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Book Reviews

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Powers of Persuasion: The Inside Story of British Advertising

Winston Fletcher
OUP 2008; 286pp; Hardback; £16.99
ISBN: 978-0199228010

Above-the-line

The inside story of British advertising is exactly what this book is not. It is, as one might more reasonably have expected from the author, one insider's view of British *display* advertising from 1951 (with a brief backward look at earlier times) to the present day, decade by decade. This Fletcher concedes on page 4: this book focuses 'almost exclusively on prime media: above-the-line display advertising'. He disclaims any view of this sector as 'more important or prestigious' (in which case why 'prime' media?), emphasising instead the impossibility of also encompassing below-the-line activities 'in one book of reasonable length'.

Internet largely missing

The internet gets a brief, and inadequate, look-in towards the end of the book; Fletcher's main interest in it seems to be a worry (which he mostly discounts) about whether or not, or to what extent, it will replace display advertising in the traditional TV and print media, on which the book concentrates.

An easy, entertaining read

That said, this is an easy book to read. It is written in an engaging style, and it includes numerous entertaining pen portraits of the characters who adorn its pages — some of them persons of international repute, or notoriety (Roy Thomson, Maurice and Charles Saatchi, Rupert Murdoch), others widely known in the business community (David Ogilvy, Martin Sorrell), and still others familiar chiefly to the small advertising coterie around whom the book centres. It contains, too, a convincing analysis of some of the most striking campaigns from each decade.

A social history

One could almost describe this book as a history of our times, as experienced by an ad-man. Thus, in the 1950s we get the struggle over the introduction of commercial television, in the 1960s the growing pressure to ban cigarette advertising, in the 1970s the birth of the ASA and the Advertising Standards Board of Finance, in the 1980s the great privatisation campaigns of the Thatcher government, in the 1990s the growth of globalisation, and in the new century the arrival of the internet. Not to mention the part played by display advertising in successive general elections, remarkable more for the sums of money spent than for the observable results achieved.

A public record

So why should marketers in general, and direct marketers in particular, read this book? Its chief and most obvious charm is that it throws a new and glancing light on five and a half decades of public and semi-public events, some or all of which we have all lived through, and many of which affect us all to this day. I would be surprised if any marketing reader did not come away a little wiser about how his or her world of 2008 came about.

Creativity vs. effectiveness

But a better reason is the way in which, throughout his narrative, Fletcher interweaves major questions still of import for all of us. Perhaps the biggest of all is: Does advertising work? And tied up with this is the distinction — sometimes almost a war — between creativity and effectiveness. The prime example given of a superbly creative but wholly ineffective campaign is that for Strand cigarettes ('You are never lonely with a Strand'). One gets the impression that Fletcher's head votes for effectiveness, but his heart for creativity.

Inconsistencies

Whatever the truth of that, his judgments are moderate, and he does not seek to impose his views on the reader. Nevertheless, there are inconsistencies: Fletcher insists that advertising (display advertising of course) works, and can be proved to do so. ('To-day nobody who knows a jot about advertising questions whether it works.') However, he also says 'If banning cigarette advertising deterred people from smoking I would endorse it unreservedly. But there is no evidence the ban has made a jot of difference'. Now, if you believe that advertising (with rare individual exceptions, like the Strand ad) works, then surely you must also believe that some people at least are persuaded to smoke by cigarette ads? Alternatively, if you believe that cigarette ads make no difference to the amount of smoking, then surely there must be some question mark over the effectiveness of display advertising?

Ironically, the claim that advertising works is made most vehemently by its enemies — from Aneurin Bevan to Shirley Williams and Roy Hattersley, to Margaret Beckett — while the tobacco and alcohol advertisers, and the sellers of junk food, piously proclaim (in public) that it has no effect at all on smoking or drinking or obesity.

The retail experience

On the other side of the argument, as Fletcher reveals, stood for many years the major retailers — M&S, John Lewis, Waitrose, BHS — whose philosophy was that advertising merely reduced the retailers' ability to offer high-quality goods at competitive prices. The dam was breached by Sainsbury's in the early 1980s, followed sheep-like by the others.

The truth probably lies, as so often, in the middle: some display ads are effective (sometimes even cost-effective); of these, a lesser number can be demonstrated to be so, more or less conclusively. A small number are observably ineffective, while for a much larger number (the great majority?) there is little, often no, really hard evidence.

Market research and tracking

The debate about effectiveness also brings in an account of the rise of market research and testing within ad agencies in the 1960s, account planning in the 1970s, and tracking and other forms of campaign evaluation from the 1970s on, followed by the start of the IPA Effectiveness Awards in the early 1980s. It is of course tempting for a

direct marketer to feel smug in the knowledge that there is no need for a debate over whether any direct campaign has worked or not: the methodology produces its own answers to this question as a by-product. This is not quite true: some of the effects (mostly the negative effects) of direct campaigns are not measured, and travel round the universe to hit us on the back of the head at a later date. Thus, unrestrained telemarketing has generated a backlash evident in the mushrooming MPS list, and will end by killing the telephone as a marketing medium; email is making strides in the same direction; renewed efforts to totally ban the commercial use of the over-exploited electoral register seem likely to be successful. We are the victims of our own excess.

What is advertising for?

The other major theme that surfaces on occasions throughout the book, without ever being completely addressed, is: what is advertising for? Fletcher quotes, with apparent approval, Beveridge in 1951: ‘... those who conduct advertising shall take service to the consumer as their over-riding purpose ...’. But Fletcher is too close to the real world to be taken in by this pious nonsense. The purpose of advertising is, directly or indirectly, to sell things to the profit of the advertiser. And it is precisely because this drive is not at all times 100 per cent consistent with the interests of the consumer that the tiresome regulation of advertising is necessary.

