**[The Pleasures of Persuasion](http://reason.com/archives/1999/08/02/the-pleasures-of-persuasion)**

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Obituaries for advertising pioneer David Ogilvy, who died last Wednesday, emphasized his respect for the consumer. "The consumer is not a moron. She is your wife," was a popular Ogilvy refrain. "His greatest legacy," declared the Associated Press, "was an approach to advertising that assumed the intelligence of the consumer."

How, then, do we explain the lady in the bath–or our reaction to her?

She appears in a classic Ogilvy ad, featured in his 1983 book Ogilvy on Advertising. Covered with suds, she holds a bar of Dove soap aloft with her right hand and a large, black telephone receiver with her left. And boy, does she gush on that phone. "Darling, I’m having the most extraordinary experience..." reads the headline, followed in slightly smaller italic type by "I’m head over heels in DOVE!" The 36 short sentences that follow include nine exclamation points, 20 words or phrases italicized for emphasis, and four repetitions of "darling." The soap, our heroine exclaims to her absent love, makes her feel like "the most pampered, most spoiled, girliest girl in the world." She can hardly wait to take another bath tomorrow.

Read with today’s eyes, the ad is quite insulting, but it is also hilarious. It is so unabashedly over-the-top that only the most irony-deprived could find it truly offensive. The 1990s reaction is to puncture it, to make jokes at its expense. In the age of Monica, the story cries out for reinterpretation as soft-core phone sex ("Well, darling, I’m all over cream. Just imagine, cream tip to toe. Arms. Legs. All of me!" says the ad) or a desperate cry for attention. Anything but a rationally based, emotionally persuasive pitch for soap.

Our cynical reaction may in fact be the greatest legacy of Ogilvy and his fellow mid-century "ad men." In their quest for perfect persuasion, they created a media dynamic that made consumers increasingly immune to the ad men’s favorite techniques. Yet that very learning process undermined the arguments of advertising’s most prominent critics.

To Ogilvy, good advertising followed clear rules. The Dove ad had a big photo, a long headline, a picture of the product, and plenty of text, because those were the established formula for success. Amid her gushing, the bathing beauty articulates the soap’s practical benefits, because Ogilvy believed that ads should always tell consumers why they should buy the product. (No "just do it" for him.) He also believed in scientific research. "I used the word ‘darling’ in the headline for this ad because a psychologist had tested hundreds of words for their emotional impact and ‘darling’ had come out top," he wrote.

This simple, static model fed criticism not only of advertising but of the market economy it served. If consumers are so predictable and so easily manipulated, where is their freedom of action? Exchange isn’t really voluntary under these circumstances. Persuasion has become a kind of force. The more the advertiser knows about what consumers want, and the more desires the product and packaging seek to fulfill, the more coercive the force.

That was the basic premise of Vance Packard’s best-selling 1957 book The Hidden Persuaders. It recounts in ominous detail how merchandisers use psychology and social science to probe "people’s subsurface desires, needs, and drives...to find their points of vulnerability." These "depth merchandisers," Packard warned, were invading our minds and destroying our wills. By discovering unarticulated wants, such as the desire for novelty or for warm human contact, these diabolical manipulators could sell things consumers didn’t really need, such as colorful phones or impulse long-distance calls. When a cocky ad agency executive claimed in 1942 that psychology offered the promise not only of understanding people but of "controlling their behavior," Packard believed him.

Packard’s stories offer an intriguing peek into the mindset of mid-century advertising and social science. But even the 1980 reissue of the book reads as anachronistically–and ridiculously–as the Dove ad. It envisions consumers as passive dupes who never catch on, even to the most obvious manipulations. It assumes that serving intangible desires is a kind of fraud. It imposes a standard of "rational" needs that exemplifies the worst sort of technocratic elitism.

By treating emotional factors as suspect, Packard’s prescriptions would make consumers worse off. He worried, for instance, that the "depth probers" had found that consumers didn’t like dealing with intimidating institutions. Fear of the stern disapproval of traditional bankers was driving borrowers to more expensive loan companies. Young housewives were afraid of revealing their ignorance to butchers. When researchers discovered these fears, banks and supermarkets attracted business by promising a friendly atmosphere and training their employees to be nice. All of which struck Packard as ominous. The research, he said, exploited customers’ fears.

