

T.V. Ads: What Are Youngsters Buying?

Don Kauchak

"If educators seek to understand components of our culture that influence youth they need only to walk across their living room and turn on the T.V."

Most educators realize that the effectiveness of any educational program is influenced by the larger cultural context in which it exists. The works of Coleman and Jenks have offered convincing proof of the power of the family to affect the effectiveness of a given curriculum. Sheer amount of time spent within the family as well as the fact that this time is spent during formative years contribute to make the family the influential force in the cultural milieu. Using these same criteria, a solid argument could be made for television as perhaps the second most powerful cultural element in today's society.

Let's look at some statistics that relate to this argument. Experts estimate that the average child has watched 15,000 hours of television by the end of high school, 4,000 more hours than are spent in school.¹ On an average winter evening during prime time, fully one-half of the entire American population is watching television,² and in any typical minute on a Saturday morning there are approximately ten million pairs of eyes watching television. Two- to five-year-olds watch an estimated 28 weekly hours, while six- to eleven-year-olds watch an estimated 23 hours weekly, or a grand total of 1,200 hours in a year, which is the equivalent of 1 $\frac{2}{3}$ months!³ If educators seek to understand components of our cul-

ture that influence youth they need only to walk across their living room and turn on the T.V.

Others have written about the glories or horrors of the electronic tribal village/wasteland before, but few have focused on what I believe to be a significant aspect of the television experience, the advertisements. In numbers or cost alone, the impact of television commercials on American culture is a significant one. There were 42,500 T.V. commercials in 1972 alone,⁴ and in 1976 over 6.5 billion dollars were spent on T.V. advertising.⁵ Of this total over 75 million dollars was specifically targeted at children with over 20 million dollars aimed at the Saturday morning cartoon audience.⁶ Using economic criteria as a mea-

¹ "Solving the Kidvid Problem." *Consumers' Research Magazine* 58(7): 2, 43; July 1975.

² Joseph Little, editor. *Coping With Television*. Evanston, Ill.: McDougall Litell and Co., 1973.

³ Joseph Seldin. "The Saturday Morning Massacre." *Progressive* 38: 50-52; September 1974.

⁴ Leo Greenland. "Advertisers Must Stop Conning Consumers." *Harvard Business Review* 18(28): 156; July-August 1974.

⁵ Harry McMahon. "'100 Best' of '76: Stars, Jingles Up; Year Marks First \$234,000 Minute." *Advertising Age* 43: 56; January 31, 1977.

⁶ Scott Ward. "Kids' T.V.—Marketeers on Hot Seat." *Harvard Business Review* 16(37): July-August 1972.

sure of cultural impact, one could conclude that television advertisements are influencing the youth of America.

Effects of Advertising

Another measure of the impact of television advertising is the amount of time children spend watching commercials. By the time he or she is 18 years old, the average child has seen approximately 350,000 commercials.⁷ Statistics relating to time are even more staggering. If we take 15,000 hours as an accurate measure of the amount of time that the average youth spends watching T.V. (and some consider this to be a conservative estimate), then somewhere between 2,500 and 3,000 hours are spent viewing commercials. This amounts to more time than is spent in most children's academic careers in any of the following subjects: social studies, language arts (excluding reading), art, music, and physical education!

So what effect is all this advertising having on children's minds? It is hard to answer this question in any absolute terms as there has been virtually no research and very little writing on this subject. A very real possibility is that T.V. advertising, like other cultural factors in children's environments, has in some way shaped or altered the lives and minds of American youth. We know that the content of T.V. commercials affects young viewers' minds (why else would we buy millions of dollars worth of Barbie Dolls and G.I. Joes?), but perhaps the most permanent and long-lasting effects may result from the form that they assume. Given the large amounts of time that preschool and school-age children spend watching T.V. commercials, it is reasonable to hypothesize that these many hours of interacting with the television have in some way influenced the manner in which young children view the world. Or, stated in McLuhanesque terms, the medium assumed by different types of television advertising has massaged and altered the perceptual habits of its users.

