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E1

THE

ART

OF

SELLING

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This is another in a series of periodic reports on life in America today.



By Donal Holway for The Washington Post

Casting a TV commercial over a sandwich lunch are Lester Colodny, Lois Korey and Allen Kay, the "crazies" of Needham, Harper & Steers.

NEW YORK—Dusk, high up over mid-Manhattan, a corner office overlooking the maze of office buildings and the East River. A woman puts a cassette in the videotape player, punches a button, then turns off the lights. A face flickers onto the TV monitor. "These are LA girls," the woman says. "We've just got the tests back from the coast." She watches intently as a succession of actresses run through their lines. That one's been in "All in the Family," she says, that one in "Chorus Line." After one particularly effervescent actress completes her tryout, the woman remarks, "Cute, but no cigar." Brief laughter from another corner of the room. Then a voice: "Do you realize what power we wield, the power to make her a star?" It is said ironically, but it is the truth.

They'll never win Oscars or Tonys for these roles. They are players who plug products in the world of advertising. Their medium is television, their vehicle the commercial, their influence on our buying habits incalculable. It is a measure of how sophisticated and pervasive the TV commercial has become that the lavish and expensive productions fleetingly filling our screens are staged and crafted with all the techniques of the legitimate theater. Indeed, the practitioners of the TV commercials will argue that their productions often are better than many of the dramas surrounding them. And often they are right (which probably says more about the quality of TV dramas than about the commercials). They are, in that sense, properly proud to be playing major roles in the newest form of an old American art—the art of selling.

JINGOISM and hucksterism come easy for Americans. The boast, the brag, the tall story, the pitch, the con, the come-on, the sucker-born-every-minute fables are older than the Republic. Snake oil men and wheeler-dealers are as much a part of the national lore as the innocent stories about George Washington and that cherry tree. Early advertising made outrageous claims, and the public had little redress for being gulled into an inferior or misleading product.

An ad that appeared in a Boston paper before the Revolution was typical of the genre. It offered citizens a wondrous tonic that was:

An Excellent Medicine, which cures the Cholick, Dry Belly-Ach, Loss of Limbs, Fevers and Agues, Asthmas, Coughs, and all sorts of Obstructions, Rheumatism, Sickness at the Stomach, Surfeits by Immoderate Eating and Drinking, Weakness, Trembling of the Heart, want of Appetite, Gravel, Melancholy, and Jaundice and is excellent for the Gout....

As America prospered, advertising business proliferated. By the Civil War, agencies had sprung

The American Experience

up to sell their skills to the growing mass circulation newspapers. Their product was more misleading than ever, and the press took the sanctimonious view that nothing could be done about it. "Caveat emptor"—buyer beware. A Boston paper, responding to reader complaints about the flagrant abuses of its advertising, publicly replied by saying:

"To this complaint we can only reply that it is for our interest to insert such advertisements as are not indecent or improper in their language, without any inquiry whether the articles advertised are what they purport to be. That is an inquiry for the reader who feels interested in the matter, and not for us, to make."

The hard sell and the fakery continued, but the ad techniques became increasingly sophisticated: brand identification and slogans were in vogue (and still are). By the 1880s a sales genius from Cincinnati by the name of Proctor called his soap Ivory. It was, he

claimed, 99 44-100 per cent pure. More wonderfully, "It floats."

Another product, Castoria, was so popular, its hucksters insisted, that "children cry for it." And if you had "that tired feeling" you obviously had to reach for Hood's Sarsaparilla. Clearly, too, every woman who knew anything had to use Lydia Pinkham's Female Compound.

Later, the ad men extolled the virtues of tobacco—Camels, Chesterfields, Lucky Strike, Old Gold—all different, all dashing, all sophisticated, all good for you, all part of the American way of life. They also helped create an image of, and an appetite for, what it takes to achieve social status and the good life. You weren't somebody until you owned a Cadillac.

Now advertising people will tell you their business and their techniques are changing rapidly. The day of the hard sell, if not over, is passing. Now successful commercials must take into account increasing public sophistication and cynicism. You can't pander, can't con, can't come on too strong and expect to get away with it.

Today's operative words among ad people are "warmth" and "wit" and "humor" and "integrity" and "humanity." At least that's how they express them.

But they still can't forget their primary role is to sell, persuade and influence consumers. If wit, warmth and humor are in, they'll give us witty, warm, humorous commercials—and carefully watch the marketplace returns. If they don't work, they'll give us something else. At \$120,000 a minute for the biggest prime time network TV spots, they can't afford to bomb.

