

Perception, perception, perception.

Marketing is all about creating perception. We use ads, public relations, coupons, whatever, to shape the public's perception of our product or service. Take for instance Geico. How do you perceive the insurer, which started life as a the Government Employees Insurance Company? Chances are you think of them as cheap insurance. Why? Because for years they have been using the tagline "15 minutes could save you 15% or more." They also use a humorous approach to make them seem accessible. (I do love the new James Lipton commercial, where he "interviews" a "real" Geico customer.)

OK. So not all perception is accurate. Giant, a supermarket here in the mid-Atlantic, runs an ad campaign that makes it seem that Giant is the place to get everything you need and save money. So not true. Many products at Giant are more expensive than elsewhere. This is where marketers can get into trouble, or where we see a disconnect between a marketing department and an operations department. The marketers are being told go out and make it look like we offer great deals on a great selection of food. Yet price points are really high for many items.

In Washington, yesterday and today, the hoopla is all about Scott McClellan's new book, "What Happened." Why? Because McClellan, who was press secretary for Bush, and who was in charge of shaping the public's perception about issues such as the Iraq war, has turned. The book is highly critical of Bush and his advisers, and claims they actively used him to deceive the American public. There is a perception problem though—why should we believe McClellan now? What is motivating him to come out against Bush (to whom he was loyal for years) NOW? In fact, the press does not seem to know what to make of this. I saw Martha Raddatz interview McClellan last night on ABC

News and she asked him point blank if he thought the Bush White House were liars. He stopped short of saying that. What McClellan has to contend with it that he is perceived as a spinner. In fact, Martha called him on it—telling him he was spinning! It was unbelievable. Read the transcript [here](#).

So there is often a gap to bridge between the truth and perception. In public affairs, if the bridge is shaky, the public will find out eventually. I think this is the case here. All governments spin the facts. That is a fact. But not all governments take the country to war. The truth is yet to be told, and the perception about the Iraq war has been crumbling for a while. Will Scott McClellan's book bring this bridge down completely? I am not sure. Like I said before, he has a perception problem himself. Reporters don't trust him. Dana Milbank (whose commentary I think is somewhat juvenile) pokes fun at McClellan in today's Washington Post. It will play out eventually. Stay tuned.

Feel good

Tylenol is currently running a campaign with "feel better" as a tagline. There are several ads in the campaign, each posing a scenario and then finishing with the tagline. I saw one today that said that sometimes you get a headache when you are dehydrated, so drink a glass of water. The message seems to be that Tylenol cares about you, and that you don't always need to take a Tylenol. It is supposed to make us feel good about Tylenol as a company. They are caring, they provide good information and of course, they want us to feel better. There is nothing wrong with this strategy, but again, I wonder if it doesn't somewhat underestimate the consumer. We take Tylenol because it makes the pain go away. If the pill didn't work,

we would take something else. Would we care if the company cares how we feel?

Dissonance

American Airlines says it knows why we fly. In any case, “we know why you fly” is their tag line for the current ad campaign. The campaign shows people traveling for various reasons, most of them to do with going to visit family or going on vacation. It seems somewhat dissonant that if American knows why we fly, and its all feel good, and they are the company that takes us where we want to go, when we want to go, that they now turn around and start charging ridiculous fees (like \$15 for your first checked bag, each way). Also, they are planning to cut back routes as well. Dissonance is just that—something is said or done that does not jibe with reality. There is a tremendous amount of dissonance in other advertising too. Like McDonald’s aiming for the healthy market or something. The truth is that American has to make the public feel like it cares about them. Because everyone who has flown knows the reality is far from rosy. We’ve been packed into flights that are often delayed, and given an option to buy crappy sandwiches if there is food at all. Once we get to our destination, we may or may not see our luggage. These days, to be a passenger takes a lot of stamina. You have to put up with security at the airport and lousy service on the airlines. But, as American knows, we are flying to go on vacation, to get away , to visit loved ones. So they cling on to that notion in their advertising. Maybe it isn’t dissonance at all—maybe it is cynicism. Since they know why we fly, they know we will put up with all sorts of crap.

Same product, different marketing, different retailers

Such is the case of a chicken sandwich being debuted at McDonald's, apparently based on a similar sandwich at Chick-fil-A, and being marketed to different ethnic groups across the country. The story is in the New York Times, and points to the importance of advertising in promoting a food product. McDonald's has a very large ad budget, and the big advertising agencies on its side. It also has restaurants everywhere. But there is one thing McDonald's does not have: a reputation for being a chicken place. Yes, they have chicken, but they are known for burgers and fries. This is their core business while, as its name implies, chicken is the thing at Chick-fil-A. It will be interesting to see if the chicken sandwich takes off at McDonald's, and whether it hurts Chick-fil-A's business or not.

Gen Y

Please visit my guest blog on Generation Y Give.

Does sexism sell?

