

## **Foreword: A Word from our Sponsor – Anthropology**

*John F. Sherry, Jr.*

Engine of economic growth. Underwriter of programming. Magico-religious ideology. Font of popular culture. Template of desire. Mercantile art. Distorted mirror. Inescapable leitmotif of the built environment. The most fun you can have with your clothes on. Advertising has been described in these ways, and in many others, but always with an undertone of ambivalence. Advertising is provocative and annoying, exhilarating and enervating, informative and misleading. It can exalt or debase, stimulate or lull, seduce or bludgeon. It insinuates itself into the background of consciousness, and offers itself up for public commentary. We argue with it, laugh at it, criticize it, resonate with it, deny its influence upon us, abhor its power over others and elevate it to a fetish focus on the cultural cynosure we designate Super Sunday (where the commercials are more highly touted and anticipated than the bowl game itself). We award it Clios for aesthetic merit and Effies for its impact on sales. We find increasingly ingenious ways to mismeasure its effectiveness. It has provided anthropological analysts something of a ritual annuity, becoming a scapegoat for the shortfalls of their home cultures, a surrogate, conveniently, if unreflectively, blamed for the excesses of market capitalism. Rarely has advertising been tracked to its lairs, infiltrated by ethnographers in the agencies and households where it flourishes, and described, dissected, deconstructed, improved or subverted by the anthropological habit of mind. The present volume marks a move away from our tradition of armchair theorizing and unreflective critique.

For over two decades now, I have plied my trade as an anthropologist within the precincts of a business school, teaching executives and MBA students how to comprehend the lived experience of consumers in order to market more effectively, how to anticipate and mitigate the consequences of managerial decisions for consumers and their cultures as an integral component of strategy, and how to respect the awesome power with which their growing facility with meaning management endows them, not just as custodians of brands, but as social architects. I have consulted extensively with firms across a number of industries and cultures, helping them solve problems and discover opportunities. I have researched consumer behavior around the globe, studying the creativity with which people

accommodate and resist the lure of marketing and the resilience with which cultures individuate in the face of globalization.

To each of these enterprises I have brought the anthropologist's competitive edge, fascination with local detail, emphasis on grounded theory, prolonged field immersion, and a penchant for comparison to bear upon my understanding and the communication of that insight to clients. Given that my audiences have firmly entrenched folk theories that often preclude even imagining consumer behavior as it actually unfolds on the ground, I am constantly challenged to make the familiar strange in ways that resonate with decision-makers and gatekeepers. This is especially exacting with my managers-in-training, who are so exquisitely attuned to practical application that they fail to cultivate systematic introspection and intraceptive intuition, laboring instead within a kind of NIMBY syndrome of blocked access to their lives as consumers. Bumping them from the autopilot of participant observation to the hands-on engagement of observant participation in the service of deep understanding of consumer experience is at once my greatest challenge and proudest accomplishment.

The authors of this volume illustrate the heroic effort this bumping project requires, and the benefits which may either elude or accrue to managers possessed of an anthropological perspective. Whether as account planners, copywriters, or research providers, anthropologists are increasingly influencing the shape of contemporary advertising. Of all the clients to whom I act as a consultant, advertising agencies are among my favorites, as they are the most alive to the animate, numinous dimension of goods, the role of the consumer as a co-creator of the marketer's offering, and the need for ever more nuanced insight into consumer behavior. Having said that, I also believe that it is a miracle that advertising ever gets made at all, given all the stakeholders that are involved in its genesis and all the hurdles that are faced in its refashioning prior to release. Our authors convey the elation and frustration attendant upon their efforts to ethnologize clients and agencies, and demonstrate the promise anthropology holds for serving and protecting consumers.

Anthropology has lately become something of a methodological darling in marketing research circles, after its discontinuous and episodic history of virtual neglect. Advertising is in the vanguard of ethnographic practice, even if it has been slower to incorporate cultural frameworks of sense-making. I believe this recent ascendancy has much to do with an empowering of the natives, a brokering of our disciplinary lenses to our informants, and a collapse of the subject-object distinction in our research. As anthropologists collaborate with practitioners, we all gain new insight into our everyday lives. We inhabit a more interesting world as a result, and create a more interesting one in turn.

A brief personal anecdote is suggestive in this regard. At the end of a recent quarter of teaching, my MBA students presented me with a cake, decorated with

symbolic mushrooms and globes, and inscribed: 'Professor Sherry, Thank you for changing our worldview.' Later that week, a prominent colleague in another department expressed a wistful desire to take that same course, as the readings looked to him to be so 'really interesting.' Altering consciousness, motivating inquisitiveness, providing practical tools for accomplishing change, and having fun in the bargain are what anthropology is all about. Anthropologists have always been in the meaning management business. Our authors show what an intriguing playground advertising is for our practice. I commend the reader to their care.

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