

SYMBOLS FOR SALE

'The consumer is not as functionally oriented as he used to be — if he ever really was.'

By Sidney J. Levy

The thoughtful businessman is undoubtedly aware of the growing use and influence of social science concepts in the business world. Management gives increasing attention to relations between people, whether among the management group, down the line, between the manufacturer and the retailer, or between the producer and the consumer. There is less preoccupation with the performance of impersonal economic entities.

The modern assumption is that people are faced with alternatives; that they may be motivated in various directions. From this assumption grows the significance of communications and understandings, and the concomitant concern with what the people of the world think — with political public opinion, consumer reactions, and so on. Because of this development the science and practice of marketing have been infused with new life.

Changing Scene

We need not belabor the obvious changes in the American scene. They can be readily enumerated. There are more people. These people have more of all kinds of things — more leisure, more money, more possessions, more pleasures,

and more, if not the same, old worries.¹ Sociological and psychological interpretations of the contemporary scene are fashionable now and are, in themselves, a part of the scene — part of the wave of human preoccupation and of self-examination that is growing as we move further and further from grubbing for subsistence.

The less concern there is with the concrete satisfactions of a survival level of existence, the more abstract human responses become. As behavior in the market place is increasingly elaborated, it also becomes increasingly symbolic. This idea needs some examination, because it means that sellers of goods are engaged, whether willfully or not, in selling *symbols*, as well as practical merchandise. It means that marketing managers must attend to more than the relatively superficial facts with which they usually concern themselves when they do not think of their goods as having symbolic significance.

Uneconomic Man

Formerly, when goods tended to mean some essentials of food, clothing, and shelter, practical matters were very important. The consumer was apt to be an "economic man," who was

¹ See Reuel Denney, "The Leisure Society," HBR May-June 1959, p. 46; and August Heckscher and Sebastian de Grazia, "Problems in Review: Executive Leisure," p. 6, this issue.

more or less careful of how he distributed his pennies. To do this meant giving closer attention to the concrete value of what he bought, to the durability of the fabric, the quantity of the food, the sturdiness of the building materials.

The philosophy of business was also oriented around these issues, with a few outstanding enterprises intent on creating an individuality of quality and a competitive price. The market place was largely occupied with the things sold and bought. These were often neither packaged nor advertised. Consumers were customers, not audiences.

The modern market place, which is exemplified so dramatically in the vast supermarket (food, drug, or furniture store), reminds us daily of the marketing revolution that has come about. There is an astonishing variety of merchandise, all of it displayed in equally astonishing ways. There are frozen foods, precooked foods, plastic containers, and packages with ingenious (often insidious) opening devices.

In this new setting, what kind of man is the consumer? He is hardly an economic man — especially since there is considerable evidence that he does not buy economically. Indeed, he is often vague about the actual price he pays for something; he has few standards for judging the quality of what he buys, and at times winds up not using it anyway!

This is not just a joke. American homes contain many things of unknown price — objects that are bought on time, appliances that would gather dust if not covered, unused basement workshops. Of course, these are extreme



examples — they may even be gifts from hostile relatives, who always have furnished homes with undesirable objects. The point is that today, when people shop, they tend to buy lav-

ishly. Consumers still talk about price, quality, and durability, since these are regarded as sensible traditional values. But at the same time, they know that other factors affect them and believe these to be legitimate influences.

New Whys for Buys

This point is worth some emphasis since many people disapprove of the fact that purchases may be made on what they consider to be insubstantial grounds. The fact that people do not buy furniture to last 20 years may be deplored as a sign of the lightheadedness of our times. On the other hand, such massive, stoutly made furniture may be dismissed from the home at the behest of other values such as comfortable living or changing tastes.

Grandmother cherished her furniture for its sensible, practical value, but today people know that it is hardly the practical considerations which determine their choices between Post's and Kellogg's, Camels and Luckies, Oldsmobiles and Buicks, or Arpège and Chanel No. 5. They know that package color, television commercials, and newspaper and magazine advertisements incline them toward one preference or another. And, what is more, when they cannot really tell the difference among competitive brands of the same product, they do not believe that a manufacturer should necessarily go out of business because he is unable to produce a distinguishable product. They do not even mind if Procter & Gamble Company puts out both Tide and Cheer.

