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## CONFERENCE PLENARY SUMMARIES

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### Selling Ideas, Attitudes, and Behaviors

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**ABSTRACT.** Advertisers are adept at changing our attitudes and purchasing behaviors, but we rarely notice the effects. This plenary talk at the eighth annual Midwest Rural Agricultural Safety and Health Forum, November 2009, focused on the psychology of advertising and how advertising is designed to work outside of our conscious awareness. Several psychological “tricks” are used to influence us, with the goal being to get us to change our behaviors but to think that it was our idea all along. These tricks include using emotional appeals and persuasion techniques that rely on biases in human problem solving. This power can be used for social marketing, the use of these techniques to promote social well-being, rather than simply for commercial purposes. Understanding how advertising works therefore allows us to use this power to effect positive changes in society.

**KEYWORDS.** Advertising, psychology, social marketing

Are you affected by advertising? Most people will say “No.” Only 10% of the Midwest Rural Agricultural Safety and Health Forum (MRASH) attendees raised their hand when asked whether they were affected personally by advertising, yet 99% of the audience knew the majority of the logos shown at the conference. Studies suggest that people who believe that they are not influenced by advertising tend to be the most influenced. These are not gullible or stupid people. All people are influenced, although most don’t recognize it.

Here is an example of what advertising can do. Say you are given the assignment of selling a product that is not attractive, kills over 400,000 people in the United States each year,

only one out of five people start using this product as an adult, it is illegal to market to kids, and you can’t advertise on radio or TV. Sounds like an impossible task! Yet the tobacco industry has been very successful at getting young people to start smoking, and older people to continue smoking.

How hard is it to get people to change their behavior? As any parent (or spouse) knows, it is very difficult. Yet that is exactly what advertisers do . . . affect behaviors. They get you to buy their product. How do they do it? They use several psychological tricks to get you to want to change your own behavior (and to believe it was your idea all along).

What if the public health community were as effective at changing behavior as Phillip Morris?

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Understanding how it works can allow us to use this power to effect positive change in society.

Advertisers use a four-step process to sell a product. First is to build brand awareness. Second is to build brand preference (which can begin simply with repeated exposure). Third is to get the person to purchase or use the product. Fourth is to build brand loyalty. Psychological tricks help move people from one step to the next.

One trick is not to provide information, but instead to try to get an emotional response. Emotion plays at least five roles in how a person's brain works. The first is attention; to get them to LOOK! Second is memory; the brain remembers things that are emotional, as these tend to have survival value for us. Third is to build attitudes. An attitude is a fact linked to an emotion. "I like chicken soup when I am sick because that is what my mother fed me when I was sick." Fourth is motivation. Motivation and emotion both share the Latin root meaning "to move." Why? Because emotion is the primary motivator of the fifth role—behavior. Note that this list is exactly what advertisers want. They want to get your attention; to get you to remember their message, to change your attitudes, to motivate you to change your own behaviors (and to think it was your idea).

A second group of psychological tricks are what could be called unconscious shortcuts. There are many established shortcuts in our brains, and if advertisers use them, they can have tremendous power over us without our conscious awareness.

One such shortcut can be called the *Authority Principle*. When people are perceived as an authority, we tend to follow them without thinking about it. An example of this is "Four out of five dentists recommend sugarless gum . . ."

A second shortcut is the *Identification Principle*. When people like or admire someone, they want to identify themselves with that person. An example of this is the use of Michael Jordan to sell sneakers. Everyone (as their ad that used this trick states) "wants to be like Mike," and to do so you can wear his brand of shoes.

A third shortcut is the *Contrast Principle*. Our brains automatically compare and contrast things, even when we do not intend to do so. For example, men who watch a lot of television rate their own wives and girlfriends as less physically attractive than men who do not watch as much TV. This demonstrates that they are comparing the real people in their lives to what else they see, even though that is not their intent.

A fourth shortcut is *Humor*. People who are in a bad mood are more critical. So humor can relax critical thinking, plus it allows for a positive association between the advertised product and the good feeling.

Why did companies spend an estimated \$412 billion on advertising in the United States in 2008? Because it works! There is a high positive correlation between advertising budgets and brand awareness, brand preference, behavior, and brand loyalty. The goal is to get brand loyalty and to get it early. Advertisers' stated goal is to achieve brand loyalty by age 3!

How can health educators use the principles of advertising to change behavior? First, we need to get the attention of our audience. We need to not be afraid to use emotion as a motivator, and to craft the message in a way that makes the target audience think it was their idea all along. Second, we need to recognize that we are not fighting a fair fight—by the time the average American child is graduated from high school, he or she will have spent twice as much time in front of the TV as in front of *all teachers in all grades!* The 1 hour a week that children are in health class cannot win. Finally, the single biggest change we should make is to stop believing in the value of giving information. Telling children that "if they smoke their risk of emphysema is increased" will *never* beat the emotional message they hear from the media—that "smoking is cool." If we want to have effective health education, we need to use the same emotional and psychological tricks that advertisers use. We need to learn to fight fire with fire, if we want to have a chance for our health education to have the effects that we hope it can.

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