It’s hard for a contemporary observer to take Packard’s concerns seriously. Aren’t friendly bankers better than stern ones? What’s wrong with selling toothpaste to get rid of morning breath rather than just for dental hygiene? What sort of conspiratorial mind would find "Reach out and touch someone" a crime against individual autonomy?

It is hard nowadays to understand how anyone could conceive of consumers as so powerless–or of advertising as so threatening. If we don’t like the ads, we turn the page or hit the remote control. The result is intense pressure for advertisers to make not just their products but their pitches appealing. Today’s consumers, and the people who study them, are more likely to emphasize the pleasures of persuasion.

Consider the recent book, The 100 Best TV Commercials. It’s very existence assumes that consumers are not victimized by ads but intrigued by them; like other forms of persuasion, ads can also be entertainment. Author Bernice Kanner begins with an explicit swipe at Packard, recounting how she once volunteered as the subject of psychological research for a shampoo company. She let social scientists probe her innermost thoughts about her hair, and it didn’t bother her a bit.

"Rather than seeing commercials or the research that shapes them as insidious, I confess, I see them as artful–a no-bones-about-it reflection of our times," writes Kanner. Advertising, in this contemporary assessment, is an interesting craft that we as savvy consumers can appreciate.

Kanner isn’t alone. A lot of consumers actively enjoy advertising, especially fashion print ads and clever TV commercials. The nostalgic cable channel TVLand features not only vintage shows but also vintage commercials. Both Nike and Adidas delighted fans with their funny ads during the recent women’s soccer playoffs. Commercial parodies and satirical allusions are a staple of comedy from "Saturday Night Live" to "The Simpsons."

This shift is partly generational. Americans born since World War II have grown up in a media-saturated environment. From childhood, we have developed a sort of advertising literacy, which combines appreciation for technique with skepticism about motives. We respond to ads with at least as much rhetorical intelligence as we apply to any other form of persuasion. We can enjoy ads, scorn them, or be moved by them. We can also accept "meaningless" product attributes–Budweiser’s silly frogs, Absolut’s playful graphics, Nike’s celebration of achievement, the iMac’s bright colors–as legitimate differentiators. We don’t demand the "rationality" of New Coke, which did great in taste tests but deprived consumers of the emotional resonances of the classic flavor.

In our media-savvy age, consumers are neither morons nor puritans. We are active participants in the exchange with producers and persuaders. We decide not only which products but which meanings to adopt–and which to reject. The Packard model is largely dead.

This widespread media literacy informs academic cultural studies. Although the discipline’s practitioners mostly see themselves as leftists, their approaches tend to overthrow the old story of exploitation and trickery. Instead, they emphasize audience "agency." Some scholars study how fan communities rearrange and add to the characters and stories offered by mass media. Others emphasize the way we define personal identities by selecting symbols to associate with, many of which are commercial.

The result is a vision of consumers as informed, self-directed actors. We do not simply absorb media images passively. We examine them, rework them, and turn them to serve our own needs. This vision is deeply threatening to traditional leftist views of commerce.

"It is a surprisingly short walk from the cult-studs’ active-audience theorizing to the most undiluted sort of free-market orthodoxy," frets cultural critic Thomas Frank in his magazine The Baffler. With their reverence for the self-directed consumer, he argues, the cultural studies mavens have betrayed the leftist cause. They are lending support to the corporate enemy, and even training graduate students who wind up doing market research. Frank finds them contemptible, and dangerous. To believe in "active, intelligent audiences," he writes, "makes criticism of the market philosophically untenable."

Unfortunately for Frank, that belief has decades of widespread experience behind it. Audiences have grown ever more sophisticated. Advertising that respects the consumer’s intelligence is no one man’s legacy. It’s what the market demands.

**In at least 25 lines of copy take a position more or less FOR or AGAINST Postrel's thesis. First, briefly state her main theme or themes, picking out specific passages in the text for substantiation. Second, react to her position by citing two or more print or broadcast campaigns or individual ads that support your agreement or disagreement. (If it's print and you can attach the appropriate ad(s), super!)**