

ISSA Proceedings 1998 - Reasons To Buy: Teaching Reasoning Through Television



Ads purport to give us reasons to buy. What sorts of reasons are they? When Nike asked us to '*Just do it*', they were not – or not simply – with a sort of primitive practical syllogism, telling us to just buy. The phrase has layers of meaning. It could mean do what you were going to do, or what you were not going to. It has overtones of the coach,

or the irritated mother, of the inner voice urging you on. It is a cryptic and ambiguous phrase, accompanied by a stylish logo, and it is universally known. What is more, people buy Nikes. But their purchase is not simply falling in with the order to buy: it is a complex and highly social event.

To think of ads as practical syllogisms is to think of them as arguments from the content of the ad to an act of buying, or an intention to buy. But it is too simple to claim that an ad is properly taken only if the appropriate action issues. Ads are complex and highly sophisticated components of modern life, embedded deeply in a variety of cultural practices, but at the same time, communicating across the global village with almost unprecedented effectiveness. My project is to look more closely at the reasoning structure of advertisements.

George Steiner's claim that advertising is the poetry of the modern age is correct in the sense that the pure condensation of meaning which was once the province of purely poetic or religious discourse is now found in the ad industry. Highly intelligent (and well paid) executives spend hours searching for the one pithy phrase, a phrase that will capture the imaginations and heart, which will resonate and be sung, whispered or held – often for life. The jingles of my childhood seem inexpugnable. One, of very limited poetic worth, went

'Menz makes biscuits a treat

Because Menz makes biscuits that are good to eat'

It will, I am sure, remain with me when all else has gone. In the days of music videos and startlingly high production values of visual television, the qualities of ads are legion. The sheer effectiveness of ads as memorable images, as semiotic signifiers, as music videos or film clips is itself a matter of academic study. We

are familiar with the intertextuality of ads, both in the sense that the one theme will appear in print, television and billboards, but also in the sense that ads refer to the genres, particularly of television, with enormous subtlety. Puns proliferate, both visual and verbal and across the media. I do not attempt here to cover all aspects of advertising paper seeks out the structures of argumentation in ads. I concentrate on the verbal messages of ads as the central focus of argumentation. This is not to deny the importance of the visual and musical components of the force of advertisements, but rather to focus on one element of ads which has received relatively little attention.

I begin with an example of a print advertisement, to indicate the possibilities of argumentation, but also to sharpen issue of differences between print and other media. In this context, I explain my general project of analysing the reasoning on the media as a way of both teaching kids philosophy and of teaching them about the impact of the media. Kids are all too familiar with denunciations of the capitalist forces behind advertising -yet they adore ads. If we wish to have kids react critically to ads, the best method is to have them draw out their own understanding of advertisements as a starting point.

The second section draws on materials I have developed for talking about reasoning in television ads, and their billboard counterparts. The final section deals with the obvious problem with ads – are they true?

Section 1. A print advertisement

In the *New York Times* of November, 1996, my former compatriot, Rupert Murdoch, now a US citizen, placed a full page ad. He, as owner of the Fox network, was fighting a battle to gain access to the New York market, controlled, through its ownership of the cable company, by another media giant, the Time Warner company. Murdoch wanted Time Warner to offer Fox news on the cable. Time Warner refused, citing that most archetypal of all US institutions, the First Amendment, which protects freedom of speech. Already the situation is complex, in a fashion not unfamiliar to European media watchers. The ad, far from reducing the complexity of the situation, exploits it and presents what is by most counts a fairly elaborate argument.

“I’m about to dust some cops off.

Die pig, die pig, die.”

Time Warner used the First Amendment’s protection of free speech in its unwavering support for these lyrics, from “Cop Killer”, by Time Warner Recording Artist Ice-T. After all, profits were at stake.

Now, Time Warner believe the FOX news Channel poses a threat to the Profits of its CNN.

