1985

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Recommended Citation

Rank, Hugh (1985) "Football Games, Elections, and 30-Second-Spots," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1759>

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Football Games, Elections, and 30-Second-Spots

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*Hugh Rank, Governors State University, advocates simplified ways of teaching persuasion analysis in his books about advertising (**The Pitch**, 1982) and political persuasion (**The Pep Talk**, 1984).*

Most of us know more about the patterns of a football game than about the **patterns of persuasion** used by advertisers and politicians.

When we see a football game, we expect to see patterns of purposeful behavior, not 22 men aimlessly wandering about the field. After we know the game, we know there are predictable sequences and typical responses to certain situations. We know basic offensive and defensive strategies. After we know the norm, we can recognize the unusual. We know when we see a "standard" play well done, well executed.

Informal experience, often from playing backyard football, provides part of our knowledge. But much of our knowledge of the patterns within sports comes from our formal training, from coaches who teach the principles and the rules of the game. From them, we learn the basics. Television announcers reinforce and refine this formal training by their constant commentary, explaining or evaluating practically every play during a broadcast. Using instant-replays and electronic diagrams, an informed commentator can provide millions of viewers with an "instant analysis," demonstrating how a principle is applied in a specific situation.

Informal experience, formal training in the basics, and constant reinforcement produces a society in which millions of people are very knowledgeable about the predictable patterns of a game. Yet our society needs the same kind of analytical skills applied to those messages of persuasion being broadcast to us by the "professional persuaders" of political and commercial advertising. Even though such persuasion involves crucial decisions as to how we spend our limited time and money, most people are less articulate about these issues than we are as sports' fans.

As adults we have had a great deal of **informal** experience with both politics and advertising. We have been at the **receiving end** of hundreds of thousands of skillfully-designed messages seeking to sell us a product or a policy. We've grown up in a "propaganda blitz," in an environment saturated with sophisticated persuasion. The mind-boggling gee-whiz statistics keep escalating: ad expenditures have tripled in a decade, over \$85 billion a year now; over 42,000 **new** TV commercials each year; record multi-million dollar production or time costs. In addition, the election campaigns have been marked by increasingly strident and aggressive political ads, designed by media consultants who are much more informed than those just a few years ago.

Our exposure to such messages has increased significantly, but our ability to deal with them hasn't. People frequently discuss these things, but most discussions are random and haphazard, often simply venting emotions and opinions, generating more heat than light. Most self-styled "experts" restrict their comments to subjective opinions (good/bad; like it/don't like it) which is hardly a sufficient response to this kind of blitz. Ads are often the best **compositions** of our age, skillful combinations of purposeful words and images. In a well-done ad, every word, every sentence, every gesture, every background has been worked on by a very highly skilled team of persuaders. Yet most of us don't have the method, or even the vocabulary, to discuss the parts and processes, the patterns and techniques, of these carefully crafted messages.

Most people have never had any formal training in school, analyzing the patterns of persuasion used by advertisers and politicians. A few "speech" courses deal with this, but usually these are electives, restricted to a few advanced students (often, the future persuaders). Most commonly, when schools deal with the larger patterns of language, it's usually with the structures of literature. Most English teachers, for example, are very competent in analyzing the structure of a novel, a short story, or a poem. But few have ever analyzed the structure of a 30-second-spot, even though these little gems are often as tightly-composed as a sonnet.

In writing and composition courses, the overwhelming emphasis is on the "little" elements of structure: usually sentence structure, sometimes paragraphs. School instruction is generally limited to expository writing and to rational arguments (with emphasis on rational proofs and refutations). However, most persuasion targeted on us today is **non-rational**: emotional appeals, "image building," nonverbals, repetition and association techniques. About these techniques, the schools teach almost nothing. Very few adults, or students currently in school, have had any kind of formal training, systematic and coherent, on how to understand, analyze, and cope with the kind of sophisticated propaganda blitz we experience today.

