

THE PITFALLS OF THE PROMOTIONAL LANGUAGE

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Abstract:

Whether expensive advertising or just low cost publicity, promotional strategies imprint their persuasive items on the public's brain and conscience, by manipulating audio, visual and language ingredients. They struggle against human passivity acting on sounds and „noises”, on colors, sizes, angles and motion, on words, symbols and cultural references. Lately they have trespassed privacy, pushing any attempted outsider back into the fictional world they artfully manage to recreate: by „information”, „instruction” or „demonstration”, by „humor” or „drama”, by accessing the cognitive or the affective sides; in fact by setting pitfalls and by stirring all five senses. Thus, promotional strategies help companies develop, being powerful enough to induce purchase, because of the multiple variables available for juggling and the well structured and targeted message.

Key words: advertising, pitfalls, manipulation, audio-visuals, language

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Promotional strategies are essential to any company in its process of development on the market. They include both advertising and publicity. If the first one is paid and permits control of the place, time and format of its display, the second one is less expensive and therefore less controllable. The marketing department (in charge with market research and advertising) is supposed to work together with the public relations department (which tries to cooperate with the press and to project a positive image for the organization and its products). Still, they both involve persuasive techniques in order to draw the public's attention on the company products/services. For this, their message is strewn with various pitfalls meant to catch the eyes, ears and wallets.

Their „weapons” are **advertisements**, on one hand - **sent to the targeted customers**, through the press or internet, indoor or outdoor posters, banners, fliers etc.; and on the other hand **messages for the public** exposed in conferences, round tables and various other events; or through materials edited by PR officers and mainly sent to mass-media (such as press releases, reports, chronicles etc.). The public is a larger group that includes the customers, but also other people such as members of mass-media, authorities, collaborators etc. who are to be taken into consideration from the PR point of view.

The promotional strategies are complex and artful projects. Their designers are careful to details and sensitive to every possible angle in their approach. Their work means deep research and then flows of creativity.

One of the messages with the highest impact is the TV advertisement. The thirty seconds of persuasive story place **audio, visual and language means** at promoters' disposal. They call for attention in the first place, narrowing the target and choosing a proper time for its efficiency. Once the public is established, the attention is drawn onto the message, which must be intelligible and credible. Still, unless it is repeated enough times, the video-clip loses its point and customers might simply forget the message. Its final goal is to generate the purchase action. After **knowing, understanding, believing and memorizing** the message, **the customer gets his own part in the game**: he takes a stand – he buys or he refuses to buy a certain product or service. He acts or denies the

importance of the message, product and/or company, having the last word. Thus, **the customer becomes a decision-maker**, on a regular base. He is thrown in words, sounds and images at every corner and at any time, companies sharing his global capacity of getting and reacting to this range of messages. With such a high number of senders, the receiver is pretty busy, sometimes even pestered. His attention is divided into many spots, while he only remains with crumbs of advertisements. Just really valuable messages get to complete the route from the sender to the receiver and, even then, the customer's own interpretation may distort the initial meaning.

The multiple variables available on the market make designers' job a very difficult one. In fact it is quite a challenge every time.

Advertising brings in techniques of arranging and rearranging the available information, so that they would give rise to **needs, wishes** and **demands**. If thirst is a *basic need* in Abraham Maslow's pyramid, a company producing non-alcoholic drinks would first appeal to sweetness or cooling characteristics, especially on hot weather, transforming the need into a *wish*; and then it would strongly „recommend” a certain branded drink, turning the wish into a *demand* in customers' mind. In the end the process becomes quite a brainwash, as most customers would normally have thought of water as a response to their thirst (if they hadn't been directed on purpose). Eventually, after having raised the appetite for the brand, the choice comes out as the perfectly normal consequence of the story presented in the commercial. Moreover, if repeated in time, the customers might develop a certain mechanical association between thirst and the displayed branded drink, according to Pavlov's principle. It only remains for the audience to decide if this is **seduction or conditioning** and try to be continuously aware of the whole process.

Motivation is definitely one of the most important factors in advertising. Sometimes customers are only *suggested* certain motives - when they are powerful enough to activate the expected attitude. Other times *motivation is the driving force* and the entire ad abounds in causes, consequences, explanations and demonstrations based on „how the customer needs the product”. However, in order to reach the target, each brand has to focus on a **well-defined public** and its own motivation.

