

The Rhetoric of Advertising

Speaker: Kameo Keltner

As you learned in the previous learning units, media (including television, newspapers, magazines, etc.) can powerfully influence our perception of the world in which we live. As a society, we often look to media to help us understand who we are and, perhaps, who we should strive to become. We rely, for example, upon our news outlets (print, online, and television) to educate us on the happenings in our community and around the world. How these news outlets frame these events, though, helps to shape our perceptions of our world—the news outlets can help us to form opinions about important issues, such as politics, war, and the economy, to name but a few.

In a similar manner, advertisements, too, can shape our perceptions of our environment and of ourselves. Unlike news programs, though, advertisements rarely capture our full attention. While we might pay close attention to a televised news program that outlines the key ideas of a presidential candidate, we probably give very little direct attention to the car insurance commercial that airs during the show's break. However, the catchy jingle and the humorous slogan used in the commercial may replay in our heads long after the commercial has ended. Advertisers know that they do not have our full attention, and they know that they only have a brief period of time (the turn of a page in a magazine or 30 seconds on television) in which to bring us into their messages. Thus, they spend much time, money, and effort in packaging their brief solicitations into very effective and *persuasive* messages.

We say that advertisements are *persuasive* because they attempt to move us to action—advertisements aren't there simply for our entertainment or our viewing pleasure. Advertisements want us to do something—in most cases, these advertisements want us to buy a product or a service. It is for this reason, then, that all advertisements have an argument. Within the bright, intriguing images and the colorful, fun font lies a persuasive argument. The argument attempts to persuade the consumer that a particular product or service will, in some way, make life better for the consumer. Think of a beer commercial that seems to provide a life of excitement, friends, and, perhaps, even attention from the opposite sex. Consider a car insurance advertisement that seems to promise safety, dependability, and affordability to consumers. Think about all of the advertisements that we come into contact with in each day. We are flooded with arguments from advertisements on television, through the Internet, over the radio, on billboards, and in magazines and newspapers. In fact, by some estimates we may view thousands of advertisements on any given day! In 2007, President of the Marketing Firm Yankelovich, Jay Walker-Smith, indicated that, while the 1970s consumer viewed nearly 500 ads daily, we now tend to view approximately 5,000 daily. Smith said, "Everywhere we turn we're saturated with advertising messages trying to get our full attention." (qtd in Johnson). Given the number of advertisements that we encounter, then, shouldn't we pay direct attention to the arguments they are making? Shouldn't we work to understand the promises these advertisements seem to make? Shouldn't we analyze the ways in which these advertisements shape our perceptions of ourselves and our environment?

How do we go about analyzing the argument of an advertisement? How do we move past the alluring images and catchy slogans to understand how an advertisement works to persuade its target audience?

One of the first steps we need to take is to consider the **rhetoric** of an advertisement. Though we could consider many definitions of rhetoric, Aristotle's celebrated definition of rhetoric, "[. . .] the faculty of discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion" (7) often proves quite useful to us when analyzing an ad. When we look at an ad, we search for its "means of persuasion." Which "means" has the ad used in order to persuade a particular audience? We tend to look at these "means" in terms of **rhetorical appeals**: logos, ethos, and pathos. Advertisers use all of these to construct their arguments.

For a full discussion of rhetorical appeals, be sure to carefully read the assigned pages in your text. This discussion will only serve as a brief overview of rhetorical appeals. **Logos** refers to the use of logical appeals. These are the facts, statistics, and examples used in the ad. For example, we might see an ad for toothpaste that promises to make our teeth "40% whiter than the other leading brands." This line appeals to our ability to reason. It *seems* to make sense that the toothpaste must be effective if it works that much better than other toothpaste brands. Therefore, this statistic helps to persuade us that we should buy the toothpaste.

Ethos refers to the ethical appeals used by advertisers. These appeals work in ads by calling upon the credibility and the reputation of a particular company or spokesperson. Olympic gold medalist Michael Phelps signed an endorsement deal with Under Armour in 2010. When we see Phelps in an advertisement for Under Armour, then, we might feel persuaded to buy these products because we believe that if a remarkable athlete like Phelps trusts Under Armour, then we should, too. We might also see ethos working when a company shows that it is credible or trustworthy. Dawn dishwashing liquid advertisements have shown their product being used to clean wildlife affected by oil spills, and the company claims to donate money to wildlife charities. Seeing the goodwill of the company could make consumers trust Dawn and, therefore, this appeal helps to persuade consumers to purchase the products.

The final rhetorical appeal is **pathos**, which is the emotional appeal. Advertisers use pathos to evoke specific emotions in the audience. Pathos tends to be used quite often in advertisements, as emotions are easily stirred in most target audiences through vivid images and touching stories. Consider the emotions consumers may feel when they watch a commercial about abused animals. Often times, these commercials feature with sad, mistreated animals, who appear lonely and helpless. Sad music often accompanies these images, and the effect is that consumers may feel distressed, angry, or even guilty. The advertisers stir the emotions of the viewers in the hope that viewers will take action by donating money and/or adopt a pet.

Many ads will use a combination of all three rhetorical appeals to construct their arguments. However, some ads emphasize ethos, while other ads mostly make use of pathos. Still other ads may tend to have a strong use of logos. All ads will vary somewhat in their use of rhetorical appeals. Much of the strategy depends upon the target audience being persuaded and product being marketed.

