

Interacting With Advertising

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There's a famous saying (attributed to John Wanamaker, the retailing pioneer): "Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is, I don't know which half." And while that's still true, we propose this corollary: Half our encounters with advertising are dripping with evil; the trouble is, we don't know which half.

Our culture at large, and interaction-focused professions specifically, seem to be enthralled by advertising. Our reactions range from bemused tolerance—an eye-rolling "What will they come up with next?"—to giddy hilarity over such antics as headvertising (writing or even, yikes, tattooing on the forehead, in exchange for financial

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compensation), or potential lunar-surface advertisements. The TV show "Mad Men" has made the advertising profession chic again, but with the narrative in a bygone decade, we don't have to consider the impact of these mad men on our lives. People are being paid to put advertisements on their forehead? An entire show about advertising? Shouldn't we be outraged?

But bombast makes for great entertainment; the bigger the posturing, the more gruesome satisfaction we feel in the extremity of our own times. At the peak of dot-com irrational exuberance, Half.com (remember them?) paid Halfway, Ore., \$75,000 and donated 20 computers for the town to change its name to Half.com, Oregon. Crazy stuff, right? But in 1950, Hot Springs, N.M., renamed itself Truth or Consequences and was awarded hosting privileges

for the radio quiz show of the same name. While we like to imagine we're going to hell in a handbasket, the only thing new under the sun may be that the handbasket is serving Google ads on its embedded plasma display. The underlying technology may change, but the absurdity stays the same.

As interaction designers refine their skills to better infuse usability and usefulness, the same approaches are being used to trick or persuade us into consuming advertising messages. Using what we would call a forcing function, hotels wrap a cardboard advertisement around the TV remote, and even though we immediately extract it for use, the cleaning staff ensures that the remote is back in its commercial sleeve the next day. Instead of making every bit of text readable, we're now regularly exposed

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to (and ignoring) “mouseprint”—the faint, low-contrast, tiny type that rapidly disclaims (or clarifies), “Professional driver. Do not attempt,” or exhaustively documents rights surrendered in an EULA, or end-user license agreement (“By submitting, posting, or displaying the content you give Google a perpetual, irrevocable, worldwide, royalty-free, and nonexclusive license to reproduce, adapt, modify, translate, publish, publicly perform, publicly display and distribute any Content which you submit, post or display on or through, the Services.”) Elsewhere, billboard and sign designers leverage the colors, layout, and typeface of wayfinding signage to promote wares in giant, distracting form.

Meanwhile, we feel a subtle irony in advertising. Red Bull gives you wings, and SoyJoy helps you see the bright side of things. Of

course, neither of those products literally does either, but somehow we don’t react negatively to the false claims.

Much has been written about the role of branding and marketing in Barack Obama’s presidential campaign. One aspect to consider is the viral behaviors that emerged on social networking sites: people changing their middle name on Facebook to “Hussein” in order to normalize the name; people changing their avatar on Twitter to a portrait of Obama (often the one created by Shepard Fairey, a master meme-maker); and the pre-election phenomenon of “donating” one’s Facebook status to remind others to vote. We may never know where these ideas came from, within or outside the campaign. Something as supremely viral and participatory as the Obama campaign may have essentially transcended traditional boundaries, thus

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blurring the lines even further between politics and advertising.

But as we are supposedly increasingly enlightened and empowered as consumers, where do we draw the line with what advertisers are allowed to do? A couple of years ago I was back in my hometown of Toronto. Walking down Bloor St. late one night, we were invited into the cinema for a free screening at a documentary film festival. The emcee introduced the movie and thanked the sponsor, then introduced the director for a few questions, and then rolled the film. We got the usual film-festival promo trailer, a few acknowledgments screens, and then an ad for Cadillac, the sponsor. The audience began to boo. And while I wouldn't normally do this, I shouted out against the booing, "You're seeing a free movie, so shut the \$@^& up!" The exchange (watch an ad, see a movie) seemed perfectly

reasonable, and the booing seemed more like hipsters on autopilot ("advertising = teh suck – pwn3d") than a considered objection. Sure, I have all the latest ad-blocking software in Firefox, but I'm not joining the Billboard Liberation Front or subscribing to Adbusters. I'm happy to limit my exposure but don't generally need to become an activist either.

Yet the first time I found myself on an airplane where the tray table was plastered with an ad, I reacted angrily and peeled it off. I was responding to a previously virgin part of the service—one that I paid dearly to utilize—being sold and sullied.

Of course, advertising as an effort often lives entirely outside the delivery of the product promise. Witness Microsoft spending copious amounts of money on an extensive advertising

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campaign to staunch the failure of Vista. Mightn't that money have been better spent to fix Vista's shortcomings and convoluted line logic? How can Target continue to get away with aspirational advertising about the emotional impact of design while the in-store experience is such a complete failure (and many of the products are of such poor quality?). When advertising uses truthiness to

tell a story we want to hear, we'll grant it endless permission to be in our face. Apple's ubiquitous advertising—hot colors, black silhouette, white earbuds—demonstrates that wonderfully. Until then, I'm remaining vigilant against the noxious invaders, staying curious about the delightful informers, and hoping for savvy judgment so I can tell the difference.

Steve Portigal is the founder of Portigal Consulting, a boutique agency that helps companies discover and act on new insights about their customers and themselves.

Steve has been studying customer behavior and corporate culture for more than a decade and has advised dozens of clients on the creation of new products, services, and innovation processes.

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