

Ask Dr. Robertson 15 — Life Raft in Entertainment: Protection Against Marketing and Advertising



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Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson is a Registered Doctoral Psychologist with expertise in Counselling Psychology, Educational Psychology, and Human Resource Development. He earned qualifications in Social Work too. Duly note, he has five postsecondary degrees, of which 3 are undergraduate level. His research interests include memes as applied to self-knowledge, the evolution of religion and spirituality, the aboriginal self's structure, residential school syndrome, prior learning recognition and assessment, and the treatment of attention deficit disorder and suicide ideation. In addition, he works in anxiety and trauma, addictions, and psycho-educational assessment, and relationship, family, and group counselling.

Here we talk about advertising and marketing.

Listing of previous sessions with links at the end of the interview.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You spoke on advertising and marketing deluging our consciousnesses throughout or modern lives. How can education and individual initiative, and conscientious, protect against some of these negative forces?

Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson: If you think that advertising is about announcing new products, then you are vulnerable. Advertising is rarely about announcing a new product, and even when it is, it is about pushing your buttons to buy that product. We think we are freely choosing a product or service, but as I have argued previously free will is largely an illusion (see: [Free Will](#)), and can only be exercised in a limited way by having objective knowledge of relevant conditions. If we are primed to buy, vote or otherwise interact by unconscious triggering, then we are not exercising free will.

A recent television ad reveals how this works. The ad begins with the upbeat rock tempo of Barracuda, a song about a sexually aggressive woman who trolls men. With this music in the

background two young men offer, “Shopping while hungry... is a dangerous game.” We then see a short, plump and wide eyed woman drinking a brown liquid from a bottle while frantically pushing a shopping cart down a grocery aisle. We then see several actors including one who is rubbing her pregnant belly soulfully repeating the phrase, “Shop like a mother.” We don’t know whether the woman who was drinking chocolate milk while shopping is a mother, a barracuda or both. But here I am exhibiting the uniquely human trait of finding relationships where none exist. We are given four disjointed memes without a defined storyline. If any one of those memes (classic rock from a women’s band, men referencing shopping as “a dangerous game,” anxious shopper, or motherhood) connect our subconscious with the supermarket in question, then we will think of that store when the trigger meme presents (For a discussion of this mechanism see: [Mind Virus](#)). Unlike this example, most advertisements have some sort of narrative, but the narrative is not the part of the ad that programs you to buy, shop, or act in a way intended by the advertiser. It is the memes imbedded in the ad that are the activating agents.

You may think that when that expensive \$2.5 million T.V. ad comes on during an all important football game, you ignore it and go to the fridge for a beer. What brand of beer? I am old enough to remember when European beers outsold U.S. beers which were commonly compared to dishwater in Canadian pubs. But after an extensive long-term multimedia campaign that including identification with Canada’s national game (hockey), one of those foreign brands has become dominant in the Canadian market. More money is spent producing television advertising than is spent on the programs that attract you to the T.V., because it works on targeted consumers. Psychologists have become mental technicians using sophisticated eye-tracking and brain wave experiments as well as surveys and focus groups to help the corporate elite push your buttons. They are using your dreams, desires and subconscious triggers to sell you stuff that you otherwise might not want.

Sometimes they use fear. We are all familiar with negative political advertising. A rival is painted as having a “secret agenda” or as having a questionable past. The same technique may be used in marketing. One European carmaker, promoting its reputation for safety, weakened the structure in a selection of competitor’s vehicles while reinforcing their own beyond production standards to produce an ad where rollovers produced disproportionate damage in North American vehicles. Safety fears would then drive customers to their brand.

Negative advertising has also been applied to the sale of foods. The phrase “health food” is used to imply that competing products are not healthy. One “health food” chain actually developed an aerosol spray which they used daily in their stores to mimic the smell of 19th-century grocery stores with the implied assumption people used to eat healthier. The so-called health food industry became a victim of its own success. The established chains began selling the same products with lower overhead, but the emphasis on negative advertising remained. Goods are now often promoted on the basis of what they do not contain instead of what they do contain. Going “gluten free” or “lactose free” is a necessity for people who are allergic to those products but of little import on most of us; and, the alternatives are often more expensive with less nutritional value. For example, while almonds have been shown to have similar nutritional value to milk, less than 2% of “almond milk” is actually almonds. The product is essentially coloured water.

Advertisers do not always succeed. A company selling shaving products recently ran a series of ads degrading masculinity as “toxic.” While the ad won favour with a particular political lobby, it offended a large percentage of the constituency that buys most of their products. Sales plummeted, and the company replaced the offending advertisements with ones that celebrated masculinity demonstrating that consumers have the capacity to defy advertisers.

