

Harold Edwards

Harold Edwards defends advertising by attacking its detractors. While advertising's critics want the various governing agencies to exercise more power by clamping down harder on advertising, Edwards answers by saying that that would only lead to an "unworkable tangle of laws," and its only benefit would be to "fatten the swarms of lawyers who think their job is to protect us against ourselves." According to Edwards, the charge that we need to be protected from advertising is "pure nonsense."

The young lady with surprisingly fleshy lips desires us more than anything else in the world. Shehorned into a tight and diaphanous dress, her eyes full of lust, she looks out at us and purrs, "I like all my men wearing English Leather—or nothing at all."

Pretty harmless nonsense, isn't it? Or were you taken in? Did your unconscious rise up and whisper to you, "Henry, Henry, if you buy English Leather, diaphanously-dressed women will purr to you"? Were you seduced so thoroughly by the ad that you were forced to buy a bottle of English Leather?

A number of critics of advertising believe that we are too weak to resist the appeals of advertisers. In *The Hidden Persuaders*, for instance, Vance Packard, a persistent critic of the advertising industry, argues that consumers are virtually powerless at the hands of advertising agencies and their hired hands, the motivational researchers. The advertisers know us, Packard says. They have burrowed into our psyches and have discovered our secret fears and desires, and now they use our weaknesses to seduce us into buying English Leather.

Packard isn't alone in claiming that we are weak and they are strong. Jeffrey Schrank, writing for the National Council of Teachers of English, claims that "Advertisers delight in an audience which believes ads to be harmless nonsense, for such an audience is rendered defenseless by its belief that there is no attack taking place."

"Rendered defenseless." Hmm. What a high opinion of the power of advertising. And what a low opinion of mankind. In fact, a patronizing attitude is never far below the surface of the arguments of those who scorn advertising. They, the aristocrats of reason and clear thinking, can of course see through the wiles of the advertisers. We, the confused and irresponsible peasants, need to be protected. It's for our own good, they say.

Indeed, like all bureaucratic busybodies, the critics of advertising want to protect us against ourselves. We might buy the wrong product (the wrong product, of course, according to their lights). We might be illogical. We might be confused about the competing claims of products. In fact, some of the critics think we're so defenseless that they want the Federal Trade Commission, like a big brother, to step in and protect us against the sweet nothings that advertisers whisper into our ears.

Harold Edwards, "The Dour Critics of Advertising." This essay appears by permission of the author.

We don't need protection. While the language of a soap advertisement may be rhetorically suspicious, the motives of soap sellers are as clear and as pure as a soap bubble: They want to sell soap. We may not always be able to discern the motives of politicians, educators, and newspaper columnists, but no one above the age of five was ever fooled by the motive of a soap company. Of course ad writers manipulate language to influence people. So do all people who use language—from government politicians to newspaper columnists. And so do essayists who want to persuade us that the language of advertising is unfair.

At least the motives of advertisers are out in the open. The copywriters for Spring Morning Soap may imply in their ads that, after lathering with their soap, you'll be accosted by strangers who will beg to touch your lovely skin. But we're not as gullible as the critics say. We've learned to take advertising, like political speeches, with a grain of salt. Besides, *Consumer Reports* (a strong proponent of more regulations) will tell us, if we really want to know, about the merits of one soap over another (and they inevitably pick the cheapest, most "reasonable" bar of soap.)

Most of us don't even want to have our purchases pre-approved by the men and women in the labs of *Consumer Reports*, much less by government regulators. We continue to buy Oil of Olav, diet pills, tummy tighteners, new and improved detergents, and two-hundred dollar Reebok tennis shoes. We like to get a little crazy every now and then and buy a soap dream instead of a soap bar.

The art of persuasion—for that is what the language of advertising really is—goes back at least to the Greeks, who called it rhetoric and used it to embellish political speeches in the forum. One suspects, though, that the artful use of words soon moved out into the Greek marketplace. It's easy to imagine an eager Greek sandal salesman's spiel: "Comfest shoe in Heathendom! Plato wears 'em!" (And no doubt there was also a busybody Greek dogooder who immediately leaped up and "exposed" the salesman: "No fair. Celebrity testimonial.")

Modern critics of advertising continue to warn us against celebrity testimonials, and some of the more radical critics want the government to step in and forbid the advertisers from seducing us with colorful words, fuzzy words, and exaggerated words.

They would have advertisers make their ads as grey and as unappetizing as a legal document or a page of bureaucratic prose. In "The Language of Advertising" Joseph Seldin even objects to the "unrelieved cheerfulness" of ads. Apparently he would prefer that the models scowl occasionally so that the advertisement will resemble real life.

In fact, the critics of advertising seem to lack a sense of humor. They don't laugh. They get into snits. They take every ad seriously, even when humor and exaggeration are obviously at work. When a football player steps up to sell Brut cologne, clinging women drinking in his every word, the dour critics can only see a celebrity hawking perfume. Offended because the ad fails to appeal to their Reason and Intellect, the critics pounce, "Ah ha! EMOTIONAL APPEAL # 3: CELEBRITY TESTIMONIAL."

Lacking a sense of humor, the critics solemnly construct their long lists of FALSE CLAIMS AND EMOTIONAL APPEALS, where we are told that advertisements not only hoodwink us with testimonials of famous people, but they fool us with weasel words, swindle us with glittering generalities, and cozen us with incomplete comparatives.

