

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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Is there anyone willing to advocate for advocacy advertising?

Today, I plan to ask the oil companies what I can do help them. Yep, it's on my to-do list, because right now there's a commercial airing, full of ordinary citizens looking to oil companies for guidance and thought leadership during this period of energy instability. I guess I wouldn't be a good American if I didn't comply.

In the advertising world, advocacy ads and trade group marketing occupy a sort of nebulous territory where almost any fact can be twisted to promote a biased point of view. And often, the real sponsors aren't mentioned in the work.

You know this category of advertising is trite because it's so easy to parody.

"They're Happy Because They Eat Lard." So says a bogus Cold War era-ad that was circulated on the Internet, showing a contented WASP family at the beach. Supposedly, it was sponsored by the "Lard Information Council."

For a while. I thought the ad was real. I can easily picture a old-time breakfast board meeting of the Lard Information Council brainstorming more ways to get lard into a 50's era diet of Twinkies and biscuit mix. The trouble is, the ad feels authentic because over the years, we've been subjected to so many preposterous selling messages that aren't the handiwork of one company, but of advocacy groups—cartels of companies or special interests that often operate under names like "Americans for America" or "People for Truth."

Sometimes advocacy groups promote entertaining messages—like the "Got Milk" ads, which were originally sponsored by the California Milk Processors Board, essentially a group of dairies. Many commodity products have groups that pool ad dollars together to get the word out, and at least when you see the work you know where it's coming from.

With advocacy ads that tend to be more controversial, the source isn't so obvious. These days however, if you do a little digging, you can find out who's behind the ads. Drug companies, oil companies, religious groups, and insurance consortiums are big time spenders. Every group has an agenda to promote, and often those agendas are promoted though ads that have an ambiguous origin, especially if politics or current legislation are involved.

But the power is increasingly in the hands of people, who have the ability to sort out the truth, and often don't rely on one source for their information. In this age of increased transparency, I wonder if advocacy advertising will catch up.

And at the moment, no issue is more transparent than our dependency on oil and the effects of high gas prices. The oil companies tell me I can go to one of their websites to get the "facts." But like any other consumer these days, I'll decide for myself what the facts are.

Which is bad news for the entire ad industry, especially if we want our work to be believed on any level. There's a lesson to be learned from blatant advocacy advertising. By creating messages that simply don't resonate or have any truth to them, we're burning up any credibility we ever had.