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Advertising Strategies of the Ontario Milk Marketing Board: Milking the Cow for All It's Worth

Adrienne Lamb

Milk. What could be more basic? Or rather, more accurately, what could embody the illusion of the basic and essential more naturally than the concept of milk. Although, apparently rudimentary, this is not altogether the case. The advertising and marketing of this "essential" product is a prime concern of the Ontario Milk Marketing Board (O.M.M.B.); established under the 1965 Milk Act (O.M.M.B. 1992:4). As a result, the O.M.M.B. acts as the middle man responsible for purchasing all the milk produced in Ontario and selling it to the provincial processors. The Board is more than just the buyer and seller of milk it ensures that Ontario milk producers receive a fair return for their labour and investment. It also concerns itself with increasing the demand for milk and milk products. In order to meet the latter objective, the O.M.M.B. has designed a highly successful advertising and marketing strategy.

Before continuing, I have an opinion that must be expressed regarding the concept of advertising in general. I find it hard to believe that any commodity, that is as good as the advertisement says, would need advertising to begin with. Wouldn't everyone already know it was essential? If a commodity is essential, should the producer need to advertise? I believe the strength to the central ideology of many of the marketing schema lie in the successful sale of an idea, a notion, a concept and not the actual product. Wholesome milk is as guilty as any other commodity in the art of displaying image values.

The objective of this vigorous product promotion and advertising program for the commodity of milk is achieved through a number of routes. One of the more conservative or traditional approaches towards advertising and promotion campaigns consists of celebrity endorsements and extensive nutritional education programs. Alternatively, a new age avant-garde approach to advertising and marketing is employed in order to appeal to a different audience and thereby increase the exposure of milk products to a larger market. This essay will examine some of the advertising and product promotion programs that are employed in order to increase the consumption of milk by the general public. The question as to why a producer feels the need to advertise initially, as well the specific angles that are employed, will be addressed through concepts such as enviability and consumer desire. Specifically, an examination of a traditional and a more off-the-wall approach to product marketing will be compared and contrasted. The "Golden Women" television campaign and the accompanying association that strikes at the heart of the

WHY ADVERTISE IN THE FIRST PLACE?

The first question that must be posed when examining the impact of advertising in the realm of dairy products is: why? What motivates the O.M.M.B. to choose to advertise? The motivation for this vigorous advertising campaign is monetarily oriented. It increases the price that farmers are paid for their milk by increasing the demand for milk and milk products, while at the same time maintaining the stability of the dairy industry.

In a sense, the O.M.M.B. can be seen as skimming off the top in terms of their motivation. It is in their best interest to promote their product and drive up sales. This is logical. They want to increase the sales of their product and they believe that advertising will enable them to accomplish this goal. Why, however, does advertising work?

Does it have something to do with the value we place on visual images and the perception of perfection as it pertains to bodily images? Could it be that by viewing these advertisements and partaking in the consumers' fantasies that we can become a part of that magical world which we envy greatly. Keeping this question in mind, an understanding of publicity and its possible motivation will be presented.

WHAT IMPACT DOES ADVERTISING HAVE WHEN IT IS EMPLOYED?

To answer the question of the impact that advertising has, we may follow John Berger who states that, "all of us see hundreds of publicity images everyday of our lives." No other kind of image confronts us so frequently (1973:95). The key element for the success of any commodity in advertising is public recognition of these messages that are briefly taken in. For instance, on your way to school, or work, standing waiting for the bus, riding the bus, or on the side of the road, advertisements stimulate the imagination by way of either imprinting them in our memory or through the expectation of stimuli. We are now so accustomed to being addressed by these images that we scarcely notice the total impact. Many studies have been prepared regarding our progressive desensitisation to the media world around us, with the majority of this research suggesting that as the tradition of advertising has grown, so has our tolerance for its nature (Firestone, 1967:2). In 1994, the producer, when addressing the public, has to come up with a campaign that will hold the consumers' interest, convey the point, and be easily recognised in order to guarantee product loyalty.

There is potential for any product to be viewed as an advertisement depending upon the light in which it is viewed. Barthes states that "every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society" (Barthes 1982:94). Therefore, "representations; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity," can all serve to support this "system of communication" that is needed to promote a product effectively (Barthes 1982:94). An individual may notice a particular image or piece of information because it corresponds to some particular interest. However, this can be a very personal thing. The key is finding an object and the accompanying association that strikes at the heart of the
collective. Establishing this link can equate to deriving what will work best for the collective consciousness.

THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO ADVERTISING

In the case of milk, one of the possible "hooks" that might strike a chord with the majority of individuals could be its nutritional value, or perhaps its availability or quality. Traditionally, the O.M.M.B. advertising campaigns have relied upon celebrity endorsement through the use of attractive, enviable individuals, thereby exemplifying the concept of enviability. Berger argues that the understanding is still, by personal desire; not objects. Its promise is one of pleasure, of product. The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour. Publicity in general is in the process of manufacturing glamour. Advertising begins by working on a natural appetite for pleasure. Publicity is about personal perceptions and personal desire; not objects. Its promise is one of pleasure, of happiness, as judged from the outside by others.

But what does that really tell us of the ad campaign of the O.M.M.B.? An understanding of its advertising philosophy can be directly applied to an understanding of the interpretation of any commodity's consumer project. Television commercials, with their high density and high profile, embody an accurate view of the message that the producer intends to relate to the consumer.

Without an incredibly detailed description (see figure 1 "Golden Women") the commercial displays five world champion women athletes all drinking milk. The frames are established with each individual athlete performing their respective sports and then drinking milk. Clearly the equation is designed to link the two: athletic excellence and the consumption of milk.

In fact, on every frame a certain quality of milk is highlighted (e.g. vitamin D 44%). The final caption reads "Milk with Energy and 15 essential nutrients". The voice-over that accompanies the commercial is an excellent clue as to whom the target audience is, and how the advertiser is attempting to reach them:

"These remarkable Canadian women have a few things in common. They're dedicated. They're concerned with eating properly. They're each a world champion in their respective sport. And they all drink Milk, with energy and 15 essential nutrients as part of a balanced diet. Five Canadian women. All world champions. Makes you wonder what the guys are drinking doesn't it?"

The voice-over puts to rest any doubts that we may have regarding the motivation of these athletic endorsements. The captions control our imaginations and produces the desired effect with stimuli from a wide range of sensors. Here, three forms of media, written and pictorial symbols, as well as verbal queuing, work in conjunction in order to compliment each other. Barthes believes that "this substance is not unimportant: pictures, to be sure, are stronger than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke" (1985:95). The reality, the believability of visual imagery, is linked to an embodiment of the natural, and by extension anything natural must, of course, be an embodiment of the truth.

Consider reading a phrase such as 'the sky is green' and then viewing an actual visual image of the sky, green. Which are we tempted to believe more readily? According to Barthes, "as far as perception is concerned, writing and pictures, for instance, do not call upon the same type of consciousness and even with pictures, one can use many kinds of reading" (1982:96). Therefore, much of the actual advertising impact can be related to interpretation.

As expressed earlier, exaggeration is one of the greatest tools that a producer can implement. With this in mind, we can extend this concept and say that a caricature would lend itself to signification much more than a realistic drawing could. Pictorial representations become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful (Berger 1971:56). We are living in a visual age, and the impact that visual representations have in our lives and consumption habits is definitely reflected in our positive response to visual stimuli. With the assessment of "The Golden Women" campaign and the examination of enviability, we can now turn to an assessment of the visual stimuli provided in our prime example; the "Spend Your Energy" billboard campaign. (See figure 2).

THE AVANT-GARDE APPROACH IN ADVERTISING

We first consider the Barthian idea that, it has been understood that every object in the world can pass from a closed silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society (Barthes 1982:94). Take, for example, the billboard campaign: the glass of milk is just that, a glass of milk. However, a glass of milk placed just to the left of a human cow on a bicycle might convey quite a different message altogether. The glass of milk might be altered, in fact, by any number of elements. It could be the visual image accompanying it, the background, or even the slogan 'Spend Your Energy' superimposed on the glass of milk. Either way, the influences are endless.

It can consist of modes of writing or of representations, not only written discourse, but also photography and other visual images. The other element to be considered is that, as far as perception is concerned, writing and visual images do not call upon, nor require, the same type of consciousness as oral processes. With this in mind, let us turn back to our traditional example of 'The Golden Women' television ad. If the slogan were to have read instead, "Milk with Energy and 15 essential nutrients: Spend your Energy!" how dramatically would your perception of the ad have been altered? Conversely, imagine those five world champion athletes painted as cows. I believe the contrast is evident.

