

## WHERE NEXT?

We have covered a great deal of ground in this analysis of advertising and its impact on American character and culture. The soft economy of 2001 and 2002 in the United States meant that companies cut back on the amount of money they spent on advertising, causing great problems for the industry. But when the economy shows signs of improving, things will look up for advertising. When companies have problems, it seems that the first thing they cut is the amount of money they spend on advertising. A good case could be made that they should do just the opposite and spend more on advertising, for it is when the economy is not doing well that organizations need advertising the most.

Where next? we might ask. Let me suggest, here, two areas of considerable importance that are good candidates for further research: drug advertising and advertising to children. They are both quite complicated and the subject of considerable controversy.

## DRUG ADVERTISING

Advertising is, as I have suggested all through this book, one of the most interesting, vital, and problematic influences on us as individuals and as American society. Take, for example, prescription drug advertising. In recent years pharmaceutical companies have considerably increased the amount of advertising they do, which has led to a rapid rise in the prices of certain prescription drugs. In addition, patients now demand that their physicians prescribe certain drugs they see advertised, such as Prozac, Allegra, and Viagra (figure 10.1). The medical profession considers drug advertising to be a nuisance, at best, and a potential menace, at worst.

A front-page article in the November 22, 2002, issue of the *New York Times*, “Madison Ave. Plays Growing Role in the Business of Drug Research,” deals with this matter and quotes a scientist, Dr. Arnold S. Reiman, a professor emeritus from Harvard Medical School, who said “You cannot separate their advertising and marketing from the science, anymore.” Advertising agencies have also bought some companies involved in testing drugs and other areas associated with discovering new drugs.

It seems, then, that advertising agencies are now influencing the kind of research that pharmaceutical companies are doing, suggesting, it must be assumed, which areas would be most fruitful (profitable). Advertising now dominates our politics and is in the process of dominating our medicine. It turns out that there is also a relationship between pharmaceutical companies and political advertising. Pharmaceutical companies have formed a lobbying association, the Pharmaceutical Researchers and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA). It gave a great deal of money to an organization with strong Republican leanings, the United Seniors Association, which paid for ads in a number of campaigns, generally supporting Republican candidates whose interests were close to those of the

pharmaceutical industry. Major drug companies are also behind Citizens for Better Medicare, which spent \$50 million in the 2000 election on television commercials in twenty-six congressional districts. They also gave the United States Chamber of Commerce \$10 million and spent another \$27 million in individual campaign contributions, 70 percent of which went to Republican candidates. This investment paid off handsomely for the pharmaceutical industry, which now has an administration that is very receptive to its wishes. (This material comes from an article by Tom Hamburger, “Drug Industry Ads Aid GOP,” in the *Wall Street Journal*.)

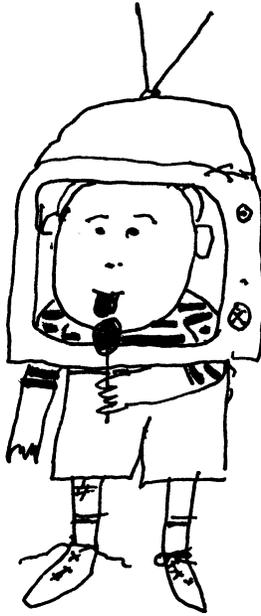
In 1970 I appeared before a subcommittee of the United States Senate and gave a presentation on drug advertising. My argument was that drug advertising follows what I call a “pain-pill-pleasure” model. Someone has a terrible headache, takes a pill, and in no time flat, is better. I also pointed out that a large percentage of advertising in the United States is for drugs of one kind or another—alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, aspirin, and so on, ad infinitum. We are, it can be argued, an over-the-counter and prescription-drug culture and we learn, from the many advertisements and commercials we are exposed to, that if there is a problem, there is always a drug to solve that problem, as if by magic.

It’s not difficult to see how people might move from legal, over-the-counter drugs for minor problems and prescription drugs for health problems to illegal drugs such as heroin, cocaine, and crack for other problems. The pain-pill-pleasure model still works, except that there are side effects to be considered to using illegal drugs, such as addiction or related problems like getting AIDS from sharing needles, and destroying one’s life.

## CHILDREN AND ADVERTISING

We’re used to subjecting children to advertising here in the United States, but in Sweden and some other countries, advertising directed toward children is forbidden. There is, I would suggest, an ethical problem of subjecting children to advertising. Until the age of seven or eight, they often do not understand what advertising is and can’t distinguish between advertising and regular content. Should we subject these children to advertising? Personally speaking, I would say no.

One effect of subjecting children to advertising is to turn them into whiners. People in the advertising industry call the kind of nagging children do, to get something they see on television and want, “pester



power.” An article by Martha Irvine in the Associated Press points out that when parents say “no,” children nag them an average of nine times before they give in. Some children nag fifty times. These figures come from children from twelve to seventeen who were interviewed for a survey on children and advertising. The survey, commissioned by the Center for the New American Dream, revealed that 60 percent of the children said that even before they reached the first grade they knew how to manipulate their parents for small things.

Young children, we must realize, have a great deal of spending power, and also influence the spending habits of their parents for everything from new cars to kinds of vacations to take. As Underhill notes:

The marketplace wants kids, needs kids, and they’re flattered by the invitation and happy to oblige. They idolize licensed TV characters the way children once were taught to worship patron saints, and manage to suss out the connection between brand name and status at a very early age. . . . You no longer need to stay clear of the global marketplace just because you’re three-and-a-half-feet tall, have no income to speak of and are not permitted to cross the street without Mom. You’re an economic force, now and in the future, and that’s what counts. (2000:142)

The following shows the projected evolution of spending power for children ages four to twelve:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Amount of Income</b>
1994	\$17 billion
2002	\$40 billion
2006	\$52 billion

The survey by the Center for the New American Dream also revealed that children who didn't have the right kind of clothes felt they wouldn't be able to have any friends and would be rejected by other children.

### BATTLING FOR PEOPLE'S ATTENTION

There is a kind of imperialism inherent in the advertising industry; it has a methodology for shaping desire and seeks to use its methods and powers everywhere. So there is good reason to investigate advertising and consider what role it's been playing, and may play in the future, in America and elsewhere.

There is, ironically, a countervailing force affecting advertising and that is the work of other agencies, which are engaged in an endless battle for people's attention—the first step in getting people to buy something—and which seem to be willing to do almost anything to get it. Advertising agencies are battling one another, and as this battle intensifies, it creates more and more clutter. This means that ordinary people, deluged by commercials, become victims of information overload, which leads them to become confused and turned off, so to speak.

So there may be a point of diminishing returns that the advertising industry faces, though, for the moment, as we are subjected to thousands and thousands of print advertisements and television commercials, we have no way of knowing when a particular advertisement will become a tipping point, a straw that will break the advertising camel's back, metaphorically speaking. It is conceivable, on the other hand, that we can be taught to process an almost infinite number of commercial messages, though I tend to doubt that this is possible. Eventually, there will be a turning point, and people will be unable to react the way advertising agencies want them to. New technology may also play a role; with

the development of TiVo and other hard disks that store television programs and delete the commercials, many people are finding ways to avoid commercials in their television viewing. So things are in considerable flux, and much research is needed on advertising's role in politics, in the lives of children and teenagers, in medicine—topics I have discussed in this book. The list of possible subjects goes on and on.