

Death of a salesman...or the product?

Americans have a reputation for being the world's premier consumers, and depending on whose statistics you use, it's estimated that we're all exposed to around 300 minutes' worth of commercials a day. This works out to roughly 110,000 minutes, 1,833 hours or nearly 8 days of commercials a year. TV viewing research would indicate that the average 18-24 year old, for example, watches about three hours of on-demand television/day (pre-pandemic). The only national viewing audience that consistently outpaces us is our English brothers and sisters in the U.K. who sit in front of the 'telly' over three hours/day, according to the research company, Statista.

These stats don't include the untold number of messages we see each day on social media, on the Internet, billboards, in newspapers and magazines or the ads we hear on radio. Neither do they include our junk mail circulars or in-store promotions where we shop. We've all grown up with hundreds of thousands if not millions of media messages all designed to part us from our money OR sell us a political candidate and their bill of goods. It's a very sobering (and I might add frightening) thought in that it shows us just how overly-exposed we are to information AND misinformation and disinformation. While we pay homage to the digital world and have embraced the machines it's spawned, we've also become the willing and obedient servants of social media purveyors, hungry and thirsting for the latest bit of gossip or *breaking news* that will put us at the head of the so-called 'well-informed' line with our peers. Today, it would seem that being au courant and in mere possession of the latest information is how we now recognize a wise person and has enabled ordinary people to become subject matter *experts*.

I doubt seriously if our media will wake up one day and say to itself, "maybe we ought to reduce the number of commercials on our channel." That would be the commercial equivalent of hara kiri, and their stockholders would roundly reject such a decision. If that be the case, how do we live with (and profit from) this massive exposure while keeping our sanity? We could always change the channel, but if you've ever tried that approach you know that competing networks run their commercials at about the same times, except of course for the Public Broadcasting Service - that bastion of self-identified fair play and balanced reporting (excuse me while I extract my tongue from my cheek). Then there's always the 'mute' button on the remote or the 'off' button. Few of the truly information-addicted among us are willing to take that drastic step of severing the signal from our cable or satellite dish or switching off the smart phone or tablet. No, the possibility of missing out on some tiny bit of breaking news is too horrible to contemplate, so we stay tuned, hoping we've seen the last commercial for this viewing hour.

America's political salesmen never sleep, especially those with an 'R' or a 'D' after their names. They're constantly figuring out new ways to package their messages in a way that we'll buy them hook, line and sinker. Perhaps the most savvy of those salesmen was our 45th President, Donald J. Trump who understood the power and reach of the media and its appetite for controversy. Trump had spent his whole adult life jousting with and manipulating the media to do his bidding and he continued to do so right up to and through his time in the White House. His style was far from low key. No one would confuse him with the sophisticated Alistair Cook of Masterpiece Theatre fame. He was the Ron Popeil pitchman who would lure you into the tent to see the bearded lady or the two headed rooster. He could sell anything, and the product he knew better than anything else was himself, Donald J. Trump. The media hung on his every word and readied their copy for the nightly news anchors who'd skewer or praise him before millions of political junkies and forever (or never) Trumpers.

Trump the salesman was clever. He knew when to shift gears - and the spotlight - from himself and pivot to the real product, America's future greatness. He sold the *sizzle* of liberty and patriotism and linked it to the *steak* of prosperity with an America First agenda - something highly desirable to a wide swath of his countrymen. And, like a successful car dealer, he promised voters a four-year warranty against all opposition political party road hazards. All they had to do was endure his repetitive boasting, hyperbole and sit back and watch.

America was ready for a new set of wheels after eight years of the 'cash-for-clunkers' president that preceded him. Trump, the salesman, became Trump the Commander-in-chief and proceeded to make good on his promises. After four years, he felt sure that Americans wouldn't trade him in for a newer model. Unfortunately, he underestimated the short American attention span and ignored the millions of Americans who thought of him as a cross between a Mack truck and a Pinto. His strategy of divide and conquer (the opposition) had crossed the political Rubicon and seeped into his own party, turning scores of moderate old-time Republicans against him. The salesman wound up empty-handed in November of 2020.

Surprisingly, a nondescript 40-year long professional politician wrestled the sale from Trump. America chose the Ford over the Maserati and convinced itself that they didn't need all that speed and flash - that the ship of state would sail well enough without a flamboyant captain at the helm. What Americans forgot was their addiction to the new, the edgy and the controversial style of one larger-than-life American leader. They had traded down instead of up and were on a collision course with buyers' remorse. It was just a matter of time before they tired of Joe Biden.

Biden was no Professor Harold Hill. He was a cross between Willy Loman (the unstable, insecure and self-deluded salesman in 'Death of a salesman') and the pathetic Shelley Levene of Glengarry Glen Ross. His pitch, when it was coherent, was tethered to his *product* of big government control and subservience which half the country opposed. He forgot the first cardinal rule: successful salesmen don't sell misery. They sell optimism, freedom and empowerment. All Joe had to offer was fear of the Coronavirus, a narrative of systemic racism, White privilege and loathing of Donald Trump - hardly a winning formula for the long term. It's no wonder that his popularity is slipping, mightily. Americans have finally begun to connect the salesman with a defective product. It will be interesting to see which is recalled first...the salesman or the product.

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