Frustration and free-floating anger are often the result of our lack of training here. Many people feel as if they are "somehow" being exploited or manipulated by the professional persuaders. Unable to define or specify the problem, this vague resentment of many people turns into a bitter cynicism, often randomly and indiscriminately directed against all advertisers and politicians, and even journalists and the media. Apathy and immobilization are other consequences. Such impotency is brought on by an "overload": there's just too much, too fast, too diverse, too confusing. Concerned people sometimes lack a sense of direction, order and coherence. As a result, they often end up either wringing their hands saying that "**something** ought to be done" or shrugging their shoulders saying, "what's the use, **nothing** can be done."

However, something can be done. We can increase the formal training in those analytical skills needed to cope with such a massive barrage of persuasive messages. Instead of vague mutterings or categorical denunciations ("all lies") of commercial and political persuasion, we should be able to look at a 30-second-spot and have the same ease in analyzing its **form** as we do in analyzing the patterns within a football game.

Understanding should be our goal. We should be able to analyze a persuasion campaign as dispassionately as an announcer comments on the techniques of athletic teams. We should be able to identify the parts, the processes, the common patterns and probable

sequences: to see the relation of parts to the whole, and the whole to the wider context; to talk about advertising without doing a hatchet-job against it, or a snow-job for it; to talk about political persuasion without being partisan; and to judge political issues and commercial products on their own merits rather than on the cleverness of the persuader.

To achieve this goal of such understanding, we're going to have to do some things in our educational system: in scholarship, in curriculum planning, in testing objectives, in texts, in teacher preparation, and finally, in the classroom. Most scholarship and research today in persuasion and communication benefits the few, not the many; the persuader, not the **persuadee**. Most texts and teachers simply ignore the existence of the most sophisticated use of language in human history. Scholars, textbook writers, and teachers need to give this more attention. Furthermore, to counterbalance the existing inequities, we need to do more on behalf of the interests of the **audience**: the receivers, the consumers, the average citizens.

Ultimately, democracy depends on informed citizens. So also, our free choice depends on truthful and adequate information, and on our ability to analyze it. Others have pointed out the dangers of societies in which the government or elites control the information flow: the grave dangers we face due to official lies, deception, censorship, and news manipulation. But there are even less obvious ways of controlling information: for example, in not teaching or encouraging the "critical thinking" skills needed to analyze information and persuasion.

The 30-Second Spot Quiz

Use this 1-2-3-4-5 sequence of questions, based on Hugh Rank's pattern of "the pitch" (Hi/Trust Me/You Need/Hurry/Buy), to focus on the "skeleton" underneath the "surface variations" of radio and TV commercials, newspaper and magazine ads.

1 What ATTENTION-GETTING techniques are used?

Anything unusual? Unexpected? Noticeable? Interesting? Related to:

- ☐ **senses:** motions, colors, lights, sounds, music, visuals (e.g. computer graphics, slow-motion)
 - ☐ **emotions:** any associations (see list below): sex, scenery, exciting action, fun, family, pets.
 - ☐ **thought:** news, lists, displays, claims, advice, questions, stories, demonstrations, contest.
- (Popular TV programs function as attention-getters to "deliver the audience" to advertisers.)

2 What CONFIDENCE-BUILDING techniques are used?

- ☐ Do you recognize, know (from earlier repetition) the **brand name? company? symbol? package?**
- ☐ Do you already know, like, and trust the "**presenters**": the endorsers, actors, models?
- ☐ Are these "presenters" **AUTHORITY FIGURES** (expert, wise, protective, caring,)? Or, are they **FRIEND FIGURES** (someone you like, like to be, "on your side"; incl. "cute" cartoons)?
- ☐ What key words are used? (Trust, sincere, etc.) **Nonverbals?** (smiles, voice tones, sincere look)
- ☐ In mail ads, are computer-written "personalized" touches used? On **telephone:** tapes? scripts?

3 What DESIRE-STIMULATING techniques are used? (Main part of ad)

Consider (a) "target audience" as (b) **benefit-seeking**; and persuaders benefit-promising strategies as focused on (c) **product claims**, or, (d) "**added values**" associated with a product.