There are many examples of stimulation and rewarding in advertising. *Men*, for instance, are frustrated for not having a Day as women have on 8th March. Therefore BERGENBIER decided to invent Man's Day on 5th May - to show its gratitude for the beer flow on men's throats. BEGENBIER is a reason to celebrate (not just in May, but during the whole year), a way of bringing men together („Friends know why...”) and at the same time a reward to loyalty. **Belonging to a group** (the third level in Maslow's pyramid) is exploited here and men finally get a sense of rightness with BERGENBIER.

The same **need of integration** is evoked in COSMOTE's message which invites people to „join the largest *community* of the country” in the Network Campaign. *Community* is so much more in reality than just a group of subscribers, but that's the whole point: to use an integrative word and generate the need/wish/demand.

In „Fit for kids” the message targets *children*, as MINI WHEATS „invented” cereals with a certain size. The Little Bites Campaign focuses on **children's „needs”**.

VODAFONE Business Profile is a personalized subscription for *businessmen*. It is „**Exactly what you need**” and no one needs more than that. The ad ends with a system of toothed gears that work perfectly together. It is a problem-solving product for both the employer and the employee (as the guy in the ad utters). The message escalades the leveled needs in Maslow's pyramid as if it could be an almighty product which solves all needs of employers and employees.

In conclusion, motivation stimulates interest. Furthermore a message must reach, not only the target-customer, but also the right side of each customer. Therefore, commercials may focus on the **cognitive** side (for technical devices, medicines, tooth

paste, 100% natural products), or they may aim at the **affective** side, by creating drama, happiness or lust, or by recalling old memories for example; eventually, commercials can appeal to **both sides at the same time** in order to increase the effect on the customer. The approach depends on the target-customer type, on the company culture and especially on the type of product. A technical explanation (the **cognitive** approach) is called for in order to sell a computer or some software, but emotional touch (the **affective** approach) works better for perfumes, beers, chocolate, kid products and services or for travel agencies.

Special words compose an **affective** type of message, words such as *love* (MILKA Chocolate – „out of love”), *tenderness* (MILKA Chocolate – „dare to be tender”), *soul* (DON CAFE Coffee – „coffee with soul”), *endearment* (JACOBS Coffee – „endearment-flavour”), *home* (UNIREA Margarine – „for the happiness made at home”), *mother’s meals* (SCANDIA tinned food – „thank you mummy”), *the old times* (MILLI Yoghurts with nut jam – „regain the old times taste”), *the country taste* (COVALACT DE ȚARĂ Cheese – „too much like in the country”). These terms are meant to suspend judgement for 30 seconds and to induce positive feelings and attitudes. Positivism leads to openness and eventually to purchase. Human beings in good spirit accept proposals more easily. They are able to give way to credibility while watching TV commercials, even if there are several derisory connections inside. In fact, credibility becomes higher and higher with each new exposure to a certain commercial. It is like a „broken mill”: once the customer has got used with a certain message, by countless repetition, he tends to start considering it quite normal. The next step is to believe. The incredible is flooded by recurrence and the customer is ready to buy. That is the affective type of messages.

Still, bank credits, cars, phone networks require some *technical facts* (the **cognitive approach**) to understand the need, besides the *charming connections* (the **affective approach**) that direct the customer towards a certain brand. To advertise insurance policies, commercials include financial explanations or demonstrations (cognitive), but they also present a black and bleak future for the dear ones *without* a policy and a pink and happy future for those *with* a policy in the pocket (affective). One of the *ING* advertisements, for instance, opens with a huge, black, shadowed „*FUTURE*” word, installed on a field, which is painted pink by those who choose to sign for an insurance policy. Their happiness is contagious, because of their sunny faces and speedy motion, but mostly because of their huge number (everybody cares about future – that is settled already). The emotional appeal, combined with the quantitative argument, becomes completed with the technical expertise brought by the story teller. He advises the audience from experience, in a know-all voice, and that means that a little orange (*ING*’s color) is to be added to pink for a „pink life”. Thus, both the cognitive and the affective sides have been challenged in the campaign called *Pink Life*.

