

# Why soft-sell is hard to sell: it isn't selling

Here's a bit of a puzzle, then. Everybody agrees that hard-sell and soft-sell are pretty meaningless phrases, yet everybody goes on using them.

They seem to be most favoured by those believing that the only true paradigm for advertising is the hi-performance brain-invader, by which something called a consumer proposition is rifled repetitively into consumers' heads until they can play it back flawlessly to day-after recallers. This, approvingly, is called hard-sell. Anything else, disapprovingly, is called soft-sell. (These are the same people who complain that a commercial is insufficiently branded, when what they really mean is that the product name has only featured five times.)

If that was all there was to it – hard, good; soft, bad – the deadly phrases would have expired long ago.

But there's another distinction they're sometimes used to make which is a good deal more useful: and it's mainly to do with different kinds of immediacy. If you want your audience to do something soon – cut a coupon, send a fax, pick up a phone, go to a sale – then you'll probably want to be sharp and urgent. These qualities are not sympathetic. They can be strident. They may not add long-term value to your brand. And you may not care.

But if the purpose of your advertising is to charge your brand's batteries, to add to its warmth and desirability, to remind existing users of its presence and its purpose, then you'll be looking for another kind of immediacy: of connection rather than action. Urgency, with its attendant stridency, will be unwanted and unwise. You'll need to be well mannered.

Depending on whether it's a real one or not, there are two good ways to sell a Rolex. The first is from a dodgy barrow on Oxford Street with the punters passing at walking speed. You have 15 seconds to get them before you lose them. The price is low enough to tempt them and high enough to make them hesitate. You do not pause to calculate possible damage to long-term brand values and corporate reputation. You will never see these punters again. You will hit them hard.

And the other way to sell a Rolex is the way they sell real ones in real life: politely and assuredly, with a style and grace to match the merchandise; conscious, as always, that every advertisement should be making a small investment in the brand's eternal worth.

The first approach is hard, the second soft. The second is far more difficult to do. But in meeting their own quite different objectives, they are comparably effective. Marketing needs both.

In fact, of course, the villain word is neither hard nor soft but sell. Sell implies that you're after an immediate, directly linked transaction; yet a great deal of advertising is not. A great deal of advertising is maintaining brand relevance and brand value. So 'sell' favours hard but not soft. Hard-sell sounds muscular and commercial; and soft-sell sounds weedy and a contradiction in terms. But I bet we all go on using them.