One critic of advertising warns us, in MISLEADING TECHNIQUE # 6: THE VAGUE CLAIM, that we ought to watch out for these devious uses of language:

Fleischmann's makes sensible eating delicious.

For skin like peaches and cream.

Take a bite and you'll think you're eating on the Champs Elysées.

The end of meatloaf boredom.

Oh dear me, what ever shall we do? We are being seduced by Hamburger Helper, who claims that its product is the end of meat loaf boredom. Let's call in the FTC, the FCC, and the NAB to stamp out these outbreaks of advertising nonsense, these assaults on our logic and good sense.

It bothers the critics of advertising no end when people aren't as logical as they are. Remember the rush to buy pet rocks a few years back? The critics of advertising were outraged. "Who's to blame?" they asked. "How could people be so silly," they fumed, "as to be seduced into buying slickly-packaged rocks?"

"Who's to blame?" That's not the right question. Consumers thought the pet rock idea was cute, so they exercised a basic right in a free economy: They pulled out their wallets and bought the rocks. No one is to blame when people choose to buy pet rocks—or pet roadstools or pet grass or pet anything. The appropriate question in a free market is this: How can we encourage more people to come up with new ideas?

After reading a number of these attacks on the advertising industry, I get the distinct impression that their hostility toward advertising goes deeper than their dislike of its seductive power—that it really stems from their dislike of the free marketplace. To the critics of advertising, to try to make a profit is, well, not quite a reputable motive. Besides we consumers don't need all of the choices that the American marketplace offers us. To its critics, their noses in the air, the system of free enterprise needs more rules written by people like them.

At any rate, they hold the language of advertising to a standard that doesn't exist anywhere else in our society outside of a legal contract. For instance, linguists nowadays tell us that language change is not only inevitable, but usually a good thing. Change, they say, refreshes the language. Yet when advertisers use neologisms—or even usages that reflect current usage—we are told that they are wrecking the language. In *Strictly Speaking*, for instance, Edwin Newman fusses (ironically and superciliously, of course) about the "assaults" on our language when products like Easy-Off, Arrid, and Fantastik cleaner use unorthodox spelling. And Winston used to cause the critics intense pain with the ungrammatical claim that their cigarettes "taste good like a cigarette should."

When a careful essayist qualifies his statements, we are told he is being logical. When advertisers qualify their statements, we are told that they are using "weasel" words. To the critics of advertising, a rose by another name doesn't smell as sweet. Jeffrey Schrank, for instance, calls it "weaseling" (rather than "qualifying") when an advertiser says that his product "helps control dandruff." (Actually, it's rather difficult

to see what alternative the advertiser had. If he had said instead that his product "controls dandruff," Schrank and his fellow nitpickers would have jumped up to holler, "FALSE CLAIM!"

When we agree with the emotionally-loaded words of a speaker at a dinner, a politician on the stump, a crusading columnist, we admire his command of the resources of the language, his "rhetoric." When advertisers use those same emotionally loaded words, the critics say that they are being unfair by seducing our unconscious.

*Of course* advertisers use the resources of language and rhetoric to persuade us to buy their products. Ads are full of weasel words, nonce words, vague words, celebrity's words, humorous words, and sometimes outrageously exaggerated words. (Look at those great ads for breast enlargement creams in the back pages of the *National Enquirer*.)

Anyone with a sense of humor or a sense of the absurd ought to sit back and enjoy the color and noise—and the occasional absurdity—of the "literature of commerce." (D. H. Lawrence once wrote that "some of the cunningest American literature is to be found in advertisements of soap suds.")

It's probably no coincidence that some of the harshest criticism of the language of advertising comes from members of the educational establishment, who are insulated against the noise—and the risks—of the marketplace. Indeed, one of the most persistent critics is the National Council of Teachers of English. From their lofty position above the hurly-burly, the Council members look down contemptuously on the dirty little business of buying and selling.

Down below, the language of advertising, like the free market itself, is noisy, impudent, and independent. And the critics don't like it. Like all busybodies who know what's best for us, they want some government agency, the Federal Trade Commission in this case, to intervene even more forcefully than they do now to curtail some of this noisy advertising.

But that would only lead to an unworkable tangle of laws. Besides, we don't need more lawyers defending us against misleading metaphors and pernicious personifications. Do things *really* go better with Coke? Is Schlitz *really* the kings of beers? Are we *really* flying friendly skies when we fly United? Let us figure it out, not a hoard of lawyers.

Right now, nowhere is freedom of speech more strictly curtailed than in the world of business. Advertising in particular is fair game for all kinds of free speech restrictions, restrictions that would elicit howls of complaints if they were imposed on other areas of American society. Indeed, the same people who use the First Amendment to defend pornography see no problem at all in shutting off all kinds of advertising speech.

The rest of us ought to worry about the tendency to turn governmental agencies into language police. We are already in the habit of denying First Amendment rights to advertisers; as a result, we are perhaps less likely to hesitate the next time we find that people are using language in other ways that we don't like.

Aldous Huxley, whose *Brave New World* is a warning against the tendencies of governments to become our all-knowing big brothers, enjoyed the language of advertising—and its freedom. In fact, he saw a connection between the language of advertising and a free society. "The art of advertisement writing," he wrote "has

flowered with democracy. The lords of industry and commerce came gradually to understand that the right way to appeal to the Free Peoples of the World was familiarly, in an honest man-to-man style."

To insist that the language of advertising is unfair and that we need to be protected from it is pure nonsense.