In the creative process, advertising designers manipulate all the elements: **colors, sizes, shapes, distances** (proxemics), **sounds, motion, language, symbols, specific cultural motifs**, even **drama or humorous elements**. The (good) story is finally equipped with high persuasive power. The target-customer is attracted, „cleared out” and pushed to purchase. It is said that advertising often makes people buy more than they need or even what they don’t need at all. That is because the advertising message is built like a trap.

Human beings love stories and, in a high-speed century, the short **colorful** stories of TV commercials are as much as they have time and patience for. It is easy to remember by color: the *red and white* used by COCA COLA, for instance, or the *red, white and blue* used by PEPSI, its competitor. The *red* Santa Clause escorts every COCA-COLA Christmas, but a few years ago a *blue* Santa Clause showed up together with the *blue* PEPSI on Christmas to make the difference. *White* is considered to be an

anti-color, COCA-COLA bets on *red* and that left only the *blue* for PEPSI to delimitate from its forever competitor.

If RAFAELLO is packed in *white* and strapped with a *red* ribbon, the whole commercial is white and red. For example, two girls and their father, all dressed in white, run to their mother and wife to offer her - on 8th March - a white-red present. The walls are white, the furniture is white. Even the mother is dressed all in white. That means consistency of a brand. The audience almost know it is RAFAELLO they are going to find out about, right from the first spot of white (and red) on screen. Therefore, just as the slogan says: *it is above the words*. Speech is not even needed anymore with such a clear message.

The ING (in the commercial presented above) tries to impose *orange* as a significant and recognizable sign for its brand (the orange lion), just as ORANGE – the phone company – has tried to do for years, but in a different field of activity. In fact, on the Romanian mobile phone market colors are clearly divided: *orange* for ORANGE, *red* for VODAFONE and *green* for COSMOTE. Each phone shop has its spot of color and the customer knows whose shop it is, even before reading the door plate. **Colors mark** certain brands - like a well-seen island in the middle of the advertising ocean.

Sometimes, **colors highlight** certain elements in advertisements. POLICOLOR emphasizes unity to demonstrate efficiency: absolutely the whole building has become *white* from just one bucket of SPOR paint. The painter has done it extremely easily while the neighbor was sleeping. *White* is there to show how much a bucket lasts. On the other hand, *red*, *white* and *blue* in the presentation for Aquafresh have different advantages for the customer: *red* protects gums, *white* struggles against tooth decays and *blue* refreshes breath. The three characters of the commercial are dressed in the same three colors and their toothbrushes are also red, white and blue. The triumvirate highlights the three advantages which AQUAFRESH *in three colors* provides (three members in the family, three glasses, three toothbrushes, three layers of toothpaste and of course three advantages). The three colors have become a symbol for the product.

Eventually, some advertisements **celebrate colors**. Such a story is the duel between white and black (a white parrot repeating *white* and a black one contradicting it and claiming the power of *black*). The winner is the NEI parrot (a colorful parrot), as NEI television „colors one's life". In the „Parrots Campaign" colors win.

Almost the same thing does PEPSI in the so-called *Graffiti Campaign*. A young man, with a doze of PEPSI in his hand, rambles through the gray city. The simple passing of the nonalcoholic drink fills the streets, buildings and fences with vivid (graffiti) colors, bringing joy to the people. Their message is that it is so easy to get hold of happiness... by drinking PEPSI. Colors are again a symbol of success and ecstasy. Therefore, the colors' power is transferred over the product within an artful spectacle.

There can be done so many things with colors in advertising. In fact, a complex psychology of **colors** (hues), **values** (of luminosity or darkness) and **saturation degrees** (*saturated* means high intensity, while *unsaturated* is for low intensity) stays behind the nice short-stories that convince the customer to buy. Colors confer the message angles of view, beauty, dynamism, recognition, credibility and ultimately desire.

