



# ***The Great Manipulators: How Advertisers Learned to Make Us Desire Whatever They're Selling***

By Michael Glawson

*How did the ad industry grow from a handful of ad men into a \$500 billion global enterprise over the last century? By becoming followers of Sigmund Freud.*

To unpack the story of how the advertising industry became the most profitable practitioners of psychoanalysis, we need to begin by looking at the earliest print ads, and the basic underlying strategy they used, before seeing how the ideas of psychoanalysis totally transformed the world of advertising.

The earliest print ads worked in a way that would perhaps seem too blunt or even naive today. They sought to inspire customer devotion by using—or at least *seeming* to use—simple information to persuade customers to make a conscious, reasoned choice to buy a product, by convincing the viewer that the product would meet some specific need, and that was a good value for the money. These were originally crafted by corporate managers who had no special training in the principles or methods of consumer persuasion, since no one had ever really studied these topics. At the time of the earliest print ads of the 1800's, the print advertisement may not have even been a genre that the public recognized. Instead,

the ads likely seemed to readers similar to the the faux-journalistic “native advertisements” that crop up in print today. [hyperlink]

The basic philosophy that guided early advertisers was rooted in economists’ “common sense” conception of how the market worked: the belief that consumers purchase a product because 1) it satisfies clear practical needs, and 2) because the benefit of having the product outweighed the cost of paying for it. On this philosophy, businesses simply need to convince consumers that their product would satisfy some need for a fair price, and they would buy. Advertising seemed simple, and so even the largest companies budgeted very little for advertising, and the work of designing and placing ads was just left to lower level business managers.

This success of this straight-forward, commonsense advertising strategy is hard to gauge, given the lack of solid data about ad circulation and product performances. But if the growth rate of the ad industry is any indication, companies generally found ads to be a good investment, and soon the initial handful of New York “ad men” multiplied and divided, creating companies of their own, whose product was the ad itself. These agencies competed with one another, seeking to refine their techniques as they researched, and experimented—often wildly—with new approaches to making advertising images.

By the early 20th century, advertising had become an industry in its own right. It was a period marked by massive, and totally unanticipated political, ideological, and economic shifts that were taking place all over the world. Events like the First World War, the collapse of the American economy, and the ensuing Great Depression were catastrophes at such a scale that they challenged our faith in humanity, and our understanding of how societies operated. No one’s beliefs were shaken more than the economists and businessmen. For evidence was continually mounting against the beliefs that were the philosophical foundation of the Western free market: the belief that humans were predictably rational, and that people’s choices—to spend money, or vote, or do anything else—were the result of rationally weighing costs and benefits, and choosing reasonably.

No industry dealt more directly with these ideas than the advertising industry. When advertisers worked to appeal to our rational minds by touting the virtues and value of a product, they were clearly expressing faith that the public was made up of rational consumers. But a world war that devastated all its members, global market panics, and the eventual collapse of entire national economies were impossible to explain as the results of collective behavior of rational individuals.<sup>1</sup> It was becoming clear that there were other motivating forces—forces that operate beneath our conscious, rational thoughts—that were responsible for driving humans by the millions to behave so contrary to economists’ idea of the “rational consumer”.

The discipline of economics had developed with the aim of describing how rational individual behavior scaled up into the behavior of entire societies. And just as economists had begun to suspect there were forces driving human action that

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<sup>1</sup> Curtis, Adam. *The Power of Nightmares*, (2004).

their discipline simply could not explain, another, very different discipline was beginning to describe the non-rational forces that drive human action. This discipline, developed by an Austrian doctor named Sigmund Freud, was called "Psychoanalysis". Psychoanalysis recognized that we are driven not only by reason, but just as often by a swarm of desires, emotions, fantasies, and insecurities that operated behind the veil of conscious rationality.

