

Competitive persuasion

In the 1950s and 1960s, at least among the chattering classes as they were to become known, both ‘competition’ and ‘persuasion’ were pretty dirty words. Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* was published in 1957; and though most people neglected to read the book, the title alone entitled them to agree with it. I first came across the phrase ‘competitive persuasion’ in a paper written by John Brunner when he was on the *Observer*. It was, I believe, part of that paper’s submission to the Shawcross Commission on the Press, which would date it to 1961. The piece below was first written for *JWT in Britain* in 1978 and was reprinted in *Campaign* later that year.

We come to most of our decisions in this country as a result of what has been called ‘the principle of competitive persuasion’.

As voters, we are offered the choice of more than one candidate, more than one political party. All parties, all candidates, have not only the right but the responsibility to put their cases to us as convincingly, as competitively and as persuasively as they can. We listen, we note, we compare and when it’s time to vote, we make a choice.

The reasons for that choice are almost certain to be complex. Indeed, in the strict sense of the word, they may not be ‘reasons’ at all. Our choice may be influenced by habit, inertia, background, self-interest, political or social principle, misconception, prejudice, distaste for the alternatives – or a marvellously muddled combination of them all. But that’s our privilege. It’s our vote, and we can spend it as we wish.

As readers we are offered the choice of more than one newspaper, each in turn trying to persuade us not only of its own merits but of the merits of different ways of life and alternative governments. And again, we read, absorb, reject, modify – and make up our own minds.

As jurors we are offered the two alternative and often irreconcilable views of prosecution and defence. Again, we listen, discuss – and come to a conclusion.

The priceless value of this principle of competitive persuasion can be fully recognised only when we examine attempts to improve on it. If we try to eliminate ‘wasteful’ competition, or to save people from ‘illogical’ choices, we move rapidly towards authoritarianism and then on to totalitarianism.

Our television companies are required, by Charter and by Acts of Parliament, to observe what is called ‘balance’. Well-intentioned though it undoubtedly was, the impracticality of this requirement becomes daily more apparent. Television programmes, like newspapers, are made by people – which is to say, subjective, passionate, differing, opinionated, fallible individuals. And it is inconceivable that the producers of programmes on property development or social benefits should, as individuals, remain genuinely neutral however hard they might try. Yet that seems to be what is expected of them because they are regarded not as individuals but as representatives of their companies.

Any serious programme, despite earnest and often comically contrived attempts to preserve ‘balance’, is likely to excite cries of outrage from at least one interested party because the reception of any communication is inevitably subjective: so much so that it is quite possible for all political parties, simultaneously, to believe that the BBC is joined in a conspiracy against them.

Not only does ‘balance’ not work, it’s also potentially dangerous. If we are led to believe that because television programmes are balanced they express the truth, our critical faculties will be less alert. We may be tempted to think: ‘It must be true, it was on television.’

It has long been fashionable to mock party political broadcasts – and it’s certainly true that as pieces of communication, as examples of advocacy, they are frequently inept and occasionally, one would suspect, downright counterproductive. But at least, as viewers, we are left in no doubt as to their stance and their purpose. They are clearly labelled, unashamedly biased, with no pretensions to ‘balance’. Balance is achieved not within broadcasts but, by strict allocation of time, between broadcasts. And it is up to each party to use its allocation of time as skilfully and persuasively as possible.

The same is true of conventional, paid-for advertising. Each advertisement is clearly seen to be an advertisement – or should be. This is why advertisements that do their best to look like editorial are quite properly prohibited by the codes of advertising practice. As receivers of advertisements, we know that the advertiser is trying to put his own case as effectively as possible. But almost without exception, every advertiser,

whether he's the manufacturer of branded goods or the Royal Air Force advertising for recruits, is in competition with other advertisers. So we can listen, compare, absorb, modify, reject, accept – and reach our own conclusions. The principle of competitive persuasion is at work again.

There are, however, some people and some bodies who seem to want to introduce into advertising the equivalent of 'balance' in broadcasting. Just as well intentioned, they want to protect us from our own instincts, our own freedom to spend our money as we spend our vote. They want to apply their own standards to everyone; to add more and more controls to what an advertiser says and how he says it; to aim for greater 'truth' in advertising.

This trend, as with attempts at 'balance', is at best foolish, at worst dangerous.

Certainly, no man should be allowed to advertise a non-existent cottage in Cornwall, keep the deposits and disappear – but there's more than enough legislation to cope with him already. Other advertisers, whether rogues teetering on the brink of the law or those who make a mistake, are dealt with through a vigorous system of self-regulation. But some of the more extreme consumerists want to go beyond that. They believe that the principle of competitive persuasion leads to a cynical, sceptical society and that advertising that is more 'truthful' (in their terms) would be in everyone's interest.

I believe the opposite to be the case. I believe that competitive persuasion leads to a discriminating, alert, intelligent society in which each member can arrive at his or her own decisions – whether or not they seem rational, sensible and correct to any self-appointed protector.

Further, I believe that – while we should make every effort to check our facts and ensure that our advertisements are honest – we should be pleased rather than worried that people question the 'truthfulness' of advertising. They are acute enough to recognise that the essence of competitive persuasion lies in promise, hyperbole, emotion and all the other time-honoured techniques of rhetoric. Should the time ever come – which it won't – when everybody believes implicitly in every party political broadcast and every commercial advertisement, I for one would want to leave not only the business but the country.

The truth of the matter is that people enjoy being persuaded, being courted, being wooed, being wanted.

We may, as individuals, find certain advertisements irrelevant, boring, offensive, silly, extravagant and antisocial. Indeed, it's inevitable.

If a large number of people share that view, and they also happen to be the very people to whom the advertisement is addressed, then it's clearly a bad advertisement. But any damage that is done, is done not to the consumer but to the advertiser.

Every client we have is in competition with other advertisers. Every client we have is trying to improve his product or service, to tailor it more accurately to the needs of its ultimate users, and to promote it honestly and persuasively.

Win or lose, competition and competitive persuasion are in the interests of everyone in the country; and it remains a delight to be part of that process.