Fletcher deals also with the final demise of the old commission-based system of payment for agency work — which he aptly describes as ‘a genteel conspiracy to rip off advertisers’ — a demise that should by now have put an end to the old out-dated distinction between above- and below-the-line. With the ending of commissions, where now is the line?

Holding companies

The book ends with a questioning of the purpose and value of the holding companies into whose maws so many of the familiar names of advertising agencies have disappeared in recent years. Fletcher is deeply sceptical of this trend, and prophesies its ultimate collapse.

This book is, above all, a paean to British creativity in display advertising — pre-eminent in the 1960s and 1970s, and holding its own since. It’s worth reading about, and celebrating. I suppose we must still await the arrival of some polymath who can give us a real history of advertising, with some understanding of how display and direct advertising do, and can, influence each other. Meanwhile, do read this book: it won’t tell you how to write better copy, or how to get the best space rates, or how to be a successful agency head, but it links up a lot of bits of history — and it’s great fun.

Robin Fairlie Hon F IDM

How Public Service Advertising Works

Edited by Judie Lannon

Published by WARC (2008) in association with COI and IPA; 288pp;
Hardback; £33.99

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For this issue of your learned journal, your reviewer was asked to scrutinise one among a flurry of new ‘guides to integrated marketing’. Wading through treacle-like chapters, a mood of ‘anodyne-paradigm’ paralysis was setting in. Stolid (*sic*) theory, sure, but devoid of real-life case material and certainly no pulse-quickenning synergic insights to inspire even the most ardent media-neutral planner! Hardly material worthy of commendation in these pages.

And then a brown package arrived on my desk ... from my contact in the Cabinet Office (I’ve always wanted to say that). In it was a complimentary copy of *How public service advertising works*. A quick email to your editors and integration was consigned to yesterday, usurped by the social marketing revolution of today. My commendation of this excellent publication follows ...

If you haven’t already noticed, *social marketing* is the new buzz, the new *relationship management*, the alternative *centricity*. Except we’re talking citizens, not customers. Society is seemingly haemorrhaging with the wounds and debilitations of our self-centred, self-satisfying lifestyles. So much so that COI public service communications, designed to encourage and cajole us citizens into behaving appropriately, collectively command the biggest direct marketing budget, and one of the largest advertising budgets, in the UK.

Taxpayers continue to argue the merits of expending their hard-given money on government-orchestrated advertising, but there’s no argument that social marketing — and specifically, public sector advertising within it — employs cutting-edge marketing thinking and some of the most innovative creativity and ingenious media planning around. It has to. The challenge is that big; the target audience is that inured to being told what to do; and the price of failure is distressing.

How public service advertising works was commissioned by the COI and published by WARC. Its 14 chapters are built around 39 public service advertising cases submitted to the IPA Effectiveness Awards. These are presented in mini case history style, wedged into a raw treatise of best practice social marketing and commentary authored by those at the very coalface.

The book’s message is poignant, yet stimulating; depressing, but compelling; almost resigned yet still evangelistic; embattled but determined. It provides sharp marketing insight, dissecting the extreme challenges of changing social behaviour through communications. But while specifically — and successfully — revealing the components of best practice public service advertising, there’s much here for any advertiser and for every marcomms professional to learn. Indeed, your

**Social marketing,
the COI, and
public service
communications**

39 Case studies

**Transferability of
learning**

reviewer refutes the suggestion in the foreword that public service advertising is a unique challenge. Yes, it is often at the extreme end of the communications cline, but all marcomms are intended to change behaviour to some degree and to elicit action to some effect. And that is why the learning in this book *is* transferable.

Measuring outcomes

There are chapters exploring both how to generate positive behaviours and how to reduce negative behaviours — some good analogies and metaphors to be drawn here by those brand stewards among us. Andy Nairn's contributions on understanding sub-cultures and addressing multiple audiences offer perspectives applicable to everyday segmentation and targeting. And beyond direct response (or direct interactivity as the 'fashionistas' are starting to call it), Rebecca Morgan and John Poorta offer a near 360-degree view on measuring communications outcomes. From the numerous cases, they have assimilated a bundle of different measures and approaches to evidencing the effectiveness of public service advertising expenditure. There are ideas aplenty to help you better measure your brand's social and commercial footprint.

Such is the excellence of material included that there wasn't room for one of the reviewer's favourite public service campaigns — that for Operation Trident, whose objective was to reduce gun crime in the capital city. As part of the communications strategy a vibrant magazine was distributed to doctors' surgeries, tyre fitting customer reception areas, fast food joints and other venues where the target audience congregated. In attempting to engage the audience, then educate it about the dangers of carrying weapons, this was editorially one of the more effective 'relationship magazines' ever to have been published. For added impact, before bundles of the magazine were distributed, they were literally shot. Copies of the magazine lying on reception room tables bore real bullet holes. Dramatic stuff indeed.

Marketing and Sales Standards Board

Social marketing will gain increasing visibility in the coming years. The Marketing and Sales Standards Board is intent that social marketing will sit alongside marketing and sales as a discrete discipline characterised by its own suite of occupational standards. To make your own mind up on the uniqueness of the social marketing challenge, read this book. In terms of plotting the effectiveness of advertising, it's 'Simon Broadbent for the 21st Century society'!

Read it!!

As and when I come across a guide to integrated marketing that has the soul and sheer grit of *How public service advertising works*, I'll be delighted to review it. Until then, I'll be taking a second canter through the latter. I've given you the sizzle; I commend you taste the steak for yourself by reading and digesting this groundbreaking publication.

Neil Morris F IDM