Sizes and **shapes** are manipulated, as well. **Little** becomes progressively **big** in order to *wring customers' attention* (NIVEA PURE GLOSS, the anti-dandruff shampoo – the ad presents a healthy, clean, shining-haired woman at the beginning, slowly approaching and magnifying the image, in order to see how the shampoo works at the hair root and along the hair); or *to show a great evolution* (WHISKAS – „for healthy growing cats / dogs"; cute little cats or dogs start eating WHISKAS and visibly grow and grow until they become mature healthy animals). The process can be reversed and then **full-size** gradually and unexpectedly turns into **smaller and smaller and smaller** - like in the SPOT advertisement. It tries to emphasize how productive their paint is when

a forefront house painter whitens the walls of a so-called „little” room and then goes to answer the door... He gets farther and farther, smaller and smaller, while the „little” room becomes larger and larger; in fact huge. The view is totally different in the end. And the audience is suddenly to understand how much it is possible to paint with just a bucket of paint. This is how proportion games change and intensify perception.

The **shape** is often brought into light by COCA-COLA. The woman-shaped bottle has a long tradition. It was designed on purpose to be easily recognized anywhere and anytime. It has become a symbol, just as the COCA-COLA logo or slogan. It is even said that the woman-shape and the red spots have become elements of American imperialism in the whole world. Today it is hard to find a city, a town or maybe even a village with no such signs of COCA-COLA presence.

Ad designers go even further and manipulate **distance**. There are four variants:

- the **intimate** distance (15-46 cm). NIVEA VISAGE and LOREAL introduce their creams with the help of a very close image of some perfect faces.

- the **personal** distance (46 cm-1.22 m). The TUBORG beer and NIVEA body lotion permit a more distant image, but still the characters are presented close enough to see their faces and half of their bodies.

- the **social** distance (1.22-3.60 m). Some ads combine the personal distance with the social one. COCA COLA, for instance, shows people in a dynamic dance, alternatively in the background and in the foreground.

- the **public** distance (over 3.60 m). URSUS puts a beer in the middle of a field and everybody gathers around the bottle, while we are shown a “site plan”.

With the help of **proxemics**, designers „help” the customer see adequately what is important, what is to be kept in mind and how things work, in the same time making the ads more vivid and less boring. Thus, colors, sizes, shapes and proxemics have become extremely important advertising tools.

However, the **sound** has its role in this parade, too. A **well-known hit** in the background confers likeness (*Cihuahua* behind a COCA-COLA party) and people happily watch it repeatedly just to hear the music. For sure, they will not forget it in years.

Then, a **slow tune** may infer relaxation. ESPLANADA RESTAURANT in Ghencea-Bucharest is presented as an oasis of tranquility and good time, with a relaxing music in the background. ZEWA also resorts to such rhythm to induce the idea of a delicate touch of the paper. Many cosmetic products use blues, romantic tunes to create a world of relaxation and pleasure, especially for women.

On the other hand, for hot food, like spicy chips from CHIO, the commercial needs an **alert rhythm**. The same rush is felt in the advertisement for DRUMETUL GUARD, a watch firm which needs to present itself as combative and capable of prompt reactions. Another call for a dynamic music in commercials comes from KINDER SURPRISE, this time the inside surprises being Sporty Animals – dynamic toys.

Also for the youngest members of society is KINDER Chocolate - whose message is sustained by a **choir of children**. A product „created especially for kids” must definitely have kids images and kids voices in order to show off directly to children (in *their own language*). Aimed and hit.

Still, sounds don’t mean just music. There are infinite „**noises**” that can accompany a promotional message: **applauses** for success (KINDER SURPRISE with Sporty Animals inside), **bells** when eating healthily (INEDIT, the genetically unmodified tinned food), **clicks** for an instant special coffee (TASSIMO, the coffee machine) or an **interjections** - „Huuu” – to make customers almost feel the burn of the spicy chicken at KFC.

Eventually, what would commercials be without the touch of sounds? Nowadays, the audio component has become a necessity, together with the image and the language.

Advertisements are generally a world of **motion**. Static displays would lose customers' interest. That is why, in this world **vegetables** dance (FLORIOL Oil), **doughnuts** kill themselves with a toothpick (ORBIT Chewing gum), **cereals** eagerly fidget around the plate to catch the taste and lick their lips (NESTLE - Cini Minis Cereals with Cinamon). **People** are also in a continuous move to try something or to solve a thing, to explain or demonstrate facts, to have fun, to get cleanness, pleasure or security, to improve or to help, to walk, to paint, to play, to eat, to drink, to buy. The whole range of actions is set in contagious motion. Actually, the final goal of this entire ad game is *an action*: the action of shopping. „The joy of motion” (VOLLTAREN Medical Cream) is definitely motivated here.

