

James Rorty

OUR MASTER'S HOUSE
ADVERTISING

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9 TRUTH IN ADVERTISING

THE conception of “Truth in Advertising” is at once *the least tenable* and the *most necessary* tenet of the ad-man’s doctrine. This contradiction arises from the fact that the advertising business is essentially an enterprise in the exploitation of belief.

It is untenable because profit-motivated business, in its relations with the consumer, is necessarily exploitative—not moderately and reasonably exploitative, but exploitative up to the tolerance limit of the traffic. This tolerance limit is determined not by ethical considerations, which are strictly irrelevant, but by the ability of the buyer to detect and penalize dishonesty and deception. This ability varies with the individual, but in general reaches its minimum in the case of the isolated ultimate consumer.

No manufacturer, in buying his raw materials or his mechanical equipment, trusts the integrity of the seller except in so far as he is obliged to do so. So far as possible, he protects himself by specifications, inspections and tests, and by legally enforceable contracts that penalize double-dealing.

But when the manufacturer or retailer turns to selling his finished product to the ultimate consumer, the situation is reversed and the elements are sharply different. In his natural state the ultimate consumer is ignorant enough in all conscience. But he is not permitted to remain in his natural state. It would be unprofitable, unbusinesslike, to leave him in his natural state. Hence business has developed the apparatus of advertising, which, as the editor of the leading advertising trade publication has pointed out,¹⁵ is scarcely a thing in itself, but merely a function of business management.

That function is not merely to sell customers, but to manufacture customers. Veblen, with his customary precision, has indicated both the object and the technique of this function:

The production of customers by sales publicity is evidently the same thing as the production of systematized illusions organized into serviceable “action patterns”—serviceable, that is, for the use of the seller in whose account and for whose profit the customer is being produced.

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¹⁵ Roy Dickinson, president of *Printers’ Ink*, in “Advertising Careers.”

What has honesty or truth to do with this business? A great deal, because the *idea* of truth is a highly exploitable asset. Always, the customer must be made to feel that the seller is honest and truthful and that he needs or wants the product offered for sale. Hence the advertising business becomes an enterprise in the coincident manufacture and exploitation of reader-confidence and reader-acceptance. In this respect the ad-man's technique is not essentially different from that of any vulgar confidence man whose stock in trade is invariably a plausible line of chatter about his alleged "trustfulness" and "honesty." The writer has watched these gentry operating all the way from Los Angeles to Coney Island. Their annual "take," while less than that of their respectable cousins in the advertising business, is still enormous. Their techniques and successes, if studied by sociologists, would I am convinced, yield valuable data regarding the contemporary American social psychology.

Once, at Signal Hill, near Long Beach, California, the writer permitted an oil stock salesman to give him transportation from Los Angeles to the oil well, and to lead him through the successive steps by which the "sucker" is noosed, thrown and shorn. The prospects, consisting of about a hundred more or less recently arrived Middle Western farmers, their wives and children, seemed naïvely appreciative of the hot dogs and coffee, and of the genuinely accomplished sales histrionism which they were getting free. One saw that they were devout believers in magic of the cruder sorts, ranging from fundamentalism, through rugged individualism, and spreading into the more exotic side-shows of Yoga, the Apostle of Oom, numerology, spiritualism, etc., etc., which at that time infested Los Angeles and still do. Their faces were weather-worn, their hands were stubby. They were indeed enormously decent and hard-working people—with less effective knowledge of their social environment than any African savage.

At the climax of the performance, after an oil-smeared ex-vaudevillian had rampaged up the aisle proclaiming that "No. 6 had just come in at ten thousand gallons," a scattering few came forward and signed on the dotted line. They did so with a kind of hypnotized masochism—I am convinced that many of them were instinctively aware that they were being gypped.