So, in order to understand how these rhetorical appeals work within an ad, we must understand the ad's target audience. Surely, the statistic about toothpaste probably isn't going to effectively persuade a

group of five-year olds. Ads are specifically designed to appeal to a particular audience, so advertisers take great effort in designing the ad's to meet the desires, needs, and wants of the target audience.

Consider some of the popular magazines available to us: *Cosmopolitan*, *Maxim*, *Newsweek*, *Outdoor Life*, *Parenting*. If we read through this short list, we can quickly decipher the target audience of each publication. Women make up the target audience of *Cosmopolitan*; men consist of the target audience for *Maxim*. (Of course, some men do read *Cosmopolitan* and some women will read *Maxim*. Overall, though, we want to look at the majority of readers to determine the target audience.) What might you say about the readers of *Newsweek*? How old are they? What level of education might they have? Most magazines will have a specific group of readers, and the advertisements within these magazines will, overall, target this group of readers. For example, we are unlikely to find an advertisement for lipstick in an *Outdoor Life* magazine. Likewise, we probably won't find advertisements for hunting equipment in *Cosmopolitan*. Understanding the target audience of a magazine and, especially, of the advertisement, is vital to understanding how the advertisement works to persuade its target audience. We must ask: To whom does this ad appeal? What age group does the ad target? Sometimes, an ad will target groups with specific interests (i.e. fashion, hunting, fitness) or of specific education levels, races, economic classes, political views, etc. So, in analyzing any argument, we must understand the target audience for which the argument has been constructed.

When we consider the target audience of ads, we must also evaluate the values, beliefs, and attitudes of this audience. For example, do the men in the target audience value strength and power? Do the women feel pressure to look thin? Do mothers in the audience value safety for their children? Also consider the insecurities and/or fears of the target audience, as many times advertisements work to exploit these weaknesses in attempt to sell a product. Take acne medication, for example. Teenagers in this target audience may feel insecure about their acne and their inability to have "perfect" skin. Thus, an acne medication plays upon these feelings of insecurities in order to seemingly promise a solution to the teenagers' acne problem: Buy the product, and the teenagers' life will be perfect! The advertisement seems to offer this solution by giving the audience pictures of popular, confident teens who smile and appear happy. The assumption is that the acne product brings about happiness. Of course, when we stop and think critically about the messages of this advertisement, we can see that a simple acne medication will not serve as a quick and easy remedy to all of the teenager's problems. However, as consumers, we often do not stop and think about how these advertisements work and about how we are vulnerable to the deceptive messages that they send. We often want simple, easy solutions to our problems, after all. After we buy the product though, and realize it doesn't do all that we thought it would do, we are left frustrated and, often, on the hunt for the next product that promises similar results.

In addition to understanding how advertisements use rhetoric to persuade us to purchase products, we also evaluate the rhetoric of an ad to consider which values, attitudes, and beliefs the ad tends to perpetuate within our culture. In other words, in selling these products, how are the ads working to shape our perceptions? Let's consider a typical makeup ad that features a "beautiful" woman with a "perfect" complexion. She appears confident, happy, and desired. We have all seen these ads, and we recognize the women who are featured in them. Do these women seem to work to define "beauty" for

our society? “Beauty,” is, after all, a subjective term that can be defined differently by different people. However, advertisers, overall, have worked to offer consumers a specific image in an effort to define “beauty” for us. They tell us how women should look to be perceived as “beautiful.” In this way, the advertisements not only work to persuade us to buy a specific product, but they also work to tell us who is (and, consequently, who *isn’t*) beautiful within our culture. Thus, advertisers often sell us ideas in addition to selling us products. As author Jean Kilbourne writes in the essay “‘In Your Face . . . All over the Place’: Advertising is Our Environment,” “Advertising often sells a great deal more than products. It sells values, images, and concepts of love and sexuality, romance, success, and perhaps most important, normalcy. To a great extent, it tells us who we are and who we should be” (85). Because we are exposed to so many ads and they have such great power in shaping our perceptions, shouldn’t we work to critically evaluate these messages?

Rather than being passive agents who allow arguments from ads (as well as arguments from other sources, too) to influence us without much awareness on our part, we can act as critical, active agents who analyze and understand the messages we receive. Whether we choose to accept, deny, or even ignore these messages is up to us, but unless we take time to analyze these arguments, we may be unaware of their powerful influence in our lives.

In analyzing ads during this unit, work to develop your critical thinking skills as well as to understand some important components of arguments, such as target audience, rhetoric, ethos, logos, and pathos. The world is filled with arguments, and once you understand how persuasion works, you can be in a position to evaluate and respond to arguments from a variety of sources.

Works Cited

Aristotle. *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*. Trans. Lane Cooper. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1932. Print.

Johnson, Caitlin. "Cutting Through Advertising Clutter" *CBS Sunday Morning*. CBS, 11 Feb. 2009. Web.

Kilbourne, Jean. "'In Your Face . . . All over the Place': Advertising is Our Environment." *Reading Popular*

Culture: An Anthology for Writers. Ed. Michael Keller. Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 2002. 73-90.

Print.

© Kameo Keltner and Indian Hills Community College