Diversity of Spending

At the heart of all this is the fact that the consumer is not as functionally oriented as he used to be — if he ever really was. Aesthetic preferences have changed somewhat. For example, we no longer go in for stained glass lamps and antimacassars, although the latter were perhaps more attractive than transparent couch covers. Moreover, the diversity of ways in which people can spend their money has had an impact on motivation:

☛ *People buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean.* At one level, society has to concern itself with bread for sustenance, and appropriate agencies must see to it that our breads are sufficiently nourishing, enriched, and not poisonously refined. But the consumer is no longer much interested in bread as the staff of life. In the first place, he (or she) is probably on a diet and not eating bread; in the second place, he

is apt to be more concerned with whether to buy an exotic twist, to do something "interesting" with a pancake flour, or to pop in a brown-and-serve roll that will come hot to the table to the moderate surprise of the guests.

¶ When people talk about the things they buy and why they buy them, they show a variety of logics. They refer to convenience, inadvertence, family pressures, other social pressures, complex economic reasonings, advertising, and pretty colors. They try to satisfy many aims, feelings, wishes, and circumstances. The pleasure they gain from buy-



ing objects is ever more playful. The question is less: "Do I need this?" More important are the ideas: "Do I want it?" "Do I like it?"

Language of Symbols

Answering the questions asked by today's consumer takes the definition of goods into new realms — at least new in the sense that they are now recognized as questions worthy of serious examination. The things people buy are seen to have personal and social meanings in addition to their functions. To ignore or decry the symbolism of consumer goods does not affect the importance of the fact. The only question is whether the goods are to be symbolized thoughtfully or thoughtlessly.

Specialists in the study of communications,

language formation, and semantics make various distinctions between levels of meaning. It is customary to speak of signs, signals, symbols, gestures, and other more technical terms. Many of the distinctions are arbitrary, expressing the specialists' preference for one or another mode of thinking, and need not concern us here. It will suffice to say that in casual usage *symbol* is a general term for all instances where experience is mediated rather than direct; where an object, action, word, picture, or complex behavior is understood to mean not only itself but also some *other* ideas or feelings.

Psychological Things

From this viewpoint, modern goods are recognized as essentially psychological things which are symbolic of personal attributes and goals and of social patterns and strivings.

When going shopping the consumer spends not only money but energy. His attention is stimulated or lies dormant as he moves through the mart. Objects he sees on the shelves are assessed according to standards which he has established for what is important or potentially important to him. For instance:

A saw may be very useful — and there may be things around the house that need to be sawed — but if he feels that a saw is beneath the way he wants to expend his energy, or allot his attention, he passes it idly by. Perhaps he buys a record instead, or he may choose a Hi-Fi component; these are objects in an area where he prefers to invest his psychological energies.

In this sense, all commercial objects have a symbolic character, and making a purchase involves an assessment — implicit or explicit — of this symbolism, to decide whether or not it fits. Energy (and money) will be given when the symbols are appropriate ones, and denied or given parsimoniously when they are not. What determines their appropriateness?

Image Reinforced

A symbol is appropriate (and the product will be used and enjoyed) when it joins with, meshes with, adds to, or reinforces the way the consumer thinks about himself. We are dealing here with a very plain fact of human nature. In the broadest sense, each person aims to enhance his sense of self, and behaves in ways that are consistent with his image of the person he is or wants to be. Prescott Lecky has written

an interesting essay on how people behave in consistency with their self-concepts,² and many businessmen could doubtless supplement his observations with a number of their own.

Because of their symbolic nature, consumer goods can be chosen with less conflict or indecision than would otherwise be the case. Legend has it that Buridan's ass starved to death equidistant between two piles of equally attractive hay; he would not have had the problem if one pile had been a bit more asinine — let us say — than the other. Modern marketing might have helped him.

