

# Down to

## The symbolic language of TV commercials

by JEFF GREENFIELD

**W**hy is Karl Malden wearing that hat? For months now, American Express has been running a series of commercials in which the dreams of vacationers are shattered through the loss or theft of their cash (one of them features a husband reassuring his wife that they can afford an expensive meal even as a thief is stealing his wallet from their car). In the last half of these ads, actor Karl Malden sternly warns us, "Don't carry cash!" and preaches the virtue of travelers' checks.

And in every one of these ads, Malden is wearing a hat. It makes no difference where he is: inside an imposing, high-ceilinged, old-fashioned bank, or standing by a desk in a contemporary office. That hat is planted firmly on Malden's head.

Why? A brief Socratic dialogue will answer that question. Who wears hats in this bare-everything day and age? Detectives and F.B.I. men, that's who. And what character has Karl Malden been playing on the ABC television network these last few years? Tough, crusty, but lovable Mike Stone, police lieutenant on *The Streets of San Francisco*, that's who. And what sort of figure would inspire confidence in the minds of prospective travelers, worried about the possible loss of their vacation money? A tough, crusty, but lovable police lieutenant, that's who.

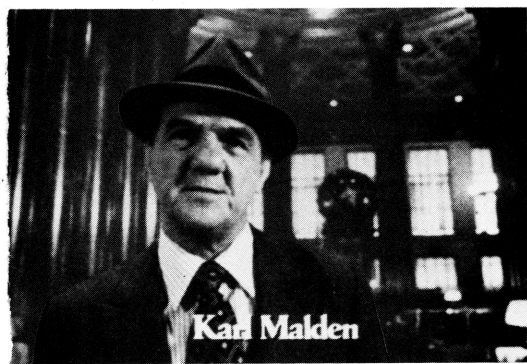
Now you, as a viewer, are not supposed to notice this detail; you are not supposed to turn to your beloved and say, "Hey, Martha — what's that idiot doing with a hat on in the middle of a stuffy bank?" No, no, no. Instead, you are supposed to absorb the general *impression* of the commercial: the sense that an authoritative figure with close ties to a law-enforcement agency is putting his word (and perhaps a few patrol cars) behind the promise of security

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*Jeff Greenfield is a writer and a political consultant.*

# the last detail

through travelers' checks. Every detail of this thirty-second drama is designed to surround you with an aura of confidence in the rock-like strength of these travelers' checks. And Karl Malden's hat is one more detail. It is, in fact, a fine example of the *kind* of detailed planning that goes into the shap-



ing of big-budget advertising: planning that has significant social consequences.

There are three things worth remembering about advertising: they are a) money, b) money, and c) money. According to *Advertising Age*, \$26.7 billion was spent on advertising in 1974. Television alone accounted for \$4.85 billion of that money. To bring it down to numbers that are (slightly) less staggering, if you want to sell something to the American people and want to reach tens of millions of them — once — it will cost you nearly \$60,000 for thirty seconds of network TV time in the middle of a top-rated show such as *All in the Family*. If you want to reach the attention of one big city — New York, say — to introduce a new product or politician, then you had better be prepared to spend \$50,000 or more a week to make a dent in the market.

And those numbers represent only the cost of *time*. They do not include the massive cost of writing, designing, and shooting a commercial. When you count the cost of lights, sets, costumes, talent fees (up to \$250,000 in the case of a Laurence Olivier for Polaroid's SX-70 camera), market research, and the amortized cost of \$50,000-a-year copywriters and art directors, the production cost of a single thirty-second commercial can exceed \$200,000.

So what? Look at it this way. A two-

hour movie that costs \$6 million to shoot averages out to \$50,000 a minute, or \$833 a second. A television commercial, by contrast, can cost more than \$6,000 a second, without even counting the far more expensive cost of time. Similarly, a network will pay a little less than \$300,000 for a single one-hour episode of a television series — call it \$5,000 a minute, or about \$85 a second. Perhaps you begin to see the point: measured by money (which is the only sensible standard in such enterprises), the television commercial is by far the most valuable, and valued, production. And that is why so much attention can, and must, be paid to every single detail.

One former advertising agency employee, who worked on a major beer account, recalls the degree of preparation and detail involved in the shooting of one thirty-second commercial.

"The 'pour' shot is the key to a beer ad," he says. "How the beer looks going down the glass; whether the glass is completely clean and suggests ice-cold beer; how the bubbles look; whether the head on the beer is big enough, but not too big. Our standard order for a 'pour' shot was ten cases of beer — 240 cans. And it wasn't overdoing it. I remember one pour shot which took 124 takes before the beer looked exactly right."

And it is not just the beer (or chicken, or car, or detergent, or soap) that must look exactly right. *Everything* must look exactly right. Are you selling to an "upscale" audience (more affluent and educated)? Then make sure the furnishings, the home, the clothes, the haircuts, the accessories, the dishes, the books on the shelves, all look appealing to that audience. Are you trying to reach the blue-collar, lower-middle-class audience? Make sure the announcer has a tough, no-nonsense voice, and put a few people in the ad who look like they work with their hands. Are you selling Ajax dishwashing liquid with a "professional dishwasher" who can make the lowliest hausfrau feel superior? Don't take chances; black out one of the dishwasher's front teeth to strip him of any pretense of sophistication.

In its use of money and talent, the

world of advertising resembles the process for making diamonds (I am here referring to process, *not* to the intrinsic value of the product). So much effort, so much money, so many minds, are focused on the development of thirty seconds of film or tape, that, like a piece of coal subjected to intense pressure over long periods of time, the commercial becomes crystallized into a miniature drama reflecting not just an attempt to sell a product, but an effort to harness attitudes, biases, tastes, life styles. It seems absurd to ascribe so much to so short a device as a commercial. But when thousands of dollars go into the planning of every second of what we see and hear, that effort becomes a lot less ludicrous, and a lot more feasible.

**F**or the most remarkable fact about advertising is that it *works*. Call it offensive, puerile, insulting to the intelligence, barbarous, intrusive, anti-humanistic, but the damn thing moves the goods. I have no doubt that the Charmin bathroom tissue commercials (they can't bear to call it toilet paper) will be a contributing factor to the fall of American civilization, should that happen. But those commercials carved out a substantial share of the market for a product that had nothing unusual to offer except a public impression formed from advertising. So compact are commercials, so frequently seen, that they can create not just new products but new personalities and folk figures within a few weeks: think of nature-loving Euell Gibbons and Post Grape Nuts; Alice Playton as the heartburn-inducing new bride in the Alka-Seltzer commercials. Think of the portly Southern sheriff in the Dodge Rebellion ads, Josephine the Plumber for Comet. These characters and situations, even more than the characters and TV shows of the networks, are the products of massive amounts of research, market testing, and above all, cold cash. And because advertisers can spend so much — so much talent, so much money, so much time — on every detail of every second, they can create a market by literally buying their way into our minds. ■