After setting the scenery, the **characters** come on the stage. There are two major categories: (1) **real characters** and (2) **animated characters**.

The ones **taken from reality** may be (1a) **human beings**: *the common user of a product* (the housewife in troubles because she doesn't use PRONTO to clean the furniture), *the VIP* (the well-known actor who presents DERO or the famous gymnast / tennis player / canoeist who advertise for ROMTELECOM), *the expert* (the doctor speaking about SENSODYNE toothpaste); or (1b) **animals** doing something naturally (the jumping rabbit in the ORIFLAME ad).

Still, (2a) **animals** become (2) **animated** when they start speaking, giving advice or acting unnaturally (the talking Bees for NESTLE HONEY CHEERIOS and the Bear, Rabbit, Fox and Bird all preparing FRUTTI FRESH). Similarly, flying (2b) **plants** and **food** end up being animated: the Vegetables joyfully fly to follow the FLORIOL Oil and ORBIT makes the Doughnut, Banana, Broccoli, Onion and Coffee run away terrified. The Margarine-character pretends to be the leader on the Romanian market; and the Milk runs from all over the town to meet the NESQUIK Whole Grain from NESTLE. Even (2c) **objects** are animated when plates fly after FLORIOL.

Personification makes the ads *more credible* (when the Bees themselves praise a product or the Animals come directly from nature to make a natural juice). It also makes the ads *funnier* and *more attractive* (when the five LISTERINE MouthWater-characters, half-human shaped, shower the teeth to clean them up).

A special category of characters are **Angels** (TRANSILVANIA BANK – the guy-angel), **Fairies** (DERO - kid-fairies adding valuables for each zodiac sign), **Wizards** (PRONTO, MR MUSCOLO), **Holidays' Characters** (*The Bunny* for NESQUIK and *Santa-Claus* for COCA-COLA) and so on. They bring a sense of fantasy into the real world. These (2d) **fantastic characters** are helpers and present-givers. People love them and tend to believe them. Therefore they are called on screen to „sell” different products.

Sometimes the characters populate *short movies*, other times just *cartoons* (for FRUTTI FRESH) or *comics* (for TUC biscuits); and often *computer simulations* (NIVEA PURE GLOSS). Each type fits a certain idea and exhibits a product or service better than the others, but of course according to the advertising budget, too.

The visual and audio aspects of an advertisement are completed by **language**. It is as important *who* says, *what* he/she says, as well as *how* it is said. Advertisers elaborate certain **verbal arrangements** so that they should be both heard and listened to by the target-customer.

MUCOSOLVANT (medicine), for example, is presented by a **poetic slogan**: „Un, doi, trei / Respiri cum vrei!” (One, two, three / Your breath is free!). Poetries are easy to memorize. Little children often play and recite slogans for fun, as long as they like the sound, and thus they unconsciously become message bearers: within the family,

in the street, on the playgrounds, in schools or kindergartens and wherever they express themselves freely and joyfully. Along with the message, they send a nice feeling to the other children around or to the grown-ups.

In one of its campaign – called „Work”, PEPSI chooses to come out with a **proverbial slogan** which emanates strength, dynamism, determination and power: „Nici muncă fără Pepsi, / Nici Pepsi fără muncă” (No work without Pepsi, / No Pepsi without work). Proverbs are already a kind of general truth, meant to be followed. It’s simply not questionable. The staccato rhythm and the young man’s resolute gestures only lead the customer to obedience, while subconsciously promising the same power seen in the clip. The message is characterized by conciseness and motivational power.

There are **explicitly motivational slogans** which focus on specific verbs or verbal structures: on 5th May (Man’s Day) „men *deserve* super-presents” and, of course, BERGENBIER beer is included; in LOREAL’s slogans women are taught self-esteem: „Because you’re worth it”; in mobile communications customers receive an invitation from VODAFONE: „Intră în cea mai mare rețea. Merită!” (Join the largest network. It’s worthwhile!).

The categorical slogan, possibly quite an ultimatum (such as the one sent by MERCEDES: „The best or nothing”), opposes **the soft slogan** which is short, simple and usually emotional (SCHWARZKOPF: „Pentru tine” / „For you”). Still, many ads are hybrids; messages are more complex, half cognitive and half emotional; persuasive, but not always as limitative as the disjunctive slogan above.