Choices are made more easily — either more routinely or more impulsively, seemingly — because one object is symbolically more harmonious with our goals, feelings, and self-definitions than another. The difference may not be a large one, nor a very important one in the manufacture of the products; but it may be big enough to dictate a constant direction of preference in the indulgence of one's viewpoint. People feel better when bathroom tissue is pastel blue, the car is a large one (or, at least, until recently), the newspaper is a tabloid size, the trousers have pleats, and so on. It is increasingly fashionable to be a connoisseur or gourmet of *some* kind — that is, to consume with one or another standard of discrimination.

Shrewd Judges

Several years of research into the symbolic nature of products, brands, institutions, and media of communication make it amply clear that consumers are able to gauge grossly and subtly the symbolic language of different objects, and then to translate them into meanings for themselves.

Consumers understand that darker colors are symbolic of more "respectable" products; that browns and yellows are manly; that reds are exciting and provocative. The fact that something is "scientific" means technical merit, an interest in quality, and (probably) less enjoyment. Theatrical references imply glamour and suspension of staid criteria.

The value of a testimonial may depend largely on whether there is an association (logical or illogical) between the man and the product. For instance, people think it is appropriate for Winston Churchill to endorse cigars, whiskey, and books. But if they are *very* average consumers, then they are apt to miss (or ignore) the

² *Self-consistency* (New York, Island Press, 1945).

humor of a testimonial for a Springmaid sheet advertisement altogether.

Dimensions of Distinction

People use symbols to distinguish. As Susanne Langer says in discussing the process of symbolization in *Philosophy in a New Key*:

"The power of understanding symbols, i.e. of regarding everything about a sense-datum as irrelevant except a certain *form* that it embodies, is the most characteristic mental trait of mankind. It issues in an unconscious, spontaneous process of *abstraction*, which goes on all the time in the human mind. . . ."³

More or Less Gender

One of the most basic dimensions of symbolism is gender. Almost all societies make some differential disposition of the sexes — deciding who will do what and which objects will be reserved to men and which to women.

Usually it is hard to evade thinking of inanimate things as male or female. Through such personalization, vessels tend to become feminine and motherly if they are big enough. Men fall in love with their ships and cars, giving them women's names.

In America there has been complaint that some of this differentiation is fading; that women are getting more like men, and men are shifting to meet them, in a movement toward homogeneous togetherness. No doubt there is some



basis for this concern if we compare ourselves with past civilizations or with hunting and agricultural societies that make sharper distinctions between what is masculine and what is feminine. But the differences still loom large in the market

³ Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1957, p. 72.

place — so large that there are even gradations of characterization. For example:

Probably all cigarette brands could be placed on a *continuum* of degrees of gender, as one aspect of their complex symbolic patternings. The same is true for musical compositions and the recorded interpretations of them; of cheeses and the brand versions of each kind.

Sex at Work

Sexual definitions may seem absurd at times, and often have only modest influence in one or another choice. But they are at work and form a natural part of, for instance, the housewife's logic and acquired reactions as she makes her selections in the food store and serves her family. She considers what her husband's preferences are; what a growing boy should have; what is just right for a girl's delicate tastes. To take two simple illustrations:

☛ Since smoothness is generally understood to be more feminine, as foods go, it seems fitting that girls should prefer smooth peanut butter, and boys the chunky. While the overlap is great, a cultivated society teaches such a discrimination, and children, being attentive to their proper sex roles, learn it early. Indeed, the modern family seems to be greatly concerned with the indoctrination of symbolic appropriateness.

In an interview one six-year-old boy protested that he had never liked peanut butter, but his mother and sister had always insisted that he did, and now he loved it. Apparently a violent bias in favor of peanut butter is suitable to little boys, and may be taken as representing something of the rowdy boyishness of childhood, in contrast to more restrained and orderly foods.

Such findings are not idle, since they help explain why "Skippy" is an appropriate name for a peanut butter, and why "Peter Pan" was not until he was taken away from Maude Adams and given to Mary Martin and Walt Disney.

☛ Similarly, in a recent study of two cheese advertisements for a certain cheese, one wedge of cheese was shown in a setting of a brown cutting board, dark bread, and a glimpse of a chess game. The cheese wedge was pictured standing erect on its smallest base. Although no people were shown, consumers interpreted the ad as part of a masculine scene, with men playing a game, being served a snack.

