

TRUTH, LIES AND ADVERTISING

“ Anti-Capitalists may view advertising as packaged lies in a damnable word, but the world we live in is a capitalist one, where buying is a key driver, and advertising is the necessary flux.

I don't see 'advertising' as the bogeyman telling tall tales.

Effective advertising acknowledges some kind of prevailing truth about 'how things are'.

”

How's this for a 'Debating 101'?

“To what degree does advertising bare any resemblance to reality? Brands, are they street-selling naked truth or the emperor's new clothes?”

And away you go.

I believe it's a compelling polemic, partly because it doesn't immediately conjure an image of there being a pole with two ends, of there being two sides to this debate.

Advertising: any resemblance to reality? Intuitively, the knee jerk would be no, not much.

'Truth and advertising' doesn't exactly roll off the tongue. In fact, it comes out more like a spit, possibly followed by a guffaw. Fred and Ginger, Butch and Sundance, Crocket and Tubbs: those guys all fit, complemented, made sense, were magically compatible. Truth and advertising, by contrast, doesn't sound like a speed date with much potential for any fireside follow-on.

Advertising, by definition, makes truth its natural antonym. The dictionary definition of advertising is a telling one:

“To *'advertise'* – the verb:
to call attention to, in a boastful or ostentatious manner,
in a public medium; to induce people to buy.

SOURCE: DICTIONARY.COM

Boastful. Ostentatious. Not exactly 'positives', are they? Neither are they qualities that we keenly seek out in others, toast them for, use as illustrative labels of someone's easy appeal. Boastful and ostentatious, read: wankers you wouldn't invite to a dinner party.

But the dictionary definition isn't a surprising one, because to *advertise* is to promote something with an *agenda to sell*, and that de facto brings into question the credibility of the promotional message.

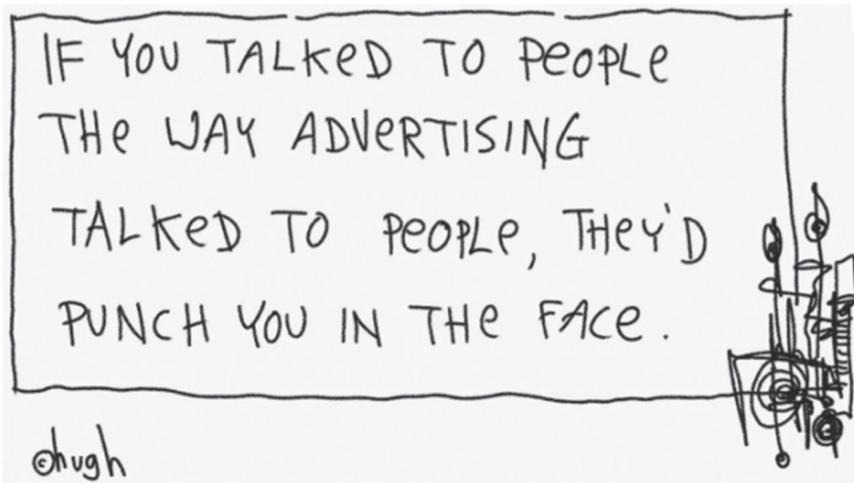
“We tell you it's great... because we want you to buy it.

Advertising, as defined, has all the tact and sincerity of, 'Trust me, I'm a salesman'. 'Trust me, I'm a gynaecologist' conjures the same essential suspicion.

And yet this is what brands are known to do, *to advertise*, and this places them under instinctive suspicion, where consumers know they're being *advertised to*, and by consequence their 'brand barriers' are up, which is very understandable. Anyone feel like we've just fallen through a time tunnel and into a frontier world of carpetbaggers, con artists and quacks selling snake oils?

Equally derisory, but again revealing, is the belief held by some that advertising takes a tone that is, let's say, far from personable.

FIGURE 22.1 Advertising deserves a punch in the face



There we were, as brand-builders, wanting our brands to disarm, when instead they're provoking people to take up arms.

So advertising is a bluff and blag, the ignoble exploitation game, where its only salience is that it has no virtue. And yet... This isn't going to wash with me. It's not going to wash because, frankly, it's a flaky witness that crumbles under cross-examination.

Good advertising has to be a reflection of life, of some kind of reality, meaning it has to be anchored in truth. The truth is, good advertising can only work if it's a comment on life, on people, on some kind of human understanding. Because the brand sell is based on the understanding of a problem and the proposition of a solution.

Effective advertising acknowledges and addresses some kind of prevailing truth about ‘how things are’. The only disrepute deserved is if the proposed brand solution is illegitimate, is fraudulent. In other words, if it’s a big fib. And while advertising has, from time to time, been busted for fibbing, fibbing isn’t tenable as a long-term strategy for keeping a brand afloat, because every brand will get found out in the end. So advertising has to be based on the honest answer to a truism. Making advertising and reality closer, more logical buddies than instinct would first have us believe. Meaning brands are more honest than they are the purveyors of pretence.

Let’s consider two successful examples that have embraced ‘real’: Dove and The Kooples.

