

A History of Advertising – the Unbelievable Truth

(The format of this piece is based on the Radio 4 programme The Unbelievable Truth in which panellists hide five true facts amongst a tissue of lies)

The advertising of products and services is as old as commerce itself. Early examples include a series of hieroglyphs in Cairo believed to be the first known reference to a pyramid selling scheme; and graffiti on a wall of the Colosseum in Rome which reads 'hic est comestibles excrementis, una stella'- which roughly translates as 'the food here isn't very good, one star'. This is often cited as the inspiration behind TripAdvisor.

The Advertising Standards Authority's rulings against certain adverts and brands were often used to court controversial publicity (there's no such thing as bad publicity, right?). Who can forget the Northamptonshire based furniture store Sofa King which was compelled to abandon its punning tag line 'Sofa King low' (a reference to its competitive pricing policy).

Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations soon became an academic discipline. Famously, Harvard Business School ran a Marketing and PR summer school which became popular with English public school boys looking for something useful to do on their gap year. Well known alumni include Boris Johnson whose end of term essay entitled "You don't have to be a pathological liar to work here, but it helps" won the Donald Trump prize for Ethical Standards in Business in 1982

No advertising campaign is complete without a celebrity endorsement. Some of the most bizarre include Kim Kardashian (she of the bootilicious behind) advertising toilet paper; bat chewing Ozzy Osbourne endorsing I Can't Believe it's Not Butter; and Dominic Cummings, currently the spokesperson for Durex.

Some concepts for advertising campaigns mercifully never made the light of day. Examples include an advert for Mr Kipling in which Marie Antoinette's head bounced off the guillotine and landed face down in a Victoria Sponge over the strap line 'Let them eat cake'; and a John Lewis advert for their range of incontinence pants (the never knowingly under-gusseted campaign).

Post war austerity and limited slots for TV advertising saw some strange pairings of companies which combined their advertising budgets to produce joint adverts. Some made sense, for example Lipton's tea and Mcvitie's digestive biscuits. However, De Beers (A diamond is forever) and Double Diamond beer (A Double Diamond works wonders so drink one today) did not make natural bedfellows. This despite the increasing popularity of diamond engagement rings, and soaring sales of Double Diamond beer for wedding receptions during the great champagne shortage of 1947.

The most expensive advert made to date was for Chanel No. 5 perfume. Nicole Kidman, star of the advert, is allergic to Chanel No. 5, a fact which had to be kept from the Chanel company. She prefers Brut and regularly splashes it on all over.

Despite regulation to ensure veracity, probity and good taste, advertisers are allowed some subterfuge. Ice cubes are made of acrylic and roast chicken is stuffed with wet newspaper to make it steam as it is taken out of the oven (The Guardian is favoured as it is the wettest of all the newspapers). However, Philip Schofield really does do his own stunts on the 'We buy any car' adverts. He is still annoying though.

The facts:

1. Sofa King story
2. Kim Kardashian advertised toilet paper.
3. Ozzy Osborne advertised 'I Can't Believe it's Not Butter'.
4. Ice cubes are made of acrylic and roast chicken is stuffed with wet newspaper.
5. Chanel No 5 is the most expensive advert ever made directed by Baz Luhrmann at a cost of \$33 million.

Bonus fact Philip Schofield is annoying.