

## ...And Now a Word from Your Teacher

Have you noticed that kids drop everything when T.V. commercials come on? Action ceases, conversations subside; I have even seen food fall from kids' immobilized lips. Isn't it interesting how kids can forget what we taught them yesterday, but months or even years later can remember "Two all beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions, on a sesame seed bun" or how to spell relief? Wouldn't it be great if they would pay teachers the attention they give to commercials?

It is possible that teachers can win their students' attention by learning from T.V. advertising. Many of the techniques used by advertisers are also advocated by learning theorists as good educational practice. Let us examine five components of successful advertising campaigns and see how they apply to effective classroom teaching.

The first component is planning and organization. Promoters spend much time and energy organizing and structuring commercials; every event is clearly directed at specific objectives, i.e., Do you want your children to brush longer? Are you getting all the vitamins you need? We, as teachers, are aware of the need for planning, but seldom do so with the precision shown in advertising. Teachers should have a clear notion about what they hope to accomplish before beginning instruction.

The second component is brevity. Advertisers keep their presentations free of clutter and unnecessary information. Teachers, on the other hand, may spend too much time talking. There is an inverse relationship between teachers talking and students listening. When kids are told (ad nauseam) "Sit in your seats and be quiet," they don't! Just as we learn to ignore noisy fans, televisions, and other pesky irritants, students will learn to ignore us.

The solution to the problem seems clear — just as advertisers are very careful not to overuse a commercial, we too must talk less, *say things only once, and mean it*. (The other day a teacher called for students to be seated and prepare for the lesson. One student continued to talk, so I inquired if he had heard the teacher. He said he did but that she had to say it three times before she really meant it.) What teachers actually do in such cases is teach children not to pay attention!

The third component involves the use of attention-getting (and sustaining) techniques. To capture the audience's attention and make their message memorable, advertisers use songs, jingles, and rhymes. How many times do you find yourself walking down the street humming about your bologna, "My bologna has a first name. It's O S C A R. . ." or "A coke and a smile, makes you feel Gooooood. . ." In your wildest fantasy can you imagine your students strolling along singing of mathematical or grammatical rules! It's possible, it does happen! Few of us can forget "i before e except after c," "Thirty days hath September. . .," or how to spell Mississippi. Jingles, rhymes and songs have a way of aiding retention and kids love to create them.

Another way to attract and maintain attention is through *the use of surprise*, e.g., when that little butter bowl finally admits to being Parkay. People will go a long way for a sur-

prise! What is the first thing you do when you get home (just before you collapse)? You check the mail! You wonder if you will be surprised today — a long lost relative leaving you a fortune, a cash rebate on toilet tissue, a letter. When desperate even a bill looks good! And you will probably continue to pay attention to that mailbox (even on some Sundays and holidays) for the rest of your life. Why? Because it feels good to get a surprise — it is unexpected. It says you're important. It says someone cares. And the result of being surprised is that people will try to replicate the events that caused it. Here is where teachers can make an impact. When kids have been especially good or have worked extra hard, we should surprise them. Then they will be more likely to repeat the good behavior. They wonder, "Will I be surprised if I have my homework completed?" Only the teacher knows for sure!

The fourth component is *emotional appeal*. Advertisers key on events that are humorous, non-threatening, familiar, or idealistic. Look what a Coke did for Mean Joe Green. Advertisers associate what people think are desirable characteristics with the use of certain products. They are trying to condition a positive emotional response to the product described. The best teachers do the same thing.

Think of the subject you enjoy the most and you will remember a teacher who conditioned a positive feeling about it. English, science, jogging, etc. are emotionally neutral but become reinforcing or punishing because of the emotion that is attached to them. This is why the same subject or activity can be rewarding for some people and punishing for others. For example, I find jogging very unpleasant, and associate it with being chased or punished. "Take a lap, kid!" I found it difficult to see how anyone could gain satisfaction from jogging until I met a P.E. coach who only used jogging as a REWARD. Good students in P.E. got to take a lap with the coach. Students begged to jog with him and were very disappointed if they could not.

