

Protect yourself from advertising

Corporate business of the big capitalist variety will pay psychologists to help them sell products. These mental technicians, once limited to simple questionnaire and telephone surveys, now use sophisticated eye tracking and brain wave experiments to help the corporate elite push your buttons. They are using your dreams, desires and subconscious triggers to sell you stuff.

You probably think you have some free will. After all, when that expensive \$1.5 million T.V. ad comes on during an all important football game, you ignore it and go to the fridge for a beer. What brand of beer? Is it one backed by an international advertising budget?

More money is spent producing television advertising than is spent on the programs that attract you to the T.V. in the first place. A corporation is not going to spend \$1.5 million (an average amount) on a 60 second ad that does not work. Like Video Lottery Terminals, which were also designed with the help of psychologists, professional advertising at this level is designed to hook a target audience.

That "enemy" of television ads, the remote control, has not led to fewer ads. It has meant that the same ad must be shown more times to ensure what the companies call "market penetration". The amount of advertising space on television has more than doubled in the last 25 years, and on U.S. channels you can be deluged with 12 minutes of advertising in a 30 minute slot. You may have noticed they also turn up the volume to ensure that if you don't see the ad you will at least hear it. The idea is to overcome resistance with repetition and loudness. If it works, you end up paying for all that advertising and then some.

You may be more resistant to advertising than most people. If so, the corporations have created new ways of "getting" to you. I remember the first time I saw advertising at the beginning of a first run movie. Hoots, howls and popcorn were directed toward the screen by people who had already paid to see the movie. This scene was repeated many times in many theaters until eventually the public just came to accept that form of indoctrination in numbed silence.

Corporations will pay up to \$500,000 to have their car or soft drink embedded in the movie itself as long as the label is displayed. Cigarette advertising is illegal in Canada, but embedded ads skirt this law.

A Roman Catholic priest once said that if you give him a child until he is 7 he will have him for the rest of his life. Advertisers know this well. For that reason Sweden has banned all advertising aimed at young children. Canada and the United States have gone in a different direction. Soft drink companies are vying for the school market. The Pepsi-Cola company has "donated" sports equipment, and Coca-Cola has "donated" scoreboards in exchange for the right to have vending machines in the school. Like the early Indian reserves that were designated "Anglican" or "Catholic", schools may be designated "Pepsi" or "Coke" but not both. Now companies from fast food chains to pharmaceuticals are offering to go "in partnership" with schools in supplying textbooks, computer equipment and curricula.

Grocery carts now carry ads as do parking meters in Regina. I was speaking at a conference in Calgary, and discovered, during the break, that the urinals had electronic ads that activated when you stepped up to them. The soft music in the hotel lobby was punctuated by ads directing you to the attached underground mall. I discovered that the "spam blocker" on my computer was directing its own spam at me. According to Economist magazine the average North American is exposed to 3,000 ads each day. What can you do?

Some people simply buy the cheapest. Often this is the best policy, however, the strategy leaves you vulnerable to "we sell for less" advertising. If two companies both claim to sell for less, at least one of them must be lying.

It may not be in your long-term best interest to buy the same item cheaper. U.S. "transnationals" are famous for undercutting local companies only to jack up prices when the competition is gone. This not only hurts consumers but leads to a loss of jobs and often to a reduced tax base.

Your free will is exercised if you become a knowledgeable shopper. This means ignoring advertising and forming your own ideas about quality. Avoid impulse buying. Throw away those coupons unless you already wanted to buy something for which you have a coupon anyway. Even so, do a price comparison. Know where the product is made and whether the companies selling it are Canadian or foreign. Join buying clubs of consumers who have tried out different products. Read consumer reports. If you find that you cannot ignore advertising then make a decision to not buy heavily advertised products. Treat advertising like an addiction. It probably is.