And this time, Time Warner cites the First Amendment to deny New Yorkers the right to see the Fox News Channel.

The First Amendment protects free speech, *not* Time Warner profits.

Support, don't distort the First Amendment

Don't block the FOX News Channel

I was struck by this advertisement, not just because of the vagaries of capitalisation - and of capital - it exploited. The sheer effrontery of using Time Warner's support of tendentious lyrics to grab attention for a competing company has style. So does the irony of Fox accusing other companies of protecting profits by excluding competition. But what was striking about the ad for me was its use of a complex logical structure to make a rhetorical point.

The ad accuses Time Warner of inconsistency in its use of the First Amendment - the law which protects free speech in the United States. The first sub argument claims that

(1) Time Warner claimed the support of the first amendment to allow playing of the Ice-T lyrics

There is an implicature we can draw from 'After all profits were at stake':

(2) Time Warner's action were caused by the need to maximise profits,

This in turn leads,, by a weak inductive argument, to:

(3) Time Warner's actions are now caused by the need to maximise profits

The second subargument takes 3 and 4

(4) Time Warner claimed the support of the first amendment to prevent playing Fox news on New York cable.

to reach a conclusion that

(5) The First Amendment has been used to protect Time Warner profits.

So far , of course, there is no evident inconsistency: Even if Time Warner's actions were caused by the need to maximise profits, their behaviour appears to be consistent in both cases. The moral force of the argument depends on two enthymematic premises:

(6) The need to maximise profits is (in itself) not a good reason for acting.

This, ironically given Fox's behaviour, is taken for granted.

The second enthymeme, attributing inconsistency to Time Warner, could be

(7) It is improper, in some sense, to appeal to the First Amendment both to allow and to prevent material to reach the airwaves.

This is a crucial and debatable premise. Since the appeals to the First Amendment were successful, Time Warner was operating within the letter of the law, so their action was not legally improper, nor inconsistent with the law. Thus the ad must be suggesting that Time Warner is morally inconsistent and has effectively distorted the law. Clearly it is not inconsistent tout court to use a law which protects free speech under reasonable constraints, as the first amendment does to prevent playing of one type of material (eg incitement to treachery in time of war, or racist jibes) and allow playing of another type of material.

The two final claims of the advertisement make it clear that Time Warner is being accused of moral inconsistency and of ill faith in the use of the law

(8) The First Amendment protects free speech, *not* Time Warner profits.

This premise draws on the first of the elliptical premises, suggesting that the First Amendment has been misused in pursuit of profits. In the final call to action,

(9) Support, don't distort the First Amendment. is then read

(10) Don't block the FOX News Channel

Supporting Fox news, the ad says, is tantamount to supporting the real intention of the First Amendment.

The advertisement is clearly designed for the *New York Times*. The complexity of the argument structure, whatever its fallacies, leaves room for relatively sophisticated readers to fill in the gaps as they choose. Its political force survives the evident inconsistency of one media giant accusing another of greed, through the immensely powerful emotional appeal to the First Amendment.

Note moreover, that in terms of argumentation, this example uses a direct argument structure the conclusion of which is an appeal to action: supporting Fox. This is indeed a case of practical reasoning. It is rare to find the argument structure of an advertisement so explicit: I will suggest that the form is often implicit in advertisements. Just as it is often necessary to supplement explicit argument structures in ordinary language disputes, in order to reveal the implicit argument structure (van Eemeren, Jackson & Grootendorst, 1993), so it is often necessary to supplement the implicit argument structure of advertisements.

My first reaction to this advertisement when I saw it eighteen months ago, was to argue that this was a characteristically print media ad. I argued that the very complexity of form identified here is unlikely to appear in television or radio advertising, since it required a level of logical and linguistic reflectiveness, let alone the time to reflect, which television viewers lack. This view is expressed, for

instance, by Postman (1993), who suggests that the linear patterns of thinking may be undermined by the immediacy and impact of television, and that hot links on the internet also fail to encourage the development of logical thinking skills. Eisenstein's (1983) finely worked analyses of the impact of print have been developed by some to suggest that television, with its plethora of clues, limits the imagination, and the demands made on the viewer. Print, on the other hand is both 'linear' and demanding – the imagination is working double time to think through images given in language, while at the same time interpreting the logical links explicit in written language.

