

Advertising and “Realism”

Nowadays people are conscious of the influence that advertising tries to exert on them, having recourse to some very refined persuasive techniques.

While initially ads were much more simple and rudimentary as they were addressed to an undifferentiated target, nowadays the situation has changed a great deal. Advertisers have distinguished different targets on the base of their peculiar characteristics, and developing a specific communicative strategy for each one of them.

It follows that, although consumers have learned how to develop their greater critical sense, they are able to filter only some of the uncountable ad messages people are subjected to. That is due to the fact that advertising agencies, by their campaigns, launch messages as believable as possible, to cheat consumer's attention.

Notably, that is carried out by proposing stereotypes socially shared by the referenced target, that is the portion of consumers the campaign is addressed to. Stereotypes, as representations of typical situations, lead spectators to identify themselves with the message, pulling down their defensive barriers.

This often generates some misevaluations of the proposed reality. Though people deceive themselves that they are impervious to inputs launched by advertising, ad messages twist their perception of the truth by representing a reality as verisimilar as possible.

These techniques do have a different relation with the reality. By way of example, let us analyse two case-histories, which point out the relation between what is conveyed to customers and what is actual reality.

The first case refers to the ads of the well-known “Lancôme” cosmetics house. In the spot, the leading role is played by the famous actress Isabella Rossellini, and the advertised product is an anti-age face-cream.

The relation between reality and representation, showed by the spot, is verisimilar. Indeed the choice of the testimonial is strategic, as the actress is the same age of targeted women; this makes the spot believable and consequently pulls down the target’s defensive barriers; therefore people recognize themselves in Rossellini’s figure.

The other cosmetics houses use different communicative strategies, engaging younger models and, thus, making a major discordance between truth and untruth, and between testimonial and target.

The second case takes as a starting point the well-known semiotician Jean-Marie Floch, who studied the communicative strategies used by French pharmaceutical houses for ads in magazines. By analyzing “Pragmazone 25” psycho-medicine, Floch found as follows: the ad is graphically structured in a vertical layout (see the side picture).

The upper zone shows a female patient in an uncomfortable state of health “before treatment” isolated from her family by a vertical fracture; the whole picture clearly transmits the sensation of deep depression and loneliness in which the woman lies.

The lower part shows the same person “after treatment” happily joining her family again.



Strategically, the point of junction between the two phases is the big inscription of the name of the medicine.

Hence, the patient sees its weaknesses represented, and perceives the medicine not only as a potential cure of the pathology, but as a “pill for happiness” too.

Without a doubt, the treatment does not change life, but that is exactly what advertisers want to communicate.

As a result, advertisers exploit people’s weak points, such as the fear of old age or of loneliness, in order to make recipients vulnerable to the message and to break down their resistance.

Thus, it is not always easy for people to distance themselves emotionally from the portrayed reality and to distinguish between truth and marketing strategies.

In conclusion, even though people believe they are able to set the right value on what communicators propose them, actually ads manage to alterate consumers’ perception of the message, by refining their persuasive techniques.

References:

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