The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty

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It's everywhere; in every direction we look. It's on the way to the train station, it's in the train on the wall beside our seat, and it's even on our coffee cup we just bought from Starbucks.

It's unavoidable. You can try to run away from it, but it always catches up to you. You can pretend like it doesn't affect you, but ultimately it always does.

It's powerful. It's much stronger then we realize. It can manipulate people into thinking a certain way, influence people to do something, and even change cultural opinion.

What is it? It's none other than advertising. With the right research, look, and design an advertisement has the capabilities to change the way people think of a certain product.

Take Dove for example. Prior to 2004, this international mega brand used advertising tactics much like many beauty brands in the industry were using- skinny models, sexual innuendos, and trendy images. (See 3 ads below)

But their products weren't getting the success they hoped for. Driven by a declining market share and decreased sales, Dove decided to take a daring new move and use curvier women in their ads. They called their new campaign the "Dove Campaign for Real Beauty." The campaign, which targeted women of all shapes and sizes, sought to reverse the fabricated idea that all women should be a size 2 with voluptuous lips, perfect hair, and toned skin. Ultimately, Dove hoped that the campaign would change the way their target audience related to their products. They never could have imagined the campaign would get so
much attention, spark heated debate, and be a leading factor of increased sales and market share. So how exactly did Dove succeed in doing all this? Let's look at one of Dove's advertisements and analyze its relationship to the original product.

One billboard sums up the “Dove Campaign for Real Beauty” in a nutshell. The billboard, which advertises Dove’s skin firming lotion, is just one example of Dove’s newest campaign, which seeks to change the way Dove’s target audience relates to their products. The billboard is able to put a certain spin on the skin firming product by using a variety of tactics and strategies.

One such strategy is hidden in the text of the billboard itself. Advertising is famous for its use of rhetoric language, and the Dove advertisement is an excellent example of using rhetoric to persuade its audience. The words ‘new’ and ‘real’ evoke a feeling of freshness and help persuade the audience to buy the lotion. According to Gillian Dyer, author of Advertising as Communication (1988, p.149), the word ‘real’ is one of the most common adjectives used in advertising. “Words such as ‘new’ and ‘real’, not only describe things, but they communicate feelings, associations, and attitudes; they bring ideas to our minds.” (Dyer 1988, p.140). Dyer (1988, p.158) also states that “rhetoric language also carries the implication of extravagance and artifice, not to mention a lack of information.” The lack of information is clear in the Dove
billboard. The sentence is abbreviated and simply constructed, which is a common technique among advertisements as to not confuse the target audience with the message.

Another element of the text on the billboard is also important in its role of influencing the audience. As suggested by Dyer (1988, p.162), "if the space between words are narrow, everyday use of a product is signified." One can see that the spaces between the words on the billboard are not stretched out and rather narrow compared to the size of the actual billboard. Aside from a textual analysis, an image and design analysis are equally if not more important in communicating a message about the skin firming lotion. As Dyer (1988, p.187) argues, "It is ultimately the images that ads leave us with, and the images of slogans, not the slogans themselves, that make ads so successful."

Every element of the Dove campaign has been strategically placed for maximum impact. The colour white, which takes up most the space on the billboard, is a sacred and pure colour. The colour can aid in mental clarity, help evoke purification of thoughts and actions, and enable fresh beginnings (Squidoo). The colour white also has a soothing aspect to it, and helps draw attention to the most important image on the billboard: the six women.

The women are shown wearing only underclothes evoking a feeling of intimacy and self confidence and acceptance. The women seem happy, relaxed, and secure. Every aspect of the women from their eye-contact, to their size, to their manner are all involved in the coding process of the ad, which helps to create a message of natural and real beauty. According to Dyer, ads generally confirm conventions of the 'ideal type'. However, with Dove showing ordinary women in their ad, a sense of realness and naturalness can be seen (Dyer 1988, p.99). This is much like what Nike did in their ads when they introduced the concept of "the ghetto" by stressing its "realness."

By creating a sense of "realness," Dove had to consider the elements of semiology. For example, all advertisements are made up of a system of distinct signs, and therefore to make an ad stand out, one must use unique images (Dyer 1988, p.117-126), hence why Dove may have chosen to use unconventional models in their ad. The six ordinary women, or the signifiers in the ad, lead to the signified, or the message of realness and honesty (Barthes 2000, p.116). This message leads the target audience to think of the skin firming lotion in a whole new light; something more than the average beauty product, but rather a beauty product meant them, real looking women.

Judith Williamson, author of Decoding Advertisements, states that ads have to have meaning to us. An ad has to connect to the person they are targeting which in Dove's case is all women, of every shape, size, and nationality. Simply put, the Dove ad is not selling a product; it is selling the target audience (Williamson 2002, p.12).

But are the women on the billboard shown in a desirable light? Many people probably don't think so. But Dove chose to show reality and not the conventional beauty model. Their daring campaign went against all the norms of modern advertising, and showed the more truthful and honest side of women today. However, much backlash and criticism evolved over the "Dove Campaign for Real Beauty."
In the book, *Mythologies*, by Roland Barthes, Barthes explains a lot about myth as a semiotic system, since he argues myth is a speech (2000, p.109-132). Is the Dove campaign a myth? Barthes would most likely argue yes. Take the six curvy women in the ad. The realness and honesty of the women masks the actual purpose of the ad, which is to sell a beauty product, which ultimately contradicts the ad’s message for real and natural beauty. If the women were really happy with their bodies, they wouldn’t need Dove’s skin-firming lotion (Guardian News). The new tactic for using real, average looking women was just another strategy to appeal to and spin women’s emotions, so that they would buy the product. Many critics raise the question of what makes these women any more honest than slender models typically shown in ads. They argue that the six women were still actors, still told to pose a certain way, smile in a certain direction, and pose in a certain manner. As Barthes (2000, p.126-129) argues, “myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion... and motivation is unavoidable when it comes to myth.”

The Dove billboard can easily be compared to the story of the “World of Wrestling” from Barthes *Mythologies*. In the story, wrestling is described as a myth for the simple reason that the audience doesn’t care if a wrestling match is rigged, but rather what it is seeing taking place. They don’t think about reality or truth. In fact, they really don’t think at all; they see (Barthes 2000, p.15). This can be applied to the Dove advertisement because the audience is only engaged with what it sees, not with the truth and persuasion of the ad. The target audience doesn’t realize that what they’re seeing was all a process to evoke a certain message and get them to think a certain way about their product or have meaning to the audience.

And think a certain way they did. Ultimately Dove’s daring strategy increased their sales and market share. Women were able to connect to the ad, which in turn made them buy the product. The campaign led to the Dove Self Esteem Fund, which gave Dove even more media exposure with the making of YouTube videos and clips.

As one can see, Dove successfully turned around their advertising tactics, which led to increased sales and changed feelings toward Dove products. These products were the same beauty products before and after the new campaign, but successful advertising allowed for people to view the products as something totally different. According to the Magic Bullet or Hypodermic Needle Model, mass media has a powerful influence over people, and can deliberately alter or control the mass audiences’ behaviour. I suppose this is not in argument today.
Bibliography


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