This is a conclusion I now reject, both at the level of the possibilities of argumentation, and at the level of the sophistication of audience reaction. What is at the heart of this ad is an accusation of inconsistency. Just such inconsistency is often attributed to opponents in political advertising on television. Inconsistency in itself is bad enough, but usually there is a further twist – your inconsistency is self serving. Quite generally, it is an error to identify print alone as suitable for reasoning skills. Being reasonable is fundamentally a feature of discourse and action, not of written linear texts. It is only a contingent feature of our culture that extended patterns of reasoning do normally appear in print. The fact that visual media evoke immediate and emotional reactions does not imply that television – and certainly television ads – are not as cognitively complex as print.

What is more, kids, especially, are highly sophisticated viewers of television. They are a highly televisually literate generation, whose skills include the ability to deconstruct the medium itself. As the media guru Rushkoff puts it: 'Most kids are doing media deconstruction while watching television' (Gabriel, 1996). He goes on 'Their favourite shows come "pre-deconstructed" that is with built in distancing devices ...such shows earn the ultimate youthful phrase "cool". By cool, I mean seeing things from a distance'. (Gabriel, 1996). Rushkoff goes on to talk of the sort of deconstruction that kids seek in watching television 'What screenagers seek from television, multi media and other entertainment is the "aha" experience of making connections across their storehouse of media images' (Gabriel, 1996).

The level and philosophical complexity of ads and the arguments they contain should never be underestimated. A good, cool ad is making a range of complex moves which are worth deconstructing, both for the argument structure and for the training in reasoning it provides.

Looking at the reasoning implicit in television ads is part of a broader project, which is designed to teach reasoning through television product, some of the

materials of which have been trialled in the US and Australia. Advertising agencies, who specialise in persuasion, are adroit at exploiting underlying philosophical uncertainty, as well as pushing blatantly fallacious claims. This project aims instead to uncover and analyse those philosophical issues while teaching reasoning skills[i].

Traditionally reasoning skills have been taught through written examples, some of which are highly anachronistic or artificial. However critical reasoning skills are required in order to filter and interpret the rapidly changing circumstances of the world around us – and those skills need to be relevant. Many students use television as their major source of information about the world and as the source of basic understanding of the world. Yet we rarely provide students with the skills directly to criticise and analyse television's world view. It is an obvious step to use the medium of television itself as a means of analysing television product critically and thereby of teaching viewers to reason. Reasoning skills as conceived above do appear on television; and can be refined using debate about television. Ads are a particularly fertile field, both at the level of reasoning strategies, and at the meta level of philosophical debate about the issues in ads.

It will not do, however, to take a simplistic line of denying the force of ads, and labelling them as immoral, stupid, or ill intentioned. However true such claims may be, they fail to capture the cleverness and attraction of ads. Far wiser to begin with the questions: "What does this ad argue? Is it valid? Why does it work?" and get kids to learn the process of reasoning about and through ads, than to denigrate what is obviously a powerful product. In recent months, I have been working on a homepage (Slade, 1998) designed to help teachers – and students – work through the philosophical and argumentation strategies of television product. This paper provides a background for the section on advertisements.

Section 2. Fallacies and television ads

Television advertisements are a rich field of examples of all of the so called classical fallacies: from 'appeal to authority' to begging the question, from equivocation to affirming the consequent. The most obvious television fallacies offer real possibilities, both of argumentation structure and of philosophical debate, for teaching and examining reasoning skills. Each of the so called fallacies, however, must be seen in a context: a context which suggests that while formally fallacious, the ad might provide a moderately good reason to buy.