"We discovered the medium is the message long before Mr. McLuhan did," one major corporation advertising manager says. "I mean that not only do the television commercials and the programs that we sponsor say something about the program. They say something about us."

See SELL, Page E2

SELL, From Page E1

"The things we say about ourselves have to do with our desire to be known as a company with a social concern, with warmth, human characteristics, a good place to work, a good place to invest your money, quality in everything we do. Those things are a given that anything we do in the commercial area should reflect."

"Then we determine what characteristics of those various products are going to have the most turn-on, the most triggers, the most buttons for the people who are viewing them. Then we just turn the creative people loose."

THE PHONE rings at 2 o'clock in the morning and Lois Korey groggily reaches for the receiver. "Monks!" a voice calls out. "That's it!" Korey replies.

Another TV commercial is being born.

"More of our stuff has come at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning," Korey says, "than at any other time. We conceive when other people are busy conceiving other things. We keep the population explosion down."

"We've worked so long together that we have a shorthand so when somebody says 'Monks!' you say 'That's it!' And you know they're talking about Xerox and monks. You don't know what you're going to do with them but the idea of a particular piece of equipment and monks is funny to begin with. The next day we start working on it."

Lois Korey is the creative director of Needham, Harper & Steers, an advertising agency whose work reaches into the homes of tens of millions of Americans. She heads a group, called the "crannies" among themselves, that dreams up ideas for TV commercials.

One of their most important clients is the Xerox Corporation, and the making of their monk commercial, seen by some 60 million people during the World Series this fall, offers both an anatomy of a commercial and an insight into the people who create them.

Xerox had developed a new, computerized duplicating system and wanted to do a commercial about it. Korey and her principal creative group colleagues, as is their custom, personally inspected the duplicating system to see how it works and what approach they might take in telling Americans about it.

"We all went up to see it and were stunned by it," recalls Lester Colodny, who has been a comedian, a TV network writer and producer, a Hollywood screen writer and a playwright before entering advertising. "It was probably the most innovative and most sophisticated piece of duplicating equipment in the world. How do you tell a story of such a very complex piece of machinery?"

Lois Korey, like Colodny, had also come into advertising late after a career as a TV comedy writer for such shows as Steve Allen, Ernie Kovacs and Peter Lind Hayes. She too found the new equipment a difficult advertising challenge.

"It is so good and it does so many things that we'd just have people to death if we did it in a traditional way," she says. "You almost had to totally overlook all its sales points and tell another type of story. You had to get the audience hooked into the commercial."

The third principal member of their group is Allen Kay, the firm's art director. He was born into an advertising family, and then studied art in California before coming back to New York. Kay is the one who came up with the monk idea.

"Let me go through the thought process for you," Kay explains. "They were: okay, we have this machine that can turn out copies. But more than copies. It turns out sets. But more than that. It turns out sets like complete books. So we then said, okay, what type of person could use this?"

"So we said, okay, a business that has to make a lot of proposals. Boring! Then we thought, geez, it makes books. Maybe we'll call it the bookmaker and it's great for bookies who've got all their tab sheets and so forth and it puts out the odds of the day. Well, nah, bookies aren't in this year. And in thinking about that it struck us that you had to figure a guy who would have to do this by hand."

"A monk! A clandestine monk tucked away in a monastery that has to make these sets. Then what happens? You've got the first terrific by hand. And then he takes it in to the superior and the guy says, 'I love it! It's fantastic! But I'd like to have 500 more.' And can you imagine—suddenly the idea starts. For 6



The punch line of the "monks" commercial: "It's a miracle!"

THE ART OF SELLING

months now this poor little monk's been working letter by letter, slaving over this document. And what's he going to do? What he does is he's got a friend of his who just got in this new Xerox machine that can make the sets for him, and he goes up to ask him for a favor. He gets the sets printed instantly, carries them back to the superior, who looks at them and says, 'It's a miracle!'"

Smash idea. The group buys it. They go to work plotting the entire miniature play. What does the monk look like? Like Pinch Tuck, of course, Lovable. Let's call him Brother Dominick. How about the monk's superior in the order? Ascetic, reverential, preoccupied with his order and his work. Naturally.

The plotting goes on. Story boards—cartoon sketches of each sequence—are created. Copy is written, including dialogue. The idea is presented to Xerox at the firm's corporate headquarters in Stamford. At these sessions, Colodny, the former stage comedian, often personally acts out the various roles.

"I've seen him act out the story board where he does everything from sing and dance to juggle," says a Xerox executive.