The same cheese was also shown in another setting with lighter colors, a suggestion of a floral bowl, and the wedge lying flat on one of its longer sides. This was interpreted by consumers as a feminine scene, probably with ladies lunching in

the vicinity. Each ad worked to convey a symbolic impression of the cheese, modifying or enhancing established ideas about the product.

Act Your Symbolical Age

Just as most people usually recognize whether something is addressed to them as a man or as a woman, so are they sensitive to symbols of age.

Teenagers are sensitive to communications which imply childishness. If presented with a soft drink layout showing a family going on a picnic, their reaction is apt to be "kid stuff." They are trying to break away from the family bosom. While they might actually enjoy such a picnic, the scene symbolizes restraint and inability to leave in order to be with people of their own age.



Clothing is carefully graded in people's eyes; we normally judge, within a few years' span, whether some garment is fitted to the age of the wearer. Women are particularly astute (and cruel) in such judgments, but men also observe that a pin-striped suit is too mature for one wearer, or that a "collegiate" outfit is too young for a man who should be acting his age.

Class & Caste

Symbols of social participation are among the most dramatic factors in marketing. Like it or not, there are social class groupings formed by the ways people live, the attitudes they have, and the acceptance and exclusiveness of their

associations. Most goods say something about the social world of the people who consume them. The things they buy are chosen partly to attest to their social positions.

The possession of mink is hardly a matter of winter warmth alone, as all women know who wear mink with slacks while strolling at a beach resort. The social stature of mink — and its downgrading — leads us to marvel that it is now sold at Sears, Roebuck & Co. On the other hand, Sears has upgraded itself and become more middle-class.

Shopping at Sears is symbolic of a certain chic among many middle-class people who used to regard it as much more working-class. People now boast that Sears is especially suitable for certain kinds of merchandise, and their candor in saying they shop at Sears is not so much frankness as it is facetiousness — as if to point out an amusing quirk in one's social behavior.

Membership in a social class tends to affect one's general outlook, modes of communication, concreteness of thinking and understanding.⁴ Advertising often says different things to people of different social levels. For example, a perfume ad showing an anthropological mask and swirling colors is likely to be incomprehensible to many working-class women, whereas *New Yorker* readers will at least pretend they grasp the symbolism. On the other hand, working-class women will accept a crowded, screaming sale advertisement as meaning urgency and potential interest, while women of higher status will ignore it as signaling inferiority.

Sense & Nonsense

Sometimes advertising symbolism can become confined to a social class subgroup. For example, some upper middle-class people are not sure what is being said in liquor ads featuring groups of sinister men wearing red shoes or handsome males riding sidesaddle. While suspecting the symbolic language may be gibberish, they have some undercurrent of anxiety about not being part of the in-group who use "nonsense syllables" to tell each other about vodka.

Discriminating Publics

The choice of the appropriate symbols for advertising a product deserves careful considera-

⁴ See Leonard Schatzman and Anselm Strauss, "Social Class and Modes of Communication," *The American Journal of Sociology*, January 1955, p. 329.

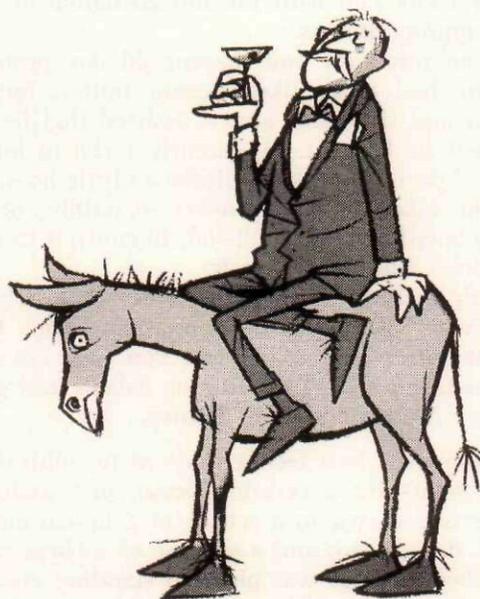
tion. The symbolic messages conveyed in the ad generally correspond to the advertiser's intention — although consumers may discover meanings additional to or even *contrary* to the intended meaning. A poorly chosen symbol for an advertisement is likely to backfire. For example:

The headline of an advertisement claimed that the product was actually worth one cent more than its price in comparison with competing products. Many housewives interpreted this claim as a sign of cheapness; they needed to see only the one cent in the headline to conclude that it was "one of those penny deals." Even to readers who understood literally what was said the effect of talking about merely one cent somehow suggested the idea of cheapening.

