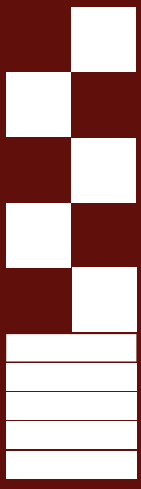
Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine

Selected Readings, 1895–1935

edited by
Patrick Parsons



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Contents

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

"The Conditions of the Belief in Advertising" (1923)

Albert T. Poffenberger

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

A somewhat different approach to the psychology of advertising was taken by Albert Poffenberger (1885–1977). Poffenberger was a Bucknell University undergraduate, receiving his PhD from Columbia University in 1912. He then joined the psychology faculty at Columbia, where he stayed until his retirement in 1950. During his career he helped pioneer applied psychology and served as president of the American Psychological Association (1935) and the Social Science Research Council.

While Scott drew support for his analyses from industry practice and extant literature, Poffenberger experimented. Both conducted their studies in support of the profession, but Poffenberger was a bit more dispassionate. In the following passage, he starts with a puzzlement: "The fact that the American people are each year induced to squander many millions of dollars in worthless securities through the medium of advertising in some

form, and that warnings seem quite ineffective in protecting them, makes one curious about the basis of belief in advertising."

In answer to his implied question, he proposes three conditions that advance a belief in an advertising message: (1) that the "ideas aroused by an advertisement must not conflict too sharply with the reader's experience," (2) according to the "well-known law of suggestion," the message should come from an authoritative source, and (3) the message should arouse desires, fears or "emotions generally." Poffenberger organizes substantial experiments and surveys around his first two conditions, employing real-world advertisements. One, interestingly, involved a cosmetic product containing radium (a naturally occurring radioactive material). The advertising campaign failed and Poffenberger found support for the hypothesis "that the suggestion to apply radium on the skin for toilet purposes conflicted too sharply with people's (pre-existing) opinions about radium."—*P.P.*

"The Conditions of the Belief in Advertising" (1923)

A reader of the literature dealing with the Psychology of Advertising finds numerous articles written upon the effectiveness of various mechanical devices, the attention and memory value of size of space and the position on the page, the influence of color, style of type and its arrangement, the effectiveness of repeating the advertisement, etc. The problem of arousing the confidence of the consumer in the article advertised, the conditions on which it depends, how belief in advertisements may be created and how it may be measured have been very lightly touched in experimental studies. The importance of these matters is emphasized in every textbook on advertising. The fact that the American people are each year induced to squander many millions of dollars in worthless securities through the medium of advertising in some form, and that warnings seem quite ineffective in protecting them, makes one curious about the basis of belief in advertising. It is not enough to say that the American people like to be fooled and that there is no scheme too wild to arouse the confidence of a large proportion of them. The advertiser should know that action is dependent upon belief and that belief in advertising depends upon conditions, some of which at least are under his control.

Belief is indeed a complex mental state and it may depend at any time upon a great variety of factors, the most common of which are listed in textbooks of psychology and advertising. It is not the purpose of this report

to repeat such lists but to cite some experimental evidence from the field of advertising to show the importance of a few of the conditions of belief for success in advertising.

1. Belief is rarely the result of reasoning. One does not go through the processes of logic to establish his beliefs. If logic is used at all it is to justify a belief already established. A striking illustration of the separation of reasoning and belief is found in the case of the insane patient who firmly believed himself to be the son of a king, and yet whose reason was intact enough to enable him to solve complicated mathematical problems.