In lieu of buying any of the promoter's exquisitely engraved optimism, I took him aside afterward and explained that as an advertising writer, engaged in advertising a nearby subdivision—a strictly legitimate enterprise out of which many of the buyers made a good deal of money—I, too, had a stake in the matter. He was only momentarily embarrassed. Later, on the basis of our professional kinship, I got to know him sufficiently so that, warmed by a little liquor,

he became approximately confidential.

"Brother," I remember his saying (He always insisted on calling me "brother"), "the technique of this racket is simple. Always tell the truth. Tell a lot of the truth. Tell a lot more of the truth than anybody expects you to tell. Never tell the whole truth."

My colleague omitted one important element from his formula, the element of emotional conviction, which I had seen him manipulate with devastating effectiveness. It is observable that the most charlatans, like the best advertising men, are always more than half sincere and honest according to their lights. Sincerity is indeed a great virtue in an ad-man, and if one has it not, one must at least feign it. In this connection I recall the experience of a friend who took leave of the advertising business after some years of competent and highly paid employment in that business. Her employer, while acknowledging her competence, had this to say on the occasion of her resignation:

"Miss ———, you are an able person and a good worker. In my judgment you have only one fault. You are not loyal to the things you don't believe in."

At first glance this statement would seem to plunge us into the deep water of metaphysics. But the exegesis is simple. The possession of a personal code of ethics is a handicap in the practice of advertising-as-usual, the business being above all else impersonal, and in fact so far as possible de-humanized. One must be loyal to the process, which is a necessary part of the total economic process of competitive acquisition. The god of advertising is a jealous god and tolerates no competing loyalties, no human compunctions, no private impurities of will and judgment.

The yoke of this jealous god chafes. How could it be otherwise, unless one were to suppose that advertising men are a selected class of knaves and rascals? They are, of course, nothing of the sort. They are average middle-class Americans, a bit more honest, I suspect, than the average banker or lawyer. In their personal lives they are likely to be kindly, truthful, just and generous. They would doubtless like to be equally truthful and just in the conduct of their business. But this, in the nature of the case, is impossible. The alternatives are either a cynical, realistic acceptance, or heroic gestures of rationalization. Hence the tremendous pother that advertising men make about "truth in advertising"; or at least, that is half of the explanation. The other half lies in the business-like necessity of keeping advertising in good repute; of nursing the health of that estimable goose, reader-confidence. Are they sincere, these advertising men who conduct this "truth-inadvertising" propaganda which is echoed and re-echoed by editors, publicists, economists, sociologists, preachers, politicians? How can one tell, and does it really matter?

Quite obviously, advertising is an enterprise in special pleading conducted outside the courts of law, with no effective rules of evidence, no expert representation for the consumer, no judge and no jury. To continue the analogy: in a court of law the accused swears to tell "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," but if he is guilty nobody expects him to do so. The attorney for the defense is theoretically bound by his code of legal ethics, by penalties for contempt of court, suborning of witnesses, etc. In practice he usually makes out the best possible case for his client, using truth, half-truth and untruth with pragmatic impartiality. Moreover, the judge and the jury expect him to do precisely that, just as they expect the State's attorney to use all possible means to secure a conviction. Judge and jury are in theory, and ordinarily in practice, disinterested. They balance one barrage of special pleading against the other, and so arrive at a verdict based on the evidence.

It is generally recognized that a defense attorney does not tell the truth, or permit the truth to be told, if he thinks this truth would prejudice the case of his client. Why should it be supposed that an advertising writer, employed to sell goods for a manufacturer or retailer, can afford to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and refrain from befuddling the judgment of his prospect? In practice he tells precisely as much of the truth as serves the interest of the advertiser, and precisely as much expedient half-truth and untruth as he believes he can get away with, without impairing "reader-confidence." If it seems profitable to scare, shame and flatter his victim he does so unhesitatingly. If bought and-paid-for testimonials will do the trick many agencies buy them. If the fastidiousness or timidity of the publisher, the barking of the Federal Trade Commission and the Food and Drug Administration, or the protests of the reforming wing of the profession make it seem desirable to conceal the fact that these testimonials were bought and paid for, such a concealment is effected.