In other words, while the literal aim had been to refer to the greater worth of the product, the symbolic means acted to cheapen it.

Fine Arts & Fine Distinctions

Dramas, particularly the theater shows sponsored by General Electric, Kraft Foods, Procter & Gamble, and United States Steel, are interpreted as serious appeals to responsible intel-



lects, the dramatic theater being a symbol of this as opposed to musical and variety shows. Within the dramatic theater finer distinctions are made. For instance, offerings by Ronald Reagan, a sincere, charming man, are considered in keeping with the institutional nature of the General

Electric sponsorship (whereas offerings by Red Skelton probably would conflict).

To Each His Own Conformity

Some comparatively well-defined modes of living and taste patterns tend to combine individual symbols into large clusters of symbols. The separate symbols add to the definition of the whole, and thereby organize purchases along given directions. For example:

■ The Ivy League cluster of symbols affects the kinds of suits, ties, and, to a lesser degree, the cars and liquors certain people buy.

■ Being a suburbanite is a broad identification, but it starts one's purchasing ideas moving in certain lines. Name your own suburb, and the ideas leap into sharper focus. Neighbors judge the symbolic significance of how money is spent; they are quick to interpret the appropriateness of your spending pattern for the community. They decide what kind of people you are by making reasonable or unreasonable deductions from what you consume — books, liquor, power mowers, cars, and the gifts you and your children give at birthday parties.

Some objects we buy symbolize such personal qualities as self-control; others expose our self-indulgence. We reason in these directions about people who drink and smoke, or who do not — and such reasoning will play a role in their choices of doing one or the other. A hard mattress is readily justified on pragmatic grounds of health, sound sleep, and the like, but people recognize the austere self-denial at work that will also strengthen the character. Conversely, soft drinks may quench thirst, but people feel that they are also buying an indulgent moment, a bit of ease, a lowering of adult restraints.

Tattletale Patterns

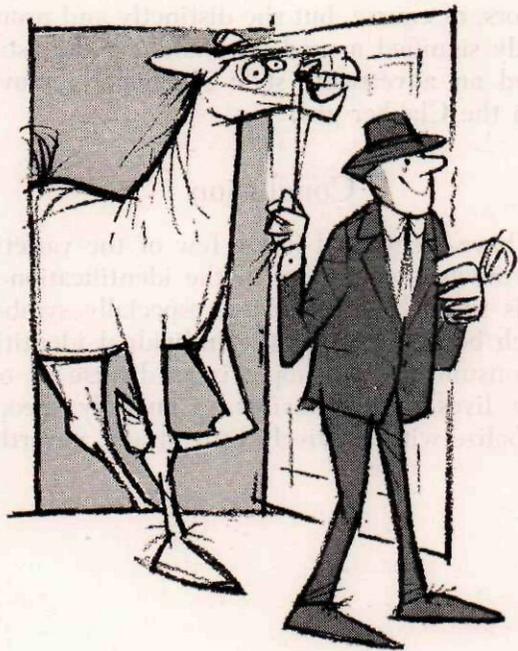
It is easy to overlook the variety of meanings conveyed by objects since they range in their conventionality and self-expressiveness. We ordinarily give little thought to interpreting milk at the table, significant as milk may be (unless, perhaps, at a businessmen's lunch). We are observant of dishes, cups, and silverware, however. True, we have to have them — people expect them. But the patterns tell people things about us — and not always the things that we would expect.

Take books: by and large, books are regarded as highly personal purchases. Guests will respect

one personally for *Dr. Zhivago* on the coffee table, and perhaps raise an eyebrow at *Lolita*. Similarly with magazines: there is a world of symbolic difference between such periodicals as, say, *Look*, *Popular Science*, and *Harvard Business Review*.