DOVE(GATE): NAKED TRUTH IN THE CAUSE OF SOAP SALES

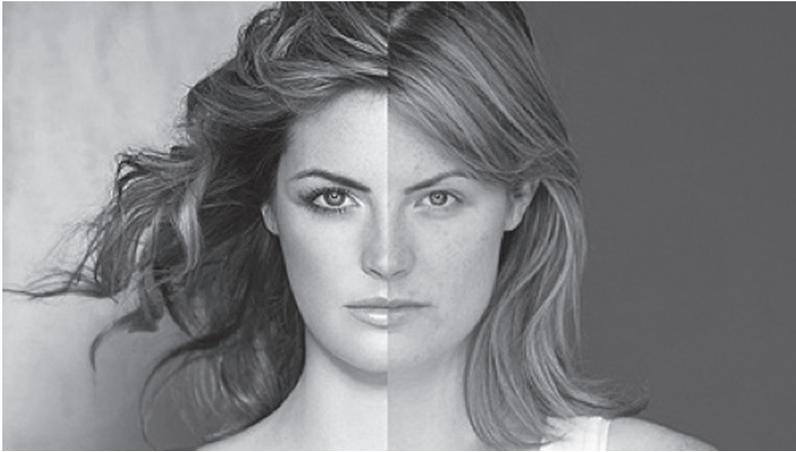
In 2004, Unilever-owned Dove launched their global ‘Campaign for Real Beauty’. This is what many corners of Adland would call a ‘Big Idea’, or an ‘idea bigger than advertising’. The whole idea is, of course, that it advertises the Dove brand, but the Real Beauty campaign is also one of those higher order, moral high-ground kind of ideas that proposes Dove as the crusader of a cause.

‘Real Beauty’ (the big idea) is about celebrating femininity in all its physical forms, that beauty is not just skin but all-the-way deep, and comes in many ages, hues and shapes. It’s a suffragette-style gesture against the archetypal media-perpetuated images of ‘what beautiful women should look like’ – all those images that make ‘real women’ feel pretty miserable about themselves.

The jewel in Real Beauty’s campaign crown came two years after its launch, with Dove’s 75-second online film, *Evolution*.

Ogilvy & Mather used the budget offcuts from a completed project, and for a reported C\$130k (that’s Canadian dollars), shot the time-lapsed journey of a model’s face, from make-up chair to billboard.

FIGURE 22.2 Split screen ‘after and before’. *Evolution* by Ogilvy & Mather (2006)



Evolution is whistle-blowing derision at how far advertising stretches the physical truth in order to create ‘unnatural’ beauty. It’s clever stuff. So clever, in fact, that it went on to take the Epica D’Or at Cannes (the first online film ever to do so), and is estimated to have generated \$150 million (that’s US green) worth of free media coverage.

Dove’s Real Beauty campaign started out as a full-tilt feminist charge against all those glossy and unreal images, exposing the clear wrongs of a system that produces ‘visual lies’. The campaign has since softened, but retains its sentiment, turning soap-box stance into a positive, saying to women everywhere: join us, and feel good about you.

Of course, ‘Real Beauty’ is no different to any other kind of advertising, in its endeavours to sell product and grow market share, by inviting you to buy into a brand that makes you feel good. Dove is selling women happiness; the invitation to feel happy about their bodies and how they look. To the principle that you sell the sizzle and not the steak, this is soap sold as self-esteem. Put another way, this is advertising sold as ‘anti-advertising’.

THE KOOPLES: TRUTH, WELL-DRESSED

The Kooples is a French rag-trade brand that came to London in late 2010, having only launched in France two years prior. Selfridges described them as ‘the chic new Parisian export’.

Parisian chic is just about spot-on as far as helpful descriptors go, but what helped their get-noticed cause more than anything else was an ad campaign that purported to use ‘real couples’. This was Dove, done the couture way.

FIGURE 22.3 The Kooples, UK print campaign (2010)



“... a very clever advertising campaign, which you might have spotted on the sides of taxis and buses if you happen to live in London, featuring real-life couples looking drop-dead cool in their Kooples gear.

THE TELEGRAPH, 3 DECEMBER 2010

‘Very clever’, suggested the *Telegraph*. I’m not sure I’d agree it was *that* clever, but at the time it was very noticeable, and getting noticed is always half the battle.

What I found wryly amusing at the time (and still do) is how advertising can only *sometimes* do reality, can only do real people, if they already *look like* advertising. Here we have real ‘Kooples’, ‘real people’, who do really good impressions of models.

Real-life couples posing as models really just felt like a cheap way of getting models, when the real people in question looked the way they did. But let’s not lose sight of the fundamentals. The very-good-looking-though-not-actually-models remain pretty effective ‘drop-dead cool’ clothes horses. The ads showed an undeniable truth: they’re ‘giving it’ and wearing it well, the way anyone would *want* to wear it. By extension, Kooples gets to imply

it's 'as worn by the cool kids', even if they're beautiful people *not* signed to Elite, and all this might somehow serve as an even more effective message to aspirational lovers of glad rags, in some pseudo-authentic kind of way.