Xerox buys it. The harder work remains next—the casting, the auditions, the staging, the filming. They finally find the right person for Brother Dominick, the monk who, in their words, "has a certain amount of warmth and a sense of humor and a cuddliness about him." He turns out to be a Berchtolt comedian who lapses into Yiddish dialect after the scenes are shot.

The commercial is completed, aired in prime network time, and witnessed by millions again and again and again. All this work, energy, talent, time and money for seconds of exposure about a terribly expensive and complex piece of machinery. Virtually no individual will buy it for personal use and only a relative few are in a position to make a decision for their companies to purchase it. What does Xerox get out of this?

XEROX OFFICIALS have both a long and a short answer. They are, simply, attempting to create an aura about their company. If the public climate toward them is favorable, then their sales will increase.

Their TV commercials are a key in creating that climate. They cannot say specifically that a single commercial boosts sales, but they know that in the long run their sales have risen. And they leave little to chance.

"The questions that plague everyone are what good do the commercials do for Xerox and do they sell more machines," says Walter L. Orsen, a top advertising executive for Xerox. "Who is that guy in Philadelphia who said years ago that half my advertising dollar goes to waste, but which half? You can't figure that out. Everybody's tried to measure it."

"It's toughest for us because we have a high-ticket item. It's a considerable purchase. It's not like, gee, I'll try that new bread I noticed in the store and run down and pick up a six-pack of Bud. It's not that kind of purchase. You've got to think about it. Maybe there's a committee in the office that's going to take on the copier or the duplicators. Maybe we reach them."

"Simple logic tells us that if you say in somebody, 'Name a company that's in the office products business?' and if 80 per cent of them say Xerox, that has got to be a plus. If you can raise that top-of-the-mind awareness from 40 to 80 or whatever you're in a better position to sell. Secondly, what do they think of you? Well you can get awareness very easily by dropping your pants in public or showing a nude lady on the television but the attitude is the important thing. If the attitude is favorable, then again purchase decision logic has got to be tilting toward your favor. We've asked people before and after these events—which is what we did during the World Series—about different characteristics. What do you think about this company? Is it socially conscious?"

Does it make quality products? Is it a good place to work? If you do this before and after the World Series and there have been no other major activities such as a sharp increase in the stock price or the announcement of a new technology, then again logic says whatever changes you get have to be attributed to your activity on the World Series.

"We were a little afraid we might increase awareness but decrease attitudes. People might say, 'Yeah, I saw 'em on there, but who cares?' But that didn't happen. Awareness increased, and also attitudes were more favorable. They didn't say, 'Oh, yeah, just another snow tire, just another beer or deodorant powder.'"

Brother Dominick, the lovable monk, is a seller.

GOOD ADVERTISING, someone once said, works even if you're not interested in the product. If the commercial is good, then it becomes a product in itself. And advertising itself has a life and a power and an influence all its own. It is the nature of the business that a seller must believe his product to be the best. Inevitably, the seller often does not only the public, but himself.

"There are very few clients that don't come to us excited by their product and really believing," Lois Korey says, "even when you find out long afterwards that it really wasn't better. But they thought it was. They get the agency hyped up. You really think you have something until somebody else comes out with a parody of the same product."

"Every product is not great to work on. You can't kid yourself and say everything is beneficial. Some things are just another form of breakfast and another kind of coffee. But I will bet that the writers and the art directors and the producers that work on the cereal advertising really believe the box and really believe the client."

She and her colleagues are understandably sensitive about criticism of their influence and power. They resent being thought of as hucksters and hidden persuaders. Their industry, they insist, polices itself as much as or better than others. Their standards are no lower and probably higher than those of others in business.

"If you're going to believe the basins of this capitalistic society exists by the very fact of competition then you have to believe in advertising," Korey says. "How else do you tell people what you have to sell so that they can make the choice? At least advertising gives the public an option. That's probably the best thing it does. And I guess that's how we all justify ourselves."

But one aspect of selling does disturb her. She once worked in a major politician's campaign as an ad consultant.

"If you can convince the world to buy a certain brand of toilet tissue by the amount of spending, you can convince them by the weight of your advertising to elect a President. That's the frightening thing. You create an image and an aura about him that doesn't exist."

"It's not in the selling of products that it's scary. It's in the selling of people."

BEFORE THOSE phone calls come in at 2 or 3 in the morning, Lois Korey often likes to watch television.

"When I'm at home, it's like I'm not in the business," she says. "When I'm in front of the television screen I'm a television viewer and I am annoyed. Sometimes there are three stupid messages with annoying people in a row. I sit there and think, 'Oh, God, enough already, get back to the show.'"