

The Hidden Sell

By PETER BART, *Advertising Columnist of the New York Times.*

A FEW years back there was a considerable furor over the development of a supposedly revolutionary new selling technique—subliminal advertising.

By using the “subliminal sell,” it was said, a manufacturer could advertise his wares without the consumer’s realizing what was actually going on. This was to be accomplished by flashing images on a screen with such great speed that the viewer wasn’t consciously aware of what he was seeing.

Although subliminal advertising attracted national publicity, it never was put into practice for two reasons. First, few advertising men thought it would work. And, second, in view of the public uproar, none of the media wanted any part of it. Thus, before long, the subliminal ad men moved into other fields, and consumers banished from their minds any fears of the “hidden sell.”

In fact, however, the “hidden sell” has remained very much with us, though not in subliminal form; and in recent years, a wide array of new techniques has come into being to promote goods and services without the consumer’s being aware that he is watching “a pitch.”

Two main factors spurred the development of these techniques. In the first place, the cost of advertising—both real and relative to sales—has soared in recent years. The average manufacturer today receives only \$70 in sales for each dollar invested in advertising, compared with \$100 in 1947.

Second, the volume of advertising has increased so sharply that consumers have built up a defense mechanism to sales messages. A number of important advertisers in recent months have expressed the fear that the consumer has, to a degree, become desensitized in regard to advertising. Since, according to some studies, the typical man-in-the-street is subjected to about 1,600 advertising messages a day, such a defense mechanism would not be surprising.

IN VIEW of these circumstances, advertisers have become more and more interested in finding new ways to reach the consumer (1) less expensively and (2) when his sales resistance is down. One of the noteworthy devices they have come up with revolves around the use of “documentary” films for television. A company spends a few thousand dollars to produce a film dealing with some aspect of its activities. The films are then distributed to tele-

vision stations around the country to use free-of-charge. Although most of these “documentaries” are liberally sprinkled with plugs for corporate products or services, they are shown without an explanation of their origin.

Thus, for a nominal investment, a company may attain \$100,000 worth of television time.

The films vary widely in length and content. The Wallace Laboratories (a division of Carter Products, Inc.), for example, produced one film ostensibly dealing with drug research. It is scarcely four seconds old, however, before it mentions the company name and delves into a discussion of Capa, a new drug that “safely and effectively reduces high blood pressure.” Says the announcer: “At Wallace Laboratories, researchers tested hundreds of compounds before they developed this new drug which acts in a unique way on the central nervous system.” Despite this rather blatant sales pitch, the film was shown by dozens of TV stations around the country as a part of news programs.

Some advertisers, to be sure, are a bit subtler about their aims. Hundreds of television stations around the country have shown a film produced by Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company dealing with a speed test of custom cars on the Utah salt flats. There is no mention of the Goodyear name, but the camera is incessantly focusing on Goodyear tires (the name is clearly visible). As everyone in sight seems to wear shirts bearing the Goodyear name as a symbol.

OTHER films of this genre include “A Visit with Betty Crocker” (produced by General Mills), “Introduction to Champion” (a thirteen-minute demonstration of Delta Air Lines’s new jet produced, naturally, by Delta), and “The Romance of Cheese” (produced predictably, by Kraft Foods).

Why do the stations use them? For one thing, many stations in small cities have no budgets for documentary-type films and are delighted to get free material. But even in New York such films are in evidence. Says a spokesman for Channel 11 (WPIX): “We are the biggest outlet in New York for public relations films—but they must be timely and entertaining.”

The “free film” business has gained considerably now that the networks are cracking down on the more blatant and traditional free-plug methods. One time it was almost the custom for comedians to drop names of products (not on their sponsor list) in return for straight remuneration. No longer, although this practice has diminished, performers still plug their own albums.



and books and other enterprises with astonishing bluntness.

In commenting on the proliferation of free plugs on the "Tonight Show" (BC-TV), *Advertising Age* said recently: "A sponsor, paying up to \$12,000 for one minute of a commercial on the telecast, might be excused for wondering if he might not get more TV time for his money if he went into a joint business venture with one of the performers on the show."