This is a consequence of what is a very general truth about television ads – they are enthymematic. Spelling out the suppressed premises is often a tedious and

unrewarding affair, like spelling out the meaning of a metaphor. Nevertheless, I think it is worth remembering that much of the force of ads derives from the ambiguities and possibilities of elaboration they contain. The general model of elaboration I adopt draws on principles of charity of interpretation of behaviour to make sense of utterances (Davidson, 1967, 1984 *passim*) together with Gricean principles (eg Grice 1975). My assumption is that where an advertisement appears to be inexplicable or meaningless, we should search for the best fit of meanings, given our knowledge of the world and of linguistic practice. My procedure is thus similar to that outlined in van Eemeren *et al* (1993), in so far as it elaborates arguments according to contextual knowledge.

Consider a Mexican example, an ad for a beer called in Spanish 'Dos X lager' **[ii]**. It shows an image of a refrigerator, opening to show it filled with beer, again with less, then again with more beer.

The punch line:

'Ahora entenderás la evolución de las especies' (Now you understand the evolution of species) is open to a range of interpretations. It may mean that Dos X has proven, by its ability to survive, that it is the best – it has achieved natural selection. From the point of view of the ad agency intentional ambiguity such as this grabs the attention and ensures impact. In part such ads are driven by the washback validity of ad companies' evaluative methods. It is normal to test ads for 'cut-through', or the extent to which they are remembered by focus groups of viewers. Ads which are difficult to understand and thus tantalising may be more memorable than others.

From the point of view of the consumer however, the sheer fact of being familiar with the Dos X ad cannot even remotely guarantee that we buy that beer rather than another. Thus we need to draw again on our principle of charity to make sense of the Dos X ad. Why would the ad give us reason to buy? One version might be

If people drink a lot of Dos X, it must be a good beer to drink

But the ad shows lots of beer passing through the fridge

So I too will buy Dos X (if I want beer)

This is not compelling, but it alerts us to a possible structure of argumentation. Ads can indirectly suggest how to behave by making indirect claims about others' behaviour.

Some ads have fairly simple arguments: the classical appeal to authority, for instance, with breakfast cereal being advertised using a sporting star, suggests that if you eat the same breakfast cereal you too might improve your sporting ability. This is not always merely a fallacy – appeals to authority are quite reasonable in their place. Indeed, a cereal recommended by one who is an expert in sporting health might provide a better recommendation than the sheer suggestion that it is great. The reasons are not as baldly bad as they might at first seem.

Another example of an apparent fallacy is again Australian:

‘Sugar, a natural part of life’

The enthymematic step relies on a premise

Natural parts of life are good for you

to reach the conclusion

Sugar is good for you (or eat sugar!)

We might point out that

Cancer, a natural part of life

is also true. The argument looks absurdly fallacious. In fact, a careful examination of the subtext of the argument might uncover a slightly better argument: say

You have a choice of natural and artificial sweeteners

All else being equal, natural is better

So buy sugar.

Appeal to a principle of charity makes better sense of the ad than sheer harping on invalidity.

Consider another example, of what are often known as life style ads. The new Apple ad, ‘Think Different’ is designed to remind consumers that although PCs dominate the market, a different product might have advantages. The ad is both elliptical and ungrammatical. Its impact derives in part from its open endedness. What does it mean to ‘think different’? Is it the same as thinking differently, or not? With Apple positioning itself to be the minor player in the personal computing domain, how is it locating its market? In a sense this is a paradigm lifestyle ad – with blatantly fallacious arguments, even if we accept the untrue premise

People who think different, the Dalai Lama, Einstein and so on are associated with Apple computers

So, if you are associated with Apple, you will be different

So you will be like the Dalai Lama, Einstein and others.

Even if it were true that you would be different if you were to be associated with Apple, it certainly does not follow that you will be relevantly like the extraordinary people shown.

