

# Advertising

Marketing gurus know their target audiences are not natural consumers.



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**C**ARS have wheels. They are vehicles for transportation, means of getting from A to B. Or so it may seem to the naïve and unschooled. The professional people who think about the purposes of cars most

deeply and with the most money and motivation are the wizards of automobile marketing and advertising. And they make no pretence of selling transportation. Car ads are about power, luxury, status, freedom, adventure, making your neighbour feel inadequate and dazzling especially attractive members of whichever gender catches your fancy.

Check the usual car ad offerings.

For barely pre-geriatric buyers, a gleaming, moderately expensive sedan is perched on a rocky outcrop in a roadless wilderness, presumably put there with assistance from Sikorsky or Industrial Light and Magic. Beside the car is a young woman whose atypical proportions are emphasized by her evening dress. A large bird of prey takes off from her bare arm and rises into the endless blue sky. The background music also rises. It sounds vaguely like Wagner.

For the still youthful but optimistically employed, a smaller but much livelier vehicle is zipping along an urban street. The driver is too young and hip to be concerned about the Highway Traffic Act. He (usually) or she weaves cheerfully through a scattering of boring, non-zippy vehicles, wins envious smiles from nearly-as-hip onlookers and slides nimbly into a magically open parking space. The jazzy music has the beat of a heart racing.

For the midlife crisis demographic, which apparently stretches from newly married to nearly geezer, an exceptionally sleek

car screams along a scenic road. It's on a planet that has spectacular highways but no other vehicles. It also has several times more horsepower than could be used if there were other vehicles to dodge, but the driver can take comfort in knowing that those other miserable punters would all be gawking at his superior, um, car. The ad soundtrack is throaty engine roar.

And so on through the market niches. In all of them, the marketing gurus see people

This is not a phenomenon that is peculiar to car advertising. Consider, merely for outstanding examples, the standard advertising for tasteless industrial beer, designer label clothes, all-inclusive resorts and carbonated sugar water. All of it goes to show that no one in the industry believes market retention and expansion can possibly depend on the merits of products.

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who may be looking for transportation, but whose purchasing behaviour is moved mostly by desires for personal expression and social recognition.

The ads may play to the lower forms of these desires. But they testify to the rich possibilities of human motivation, and the happy fact that these motives have no direct connection to buying things.

The marketing wizards of the car industry know that people aren't natural consumers. That is why the ads are not selling cars so much as a suite of desirable self-images, emotional states and social opportunities. The ads are devoted to creating the illusion that physical products (in this case vehicles) will deliver goods that are less tangible but more deeply sought. They are selling people their own dreams.

consume. Instead, advertisers have found that despite decades of training to seek ever more commodities and services, buyers still have to be tricked into it, chiefly with fantasies based on ordinary non-consumer hopes and aspirations.

This is deeply subversive wisdom. It reveals and confirms the cheerful social and ecological possibilities of a planet where people can see through four-wheeled identities and other marketing mirages, decide they already have enough stuff, and find more direct routes to personal and social accomplishment. **EW**

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