A device similar to the television "free film" has penetrated the book world. A number of important advertisers have taken to "sponsoring" books—mainly paperbacks—that plug their products. The paperbacks are sold at regular prices. But, nonetheless, they contain commercials aplenty.

American Machine & Foundry, for example, joined with Pocket Books in publishing "The A.M.F. Guide to Natural Bowling." The book contains a variety of plugs for A.M.F. bowling accessories. The same goes for "The Kodak Camera Guide" (Eastman Kodak), "The Betty Crocker Cook Book" (General Mills), "Little Lulu and her Magic Tricks" (Kleenex, which uses Little Lulu in its advertising), and "The Dennison Party Guide" (Dennison Manufacturing Company, maker of party games).

Neither children nor household pets spared this soft-sell approach. For the kids, there is "Gordon's Jet Flight." American Airlines contributed to the publication of this volume and, predictably, all of the illustrations are of American Airlines planes. For the canine crowd there is "Puppy and Dog Care" sponsored by Gaines Dog Food.

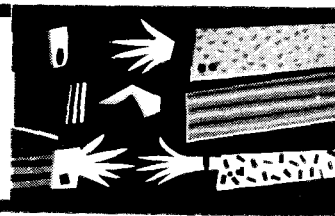
Arrangements for these books vary. In some cases the "sponsor" and publisher share publishing costs; in others the sponsor merely agrees to buy a certain number of books, thus guaranteeing a good sale.

The practice has not as yet moved into the hard-cover field. But one publisher noted that the day might come when, say, Coca-Cola might "sponsor" a novel on condition that all the characters swig the drink with frequency.

To be sure, these devices cannot be termed a threat to public taste or morality. But they are symptomatic of a trend that will doubtless increase in coming years. More and more advertisers, it is clear, are going to look for ways to get "free" mentions and free exposure. And more will be looking for methods of reaching the consumer at moments when he is not expecting a sales pitch. In accomplishing these ends, advertising will continue to intrude more and more into areas heretofore relatively untainted by commercialism. The "sell" won't be subliminal; but it will be subtle.

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Public Relations



How the National Safety Council Does It

By L. L. L. GOLDEN

ALTHOUGH there are no satisfactory figures on the number of people working in public relations—informed guesses range all the way from 50,000 to 100,000—it is fairly obvious that this is one of the fastest-growing fields in the nation. Much of its growth since World War II has, of course, been in the commercial sector, but an increasingly large part has also been in the nonprofit, nongovernmental sector. Today, in fact, this latter has become one of the most rapidly expanding areas in public relations.

Even more than in commercial public relations, however, the quality of personnel here is uneven. In some cases, there are first-class practitioners; in others, the practitioners are among the weakest in the business, men and women with very little in the way of competence. The reason, too, is pretty much the same as in commercial public relations—lack of understanding on the part of management as to what skills are necessary in this relatively new occupation. Add to this basic reason a corollary—lack of a standard for measuring performance.

But regardless of the quality of its personnel, nonprofit, nongovernmental public relations continues to grow. Today it is hard to find an important foundation, health agency, college, or other institution, whether it seeks funds from the general public or not, that

doesn't have a public-relations staff. The American Cancer Society, the National Foundation, the National Tuberculosis Association, CARE, the International Rescue Committee, and a host of others spend sizable sums on public relations. In addition, many organizations of this type are not only set up with specialists in all media, but they use outside counsel as well.

In most cases involving both the organizations that have to raise funds and those that do not, very little attention is paid to public relations "posture." But what the organizations do want and demand of their public relations departments is publicity. Many commercial public relations practitioners who have never closely observed the operations of nonprofit organizations think that it is easy for them to get space or time in all media—and it is true that they have greater acceptability with the mass media than do commercial concerns. But they must compete both against other nonprofit organizations and also with what a newspaper, magazine, or television or radio station carries in news and features. The fact that an organization represents a good cause does not in itself open media doors.

It is worth taking a look at a top nonprofit, nongovernmental organization—the National Safety Council—to see how it operates. Now forty-nine years old and devoted to the prevention of accidents of all kinds, this organization does not ask the general public for