The message for teachers is especially clear. If we want kids to use (and even enjoy) what we teach them, we must be sure to associate positive feelings with it. Too many times we can catch ourselves using our subject as punishment. "For that, write me a hundred sentences!" "Answer all the questions at the end of the chapter" or "Now you've done it. Do fifty extra problems for homework!" Is it any wonder that many kids become negative about what we try to teach them? Ideally, our subject should serve as a reward: "Nancy, you have been so good that you may read 20 extra minutes." "Billy, thank you for doing your work so promptly. You may work on an extra credit math sheet today," or "Pennysue, thanks for helping Billy. You may take your book home today and start reading ahead." I know what you are thinking, but try it for a week and see if you do not notice some changes. Who knows, years from now when your students are asked about their favorite subject, they may think of your class!

The final component is *a plea for action*. Viewers are encouraged to act in a certain way (and ultimately buy certain products). We, in education, should do the same and may even have an advantage in doing so. Commercials can only provide a one-way message. Classrooms not only provide the opportunity to see and hear but also allow for active

participation. Students can touch, feel, and test out ideas, and then receive feedback on how well they did. Students' actions provide the ultimate measure of our success. Will they act upon what we have taught — take responsibility, become civic minded, help others, etc.? If we can provide them with enough opportunities to act on the subject matter, they may become "Bullish on Learning."

As we have seen, there is much overlap in the psychology that makes commercials and classroom teaching effective. It is possible to point to some strategies and activities that teachers can use to better implement the points mentioned. Consider the following:

■ *Improve Planning and Organization.* Know your objectives before beginning the lesson and share them with students. Tell them at the beginning of the day or class what you expect them to do. Evidence indicates that it is beneficial to provide students with information about the goals and objectives that will be covered. This information serves as an advanced organizer; it allows the students to know where you are going at the outset, and thus enhances the possibility of producing a coherent, meaningful learning experience.

■ *Be Brief and Concise.* Reduce the amount of teacher talk. Use more peer learning, teaching and counseling situations. It has been said that the best way to learn something is to teach it, and so it should be with kids. Structure the learning experiences so students might interact and learn at the same time.

■ *Use Attention-getting and Maintaining Techniques.* There are so many things teachers might do for this. Use humor, novelty, use children's names (you can hear your name on the other side of a noisy room), and the power of surprise. Have kids write commercials about the subject matter being studied and then present them to the class. Give them 60 seconds to "sell" an important point. Give awards for the best commercial (a cleo). This also provides a forum for looking at advertising techniques (persuasion, propaganda, etc.) and can enhance students' consumer awareness. The possibilities are almost limitless.

■ *Remember That Learning Has an Emotional Component.* Someone once said "don't teach literature, teach a love of reading." Skills and knowledge are useless without the disposition to use them. If you hate reading or math, you will avoid them at every opportunity. Teachers can protect against this happening by supplying not only knowledge and skills, but positive affect about subject matter as well. This is accomplished in subtle and sometimes indirect ways, through making lessons meaningful, practical, and fun. If you are teaching about fractions, how about having a fractions party? Bring in pies and cakes and see how fast those kids can learn the difference between one-half, one-fourth, and one-eighth! As strange as it sounds, we may be able to teach more math in the long run by having a party in class today.

■ *Point Your Students toward Some Action.* Meaningful learning is useful; it can be acted upon. Be careful to avoid the trap of only talking about things. Probably one of the best ways to teach this is through our own actions.

Remember that actions can speak so loudly that people can't hear your words!

These are just a few ideas on how we might implement the psychological principles that are used in commercials. If we can learn to use them as systematically as advertisers, we should expect to have similar success with our "products." One day, you may walk into a noisy, crowded cafeteria and hear:

"Mary says it's dumb."

"Well, my teacher is Ms. E. F. Hudson! And Ms. Hudson says ... (silence) ..."

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