The fallacy is shared by all life style ads, of which Coke has been the leading exponent. Coke ads associate a particular life style with those drinking Coke, with the implicit suggestion that if you drink Coke you will also be young elegant and lively. But even if it were the case that:

All the young and lively and beautiful people drink Coke,
which is the best that could be claimed on the basis of the lifestyle ad it would be affirming the consequent to claim that

If you drink Coke, you are young and lively and beautiful.

Even worse is the claim that drinking Coke will make you young and lively and beautiful. But kids certainly recognise this fallacy.

The Sprite ads in Australia drew on kids' scepticism, saying:

Drinking Sprite will not make you a good basketball player. But it will refresh you.

The very existence of the debunking form of ads, of which there are many, shows how aware we are of the logical weakness of ads.

How then are we to make sense of such ads providing us a reason to buy? If we as viewers are well aware of the fallacies, why do we like the Coke ads, the Nike and the Sprite ads, and why do we keep on buying? Partly, the answer is elliptical phrase to draw attention, to avoid the obvious. The Nike campaign, 'Just Do it' exploits ambiguity to draw attention. It does not simply tell us to buy the shoes. There is a perfectly justifiable argument which might go:

When we buy training shoes, we want to buy the same sort as everyone else - we will try to buy what others buy..

In the absence of other good reasons to pick one brand over the other, what reasons are there to pick a brand? I pick the brand I think others will pick, and assume that they do the same.

We all know we all watch television and the Nike ad

So we all know we all know the Nike brand

So the best strategy is to buy Nike.

Such chains of reasoning are rarely made explicit; but they do provide a rational reason for acting as the ad suggest, and buying Nike. Any criticism of the impact

of ads in the lives of kids must allow for this level of complexity, rather than debunking ads. This does not mean we have to accept a pattern of consumption dictated by ads. The next step is to develop the ability to question, philosophically, the patterns of justification themselves. In effect, once we have found the best possible argument, we examine the truth of the premises. In the case of this version of the argumentation, we would want to ask why kids *should* use the same trainers as others, why they want to be like others. We might ask what the costs to those who produce the goods are. Indeed, the recent difficulties of Nike about their use of cheap labour suggest that just such questions have been asked by consumers.

The issues are often complex ethical problems. Such problems are worth discussing outside the context of the ad and raise fundamental philosophical issues. That I wish to finish with is the notion of truth in ads itself.

3. Truth and Ads

Are ads ever true? In so far as an advertisement is a call to action, it is either complied with or not, rather than either true or false. But the premises of ads are certainly either true or false, and the notion of truth plays a major role in talk about advertising, as well as in ads themselves.

But first a word of caution. The truth of premises is neither sufficient for a good ad, nor necessary. Consider first those familiar soap powder ads in which mothers of a family of five kids vouch for Omo. True they may be, but the ads lacked cool. Even more striking is the case where truth in an ad was seen as negative, so that truth of the premises was definitely not necessary for a good ad. I quote the following story about Coke ads in Mexico:

Mexicans had such an inbuilt scepticism that they regarded the very concept of "truth" with great suspicions the Coca Cola company... found in their marketing studies..

Coke had conducted extensive marketing studies in Mexico as it was introducing the company's world wide slogan "It's the real thing", which had worked wonders throughout the world, advertising industry sources recall. In line with Coca-Cola's international advertising campaign, it had translated the slogan in Mexico almost literally to "Esta es la verdad" or "This is the truth". But it didn't work. Several focus groups assembled in Mexico City reacted coldly to it.

"We found that the word *truth* had a negative connotation in Mexico," I was told by Jorge Matte Langlois, the Chilean born psychologist, sociologist and theologian

who had conducted the confidential polls for the Zedillo campaign, and who had conducted the focus groups for Coca-Cola years earlier. "People's reaction was, if it's the truth, it must be bad".