Well, it must because these sexist ads keep on appearing. You know the kind—where women appear as sexual objects, there to look pretty and please men. Or where every 1950s notion of male and female roles are reprised (women cook, men work, women clean, men work, women simmer, men work). Women's magazines are filled with these images, plus they also tend to create the unattainable ideal of women courtesy of starving models and/or Photoshop. Why do these tendencies toward objectifying women continue in 2008, when for the first time in the United States a woman had a viable shot at being president of the country? Because it's societal and because men are still in charge at most large U.S. advertising agencies. What can we do? Continue to disagree with this state of affairs, and be vocal about it. The University of Michigan houses the Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center, which is running a campaign to stop sexism in advertising. Read about it [here](#).

Blurring the line

Sometimes it is hard to know where the PR pitch ends and the feature story begins. Such is often the case on Food Network (even so, one of my favorites). Last night, on a program called Heavyweights, three very large fast food chains were featured. It was a “behind the scenes” look at everything these retailers do to produce a particular meal or the innovations they have created. In a sense, this was a puff piece. There was no critical look or journalist doing the interviewing. In fact, the spokespeople for each of these chains was telling the public, directly, all the great things

the chains do to bring “great” food to the consumer. This is beyond a feature piece or a review. I am sure it must be a way for Food Network to give added value to certain advertisers. There is no other explanation. They have other shows like this too. Is it wrong? No. It is a boon to these advertisers, which receive an editorial type endorsement and lots of great exposure. But is it real TV? No. It is an advertorial and it is too bad it is not labeled as such. Magazines have been doing this for years—creating special sections for say, the hotel industry—and pitching it to advertisers as a chance to tell their own story, without the journalistic filter. But the difference is, these sections are nearly always listed (maybe in very fine print) as advertising or advertorial.

Are you going to raid the lost ark?

In case you have been living under a rock, the newest Indiana Jones movie is opening this weekend. It is being accompanied (or should I say anticipated) with lots of media hoopla and a re-release of all previous Indiana Jones movies. Of course! This franchise has a lot of life to it. Raiders of the Lost Ark, the first Indiana Jones movie, came out in 1981. Harrison Ford has aged since then, but apparently he is still running around in Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull. He is also running around doing the media circuit. In fact, media is really driving the potential audience for this movie. This media relations blitz probably originated on both ends. News programs know that Indiana Jones will probably be a winner and seek to book Harrison Ford and have “first looks” at the movie. The movie is definitely marketing and aiming to become the biggest hit of the summer. First, it is opening on

Memorial Day weekend, traditionally the start of summer. They are pushing the movie everywhere. Harrison Ford is doing interviews from Cannes to the CBS Early Morning Show. The movie was screened for the first time in Cannes, and apparently there has been build-up on the Internet since the movie was announced more than a year ago. Read this blog (Thompson on Hollywood) to see more about the media push.

In any case, Indiana Jones will be a success. I would argue mostly because people enjoyed the first three movies and know and like Indy. But certainly, the build-up in expectation will create anticipation and desire to see the movie. I would bet on it to be a very large opening weekend.

Movie advertising for a blockbuster like Indiana Jones shows what an unlimited marketing budget can do. It also demonstrates the integrated marketing communications approach—that is, using all marketing vehicles (advertising, public relations, social media, etc.) to get a unified message out. You could just be exposed to one media outlet and still know that this movie will be opening next weekend.

Real Estate Advertising and Starbucks Logo

Existing and new home sales are down across the country due to the mortgage/credit crises. So what is a home seller to do? Advertise of course! In the past few weeks, I have been receiving more and more postcards featuring condos or townhomes in the area. In fact, on Thursday alone, I got three such over-sized, glossy postcards addressed to “resident.” This tells me that these advertisers (Ryan Homes was one of

them) are pulling all the stops to be able to sell homes that were probably built or planned for before the real estate bubble blew. They are offering incentives and slashing prices while advertising heavily via direct mail and in the real estate section of the newspaper and even on television. The construction companies need to make up some if not all of their investment and know they need to sell those units, almost at all cost. Have you noticed an uptick in real estate advertising too?

On a completely unrelated note, a few weeks ago, Starbucks unveiled its new (“and improved”) logo. It is brown instead of green and shows a more detailed mermaid than before. Apparently, some groups are offended by the more anatomically correct mermaid (of course). The question is: was it necessary to tinker with a perfectly good and highly recognizable logo? Fortunately, the chain has already built a huge customer base. However, we all know Starbucks by its green logo. Brown may not fly. I don’t think the new logo will hurt their sales, but I don’t think it will help either. You can read a story on this on MSNBC.com. Here’s the link: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24671066/>

The Power of Suggestion

No secret here. The power of advertising is to suggest that you need something. Sometimes you didn’t even know you needed that something. Such is the case in some types of medical advertising. Is your skin red and flushed looking? It might be rosacea! Trouble falling asleep? Get some Ambien! On MSNBC.com today there is an article about Requip, the medicine for “restless legs syndrome.” Apparently, since the drug got approved in 2005, the company has been advertising and

inquiries about the “syndrome”and the drug have increased dramatically. However, the drug is just about to go generic, and thus, Requip will no longer be advertised as heavily. They are expecting a drop in people with “restless legs syndrome.” Read the story here <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24603237/>

In any case, this speaks volumes about the power of suggestion (and persuasion). And really, about the power of advertising. We tend to believe what we see on TV. And we are concerned about our health, so advertising on TV about our health seems to be very effective.