As the ideas of psychoanalysis spread beyond the medical and academic communities, the notion of our non-rational drives soon gained the interest of corporations, who were eager to find ways to harness them to promote products. Just as this new corporate interest was gaining momentum, its reigns were grasped by a cunning young consultant named Eddie Bernays. Bernays, who would eventually become known as a father of modern advertising, had a keen awareness of our non-rational drives. And so he should, for this interest had been nurtured from youth by his uncle, Sigmund Freud.<sup>2</sup>

Bernays' client list is a roster of the most profitable ventures in American history, among them the American Tobacco Company, Proctor and Gamble, Cartier, as well as political clients like Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover. His campaigns convinced women to take up smoking, prompted the CIA overthrow of Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz Guzman, and made bacon and eggs the all-American breakfast food.

Bernays clearly knew how to sway the public. He and the advertisers who quickly adopted his approach did not bother touting practical value, but by portraying products as symbols of satisfaction for our deepest, non-rational desires and fantasies. Car advertisements ignored facts about excellent gas mileage and reliability to focus on artfully presenting the car as a symbol of sexual virility, or freedom from the slavery of work and family life. Coke was no longer a tasty beverage good for quenching thirst, but became "the real thing" that we have been wanting, the satisfaction to our need to experience authenticity.

This new advertising strategy was given even more momentum because it seemed the perfect solution to a growing fear that had gripped economists and businessmen: the worry that the day was approaching when consumers would have bought all the products they really needed, that producers would eventually supply everything consumers demanded. If human needs were stable, well-defined, and satiable, it seemed inevitable that an efficient market was headed toward a day when, at least in the case of many products, everyone would have bought all that they needed.

The eventual solution to this worry lay on the shoulders of advertisers, who must use their newly acquired psychoanalytic skills to cleverly manipulate the public's desires so that even if the day came when we had bought all we needed, we would still go on buying. This strategy is perfectly summarized by Lehman

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<sup>2</sup> "Edward Bernays, 'Father of Public Relations' And Leader in Opinion Making, Dies at 103". *The New York Times*. March 10, 1995.

Brothers executive Paul Mazur, in a 1927 piece he wrote for the *Harvard Business Review*. In it, Mazur counsels his fellow marketers and ad men:

*"We must shift America from a needs, to a desires culture. People must be trained to desire, to want new things even before the old had been entirely consumed. We must shape a new mentality in America. Man's desires must overshadow his needs."*<sup>3</sup>

In order for the market to keep churning out goods that would satisfy public desires, Mazur says, the market must not only create new products, it must generate in the public new desires as well. Mazur struck a similar tone a year later when he reflected that "Human nature very conveniently presents a variety of strings upon which an appreciative sales manager can play fortissimo". What might these strings be? Mazur identifies a few: "threats, beauty, sparkle" and "fear...".<sup>4</sup>

The advertising industry proved a faithful disciple of both Bernays and Mazur. Advertisements grew more imaginative and psychoanalytically sophisticated in the way they pulled the strings of our sub-conscious to generate desires that surpassed our needs. Consider, for example, the shift in strategy that took place between the two ads above, and those below from the same two companies. The first pair lauds the products' objective qualities (e.g. it floats, or has antiseptic properties, or it is modestly priced), and implies that we should purchase the product because it will satisfy some clear need we have (to wash our hands and bodies). The second pair is much different, a product of the new philosophy championed by Bernays and Mazur. These ads avoid mentioning the product's actual qualities altogether, and instead present soap as a symbol of sexual fulfillment, or a solution to one's insecurity or longing for beauty. Advertisers were learning to identify and exploit the deep desires of the consumer, the ones we hide and suppress in our everyday lives, the ones we push below the threshold of conscious thought.

Any sub-conscious desire or fear could be a gold mine, if only the advertiser could find a way to present their product as a symbol of its fulfillment. It did not matter how unrelated the product was to the actual concern, because the ads worked below the level of what we normally consciously reasoned about. Sticking with our example of ads for a mundane product like soap, advertisers honed in on some deep emotional concern—in this case, the female viewer's fear of spousal abandonment—and simply presented their product as a means of satisfaction, regardless of the fact that a moment's *rational* thought made it clear how preposterous their basic suggestion was—that switching soap brands could save a marriage.

