

Ideas

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Advertising Scents

By Jeff Greenfield

After a dozen years and hundreds of gloriously misspent hours, I am convinced it is constitutionally impossible to open a flaking volume of Collier's or Look, turn to the page you were looking for in the first place and calmly close the book. Instead, page after page offers a kind of time travel; from hemlines to editorials, we gain a glance at the styles, assumptions, prejudices, hopes, and fears of our ancestors, unfiltered by historians or ax-grinders. More important, by looking at past hopes and fears, we gain some understanding of the impulses that unconsciously shape us now.

By far the most revealing glimpses into our past come not from stories or photographs, but from advertisements for products. Advertising is engaged in a far more urgent task than offering an idea or opinion; its task is to sell something and make money. To do that well, advertising must accurately gauge what consumers really have on their minds, and what can effectively be implanted in their minds.



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rectively be implanted in their minds. If we are to believe the major corporate advertisers of the last half-century—I mean, of course, if we are to believe their opinions of our mental state, not their claims for their wares—then the American consumer has been a consistent neurotic. Change a word or two, update a collar point or a disease, and the ads of the last five decades might be completely interchangeable, each one embodying the fundamental watchword of advertising: *fear your body, fear your friends*. It is a watchword that is still very much a part of what we are being sold.

According to the Gospel of the Merchants, Americans believe themselves afflicted with a highly original kind of original sin: they believe that every personal shortcoming is objectified by bodily putrefaction; that success, love, affluence and happiness are constantly threatened by emissions, secretions, odors, excretions, vapors and bacteria, burrowing out of every pore and orifice from tip to toe, driving away customers, colleagues and friends. We fearful primitives believe, further, that no one—not family, not friends, not passing strangers—will warn us of our transgressions. The victims of bodily corruption are doomed, rather, to waste away in Coventry, redeemed only by unceasing application of unguents, ointments, herbs, and sprays thrown onto and into every last square inch of flesh.

Nor is the grim silence of acquaintances confined to the shame of bodily

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Newsday Drawing by Bob Newman

offense. Family and friends—so concludes the Gospel—are incapable of honest, person-to-person communication. They will judge you not by your character or personality, but by the quality of your coffee, the dinginess of your floors and walls, the tastiness of your bridge club snacks.

As long ago as 1923, Thorsten Veblen noted this preaching to fear our bodies and our friends:

"... among the human sensibilities upon which a sagacious salesmanship will spend its endeavors the most fruitful are Fear and Shame," Veblen wrote in "Absentee Ownership." "The fear and shame on which the sales publicity proceeds in its

work of turning credulous persons into profitable customers are the fear of mortal disease and the fear of losing prestige."

Veblen might have been leafing through the pages of the Saturday Evening Post as he wrote. A 1920 ad,

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for example, shows a chic young woman surrounded by three dashing young men and an air of uneasiness. "Ever Wince Inwardly?" asks Wood—"Under Searching Eyes, Do You bury Soap."

"An unexpected meeting—a battery of eyes focused upon your face—Can you meet it with composure? Is your skin flawless? . . . or is there some blemish that stands out mercilessly in your own consciousness? Some flaw in your complexion that you *know* observant eyes must take notice of? . . . You want to sink into the background. You lose your gaiety, your self-confidence."

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The cause of this nervous collapse? Conspicuous Nose Pores. (In the '20s, our eyesight was much better.) The cure? Woodbury Soap.

The same period offered us the lineal ancestor of those tooth-in-mouth ailments that constantly plague American homes. Pebecco toothpaste urged our parents to "check the mischief caused by 'acid-mouth' . . . a condition which gradually weakens enamel . . . and starts teeth on the road to decay. Authorities believe that 95 in every 100 Americans have 'acid-mouth.'" (By the 1940s, the germs regrouped and we were being told that "four out of five Americans have pyorrhea," a condition remarkably similar to 'acid mouth.')