You asked how we may avoid the negative effects of advertising, Scott. We need to do more than simply not buy a product when we are offended. Simply turning off the remote is insufficient because it only results in advertisers increasing their saturation through multiple mediums. The amount of advertising space on television has more than doubled in the last 35 years, and on U.S. channels you can be deluged with 12 minutes of advertising in a 30-minute slot. You may have noticed they also turn up the volume to ensure that if you don’t see the ad you will at least hear it. Ads appear on shopping carts, parking meters and even electronically triggered above urinals. The cartoons that used to introduce movies were replaced by advertising long ago. My internet provider asked me if I wanted to stop seeing an ad, and when I hit the “yes” button, it then asked me why. And my computer was frozen until I answered the question! The cost of all this advertising is built into the price you pay for the product.

One way to protect yourself from advertisers is to avoid buying heavily advertised products. A more sophisticated variation of this strategy is to know your triggers and refuse to buy from advertisers who push those buttons. For example, the majority of males are attracted to women. If this is one of your buttons, refuse to buy from an advertiser who pushes it. Many feminists miss, but most men know that the attractive woman with the .7 waist to hip ratio selling overpriced consumer products is not selling sex but status. By noticing men with high-status women are, in fact determining the status level of men. Men who lack status, such as the 90% in prisons who are men, the 80% who are homeless, the 75% who commit suicide, and the 50% who are victims of domestic violence are invisible to most women. The promise of the advertisers pushing this button is that if you purchase this overpriced product, you will demonstrate status. I know of one of the federal political leaders has two Rolex watches. Even one Rolex is an excessive display of wealth similar, in kind, to a peacock displaying his feathers to the peahen. Both men and women have sex and status buttons but they also have the power to ignore advertiser’s attempts to push them.

The ultimate answer is to research each competing product comparing quality and price. For example, we could research the nutritional value of a variety of foods and match these foods against our own nutritional needs. We then may add additional factors such as taste and price in making a decision. Unfortunately, we do not have the time to sufficiently research every product we buy. We are forced to rely on heuristics.

Some people simply buy the cheapest. While this is often this a good policy, you could be sacrificing quality. You could also be sacrificing your long-term interest. U.S. “transnationals” are famous for undercutting local companies only to jack up prices when the competition is gone. This not only hurts consumers but leads to a loss of jobs and often to a reduced tax base.

We become creatures of habit almost by necessity. We buy the same brands until we have reason to change that decision. If this is your profile, then compare shopping with others from time to

time, looking for alternative opinions to research. Knowing that we become largely creatures of habit, advertisers target children. Soft drink companies vie for the school market. The Pepsi-Cola company has “donated” sports equipment, and Coca-Cola has “donated” scoreboards in exchange for the right to have vending machines in the school. Like the early Indian reserves that were designated “Anglican” or “Catholic”, educational institutions may be designated “Pepsi” or “Coke” but not both. Fast-food chains and pharmaceuticals offer to go “in partnership” with schools in supplying textbooks, computer equipment and curricula. Sweden has banned all advertising aimed at young children because of the long term habituation.

Your free will may be exercised if you become a knowledgeable shopper. This means ignoring advertising and forming your own ideas about quality. Do the research on selected shopping habits from time to time. Avoid impulse buying. Throw away coupons unless they are something you already wanted. Know whether the product is local or foreign. Read consumer reports. Be careful about buying heavily advertised products. Approach all advertising skeptically.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Robertson, again.

Robertson: You are most welcome Scott.

For previous sessions, please see: [Ask Dr. Robertson 1 — Counselling and Psychology](#), [Ask Dr. Robertson 2 — Psychotherapy](#), [Ask Dr. Robertson 3 — Social and Psychological Sciences Gone Wrong](#), [Ask Dr. Robertson 4 — Just You and Me, One-on-One Counselling](#), [Ask Dr. Robertson 5 — Self-Actualization, Boys, and Young Males: Solution::Problem::Hammer:Nail](#), [Ask Dr. Robertson 6 — It’s All About Me, Me, Meme, and the Self: From First Nations to Second Nations, Building Third Culture Counselling](#), [Ask Dr. Robertson \(and Teela\) 7 — Elate, Hawkeye on Roberts: A Happy Counselling Psychology Family Affair](#), [Ask Dr. Robertson 8 — A Social Work Betrayal of Male](#), [Ask Dr. Robertson 9 — The Age of Psychology, Low Self-Esteem, Crazy Making, Schizophrenia, Racism, and Religious Fundamentalism](#), [Ask Dr. Robertson 10 — Real Life Effects of Fantasy Categories](#), [Ask Dr. Robertson 11 — Smells Like Teen Spirit: Hell Hath No Fury Like a Youth Scorned](#), [Ask Dr. Robertson 12 — Fault and Responsibility: If You Pass the Sentence, Then You Should Swing the Sword](#), [Ask Dr. Robertson 13 — A Hawk’s Eye on Counsellors’ Professional Ethics and Morals](#), *and* [Ask Dr. Robertson \(and Teela\) 14 — Adlered with Eclecticism: A Confidence of Riches](#).

Image Credit: Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen founded *In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal* and *In-Sight Publishing*. He authored/co-authored some **e-books**, free or low-cost. If you want to contact Scott: Scott.D.Jacobsen@Gmail.com.



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