Toward Informality

A whole treatise could be written on another symbolic dimension, that of formality and informality. Many of our decisions to buy take into account the degree of formal or informal



character of the object. Housewives constantly gauge the hot dogs that they serve, the gifts that they are giving, and the tablecloth that they plan to use with an eye to how informal the occasion is or should be.

The movement toward informality has been a fundamental one in recent years, governing the emphasis on casual clothes, backyard and buffet meals, staying at motels, and bright colors (even for telephones).

Currently there seem to be signs of a reaction to this trend — of a seeking for more graciousness in living. Again, there is interest in the elegance of a black car; a wish for homes with dining rooms; and a desire for greater individual privacy. But the existence of a counter-trend does not cancel out the symbolic meaning of casual clothes, buffet meals, and so on; in

fact, it may even sharpen awareness of the implications of these products and customs.

Symbolic Obsolescence

As I have indicated, among all the symbols around us, bidding for our buying attention and energy, there are underlying trends that affect and are affected by the spirit of the times. Every so often there comes along a new symbol, one that makes a leap from the past into the present and that has power because it captures the spirit of the present and makes other on-going symbols old-fashioned. The recent Pepsi-Cola girl was a symbol of this sort. She had precursors, of course, but she distinctly and prominently signified a modern phantasy; she established an advertising style somewhat removed from the Clabber girl.

Conclusion

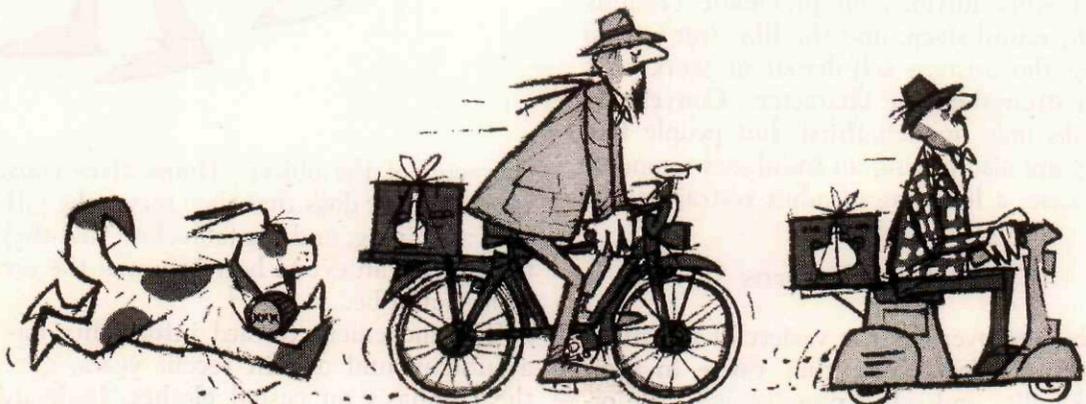
I have mentioned just a few of the varieties of symbols encountered in the identification of goods in the market place, especially symbols which become part of the individual identities of consumers. The topic is as diverse as our daily lives and behaviors. Generally, people symbolize with relatively little strain; neverthe-

less, the interactions among symbols which direct consumers' choices are liable to the difficulties of all communications, and consequently warrant study.

This seems obvious if we grant the importance of symbols — but not all businessmen do, of course, and that has accounted for many failures in sales. Greater attention to consumers' modes of thought will give marketing management and research increased vitality, and, in turn, add to its own practical and symbolic merits.

Since the concept of brand image was put forth several years ago,⁵ the idea has been debased by widespread use of it to refer to any and all aspects of product and brand identification. Now it seems worthwhile to redirect attention to the ways products turn people's thoughts and feelings toward symbolic implications, whether this is intended by the manufacturer or not. If the manufacturer understands that he is selling *symbols* as well as *goods*, he can view his product more completely. He can understand not only how the object he sells satisfies certain practical needs but also how it fits meaningfully into today's culture. Both he and the consumer stand to profit.

⁵ See Burleigh B. Gardner and Sidney J. Levy, "The Product and the Brand," *HBR* March-April 1955, p. 33.



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