Independent of the particular content that is contained in individual advertisements, there is a larger, more pervasive message, which is the way that commercials are constructed. They are designed to captivate, titillate, educate, some-

times obfuscate, but always capture our attention. If they don't they soon find their way to the slag heap of unsuccessful commercials. (Anyone who doubts the ability of T.V. commercials to capture the attention of children should observe young children at play while the T.V. is on. They will play straight through high speed chases and knock 'em down drag 'em out cowboy brawls, but look up as soon as a commercial comes on.) Television commercials are designed to take a basically passive, inattentive viewer and persuade him or her to attend to, comprehend, and believe

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a particular message. They start with the assumption that the viewer is passive, basically uninterested in the message, and lacking in prerequisite information. From here the producers of television advertisements construct commercials that are designed to be literally viewer-proof. How different are these from the assumptions held by most teachers as they prepare to teach a lesson?

But what is it about the form of television ads that shapes the minds of the young? Well, for openers we might try length. Commercials are short and to the point and deliver their message in a thirty-second time span. Contrast this with a teacher lecture that drones on and on, well past the attention span of most students. And action. Compare the movement and action found in most T.V. commercials with the teacher who sits or stands in one spot for the whole class. And sounds. Commercials abound with a smorgasbord of sounds that range from special sound effects to snappy jingles (Ever catch yourself humming the melody to a commercial that you've seen on T.V.?). Contrast this with the teacher who drones on and on in a monotone that would put most insomniacs to sleep. Other differences

⁷ Joseph Little, editor. *Coping With Television*. Evanston, Ill.: McDougall Littell and Co., 1973.

include the way in which the viewer's attention is engaged, the sequence of reasoning (expository vs. inductive), and the way in which the content of the message is geared to the needs and interests of the audience. It isn't an accident that the commercials interspersed between soap operas are different from those found accompanying a football game, or that a large percentage of evening commercials are concerned with beer and snacks.

Cultural Factors Influence Learning

Some teachers might respond to these differences by stating that educating isn't advertising, and teachers aren't Madison Avenue actors, but this position ignores an important point. As educators we can't control cultural influences. Our students enter our classrooms shaped and influenced by the experiences they've had in society. These experiences determine in large part how they will respond to a given unit of instruction. Our experiences with various American subcultures have provided us with ample evidence to support these contentions. Once aware of the influence of different cultural factors on school learning, teachers must then make professional decisions as how best to use this knowledge. One way is to ignore it; an alternate path is to reflect upon these factors and rethink our instructional procedures.

A Saturday morning of cartoon watching or several hours of T.V. viewing during programs designed for older students should provide the teacher with a number of ideas on how to attract and keep students' attention. Perhaps the most striking impression to be gained from such viewing is that the producers of T.V. commercials have done their homework. They know what interests or troubles today's youth and design their commercials accordingly. How different this is from classrooms where content reigns supreme, and students' needs and interests are neglected or ignored.

Another characteristic of T.V. commercials with implications for educators is their length and format. Over the years, advertisements have become shorter and more aimed at capturing viewers' attention. Experience over the years has proven the desirability of a number of short, in-

teresting advertising segments over longer, more didactic sequences. One is reminded of the laws of learning that point to the relatively greater efficiency of short, spaced drills over prolonged practice. Also related to this idea is the research that points to the effectiveness of instructional flexibility and variety.⁸

One teacher education program that has capitalized on ideas like this is at the University of Southern California. Instructors there have turned to analysis of television commercials to discover how and why they work. Based on this analysis, the developers have formulated a number of methods designed to teach prospective teachers stage techniques for holding and capturing student attention. Experiments conducted within this program have shown classes using these techniques to be more effective than traditional presentation modes.⁹

But perhaps more important than the specific techniques that arise from such an analysis is the continued awareness that the children we teach are products of their environment, and that the environment that shapes and molds today's students is radically different from the one encountered twenty years ago. An important part of that environment is the media, and unless teachers recognize this, they will be attempting to teach space-age children with horse and buggy perspectives. [E]

⁸ Barak Rosenshine and Norma Furst. "Research in Teacher Performance Criteria." In: B. O. Smith, editor. *Research in Teacher Education*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971.

⁹ "Quality Teacher Effectiveness Program." *What's New in Home Economics* 1: February 15, 1977.



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