The advertising of the New Gillette razor offered a good opportunity for studying the relation between belief and reasoning. On May 16, 1921, the Gillette Razor Company announced "a new triumph of American inventive genius of startling interest to every man with a beard to shave." The advertisements state that the "fulcrum shoulder, overhanging cap and channeled guard" were the three innovations which made possible "for the first time in any razor, micrometric control of blade position." A diagram showed "how the blade is biflexed between overhanging cap and fulcrum shoulder. It is flexed once into the inside curve of the cap. This is the minor flexure—the curve for easy gliding, action and play of the wrist in shaving. It is flexed a second time—more sharply and in a shorter radius—by the grip of the overhanging cap the whole length of the fulcrum shoulder. This is the major flexure." This arrangement provided an exactness of adjustment to 1-1000 of an inch. Advertisements containing the above information and well illustrated were given to fifty seven men, college students and university graduates, together with a series of seven questions intended to test both their belief in the new razor and their understanding of it. The answers to these questions showed that all the students agreed that the new razor was better than the old one, and that they would rather pay $5.00 for the new one than $1.00 or $2.00 for the old one. In supporting their belief they were allowed to consult the advertisement as much as they wished. They quoted the "fulcrum shoulder, overhanging cap and channeled guard," which made possible "micrometric control of blade position," but not one of them could explain how the micrometric control was obtained or what advantage there would be in having such micrometric control. They believed that the "channel guard" was an improvement although they could not tell why it was an improvement. As to the importance of major and minor flexures they were entirely ignorant. Five minutes examination of an enlarged diagram of the new razor improved their understanding of the razor little—or not at all.

Here is a belief effective for the purpose of the advertiser in spite of the inability of the reader to support his belief with reason. This experiment is quoted not to show that the advertisement is poor, but merely to show that in advertising reasoning is not needed to create belief. Whether the space in the advertisement devoted to argument might have been more profitably filled, is however an interesting question.

2. It is not necessarily that which is true that is believed. The fact that a statement in an advertisement is true will not guarantee belief on the part of the readers of it. The truth may be too startling and surprising to be believed, and in some cases it might be more effective to tell half the truth than the whole truth. [...]

Thus far the negative side of the question has been presented. If belief in an advertisement does not depend upon the truth of the statements made and does not depend upon the reasoning of the reader, on what does it depend? To state the matter simply, we may say that ideas which are present in the mind and are not interfered with by any opposing ideas will be believed. This is merely a bare statement of the law of suggestion and to comply with it in advertising, conflicting ideas should be prevented from entering the mind. There are many conditions on which such undisturbed acceptance of ideas depends. Only three will be mentioned here.

1. The ideas aroused by an advertisement must not conflict too sharply with the reader's experience. Introspections volunteered by many of the 100 subjects who served in the experiments just described indicated that their past experiences with trunks, vacuum bottles and phonographs furnished conflicting ideas which the advertisements were not sufficiently powerful to overcome. This was especially true in the case of the phonograph advertisement where doubt was expressed in a large percentage of the cases.

An experimental study of an advertising campaign that failed showed clearly the need for complying with the conditions of belief. "Radior Products," a series of toilet preparations were introduced into this country by an English firm. The appeal contained in the advertising may be illustrated by the following quotation taken from one of the advertisements: "Radior is the magic new word in the book of beauty. It means the triumphant union of the finest complexion preparations with actual radium. Its content of radium works the miracle of nature. It purifies the skin, gives it the health to regain 1ts youthfulness and loveliness." The container of these preparations was represented as emanating rays which were very suggestive of bolts of lightning. These toilet preparations could not be sold—the campaign had failed.

Why? One possible reason for the failure was that the suggestion to apply radium on the skin for toilet purposes conflicted too sharply with people's opinions about radium. In order to discover what people believed about radium, a questionaire was carefully prepared in the form of a True-False test and submitted to 400 people, comprising a well-to-do, well-educated group, a group of average intelligence and financial standing and a special group of persons working in "Beauty Parlors." [...]

Nothing need be said here concerning the difference in the reactions of the different groups to the questionaire, except that the most intelligent group had the strongest reaction against radium-containing products, and that the "Beauty Parlor" workers had the least antagonism. Inquiry among these people indicated that some of them had confused radium with the violet ray which was at the time a very popular form of treatment with them. The results of the study of the questionaire may be summarized as follows:

Forty-eight per cent of the persons tested believed that radium is a deadly poison; 80 per cent believed that it causes burns when it comes in contact with the skin; 89 per cent believed that radium preparations should be used only upon the advice of a physician; 71 per cent said that they would not buy any kind of toilet preparation that they knew contained even a minute quantity of radium; 90 per cent thought of radium as a substance used for the treatment of cancer. The whole experiment may be summed up in the statement that about 70 per cent of all the replies indicated opinions unfavorable to radium-containing products as toilet preparations. The basis of this unfavorable reaction could easily be traced to the people's accumulated experiences of radium. Clippings of all articles dealing with radium and appearing in newspapers and magazines were collected for a short period. Practically all of them emphasized the harmful effects of radium and the dangers incurred in handling it, instead of any beneficial properties it might possess.