- ☐ a. Who is the "target audience"? Are you? (If not, as part of an unintended audience, are you *uninterested or hostile* toward the ad?)
- ☐ b. What's the primary motive of that audience's benefit-seeking? Use chart at right. Most ads are simple acquisition (*lower left*). Often, such motives co-exist, but one may be dominant. Ads which intensify a **problem**, (that is, a "bad" already hated or feared; the *opposite*, or the *absence of*, "goods") and then offer the product as a **solution**, are here called "**scare-and-sell**" ads. (*right side*).

To keep a "good" (protection)	To get rid of a "bad" (relief)
To get a "good" (acquisition)	To avoid a "bad" (prevention)

- ☐ c. What kinds of **product claims** are emphasized? (Use these 12 categories) What key words, images? Any measurable claims? Or are they *subjective opinions, generalized praise words* ("puffery")?

SUPERIORITY ("best")	BEAUTY ("lovely")	STABILITY ("classic")	UTILITY ("practical")
QUANTITY ("most")	SCARCITY ("rare")	RELIABILITY ("solid")	RAPIDITY ("fast")
EFFICIENCY ("works")	NOVELTY ("new")	SIMPLICITY ("easy")	SAFETY ("safe")

- ☐ d. Are any "**added values**" implied or suggested? Are there words or images which associate the product with some "good" already loved or desired by the intended audience? With such common human needs/wants/desires as in these 24 categories:

"basic" needs:	"certitude" needs:	"territory" needs:	"growth" needs:
FOOD ("tasty")	RELIGION ("right")	NEIGHBORHOOD	ESTEEM ("respected")
ACTIVITY ("exciting")	SCIENCE ("research")	("hometown")	PLAY ("fun")
SURROUNDINGS	BEST PEOPLE ("elite")	NATION ("country")	GENEROSITY ("gift")
("comfort")	MOST PEOPLE	NATURE ("earth")	CREATIVITY ("creative")
SEX ("alluring")	("popular")		CURIOSITY ("discover")
HEALTH ("healthy")	AVERAGE PEOPLE	love & belonging needs:	COMPLETION ("success")
SECURITY ("protect")	("typical")	INTIMACY ("lover")	
ECONOMY ("save")		FAMILY ("Mom" "kids")	
		GROUPS ("team")

4 Are there URGENCY-STRESSING techniques used? (Not all ads, but always check.)

- ☐ If an urgency appeal: What words? (e.g. Hurry, Rush, Deadline, Sale Ends, Offer Expires, Now.)
- ☐ If no urgency: is this "soft sell" part of a repetitive, long-term ad campaign for standard item?

5 What RESPONSE-SEEKING techniques are used? (Persuaders always seek some kind of response!)

- ☐ Are there specific triggering words used? (Buy, Get, Do, Call, Act, Join, Smoke, Drink, Taste, etc.)
- ☐ Is there a specific response sought? (Most ads: to buy something)
- ☐ If not: is it **conditioning** ("public relations" or "image building") to make us "feel good" about the company, to get favorable public opinion on its side (against any government regulations, taxes)?

HOW TO ANALYZE ADS

Based on *The Pitch* © 1982 by Hugh Rank

(Teachers may photocopy for classroom use.)

Recognize that a 30-second-spot TV ad is a **synthesis**, the end product of a complex process in which scores of people (writers, researchers, psychologists, artists, actors, camera crews, etc.) may have spent months putting together the details. TV commercials are often the best *compositions* of our age, skillful combinations of purposeful words and images. Be patient and systematic: **analysis** takes time to sort out all of the things going on at once. We perceive these things *simultaneously*, but we must discuss them *sequentially*. Use this 1-2-3-4-5 pattern of "the pitch" as a sequence to start your analysis.