Privately, the cynics of the profession will tell you that this is the prevailing practice, including their own practice. Having learned to digest their ethical sins, they have no need of rationalizing them. These cynics leave the "reform of advertising" to their more illusioned colleagues of whom they tend to be coarsely contemptuous. The plaint of the reformers—vulgarly referred to by the cynics as the "Goose Girls"—runs somewhat as follows:

"The exaggerations, the sophistries, the purchased testimonials, the vulgarities, the outright falsifications of current advertising are quite intolerable. Such practices are destroying the faith, the illusions, the very will-to-live of 'reader confidence.' They constitute unfair competition. The irresponsible agencies and advertisers who

are guilty of such practices are endangering the stability, the good repute, and the profits of the advertising profession as a whole."

To this plaint the cynics retort somewhat after this fashion:

"You fellows prate a great deal about 'truth in advertising.' What do you mean, truth, and what has the truth got to do with this racket? You say we are killing that estimable goose, reader-confidence, the goose that lays the golden eggs of advertising profits. Nonsense. It wasn't the goose that squawked. It was you. And the reason you squawked was not because you really give a whoop about 'truth,' but because we, with our more sophisticated, more scientific practice, have been chiselling into your business. We can prove and have proved that bought-and-paid-for testimonials sell two to one as compared to your inept cozenage, your primitive appeals to fear, greed and emulation. Furthermore, the ethics of advertising communications is relative and must be flexible. You have to take into account both the audience to which such communications are addressed and the object which these communications are intended to achieve, and demonstrably do achieve.

"The audience, by and large, is composed of 14-year-old intelligences that have no capacity for weighing evidence, no experience in doing so, and no desire to do so. That goes equally for the readers of *Vogue* and the readers of *True Romances*. They are effectively gulled by bought-and-paid-for testimonials and even appear to take some pleasure in being gulled. They buy on the basis of such corrupt, false and misleading evidence, and this way of selling them costs less than any other way we have discovered. It is, you will grant, our duty as advertisers and as advertising agencies acting in behalf of our clients, to advertise as efficiently as possible, thereby reducing the sales overhead which must ultimately be charged to the consumer: thereby, incidentally, safeguarding and increasing the profits of the companies in which hundreds of thousands of widows and orphans, directly or indirectly, have invested their all. It is our duty to use every means we can devise, truthful or untruthful, ethical or unethical, to persuade consumers to buy, since only by increased buying can the country be pulled out of this depression. Ours is the higher morality. The burden of restoring prosperity is on our shoulders. We have seen our duty and we are doing it."

Thus the cynics, in private. I must confess that I have derived far greater intellectual pleasure from the utterances of such hard-boiled devil's disciples than from the plaintive reproaches and lamentations of the Goose Girls. One could wish, indeed, that the cynics were more outspoken. Unfortunately, rationalization is the order of the day, in business as in politics. Every week sees another proclamation of the new order of probity upon which business is entering under

the New Deal. Even Kenneth Collins.... One is disappointed to see so able and interesting an advertising man pledge himself to the Goose Girl Sorority. But consider the recent advertising of Gimbels department store in New York. Mr. Collins is Gimbels' advertising manager, having recently transferred his talents from Macy's across the street, where he had achieved a notable success by exploiting the slogan "It's smart to be thrifty."

Mr. Collins, judged by his writings in the trade press, is something of a realist. One can only conclude therefore, that when he assumed his new duties, his survey of the situation convinced him that radical measures were needed for the effective exploitation of belief. Here is the advertisement in which the new "slant" was announced:

GIMBELS
TELLS THE
WHOLE
TRUTH

Every intelligent person will join us in a great new campaign for truth in advertising. And by truth we mean the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—exactly what you demand of a witness before a Senate Committee, or of your own children at home.

