get to a definition that encompasses all these possible differences is: ‘Any paid-for communication intended to inform and/or influence one or more people.’

First: ‘paid-for’. An advertisement that is not paid for is not an advertisement, though its cost may be minimal and the payment may not be to a media owner.

Second: ‘communication’. Every advertisement is attempting to bridge a gap between a sender and one or more potential receivers. That bridge is a form of communication. To buy a 16-sheet poster site and leave it absolutely blank is not to advertise. There must, in other words, be content as well as medium.

Third: ‘intended’. Not all advertisements ‘work’, in the sense of achieving their desired objectives, but they are nonetheless part of advertising.

Fourth: ‘inform and/or influence’. The purely informative advertisement may be rare, and the distinction between information and persuasion may be difficult to draw (what about ‘Gratuities Not Included’ on a British Rail breakfast bill, for example?), but an advertisement does not have to set out to influence either attitude or behaviour in order to qualify.

And finally: ‘one or more people’. All advertisements are addressed to people: sometimes one (‘Gypsy. Am back. Call soon. Lollipop’) and sometimes millions (‘Don’t Waste Water’).

Some years ago, a lady in Dulwich decided that she no longer needed her second-hand electric riding camel so she bought a space in *The Times*. This space was filled with an advertisement which was in turn read by one or more other people, previously unknown to the lady from Dulwich, who happened to want a second-hand electric riding camel and were well prepared to pay £400 o.n.o. to get one. The lucky applicant was happy; the lady from Dulwich was happy; *The Times* was happy; *The Times*’ readers were happy (since the insertion cost helped to pay for their newspaper); and the second-hand electric riding camel found itself once more both wanted and useful.

Exactly the same simple principle applies to the Department of Energy, when it wants us to conserve energy; to the Prudential, when it wants to recruit personnel for its pensions and administration departments; to the Home Office, when it wants us to keep matches away from children; to a foreign government that feels itself to be misunderstood and wants to put its case; and to Heinz, when it wants to make clear the virtues of its baby foods to millions of parents it’s never met.

All these advertisers have just this in common: they wanted to achieve something and chose advertising as one means of achieving it. How they used that advertising, the advertisements themselves, varied enormously in style, intent, format, price, size and medium. Whether or not they were as satisfied with the results of their expenditure as the lady from Dulwich, only they will know. So to attempt to identify some shared and general purpose or effect in all those advertisements is manifestly absurd.

‘Is advertising wasteful?’ is a non-question since ‘are advertisements wasteful?’ can be answered only by the person who paid for each one and sometimes not even then. Was the Dulwich lady’s advertisement wasteful? Demonstrably not. (Alas, the cost-effectiveness of other advertisements is much less easy to demonstrate.) But it would have been wasteful had her electric riding camel rotted away in its Dulwich attic, unknown

to all those who were longing to acquire it. In other words, it would have been wasteful *not* to advertise.

By substituting 'advertisements' for 'advertising', equivalent points can be made about all the statements at the beginning of this chapter, and many more besides.

Do advertisements prevent small, enterprising companies from breaking into established markets? Ask Polaroid or Bernard Matthews.

Are advertisements a force for change? Ask the manufacturers of those brand leaders that have continued to lead their markets for 30, 40 years or more.

Advertising, as such, can do absolutely nothing. It is simply there, waiting to be used. Advertisements, in theory, can do practically everything: introduce the new, confirm the old, congratulate existing buyers/users/consumers/employees, or attempt to convert them. Advertisements can, and do, encourage consumption and encourage thrift, and advocate a vote for any number of competing brands, companies or political parties.

Television, as we have seen, suffers from the same semantic confusion. Like advertising, it is simply an available channel of communication: there are cameras, transmitters and receivers. How can these inoffensive and inanimate pieces of hardware, of themselves, encourage violence? (Except, of course, by failing to function.)

It is both legitimate and healthy to question the effect of television programmes, just as it is to question the effect of certain advertisements, but to suggest that advertising does this or television does that is nonsense.

In fact, one of the few commercially available channels of communication not to suffer from this confusion between the container and the thing contained is the telephone system. Some subscribers use the telephone to sell insurance policies; some to call the plumber; some to say 'How are you?'; some to get in touch with the Samaritans; and some, no doubt, to arrange for the collection of a new consignment of hard drugs. Some unhappy subscribers use the telephone for breathing down heavily and saying 'knickers'. Again, the same channel of communication is being used for an infinite number of different purposes, including, sadly, some undeniable abuses.

However, because no one ever confuses the telephone system with telephone conversations, we have, so far at least, been spared the suggestion that radical reforms and controls are required in order to prevent one man in a raincoat from saying 'knickers', however understandably distressed the receiver of that message might be.

The distinction between advertising and advertisements is clear, and it's been made many times before by many people. Yet somehow it always seems to get forgotten in the heat of commercial, social and political thundering.

This handbook seeks, among other things, to spell out in some detail the diversity of the industry so often thought of as one homogeneous whole, as witnessed by phrases of the 'advertising is...' sort. It seeks to show the great diversity of the media and the great diversity of types of advertiser. It attempts to spell out the role of the advertising agency in producing effective advertising. It touches on the role of advertising in the economy, on some sensitive issues in advertising, on advertising controls, and on public attitudes to advertising.

As co-editor, my one great hope for this book is that having looked at even part of it, the reader will never again feel inclined to say 'advertising is...'.