Recognize "surface variations". In 30 seconds, a TV spot may have 40 quick-cut scenes of "good times" (happy people, sports fun, drinking cola); or 1 slow "tracking" scene of an old-fashioned sleighride through the woods, ending at "home" with "Season's Greetings" from an aerospace corporation; or a three-scene drama: a problem suffered by some "friend," a product/solution recommended by a trusted "authority," and a final grateful smile from the relieved sufferer. But, the structure underneath is basically the same.

Recognize our own involvement in a mutual transaction. Persuaders are *benefit-promisers*, but we are *benefit-seekers*. Most ads relate to simple "trade-offs" of mutual benefits: consumers get a pleasure, producers get a profit. However, investigate issues relating to any non-consumer ad; these are paid presentations of only one side of an issue, often involving more than a simple purchase transaction.

Understand that advertising is basically persuasion, not information nor education, *and not coercion!* Many important moral and ethical issues (concerning intent and consequences, priorities, individual and social effects, truth and deception, legal and regulatory problems) are related. The more we know about the basic techniques of persuasion, the better able we are not only to cope with the multiple persuaders in our society, but also to consider these ethical issues.

Observe. Understand. Judge. (In *that* sequence!) We "jump to conclusions" too often: we judge before we really understand, or even know what we're talking about. Observe closely what is explicitly said and shown; consider carefully what may be implied, suggested either by verbal or nonverbal means.

Anticipate incoming information. Have some way to sort, some place to store. If you know common patterns, you can pick up cues from bits and fragments, recognize the situation, know the probable options, infer the rest, and even note the omissions. Some persuaders use these techniques (and some observers analyze them) consciously and systematically; others, intuitively and haphazardly.

Categorize, but don't "pigeonhole." Things may be in many categories at the same time. "Clusters" and "mixes" are common. Observers often disagree.

Seek "dominant impressions," but relate them to the whole. You can't analyze *everything*. Focus on what seems (*to you*) the most *noticeable, interesting, or significant* elements (e.g. an intense "urgency" appeal, a very strong "authority" figure). By relating these to the whole context of "the pitch," your analysis can be *systematic, yet flexible*, appropriate to the situation.

Translate "indirect" messages. Much communication is *indirect*, through metaphoric language, allusions, rhetorical questions, irony, nonverbals (gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice), etc. Millions of specific concrete ways of communicating something can be grouped in the general abstract categories listed here as "product claims" (3c) and "common needs" (3d). Visuals imply. We complete the connection: e.g. very few "sex" words used, but many *images*.

Train yourself by first analyzing those ads which explicitly use the full sequence of "the pitch," including "urgency-stressing" and a specific "response-seeking." Always check for this full sequence; when it does not appear, consider what may have been omitted: *assumed or implied*. "Soft sell" ads and corporate "image-building" ads are harder to analyze: *less is said, more is implied*.

Practice. Analysis is a skill which can be learned, but needs to be practiced. Take notes. Use print ads. Videotape, if possible; replay in slow motion. No one can "see" or "understand" everything during the actual 30 seconds while watching a TV spot. At best, we pick up a few impressions. Use the pattern of "the pitch" to organize your analysis and aid your memory. Such organization helps to avoid randomness and simple subjectivity ("*that's swell . . . I liked that!*"). "**The 30-Second-Spot quiz**" provides a lot of specific information, but even after you lose that paper, you should be able to remember the basic structure.

Read more. *The Pitch* gives details (word lists, examples) of this way to analyze ads. Use the **Intenality/Downplay** schema for a more comprehensive analysis, especially as a systematic way to examine omissions. Libraries have many other books available about advertising: gossip, anecdotes, gee-whiz statistics, nuts-and-bolts about the business and economic aspects. (See also: *rhetoric, persuasion, propaganda*.) For current information, see the weekly trade magazine, *Advertising Age*.

Are ads worth all of this attention? Ads may not be, but your mind is . If we can better learn how to analyze things, to recognize patterns, to sort out incoming information, to see the parts, the processes, the structure, the relationships within things so common in our everyday environment, then it's worth the effort.

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