At the risk of over-analysing this far too much, I'll move on.

CRAZY BUT TRUE

Advertising, reality and how they rub up against each other was the central premise of the movie *Crazy People* (1990). Starring the late Dudley Moore, it pitched itself as 'a comedy about truth in advertising'. As a movie, it's sadly less than the sum of its parts, but some of its parts are, to me, little comic gems. Moore plays a disillusioned copywriter who wants to 'level with America', and conceives a series of ads that don't hold back in their levelling:

“ Jaguar – *For men who'd like hand-jobs from beautiful women they hardly know.*

“ Volvo – *they're boxy but they're good.*

Movie launches and tourist boards also get the treatment from Dudley: for *The Freak*, a new horror flick: 'It won't just scare you, it will fuck you up for life!'; for the Greek Tourist Board: 'Forget Paris. The French can be annoying. Come to Greece. We're nicer'; for the Bahamian Tourist Board: 'Come... in the Bahamas.'

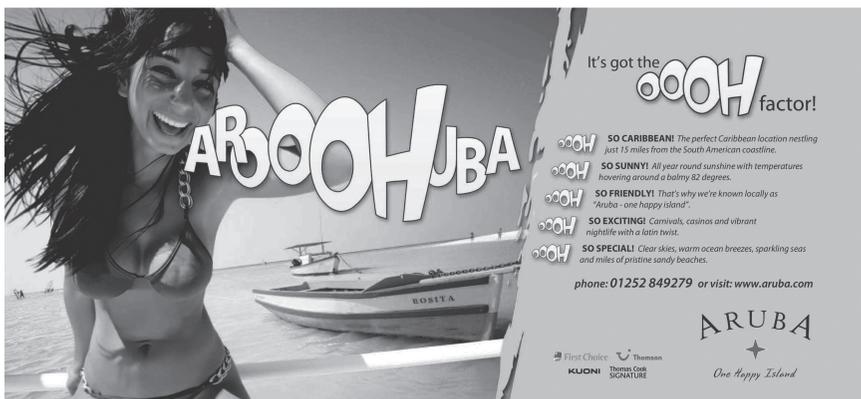
The funny thing about all the spoofs in *Crazy People* is that they're all actually really good pieces of advertising... that really just mimic what the best 'real world advertising' does. The spoofs simply spell out the subtext, put it on the page – which, of course, is what makes it funny – but 'real advertising' *is* like the movie's spoofs.

Take this execution by Euro RSCG in 2005, for the launch of Jaguar's new 'XK'. It's 15 years on from *Crazy People*, and you could argue it's just a new execution working from the same consumer insight.

FIGURE 22.4 The launch of Jaguar's new XK in 2005

On the 'DVD Dungeon Night' that they popped *Crazy People* into the tray, one imagines the guys from Jaguar were sharing popcorn with the people from Aruba.

Nassau may be nearly a thousand miles north of Aruba, but both islands can play the same card. Aruba Tourism Authority won the 'Best Poster' category at the 2010 Travel Marketing Awards for their 'Oooh' campaign, inviting tourists to come to their 'happy island'.

FIGURE 22.5 Aruba's 'Oooh' campaign wins 2010 travel marketing award

THE REAL TRUTH OF IT

Advertising makes its own bed. The bad wrap and vile rep occasionally placed at its door is sadly an earned one, a function of past follies and some very gross misdemeanours. Selling cigarettes ‘for their flavour’ is one ‘guilty as charged’ that’s pointless taking to appeal. From half-truth can sometimes come whole-lies.

While advertising today is not akin to the cigarette advertising of yesterday, the ad industry remains a convenient scapegoat for all things demonized as ‘abhorrently capitalist’.

To be anti-advertising is to be anti-capitalist. The anti-capitalist ‘demonstrates’ (with placards aloft) that we don’t need *all this stuff*, that it doesn’t make us happy, and so let’s zero the clock, stop buying, and see what happens (it’s a big placard and they abridge). Keep buying, or the house of cards tumbles, they suggest, before then adding, let it tumble.

Many people want to make the world a better place. An evil few may rather like to see it burn. The trick is to make sure good intentions don’t fan flames. I don’t think the world’s quite that bad, or in that bad a shape, and I don’t see ‘advertising’ as the bogeyman telling tall tales.

The truth is, while anti-capitalists are wholly entitled to their ‘right-to-reply’, and will view advertising as packaged lies in a damnable world, the world we live in *is* a capitalist one, where buying is a key driver, and advertising is the necessary flux.

And I don’t see how liking and buying things has to occupy a moral low ground. Since when did liking stuff, enjoying material things, automatically make someone shallow? Having possessions does not dictate that people can’t also run deep. It’s a non sequitur. People with no material goods aren’t automatically spiritual by nature of their not owning anything.

It’s the responsibility of the pro-advertising camp to ensure the observance of a moral code; a code whereby products are promoted and brands built on a foundation of truth. This is in everyone’s interest. More and more often, advertising and reality are twains that *do* meet. Good advertising, *effective advertising*, necessitates their union and their working together. I think that’s the real truth of it.