Over the next half-century, advertising frequently mingled the fear of bodily betrayal with the fear of losing prestige among friends and prospective lovers. While the attempt to stir such fear was pervasive—Lifebuoy built a long-running ad campaign based on the menace of "B.O." (body odor)—no product more skillfully manipulated these emotions than Listerine, the all-time winner of the Fear-Your-Body-and-Your-Friends sweepstakes. For it was Listerine that assured two generations of Americans that bad breath was so horrendous "even your best friend won't tell you." As painted by Listerine, the consequence of that silence was literally a life and-death matter.

Week after week, in Collier's, Redbook, McCall's and other mass magazines, men and women suffered friendless neighborhoods and broken engagements, all because no one told them their breath could knock down the Empire State Building. Beauty contest winners on overnight trains slunk back to their berths, ignorant of the *real* reason the handsome young executive suddenly drew away. An office girl sat hunched over her typewriter at noon as two secretaries, pointing and whispering, sneaked out to lunch. ("There's one in every office. The other girls never asked Laura to lunch if they could possibly avoid it . . . She had just one fault that outweighed her good points. What it was Laura, poor girl, would be the last to suspect . . . it can happen to you—any time.")

Indeed, according to one 1951 ad, the only way to discover the curse was by eavesdropping. Redbook shows a debutante, mouth open in shock, listening at a door. "So

that was it!" proclaimed the headline. "Now she understood why people had been avoiding her of late Why Bob had become indifferent. She appreciated hearing the truth, brutal as it was, because now she knew what to do. Find new friends who didn't whisper behind her back? Of course not; gargle every day with Listerine."

While mouthwashes warned us of oralaxity, every orifice of the human body was fraught with such dangers, especially those associated with the shameful business of sex.

"Too late to cry out in Anguish!" screams an ad for Lysol in the late 1940s, depicting a woman in a strapless evening gown sinking into a sea of "doubt," "inhibitions," "ignorance" and "misgivings."

"Too late, when love has gone, for a wife to plead that no one warned her of danger. Because a wise, considerate wife makes it her business to *find out* how to safeguard her daintiness in order to protect precious married love and happiness."

Which raises an interesting question. *Why* did "no one" warn her of danger, the "no one" in question being her husband? Is it really improbable that after four weeks of evasive abstention ("mind sleeping downwind again tonight, dear?"), a wife might ask, "Okay, what's the matter?" It's even possible that a husband might open a conversation: "Say, listen, this is gonna sound silly, but"

Not, however, in the world of advertising. It is the job of Lysol's hucksters to plant the seed of doubt in the mind of every sexually active woman reader; *two* doubts, in fact. First, that sexuality is a matter of surgical purity; that a woman with the faintest hint of womanly aroma is shameful, disgusting, to be shunned by any decent man. Second, that a husband will never tell his wife that she is offensively aromatic, preferring frustration or adultery to honesty.

Indeed, it seems to be a pattern of mass advertising to suggest that friends and family relations are totally dishonest with each other, not simply in the matter of bodily offense, but across the whole range of daily life. Friendships, in the unspoken message of modern salesmanship, are composed not of people with genuine affection for each other, but of mutually suspicious, backbiting groups of mean-spirited harpies.

Consider this 1933 advertisement for Sanka coffee. At a dinner party, two guests are holding a whispered conversation. "Clever hostess, isn't she?" asks a woman.

"Yes," replies an exasperated male. "But I wish she'd learn that lots of people can't drink coffee at night."

"Many guests resent the serving of the evening coffee," the ad warns. "They hate to refuse—even though coffee keeps them awake! *They dread the fuss and stir caused*

when they decline coffee. So they accept it—and spend a sleepless night thinking unkind thoughts about their hostess.” (My italics, and I’d like them back, please.)