It is unclear to what extent this fear was already common among wives, but sociologist Stephanie Coontz offers five significant reasons why many women of the

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Mazur, *Harvard Business Review* 1927, as cited by Norbert Haring and Niall Douglas in *Economists and the Powerful* (London: Anthem, 2012), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

time would have feared abandonment.<sup>5</sup> First, for a woman at the time, losing her marriage meant losing all economic stability. Second, until as late as the 1950s, four-fifths of Americans felt that singleness was a sign that a person was “sick, neurotic, or immoral”, an attitude that intensified the stigma borne by the divorcee. Third, a divorced woman had generally poor prospects of remarriage. Fourth, the ability to dissolve a marriage lay almost entirely with the husband up to the early to mid 19th century, and a woman’s power to resist being divorced was very weak, making marital abandonment a uniquely female fear. Finally, the popular attitudes toward male and female infidelity were generally forgiving toward the man, yet tended to demonize the woman. One such ad gives an explicit warning to any “careless” women who might have forgotten to worry about their husband’s attraction wandering away from them, and toward other women with more youthful appearances:

[Fig. 1]

*Warning—to careless youth—to discouraged age—to women fo all ages who know...but too often forget, the lure of a soft, seductive skin.*

*Don't ignore it! Never forget it! Remember—there is a simple, easy way to guard the inviting skin of youth...to win back the charm that you may think you are losing as you grow older.*

This style of predatory psychoanalytic advertisement preyed upon the viewer’s deep, irrational insecurities, by conjuring paranoid images of what others might actually be thinking, or even saying about her behind her back. This eventually crystallized into a distinct genre called “Whisper Copy”—ads whose “copy ” (i.e. text) advertised products through images of whispered gossip about the viewer.<sup>6</sup> No doubt, there were a dozen ads for every conceivable insecurity, and it was simply a matter of trial and error to find which of the public’s insecurities were the most profitable. As it turns out, women’s fear that others were offended by her body odor was a gold mine. Historian Julia Sivulka sums up the ad strategy as “present[ing] perspiration as a social faux pas that nobody would *directly* tell you was responsible for your unpopularity, but which they were happy to gossip behind

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<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage: From Obedience to Intimacy—or, How Love Conquered Marriage*, by Stephanie Coontz (New York: Penguin, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> “Lasker”, by James B. Twitchwell in John McDonough and Karen Egolf, *The Advertising Age, Encyclopedia Of Advertising* (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2003), 919.

your back about”.<sup>7</sup> The conclusion to be drawn was obvious to the viewer: “If you want to keep a man, you'd better not smell”.<sup>8</sup>

Surely, these ads preyed upon the sub-conscious of their viewers, but did they achieve Mazur's goal of creating entirely new desires that would drive use to consume beyond our needs?

In this particular case, they may have indeed succeeded. For there is little evidence that body odor was a serious social concern for many prior to its exploitation through whisper copy. The first mass market deodorant, Odorono, was an abject market failure until it was rebranded as a curative for “excessive perspiration” rather than body odor, and a 1919 survey found that while nearly every woman knew effective deodorants were widely available, about 70% of them simply “felt they had no need” for the product.

Body odor was a small realization of the economic nightmare mentioned above—a point at which the public overwhelmingly felt that their needs had been fully satisfied, and so the market had nothing left to offer them. But advertisers saved the day, achieving Mazur's goal of creating new desires by using Bernays' method of exploiting consumers' sub-conscious feelings, in this case, by preying again on a woman's fear of being alone. Here is the text from an ad from the period, for Mum deodorant:

[Fig. 2]

*Wake up, Mary! It's a grand old world, and you're missing it!*

*You're a pretty girl, Mary, and you're smart about most things. But you're just a bit stupid about yourself.*

*You love a good time—but you seldom have one. Evening after evening you sit at home alone...*

*There are so many pretty Marys in the world who never seem to sense the real reason for their aloneness.*

*In this smart modern age, it's against the code for a girl (or a man, either) to carry the repellent odor of underarm perspiration on clothing and person.*

*It's a fault which never fails to carry its own punishment—unpopularity. And justly. For it is a fault which can be corrected in just half a minute—with Mum!*

It is tempting to conclude that campaigns like this one are what transformed deodorant from a product the vast majority of the public felt they had no need for, into a product that most of us use every single day. The truth, however, is that the ads did not change the product at all. They changed the public—from one that felt just fine without the product, to one that feared going a day without it—by

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<sup>7</sup> Julian Sivulka, as quoted in Sarah Everts, “How Advertisers Convinced Americans They Smelled Bad”, *Smithsonian Magazine*, (August, 2012). Last accessed April 7, 2018 <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-advertisers-convinced-americans-they-smelled-bad-12552404/>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

exploiting individuals' fear of rejection, and framing the product as the means of avoiding humiliation, rejection, and loneliness.

