
16. Rob LiVolsi (Prof. Andy Perry)

It's a pleasure and an honor for me to introduce Mr. Rob LiVolsi, this year's First Place recipient of the McKenzie First-Year Writing Prize.

Ironically, Rob describes himself as a mediocre writer in high school, regularly struggling to meet deadlines and what he calls, "The minimum requirements of his writing classes." For Rob, opening up the flow of words was always challenging. Without a doubt, he has found his voice.

His writing is confident and accessible. In his essay entitled, "The Consumer Generation: Advertising's Youngest Audience," he cautions in his conclusion: "And so be warned of the dangers of advertising, especially when the target audience is your children. Even I myself, when I took a break from this essay, left my desk with a jingle in my head and a distinct taste in my memories. Shortly before finishing this, I walked down to the Corner Store and bought myself a box of Lucky Charms."

It is also thought provoking. In "Thinking Vertically: Depth in a Lateral World," he argues: "The rise of education and the spread of information has allowed for an age where such knowledge and skills are available to all who seek it. Let's just remain conscious of our inner depth as well, so we'll know where to find meaning in ourselves."

As far as words of wisdom for other aspiring academic writers, Rob says he has "no idea." He advises nailing down a reliable prewriting process and then simply

putting in the effort. I'm pleased that his work will be included in the College of Liberal Arts' annual collection of award-winning student writing. It needs to be shared with others as a clear example of outstanding writing.

Robert LiVolsi
January 9, 2008

The Consumer Generation: Advertising's Youngest Audience

The other day while relaxing in my floor lounge, I was bouncing essay ideas off a few friends when a familiar theme started playing on the television. "Hearts, stars, and horseshoes!" A cartoon leprechaun runs frantically around a fantasy world full of sugar and rainbows as young adventurers pursue him for his Lucky Charms. "They're magically delicious!" refrains, and the commercial familiar to the ears of any avid cereal eater fades out. In a time span of less than twenty seconds, I was reminded not only of one of my own favorite breakfasts, but the distinct taste and texture of the product itself. Like magic I was flooded by nostalgic memories of my childhood, deeply entwined in the commercialism prevalent since the dawn of the T.V. era.

We all have vivid memories of hundreds, if not thousands, of classic commercials and catchy jingles that have been engrained into us since birth. Every day we are bombarded by dozens of marketing campaigns that have been designed and engineered to specifically appeal to our age, gender, personality, or any other trait by which we define ourselves. However, we are most influenced not by the media we encounter as adults, but by the media we grew with during the time when we were most impressionable, our childhood. Because childhood is also the time we are most vulnerable and also trying to find our own identity, it is important to consider how an increasingly commercialized world affects not only ourselves, but also today's youth. How do advertisements specifically target children? Why are children specifically targeted? What can be done to prevent brainwashing an entire generation?

One of the key ways advertisers hook their young audience is by associating a product with a sense of reward. Often, a product alone might not be enticing enough to warrant

excitement on its own. In this case, a regular sales pitch may be directed toward the parents, but the “hook” is left for the child. For example, Huggies Pull-Ups might be directed toward parents as a great method for bathroom training toddlers, but to encourage interest in and invoke a sense of reward from the toddlers themselves, all Pull-Ups commercials end with the catchy jingle “I’m a big kid now.” Likewise, advertisers may try to increase the appeal of a toy by making it seem like a replacement for a chore. During the commercial for an educational video game system, a mother can be heard saying, “You can’t go to bed until you play your video games,” among other similar phrases, much to the surprise of her young children. The main audience of the advertisement is parents, but the gratification is demonstrated for their children.

Another method is to associate a product with a character or role model that children may identify with. Virtually every kids’ cereal features bright, colorful cartoon characters that will appeal to a child’s sense of imagination. Children almost always accompany the character, who either advises them about the product, or demonstrates a desire for the product. Trix the Rabbit always tries to obtain a bowl of Trix, but fails every time, only to be given the reason, “Trix are for kids.” Tony the Tiger hands everyone a bowl of Frosted Flakes while reassuring that “They’re great!” In both cases, kids are being informed about what they should like and eat by characters that seem very real to them. Even more alarming, the concept extends further to real actors and actresses. Shows and movies like Hannah Montana or High School Musical attract not only a large young fan base, but also sell millions in DVD releases, iTunes exclusives, and miscellaneous merchandise. Media conglomerates like Disney are not only demonstrating to kids how to live their lives through their fictional settings, but also what they should be buying and what the average kid should want to own.

Finally, advertisers lead children to their products by demonstration and example. By showing young actors playing with and enjoying certain products, children from a very young age quickly learn that boys are supposed to like Hotwheels and action figures and that girls are supposed to like Barbie dolls and toy houses. The stereotypes of western society are not just created by the roles imposed upon us by familial and peer pressure, but also by the commercialism and consumer habits imposed upon us by mass media and corporate greed.

Advertisers use all of these tactics to target children because they are one of the largest consumer groups. Mom might not pick up a box of Trix on her own due to its high sugar content, but she might not hesitate either when her son demands it because Trix the Rabbit told him that's what kids eat. At the same time, advertisers want to train children to become heavy spenders as they grow older. Dozens of accessories are sold for Barbie dolls with the hope that in a few years the girls who played with those toys will be buying their own makeup and accessories. Likewise they expect boys to progress from Leapfrog to Xbox and Hotwheels to real cars. Toys are really just another way to train sheep.

The best strategy against this marketing assault is education. It is unrealistic to expect lawmakers to restrict the marketing of products deemed "safe," nor is it reasonable to assume advertisers would give up their right to free press or give up a large chunk of the consumer market. Instead, it is important that parents not impose stereotypes and marketing habits on their own children, and also inform their children of the deceptions of mass marketing as they grow older. Not all kids have to go cuckoo for Coco Puffs.

And so be warned of the dangers of advertising, especially when the target audience is your children. Even I myself, when I took a break from this essay, left my desk with a jingle in

my head and a distinct taste in my memories. Shortly before finishing this, I walked down to the Corner Store and bought myself a box of Lucky Charms.