Now picture the dinner table this ad evokes: a sudden hush falls over the room; eyebrows shoot up; whispered exchanges (“Good God, Esmeralda, he’s *turning down the coffee!*” “Throw the boulder out!” “Shame, shame!”) It makes no sense, of course. It is, however, advertising’s task to *create this fear* of a silent, sullen endurance of an unwanted cup of coffee, followed by nocturnal emissions of verbal abuse.

A similar kind of dishonesty marks decades of advertising with a common plot: The Visit of an Outsider. The boss is coming home for dinner; the bridge club president is dropping in; the social secretary of the Friends of Gluteus Maximus is making a sudden inspection visit. Good heavens, cries the hostess, I have nothing to prepare, or clean with. But this new miracle cleaner/snack food/duster makes it appear she’s been dusting/cooking/polishing all day. And so her husband gets the raise, or she gets into the club. Why anyone would want to work for, or relax with, such snobbish, nasty-minded Outsiders doesn’t matter. The message is clear: Either you *pretend* you’ve made an enormous effort to impress your guests, or they’ll talk about you *behind your back*.

What of today’s buying public, so sophisticated and immune to the emotional and sexual hang-ups of the past? Before we congratulate ourselves, consider that we are the generation buying deodorants for the genitals, marketed, of course, under the rhetoric of sexual freedom, but rooted in a fear of bodily shame. Consider the ads which show new-found boy friends and girl friends recoiling at bad breath; consider that we are now being sold deodorant for the *feet*. What the years have brought, it seems, is a New Frontier of body parts that may betray our trust.

As for the new honesty of modern consumers, the freedom from friendships based on neurotic fears, the coffee advertisements of today seem to have been written by the same hand that taught readers of the 1930s the social dread of serving coffee to the wrong people. In a series of television commercials, Maxwell House coffee presents a variety of “tense” encounters between a suburban young married

of tense encounters between a suburban young married and an outsider whose opinion is important to the woman. A lonely suburban mother is receiving her first visitor: "I just *had* to make a good impression." A child has been misbehaving at school, and his teacher is dropping over to *the house*. ("The teacher said she wanted to see *me*," moans the housewife. "The coffee just had to be good.") Two sisters are reuniting after years of separation, and, after early uncertainties begin to become friends "around our third cup of coffee." The assumption of this series, apparently, is that none of these reasonably close relationships—new friend, teacher of one's child, or sister—can be sustained by itself. It is the *coffee* that "has to be good," that must cement a "good impression" or that will turn sisters into friends. If the coffee is bad, evidently, the sisters will part for life, the teacher will not pay attention to the child.

If there is a genuine repudiation of body-fearing, friend-fearing mass advertising, it lies in the surviving remnants of the counterculture; in the long hair, the clothing that emphasizes the body, and the sensuality suggested by strobe lights, slam-bang rock and roll, and the still shocking notion that two men can greet each other with hugs instead of by gingerly shaking hands. It is my own sense, subjective and based on nothing more than watching chance encounters, that much of the instinctive hostility toward "longhairs" by Middle Americans has less to do with politics or marijuana than with the whole universe of fears established by 50 years of corporate conditioning. The average consumer has been ceaselessly bombarded with what Marshall McLuhan has described as "a disgust with the human organism . . . fear of the human touch and hatred of the human smell." America's consuming He and She have been taught to hide and sanitize both flesh and emotions; to insulate themselves from honest physical and emotional contact between human beings.

To someone so conditioned, the sight of a community reveling in flesh and hair and touching is a pageant of horror. Dry scalp! Dandruff! Bad breath! B.O.! Armpits the temperature of the Sahara! As for the remaining apertures, forget it! In short, a parade of bodily corruption that would send the copywriters of the last 50 years rushing to the thesaurus for new terms of revulsion, accompanied by a style of friendship which seems to place all value on openness and honesty.

There is much that is foolish, destructive, even dangerous about the counterculture, much in it that ignores enduring values. But if it can, by example, repudiate the paranoia that has been imposed on us for so long—if it can break the web of fear that has spun through our past, separating us from ourselves and those closest to us—it will have justified itself by that act alone. □