

The Erotic History of Advertising

Tom Reichert

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This sexy book could well have been titled *The History of Erotic Advertising*. The author, advertising professor at the University of Alabama, explores with zest, acuity, and almost suppressed humor the two higher truths of western civilization: sex increases the potency of advertising, and advertising increases the emission of money from consumers, fertilizing manufacturers. Men are ceaselessly fed images of delectable women, and women images of others more delectable than themselves. Products sell, cash registers ring, and everybody is happy.

The text-image-product-purchase-reward model of advertising has been on the road for more than a century. Reichert traces the model from the 1870s, when bare-breasted beauties smiled sexily at potential tobacco purchasers; he then moves in quarter-century takes through key campaign themes. “A skin you love to touch” (soaps); the benefits of “rustproof corsets”; décolletées and derrières stimulating lingerie sales (“neat panties” produced by The Well-Made Bloomer Company of Brooklyn, N.Y.). Then recent liquor and jeans ads, and (as so often promised) “much more” ... but keep your breath fragrant and mind those body odors. Then on to the current decade, one of straining couples promised hotter sex lives (buy that video!) or a defense against AIDS (use that condom!).

Reichert offers much more than snappy takes on these themes and one hundred or so high-drool images. He analyzes the thinking that produced the copy and its erotic catalyst, exploring the titillatory thrust, the hint that sex will fall as energizing rain on (presumably) parched male purchasers. He is engagingly informative on such topics as “embeds” that lead (we hope) to in-beds-the swizzle stick as penis; the cigarette as symbol of desire aflame. Where’s Dr. Dichter when we need him most? Worth mention is the long-forgotten Tachistometer, which flashed supposedly powerful subliminal images, but failed its FCC test. “Eat popcorn” was the message-but the audience didn’t, and inventor James Vicary skipped town, unearned retainers in his pocket.

Throughout Reichert provides product case histories detailing what sex-heavy advertising achieved for them, even with occasional restraints. He concludes with a fine chapter discussing the sexual content of Internet advertising, and how this medium is used. “Online sex in advertising” is certainly here to stay.

“You can tell the ideals of a nation from its advertising,” said the writer Norman Douglas. Reichert reminds readers of this comment, and his sparkling social history proves it true. So read on and get it on. Or sit alone with *Victoria’s Secret* and a packet of Chup Chups—guaranteed to give “Oral Pleasure.”

PETER SKINNER (May / June 2003)

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