Let us tell you a straight story.

For years on end, we at Gimbels have been thinking that we were telling the truth. We have been supported in our belief by "the custom of the business," by "trade privilege," by reports from the Better Business Bureau of New York and by the comments of our customers.

But what we have been telling was, so to speak, "commercial truth." We would tell you, quite honestly, that a certain pair of curtains had been copied, in design, from a famous model, that the colors were pleasing, that the price was very low. *Every word of this was scrupulously true.* But we may have failed to say that the curtains would probably fade after one or two seasons of wear.

In the same way, we would tell you that certain dresses had materials of good quality, that the styles were fresh, and the price very reasonable. *Every word of this was scrupulously true.* But we may have failed to add that the workmanship was by machine rather than by hand, and therefore the price was low.

We believe it is time to take a revolutionary step, in line with the beliefs of the Administration, and of the opinions of intelligent people everywhere. We believe that old-fashioned "commercial truth" has no place in the New Deal. From now on, all Gimbels advertising (and every word told you by a Gimbels salesman or saleswoman) will be—

The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

How are we going to assure this? It is human to make mistakes, and we may make them. If so, we want them called to our attention. We will gladly and willingly print corrections. But we believe we will make few errors, for this reason: as a check on our store buyers, and our advertising writers, we have employed the services of a famous outside research laboratory—

THE INDUSTRIAL BY-PRODUCTS AND RESEARCH CORPORATION OF PHILADELPHIA

to make frequent scientific tests of the materials, workmanship and value of the goods we offer for sale. This is one of the best equipped laboratories of its kind in the United States, with a reputation of many years of service to many of the largest industrial corporations in this country. They are experts in textiles, and chosen for this reason, because 80% of our merchandise is either textile or dependent on textile for wear.

They have no human or partisan reason to give us the benefit of any doubt. They will give us impartial tests and reports.

Please read our advertising in today's News, Journal, Sun and World-Telegram. Bear in mind when you read the advertising of this firm that

GIMBELS TELLS THE TRUTH

Note the astute dedication to intelligence, morality and unity of interest which is implicit in the first paragraph. Just what is the nature of this "revolutionary step, in line with the beliefs of the Administration, and of the opinions of intelligent people everywhere," which Gimbels, under the leadership of Mr. Collins, has taken?

Instead of contenting itself, as in the past, with telling that part of the truth which might be expected to promote sales, and suppressing the part which would tend to discourage or prevent sales, the store pledges itself to "tell the whole truth." For example, whereas it had previously described a piece of cloth truthfully as being good value, it would add in the future, the further truth that it would quickly fade; it would say that a raincoat, while worth the price asked, would last only a year.

One readily admits that this does represent a certain gain for the consumer—a gain brought about either by the evangelical enthusiasm of Gimbels and Mr. Collins for the New Deal, or, possibly, by the coincident collapse of the consumer's confidence and the consumer's pocketbook, and the consequent stiffening of his sales resistance. Mr. Collins is to be credited for his astuteness in recognizing and dealing

with this condition. In fairness one should also credit him with a personal, though far from unique preference for fair dealing, as against the customary chicaneries of salesmanship and advertising.

But—and this but is important—Gimbels is a profit motivated corporation, engaged, like any other business, in buying as cheaply as possible and selling as dearly as possible. The Industrial By-Products and Research Corporation of Philadelphia will undoubtedly tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth to Gimbels, because it is employed by Gimbels, and, in respect to this specific service at least, is responsible to Gimbels and to Gimbels alone. But will Gimbels pass on this whole truth and nothing but the truth to its customers and to the readers of its advertising? The whole truth, including the truth about Gimbels' profit-margin—*all* the data which the customer would require in order to measure value? No such proposal is made. At this point the customer is protected by the competition of other merchants and by that alone.