This would prove to be the advertiser's most powerful tool yet, for they had discovered they could actually cultivate entirely new attitudes in the public by simply depicting them, attitudes that may not even have existed in the first place. Thus, advertisements can create a kind of feedback loop through which social attitudes and feelings that are *represented* as reality actually *become* real. In this case, by presenting a scene where body odor is a topic of gossip, viewers are invited to reproduce the scene itself, along with the attitudes and other personal aspects of those pictured, in a process philosopher René Girard calls *mimesis*.<sup>9</sup> Just look at how another deodorant advertisement of the time pivots from the female consumer to the male viewer, not to convince him to buy, but to invite him to feel disgust toward the odor of a woman's body:

[Fig. 3]

*Remember, men avoid girls who offend!...*

*"Never again for me, Tom! Janet's a peach of a girl and a swell dancer, but some things get a man down. Too bad somebody doesn't tip her off. Other girls know how to avoid underarm odor."*

These invitations to adopt new attitudes could actually *change* the public's values in ways that do not align with our interests, but still benefit corporations whose survival depends on their ability to continuously mold the psychology of the public, to keep us consuming, to make sure we feel perpetual need, and to make us believe that products—in reality totally mundane things—are the means of deep satisfaction. It is this power, to shape the consumer, that fueled the growth from a handful of New York ad men into an industry that can spend half a trillion dollars a year manipulating the public's psychology, often against our own interests.

There is no hope of toppling the ad industry today, and perhaps there are good reasons we would not want to. But if its history tells us anything, it is that we have to take a very critical stance toward advertising images, paying attention to the values and attitudes they leverage, the fears and fantasies that they play upon. For we have no reason to think that the most profitable ads will be the ones that offer any benefit to us, the consumers, and every reason to believe that, right now, advertisers are seeking out even more effective ways to exploit our deepest psychological vulnerabilities. The benefit for the corporations is monetary profit, but, to see the world through the lenses advertisers push on us, we lose more than just money. We give up some of the most intimate pieces of our own way of experiencing the world. Like the belief that body odor can be kind of sexy.

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<sup>9</sup> Gabriel Andrade, "Rene Girard" in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Last modified 2018, accessed June 27, 2018, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/girard/>.

# Figures

Figure 1

**"His eyes don't stray to other faces since I took my beauty expert's advice"**

*Keep that Schoolgirl Complexion*

**PALMOLIVE**

Small text on the left side of the advertisement describes the benefits of Palmolive soap, mentioning its ability to keep the skin soft and clear, and its use by many famous women.

Figure 3

**"THERE'S ONE GIRL I'LL NEVER DANCE WITH AGAIN!"**

**So there's plenty of room and room for the girl who uses MUM**

**AFTER-SHAVE FRESHENS SOON-FABES WITHOUT MUM**

**MUM**

**TAKES THE ODOR OUT OF PERSPIRATION**

The advertisement includes several columns of text. The top section is a testimonial from a man who claims that using Mum deodorant has made him so attractive that he is no longer being danced with. The middle section describes the product's benefits, such as its ability to keep the skin fresh and clear after a shave. The bottom section features a testimonial from a woman who says that using Mum has helped her maintain a clear complexion.

Figure 2

**WAKE UP, Mary!**

**MUM TAKES THE ODOR OUT OF PERSPIRATION**

The advertisement features a large headline and a central image of a woman in a dark dress. Below the image is a testimonial from a woman named Mary, who describes how she discovered Mum deodorant and how it has helped her feel more confident. The bottom of the advertisement features the product name and a small image of the Mum deodorant container.