This is a clear case of the inability of an advertising campaign to overcome the resistance established by experience. To create a favorable attitude toward radium-containing products as toilet preparations by an educational campaign conducted in newspapers and magazines might conceivably have been possible. But it certainly would have been impracticable.

2. Ideas that are to create belief must come from an authoritative source. This is a well-known law of suggestion. The hypnotist can do nothing without his air of authority and the subject's recognition of it. We are accustomed to believe the statements made by a person in whom we have confidence,

and to believe what is printed in a medium which we consider authoritative. Even if there is conflict with one's own experience, he will sometimes accept the contrary experience of another person as a basis for belief if he have sufficient confidence in the other person. But even then the new experience may not be too conflicting. Advertisers have for years striven to develop an atmosphere of confidence and authority by all the devices at their command. The present experiment was intended to measure in a tentative fashion the degree of confidence which an advertisement can create in comparison with other forms of publication. I have compared the degree of belief or doubt aroused by the three advertisements previously described (namely Taylor Trunks, Stanley Vacuum Bottles and Edison Phonographs) with the belief aroused by essentially the same statements coming from a reputable journal. In order to make such a comparison, the facts stated in each advertisement were prepared in the form of a news item abstracted from an engineering magazine. One such abstract will illustrate the character of all. These abstracts were presented to a group of 100 persons of the same general character as those tested in the earlier experiments, but who knew nothing of those experiments or nothing of the purpose of the present experiment. Along with the abstract of each advertisement was a series of questions as nearly as possible like those used in the test with the advertisements. As far as we were able to ascertain, no one doubted the authenticity of the news abstracts. Instead of reporting the results of the three questionnaires in detail, it will be sufficient to compare for each of the three cases the number of replies indicating doubt in the advertisement, and doubt in the news item. [...]

In two of the cases it will be noted that there was greater confidence in the advertisement than in the news clipping, while in the third there was greater confidence in the news clipping. An examination of the three advertisements did not afford an entirely satisfactory explanation for the shift of belief in the case of the third advertisement. It seems safe to conclude from these records that although belief in certain advertisements may be low, they may carry at least as much authority in presenting a set of facts as can be conveyed by a news article. The doubt in the cases we have studied is the effect rather of conflict of ideas with experience, than the effect of the use of an unauthoritative medium of expression. Introspections volunteered by the subjects suggest that illustrations and especially photographs used in the advertisements tend to strengthen belief. Unless one suspects trickery, as some of our subjects did, looking at a picture ought to carry with it greater weight in establishing belief than merely reading printed matter. Even if

Mark Twain was right in advising that one believe only half that he sees and nothing that he hears, the advantage in favor of the picture is obvious.

3. There is a third important condition of belief, namely, that we tend to believe what arouses our desires, our fears and our emotions generally. I have no experimental evidence to offer in this connection, and know of none in the field of advertising. But evidence for the importance of this factor may be drawn from psychology. Wm. James has said, "A man who has no belief in ghosts by daylight will temporarily believe in them when alone at midnight, he feels his blood curdle at a mysterious sound or vision, his heart thumping and his legs impelled to flee." In strong emotion we might find the condition responsible for the belief in the bargain counter. The politician finds no difficulty in honestly believing what best fits in with his aspirations, while his opponent may as honestly believe the opposite and for a like reason. If one really wants a certain suit of clothes or an automobile which costs more than he should pay, he may honestly believe that he is making an economical purchase. Once a belief has been established m this way, logic and reasoning may be used to support it.

These three conditions of belief which I have described represent three important variables in the formula for advertising success. For most advertising situations they are unknown variables which may interact in a very complex manner. But they may be discovered by careful examination. That they are not always sought or discovered, is clear from the cases I have cited which were taken from advertising already used. Three questions might well be asked about every advertisement: (1) What adverse beliefs and experiences does it have to meet in the minds of consumers? (2) Will the authority which it wears by its mode of presentation or by the medium in which it appears enable it to create belief? (3) Does the appeal used arouse desires which will in turn create belief in the advertised article? These are human behavior questions that psychological methods will enable the advertiser to answer before the advertising is used as well as after the money has been spent upon broadcasting it.