No, what we have here is a lot of the truth, more of the truth than anybody expected Gimbels to tell, but not the whole truth. It is not in the nature of profit-motivated business to tell the whole truth. Gimbels is paid by its customers, but is responsible ultimately, not to its customers, but to its stockholders. Hence the pressure of the economic determinants is here as always and everywhere toward the exploitation of the customer up to the tolerance limit of the traffic. Possibly this tolerance limit is narrowing. I am not sure.

Mr. Collins' demarche is designed to produce customers by manufacturing a "systematized illusion" to the effect that business is not business, and that the customer, on entering Gimbels, can safely put aside and forget the maxim, *caveat emptor*, which is the only ultimate protection of the buyer in a profit-motivated economy.

Suppose that Mr. Collins' readers are convinced; that they do stop worrying about whether they are being cheated or not. They would like to do this because it would certainly mean a great saving of time, money and energy. But what happens if they do? They find that Gimbels' stock in trade consists not merely of goods but of "systematized illusions" built up by decades of advertising and capitalized in trademarks which add a considerable percentage to the cost of the product and a still higher percentage to the price of the product. In the drug and cosmetics department they would find that the price of the products offered for sale frequently represents about 90% of advertising bunk and 10% of merchandize. Will Gimbels, which is pledged to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, tell them that? No. Does the Industrial By-Products and Research Corporation know this part of the truth? It either knows it or could easily learn it. Is this truth of interest and value to the customer? It

certainly is. Then why doesn't Gimbels buy this truth from its research company and pass it on to its customers? Because Gimbels is a profit-motivated corporation responsible not to its customers but to its stockholders. Because the manufacturers of these absurdly priced and inadequately described products have by advertising them, built up systematized illusions to the effect that they are worth the price asked for them. Because Gimbels, which is not in business for its health or for the health of its customers, is obliged both to carry these products, and *not* tell the truth about them, or lose an opportunity for making a profit—usually a high profit—on their sale. What would happen if Gimbels started telling the truth about these products? The manufacturers would probably bring legal or economic pressure to bear, sufficient to cause Gimbels to cease and desist. Where can you learn the truth about such products? From Consumers' Research, or for that matter, from almost any honest testing laboratory you chose to employ. Why does Consumers' Research really tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, to the best of its ability? Because it is employed by and responsible to its subscribing members its customers. Why doesn't Gimbels tell that kind of truth to its customers? Because it is not responsible to its customers. It is responsible to its stockholders.

It will perhaps be argued that the drug and cosmetic department is exceptional. It is somewhat exceptional, but by no means unique. The breakfast cereal business is also primarily an advertising business, and many of the packaged "values" offered by Gimbels grocery department are chiefly air, paper, cellophane and advertising.

It will be further argued that these areas of exploitation, entrenched in the systematized illusions built up in the public mind by advertising, are outside Gimbels' control. But is Gimbels completely frank about its own "house products"? If so, Mr. Collins can claim a real revolution. The ordinary practice of the retailer in substituting a house product for an advertised product is to take advantage of the inflated illusion of value built up by advertising. The house product may be, and frequently is, as good or better than the advertised product. The price asked for the house product is ordinarily just enough less than the price of the advertised product to make the substitution acceptable to the customer. By crawling under the tent of inflated "values," erected by advertisers, retailers are able to make excellent profit margins through such substitutions—in the case of such a product as face cream, margins running up to three hundred and four hundred per cent. Wouldn't it be wonderful, Mr. Collins, if Gimbels made up a list of such products and undertook to sell them for approximately reasonable prices? Would this be in line with the beliefs of the Administration, or would it come under the head of

"destructive price cutting"? In any case, wouldn't it be nice for the consumer and—just possibly—good business for you?

