

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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This Land was Hand-Crafted for You and Me

Perhaps we should rename this country the United States of Advertising

As this column is being posted close to July 4th, it occurred to me that if there's anything as American as baseball and apple pie, it's advertising.

Oh, I'm sure the Egyptians may have thrown a coupon in with all their hieroglyphics. And the ancient Greeks probably had some sort of corporate sponsors for their comedies and tragedies. We Americans, however, have made self-promotion a national institution.

Most likely, it started with Christopher Columbus. Try getting boatloads of people to travel to the edge of the earth without some sort of unique selling proposition or clever tagline. You know, like Royal Caribbean does: "Get Out There!"

But it didn't take long until settling the land in the New World gave birth to all new forms of shady hucksterism. It's alleged that British and French soldiers gave Native Americans smallpox-infested blankets. Can't you picture that? "Here's your free gift. Yours to keep with no obligation. It's our way of saying thanks."

And so we created a republic blessed with freedom of the press. Anyone could crank out a political screed or daily paper, so long as you could afford the equipment and paper. Thus, to generate needed revenue, was invented the classified ad. If you were a metalsmith or a cobbler, you could advertise your wares. If you were a slave trader, you could, too. Hey, it's a free country, after all.

Through wave after wave of immigrants, one of the promises of America is still that anyone can come to this country and start a business. Which, of course, means people have to know about your business before they can become a customer. Despite the sophistication of globalism, technology and media, and despite all the, uh, foreigners that win One Show pencils, I firmly believe advertising as a basic human ritual has remained uniquely embedded in the cultural DNA of America for 230 years, unlike in any other country.

Look around you. Red, white, and blue blend perfectly with any Pantone palette.

We live in a land where anybody can stand in front of a camera dressed up like George Washington, cherry tree in the background and say, "I cannot tell a lie. I'm chopping prices on all sofas and loveseats in the store." Try doing that in North Korea dressed as Kim Jong-Il.

We live in a land where it's a summer habit to cook meat over an open flame much like humans all over the world have done for centuries. Yet we tell ourselves we'll improve our self-image if the cooking's done on a \$3000 grill with bun warmers and built-in refrigerator so the neighbors in the cul-de-sac drool with envy.

We live in a land where terrorists will come here to attack symbolic American buildings in an attempt to destroy our way of life and commerce, but spend the night before shopping in Wal-Mart and eating at Pizza Hut, which as brands are just as symbolic of our country as the World Trade Centers were.

American advertising, much like the country itself, has long promised the good life to the rest of the world. A shiny new car, whiter teeth, a greener lawn. Every day, thousands of people risk life and limb to cross our border with Mexico to pursue that dream.

Perhaps we'd do a better job of planning America's future if we recognized that we're a nation that markets itself to the world. Of all the brands we've created for businesses, America itself is also brand. Every action our country takes advertises the brand internally along with the rest of world. Let's think of America in those terms: Is our country one that provides service after the sale, or are we a bait-and-switch nation?

Maybe that's a discussion for another day. In the meantime, I hope you have a wonderful July 4th. Go get all the fireworks and BBQ fixins you'll need to celebrate with friends and family. If you go to the grocery store, don't forget your frequent shopper "loyalty" card. You could save up to 20%.

And what's more American than that?