"Pictures, become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful: like writing they call for the lexis ...we shall therefore talk about discourse" (Berger 1971:97). Like writing, they can be called on for different interpretation; perhaps, to an even greater extent than actual words. On the plane of language, the signifier, or meaning, is what you receive visually from the image. In our case, the image is of an athletic individual elongated and placed on a blue background employing some form of athletic equipment (which contrasts with the background) and painted as a black and white Jersey cow. But at the same time these images and words are justified since they act to point out and notify, make us understand something by imposing it on us. The next question is of course, what do we do with it?
What we see as individuals is a combination of the way that we have been socialised and the way that we perceive things to be. Within the meaning, a signification is already built. "The meaning is already complete, it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past or memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas and decisions" (Barthes 1982:102). As far as our example is concerned, the perception of the cow image could be extremely important to the message that is being transmitted.

The illusion is that you have the choice as the consumer and that your interpretation is what you dictate it to be. The reality is that we are being led by the producer like cows to the pasture. For example, if we were to take a group of individuals who were to be tested for their respective responses to this particular advertising campaign we would see that no two individuals would be affected in quite the same way. The hope of the advertiser is that the 'Spend Your Energy' ads will first make people stop and take notice, and most importantly, buy the product that is offered. With advertising, the goal is to hook as many different individual tastes as is possible, through the use of one marketing tool or strategy. In our case, the natural animal and the embodiment of the truth and beauty is instilled as wholesome.

The possibility that this ad could be received favourably by a number of participants may be based solely on their love for Jersey Cows. However, a specific audience is targeted (see figure 3). The billboard advertisement is not geared towards the targeted, for billboard ads, could be due to the driving age. Part of the reason that this audience has been your Energy" campaign is geared toward young adults ranging in the age from 18-35. Part of the reason that this audience has been your Energy" campaign is geared toward young adults ranging in the 1-6 year age range nor to the 35-55 year age range. The target audience has a lot to do with the subject matter. The "Spend your Energy" campaign is geared toward young adults ranging from 18-35. Part of the reason that this audience has been targeted, for billboard ads, could be due to the driving age. Keeping these issues in mind, let us consider the reasons the ad appeals to our test group.

Perhaps, a certain number of individuals from our test group are especially taken with the black and white colour motif, or the contrasting red, blue and white genera. Perhaps it is the uncomplicated basics of the billboard ad consisting of a mere three words and only three objects, allowing the message to be quickly conveyed. Then again, the ad's appeal could stem from an understandable appreciation of the slender young athletic body, who just might remind you of the girl next door whom you always thought was just swell. Maybe the facial expression of the model expresses the kind of physical determination and sheer will-power that you long to exhibit. The athletic equipment chosen to be represented could be especially appealing, as you may be, for instance, an avid cyclist.

It could be any number of these elements, or others, that have not been mentioned. Consequently, the ad might not work for two people in quite the same way, yet, advertising is still effective because it taps into an element of socialisation that is uniformed obtaining a common theme.

Even more perplexing is the fact that instead of personal conscious preference, your impression of this ad could be influenced solely by a subconscious element. Perhaps you were raised in the city and have never witnessed a Jersey cow in its natural habitat and are therefore leery of large domestic farm animals. Furthermore, you may equate them with flies, grass, hay—fever and all of those other unsightly rural elements that have no place in civilisation. On the other hand, let's say that you had a rural upbringing and the painted pattern depicted in the ad fondly reminds you a loving farm pet.

Again, as simplistic as, perhaps, these individual examples may be, the point is that consumer preference in conjunction with conscious and subconscious influences, coupled with the concept of common social themes, will determine the difference between a successful or failed advertising campaign. The social aspects of advertising are the key to linking the individual to the collective consciousness.

It is true that the 'Spend your Energy' billboard ad is shocking and furthermore, expresses an ingenuity that is unique, attractive and interests society by enticing them to purchase the concept as well as the commodity. The shock that occurs in conjunction with the surprise that is associated with this type of avant-garde signifier could alone imprint the image in a thought pattern. So much so, that you might be compelled to observe the image and thereby, the accompanying slogan, (as the Ontario Milk Marketing Board hopes) thus increasing your milk consumption.

CONCLUSION

Advertising attempts to engage as many individuals as possible, on a personal level, in the hope that this connection will woo the consumer into purchasing the product. Traditional advertising has surrounded us and we, as a society, are now desensitised to it. In order to be noticed apart from the mass of generally traditional advertising, the producer has to employ thought provoking advertising ploys in order to grab the consumers' attention and cash in on the power of the collective consciousness.

The 'Spend Your Energy' billboard ads are very successful in achieving this advertising objective. The advertising division of the Ontario Milk Marketing Board has made every effort to milk the cow for all it is worth.
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