

The Hucksters Hit Bottom

Since the dawn of advertising (maybe earlier), companies have been cashing in on our body anxieties. The wet-wipes brigade is launching the latest smear campaign.

nice eyes. Shame about your yellow teeth. Bummer about your grotty armpits. And you oughtta scour your dirty bum. Thank goodness these repulsive flaws of yours are fixable. But how do you feel about the fact that, until advertisers invented them, few of us thought of them as problems? Ever eager for a quick fix to perceived difficulties, we've accepted that marketers are experts at pointing out our daily challenges—vitamin deficiencies, say, or fatigue—and presenting us with handy solutions, like vitamin water and energy drinks. Indeed, there's no limit to the ludicrous items advertisers suggest we really need. (Outdoor TVs, anyone?) Appealing to our competitive nature, pride in our homes and a sense of ourselves as able providers for our families works wonders for a huckster's bottom line.

Threatening our egos, however, may be the most slyly effective way to rack up sales. On his CBC Radio One show, *Under the Influence*, advertising guru Terry O'Reilly pointed out that the practice is hardly new in an episode called "Shame: The Secret Tool of Marketing." The strategy of inciting "critical self-awareness" has been crucial to his field for more than 100 years, O'Reilly told listeners. "The marketing industry has a vested interest in keeping shame alive and well." Among the examples he cited were Listerine's popularization, almost a century ago, of the medical term "halitosis" to make people fear bad breath and purchase its mouthwash, and Wisk's invention in the 1960s of the taunt "Ring around the collar!" to embarrass housewives into using its soap for their husbands' shirts.

You'd think we'd be wise to such tricks by now. Sadly, social media helps these architects of self-reproach get more sophisticated and insidious every day, while we remain hapless rubes.

Until about the 1980s, for example, we mere mortals accepted that no matter how hard we tried to keep our teeth a-gleam, they'd fade in brightness over time. Then modern dentistry introduced hydrogen peroxide bleach, allowing us to treat our chompers to a dazzling Chiclet glaze. Thus began the Matthew McConaughey-zation of the North American smile. These days, "If you're not whitening, you're yellowing," one toothpaste campaign proclaims. Motivated by paranoia and vanity, some 100 million Americans whitened their teeth in 2010, according to Wikipedia.

Likewise, none but the freakish used to shudder at the sight of the naked female armpit. Enter Dove—that supposed cheerleader for women



ILLUSTRATION BY MARIA STOJAN

accepting themselves—with its Go Sleeveless advertising campaign, selling moisturizing antiperspirants that ostensibly make the feminine underarm softer, and thereby foxier. What for?

Lately, though, advertisers appear to have hit rock bottom. Outside our shower stalls, few of us used to spend time fretting about the spotlessness of our rear ends. Then the paper-product industry apparently launched Operation Reboot Bumwad Sales. Proctor & Gamble's Charmin brand began broadcasting images of cartoon baby bears whose adorable rumps are spattered with bits of paper due to their mothers buying Charmin's sub-par rivals. (Who knew mama bears were such cheap slob?) Taking the campaign to a whole "nother" level, the company tried to turn the necessity of excretion into a party, supplying toilets at major public events. Its representatives took pictures of those who used them and "enjoyed an incredible bathroom experience." "We all go. Why not ENJOY the go?" Charmin's campaign chirped in both oddly festive and infuriatingly ungrammatical fashion.

Meanwhile, Kimberly-Clark's Cottonelle promoted its solution: a multi-step system meant to leave your derriere as clean as a freshly hardboiled egg. Pretending that a strenuous toilet-paper and wet-nap regimen was already the norm in decent-folk circles, Cottonelle's Care Routine campaign proposed alarming nicknames for this personal detailing enterprise, terms like "Southern Hospitality." More than a few consumers must have asked themselves who they were supposed to be welcoming back there.

Then Cottonelle unleashed a Mary Poppins-like English "documentary filmmaker" called Cherry Healey. Bottle-blond and oppressively chummy, she could be seen on TV commercials buttonholing American strangers in public places to chirrup, "Excuse me. How do you wipe your bum?" Proving once again that some people truly will do anything to get on television, these free spirits welcomed Healey's impertinent verbal probes.

Whatever they claimed they did in the bathroom, however, it wasn't good enough for her. "I want to see tailpipes as clean as that," she told a couple of men at a car show in one online video, the camera flashing to a picture of a robustly polished tailpipe. Wait a sec, this recoiling viewer asked herself—there's going to be an inspection?

Of course, we consumers do have free will. We can choose to align ourselves with yawn-worthy, doddery, old-school bottom-wiping doctrine and just not share details of our toilette on television or Twitter.

The real trouble is that we're all supposed to be reducing, reusing and recycling, and any new throwaway products add a growing insult to environmental injury. Media reported this year that municipalities across the continent

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are spending millions to fix pipes and pumps that have been clogged by shred-resistant bathroom wipes.

According to one Associated Press story, the increased prevalence of the problem coincides with more intense marketing of "flushable" wipes—a \$6 billion per year industry that's expected to grow six per cent annually. Dollar Shave Club, for instance, recently launched a "Clean Snap" campaign promoting its One Wipe Charlies for men, featuring four NFL offensive linemen. (At least, they used to be offensive.) At the same time, AP disclosed, the sewer authority in London, England fished a 15-ton "bus-sized lump" of grease and wet wipes out of its system and nicknamed it "the fatberg."

Consumer Reports.org, which tested three brands of "flushable" wipes, noted online that not only do they fail to break down, they also cost much more than regular toilet paper. Bagging them up is the best way to dispose of them, said its reporter—yet more grist for already groaning landfills. Even worse, some swank hotels and clubs now carry individually wrapped towelettes called Freshends, lest fastidious socialites and gadabouts be caught with their pants down. Talk about tunnel vision.

Still, the wet-wipe brigade marches blithely on, making us feel sinfully grubby and socially clumsy for failing to get our sorry asses on board. ☹

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