Coca-Cola's Mexico division soon changed its slogan to "La chispa de la vida"- "the spark of life". (Oppenheimer, A, 1996: 269-270)

Coke has gone through a myriad of ads in Mexico since then: now we have 'Disfrute Coke' and a much debated campaign, which thankfully never reached the air, trying to link Coke with the Easter spirit. One cringes at the thought of Coke reviving Jesus or Jesus turning water to Coke, but the proposed campaign was not far off. Last year, an ad for local spring water featured a priest standing over a bottled of imported purified water and saying 'Well if it had to be purified, how many sins had it committed?'

Thus far the point may be merely that truth or - at the very least, the desirability of truth - is culturally influenced. For many, the function of ads is precisely to transform truth, to alter meanings. Barthes' (1972) work on soap powders showed how ads about what are really harsh chemical substances could transform them into gentle products: products which manifested the mother's loving care for her family. Mark Morris transformed the thesis into a ballet, transforming the product again into a signifier of the US commercial culture. Such transformations, we are reminded by those who create and those who criticise advertisements, are essential to the advertising culture.

The study of such transformations have long been a staple of the media criticism industry. What I mean by philosophical debate about ads, however, is something different. Ads are a potent site for philosophical questioning, in part because of the enormous energy that is involved in locating where an ad will have an impact. The ad is often a clue to a real philosophical dilemma. Television commercials characteristically aim to be unsettling, to cut at the margins of issues which are exercising a community. The best ads play on the issues which are exercising a community, drawing out the concerns and materialising them. The very content of ads contain issues about truth which need discussing.

Toby Miller^[iii] notes the following statistic: while in 1993, six hundred ads in the US mentioned truth, by 1994 two thousand did (Fitzgerald, 1994). The mention of 'truth' here calls out for investigation. Understanding what is going on in appeals to 'truth' requires hard philosophical leg work. It is truth, as it is used in the ads, that we need to begin to address when we talk of television. Kids and adults have been told that television is a capitalist plot. They don't want to talk about that.

What they want to do is talk about what interests them – what ‘true’ means in an ad. Kids are not interested in the meta-level debate about whose interests are served by television; but they are interested in issues like fairness, truth, reality. Consider the Cannon ad, for a laser printer – ‘Its only competition is reality’. What is real and what unreal about a photocopy, colour or not? Surely photocopies are real photocopies?

Truth as a concept used in ads has burgeoned as the disquiet about the role of truth on television, in the news, and in the advertising industry itself has risen. My project is to allow this debate to go back to its philosophical beginnings, to the theories of truth which sustain lay talk about truth. I will not rehearse my account here, since I aim merely to encourage debate about truth and television, although I do think we can do better than a wholesale post modern rejection of truth.

I finish with another New York gleaning, this time from a department store called Barney’s. I was wandering in the store when I saw a huge sign ‘Philosophy’. It was a trade mark for a range of cosmetic products. I quote the booklet the naked truth:

... the naked truth is a revolutionary new product that takes the notion of tinted moisturisers to the next generation... so we’re stretching the truth a little. after all perception is reality.

(philosophy sales booklet, Barneys, 1996, p30.)

Truth has become an issue which advertisers have latched on to: After all, the ad says that ‘perception is reality’. Surely that claim needs debating?

NOTES

i. ‘Reasoning’ as it is used here has a broad application, to skills which range from analysis through inference to evaluation. Reasoning thus conceived is far broader than the set of logical skills often caricatured by non logicians: it is rather, logical skills as conceived by many logicians and most informal logicians, as skills of interpreting and evaluating arguments, with all due contextual sensitivity. They are skills used by all from the youngest toddler when guessing at causal connections to the most theoretical of physicists or post modernists, drawing out implications of statements.

ii. This is a Mexican beer. Four X is the Australian beer noted for the ad ‘I can feel a Four X coming on’, which I will not attempt to analyse.

iii. in conversation, and in Miller (1998)

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