The possessive slogan „helps” the public identify itself with the product, through the stressed possessive pronoun: „**My** sweet thing” (for the SWEET THING from 7 DAYS); or in „We are **your** bank.” (TRANSILVANIA BANK). Thus, the audience becomes part of the game and finds itself involved.

Sometimes, companies resort to **fabricated language**. THE MONEY CHANNEL introduces the so-called *afacereza* (afacere + engleza) – a pun that combines business language with English in a slightly humorous ad.

The symmetrical sequential approach is met in COVALACT yoghurts when a countrywoman „expert” says: „too sour, too sweet, too good, too much like in the country.” Besides the humour that makes the ad more enjoyable, the repetitive structure tries to prove the company’s high expectations in quality matters. With a symmetrical slogan it is easy to draw attention, to make the customer understand the value and memorize the message.

KINDER PINGUI, on the other hand, prefers a **comparative sequential approach** in: „Nourishing *like* a snack, adored *like* an ice-cream”. Children like snacks and they love ice-cream. Moreover, as the slogan says, the product is also nourishing and this is what mothers need. In this way, the message briefly aims at both types of public: consumers (children) and payers (mothers), in an integrative mode.

The minimal representative sequence represents the short list that characterizes - in the best way - a product, a brand or a company: „Quality, imposing presence, tradition.” (ADP – Public Domain Agency); „Fluffy, creamy, delicious.” (BIG MILK ice-cream from ALGIDA); „Extremely fluffy layer, fine cream and delicious chocolate.” (MĂGURA Cake). Three characterizing terms seem to be necessary and sufficient to convince the customer.

Slogans with superlatives are another verbal arrangement meant to sell products: „Mega-savings with *mega*-qualitative products.” (PROCTER&GAMBLE); „*The best* or nothing” (in other words MERCEDES is the only option); „*The largest* community in the country (13.000.000 people) – now closer to you!” (COSMOTE).

A different **sequence of cues** appears in the dialogue between an employee and his boss. The first comes to ask for a salary rise. The rhythm changes every time, their attitudes and mimicry metamorphose (from fear, shyness to determination, aggression;

from superiority, relaxation, anger to fear). The verbal and non-verbal replies are never the expected ones. Absolutely unexpectedly, the employee's demand is formulated for just 2.99 Euros a month, to pay for an iPad subscription at GAZETA SPORTURILOR (a sport newspaper). The whole dialogue is a **sequence of surprises** that incite curiosity, throw in humour and eventually inform and try to sell the product.

Verbal arrangements are also needed in advertising to create **utopian paradises**: BONUX „crazes the stains”, CILLIT BANG „works instead of the housewife”; with DR. OETKER „creams are ready in three minutes”; with DORNA, HARGHITA (water) and AMIGO (coffee) anyone „conquers the world”; SEMANA is able to „make enchantments” with clothes; at PENNY MARKET money „gain power”; with a yoghurt bite one can evade into the world of MULLER taste (yoghurt river, sweet waterfalls, flying fruits and a strawberry balloon to visit the fantasy world); eventually, YOGPLAIT „brings five minutes of **perfection** into your family”. *Perfection* itself is a utopian term, but it is something everybody tries to achieve.

Paradise is another synonym for *perfection*: for thirty seconds the viewers feel better - surrounded by beauty, ease, happy colours, encouraging words and lots of promises. They suspend their judgement temporarily and simply enjoy the *artificial world* created by advertising. If the ad is „perfect” enough, the feeling activates again every time while shopping when the product is seen on the shelf or at home when it is consumed. That generates **the wanted cycle** to sell products again and again.

Eventually, the whole process is a trap. Once the customer is trapped inside, he develops a buying behaviour. Through **image, sound and language**, advertisers connect the audience to the *brand world* and that works as long as the connection is validated by the customers. Within the **dramatic, lecturing or humorous thirty-second stories**, there are **countless triggers** (that stir all five senses): colours (with their complicated psychology), symbols, specific cultural motifs, proportions, accents, codes and so many more **pitfalls**. Advertising creates this *parallel world* in which the public get what they want (or they think so), while the companies manage to sell almost anything.

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