Sadly, one begins to suspect that the able, intelligent, hard-boiled Mr. Collins has become just another Goose Girl. The morale of the geese is terrible these days. Mr. Collins is responsible for a large flock, and as a practical advertising man he realises that he must do something about it. Hence, with his left hand, he launches "a great new campaign for truth in advertising." But his right hand is also busy. Alongside this pronouncement "Gimbels Tells the Whole Truth," we find another Gimbel advertisement headed "Sky's the Limit!" In this advertisement the reflexes of the reader are shrewdly conditioned to the need of and purchase of a collection of beach chairs, outdoor tables, etc., for use on the roofs of city apartments—a new market. This would seem to be very competent advertising-as-usual in the modern chatty manner, designed to compete with the interest of the adjoining news columns. It is currently argued in the trade that this is good "educational" advertising because it manufactures customers. From the consumer's point of view it would be possible to contend that what the consumer is interested in is a concise description of the product and why it is worth its price; that the chatter, being neither news nor information, is a tiresome impertinence, intolerable in a civilized community. But then, if the consumers had that much sense, they would no longer be geese. So that Mr. Collins' big-hearted services as Goose Girl and customer producer would no longer be required.

This example and that of the Gillette Safety Razor Company which is examined in the following chapter, have been selected because in both cases the claim of truth-telling is explicitly made. But for the fact that the American pseudoculture is based on a structure of make-believe, which, in turn rests on layer after layer of the accumulated make-believe of past decades and past centuries, it would not even be necessary to explode such claims for it would not pay to make them. Sufficient to say that when an advertiser takes the *name* of Truth, it is in the nature of the case that he should do so in vain, and with either conscious or unconscious hypocrisy; that the coincident appeal to, and exploitation of, reader-confidence is merely one of the necessary techniques of advertising mendacity-as-usual. The documentation of this mendacity has been sufficiently attended to by Messrs. Chase and Schlink in *Your Money's Worth*, by Messrs. Schlink and Kallet in *100,000,000 Guinea Pigs* and by the run of the mill prosecutions by the Federal Trade Commission, by the seizures of the Food and Drug Administration and by the exposures of quack proprietaries by the American Medical Association.

The conclusion which these massive accumulations of data add

up to in the minds of good citizens in and out of the advertising business is that the abuses of advertising should be corrected; that Congress should pass another law; indeed, as I write this, Congress seems likely to pass another law, which will be discussed in the concluding chapters of this book. As a former advertising man, made familiar by years of practice with the various techniques of the profession, the naïveté of this conclusion leaves me groaning with despondency. Congress can and probably will legislate itself blue in the face, without changing an iota of the basic economic and cultural determinants, and so long as these determinants continue to operate the exploitation of the consumer will simply, in response to criticism, spin the kaleidoscope of technical adaptations. To put it more brutally, advertising will merely find new ways of manufacturing suckers and trimming them. Mendacity is a function of trade and observes no ethical limits just as military warfare observes no ethical limits. Advertising is an exploitation of belief. The raw material of this traffic is not merely products and services but human weakness, fear and credulity. In the end, as Veblen pointed out in the penetrating footnote already quoted, it becomes a “trading on that range of human infirmities which flowers in devout observances and fruits in the psychopathic wards.”

To do them justice, the Goose Girls—the reformers have come to constitute almost a sub-profession of the profession itself—are in many cases entirely sincere, since the ideas of a unified, functional society is something undreamed of in their philosophies, or in the textbooks of orthodox *laissez faire* economists for that matter. Few of them are as logical or as frank as the banker, Paul M. Mazur, who in his book, *American Prosperity, Its Causes and Consequences*, has this to say about the “Truth in Advertising” ballyhoo:

But should advertising ever limit itself under judicial oath to tell the whole truth, unvarnished and unadorned, woe betide confidence in America’s products and industry.... If the whole truth were really told, the career of advertising would degenerate from the impact of a powerful hydraulic hammer to a mildly reproving weak slap on the wrist.

So far as the writer is aware, the Better Business Bureau has never denounced Mr. Mazur for this heresy has—never even given him a “mildly reproving weak slap on the wrist.”