

Sex Sells: Does Science?

You don't have to be an advertising mogul to realise that sex sells. A partially naked man or woman only needs a tenuous link with the product they want us to buy. More often than not the link isn't even tenuous – it's non-existent.

But science is linked to an overwhelming number of household products. It's not magic that makes your whites whiter than white. And it's not the fairies that make you 'worth it'.

Science behind the products

So are we ever told of the science behind the products we're buying? Advertisers often attempt to baffle us into submission with stunning graphics and grossly out-of-proportion graphs and charts, or, conversely, insult our integrity by assuming we'll believe them.

It's unlikely that advertisers lie, but more than likely that they twist statistics to their own advantage, and omit essential information such as survey sample sizes. A copper wristband that claims to make 90% of people with rheumatism 'feel better', for example, is going to make sufferers stop and look, and maybe buy. But what if they stopped and thought for a while. 90% of whom? 90% of how many? Surely 'feeling better' is a rather subjective claim.

How useful is the claim if only 25 people were asked? And what if those people were a group of OAPs who, when confronted by a kindly man with a lovely looking wristband, a slice of cake and nice cup of tea, are bound to 'feel better'. Perhaps the survey is a better example of the healing powers of a nice cup of Earl Grey!

And as for gimmicks

Pyramid shaped tea bags? (there seems to be a tea theme here). Putting a tablet in the middle of your washing? Friendly bacteria? They may well be massive improvements – results of extensive scientific research. The point is, we never stop to question the claims. 'Wow! The man says it gets really ground in stains right out. Give me two!'

This assignment aims to raise your awareness of science in advertisements, using extensive content analysis. By the end you should be annoying friends and relatives with your facetious jibes at the television and your worldly-wise scepticism of all new products and their adverts.



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What you have to do

You will produce a poster presentation and written report about the way science is used to advertise products from an area of your choice.

1. Take a random selection of magazines and newspapers and see how they use science to sell products. Check out household products – beauty products, medicines or food, for example – see if these use science to sell themselves. For example, in numerous women's magazine you'll find adverts for beauty products claiming things such as, 'It's proven: the new Grease-Controlling solution makes your hair feel straighter, bouncier, stronger for more than 36 hours'. Or, 'Our shampoo adds up to 75 per cent more volume to your hair'. Who proved it? 75 per cent more than what? Cereal packets will tell you that one bowl of cornflakes provides 50 per cent of your recommended daily allowance (RDA) of vitamins. But what's the likelihood of consuming those vitamins even if you don't eat the cornflakes? Discuss in groups of three or four the different sorts of adverts you found. You may like to talk about the validity of the claims, and whether or not they are quantitative or qualitative (does it contain 25 per cent more of something, or does it just make you feel better, for example). What information is not included? Use the information gleaned from these discussions to form the introduction to your report.
2. Choose an area for further investigation from the following list, or, if there's something else you'd like to investigate, check it out with your teacher:
 - Food and drink
 - Cosmetics and beauty
 - Medicines and health
 - Technology
3. You now need to build upon what you learned from task one. This time focus on your chosen area. Find a varied selection of magazines and raid your cupboards for relevant products. Use this assignment as an excuse to watch TV – you'll need to take note of television adverts. Write down the frequency of science in the adverts relevant to your chosen area. Did the advertisers qualify their statements? Did they use graphics to demonstrate products working? (a giant computerised hair being miraculously mended by some deep penetrating shampoo, for example.)
4. These are some of the things you may like to consider, along with the issues raised in task one, while carrying out your investigation:

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- Food and drink: Is the product 'healthy'? Do they claim to have extra ingredients, or are they low fat or caffeine free? Do they mention RDAs, and why?
 - Cosmetics and beauty: Who clarifies the claims that, for example, certain shampoos give 75% more volume to your hair?
 - Medicines and Health: Advertisers sometimes say a product makes one in three people feel better. Who did they ask? Could it be an example of the placebo effect?
 - Technology: Batteries and long-life light bulbs are good examples of quantitative advertising 'X performs for three hours longer than Y'.
4. Create your poster presentation and word-processed report. The presentation should demonstrate to the rest of your group how science is used to advertise your chosen area. The report should be a more detailed analysis of your findings, with examples and conclusions.

Places you might like to look for advertising:

Wander round a supermarket, picking up products and reading what they say about themselves – remember, the information on the side of a box, if it tells you why the product is good, is advertising. It's not just a couple of minutes' airtime or a page of a magazine.

Women and men magazines are particularly good sources.

Marie Claire, Cosmopolitan, Elle, New Woman, FHM, Loaded, GQ, Arena are all good examples. So too are *Take a Break, Woman's Weekly* and *Woman*, which aim themselves at older age groups, and *J17, Smash Hits* and *Mizz* which aim themselves at younger people.

You might also like to compare this to advertising in publications such as *The New Scientist*, or on the websites of large manufacturers.

There is also a greater variety in television magazines (*Radio Times, TV Times*) as these have a larger target audience.

Your best bet, though, is to just keep your eyes open. We live an age of images and advertising is absolutely everywhere. Postmodernism, and all that.