

WHAT VERONIQUE TAUGHT ME ABOUT ADVERTISING

Isn't that how advertising is supposed to work?

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Some time ago, I told the story of how our chance exposure to a television ad for the lingerie company that she had once modeled for led Veronique to share her reflections on how a brand differs from a business, and how changes in one can drive changes in the other. We considered the lottery business, and talked about how the brand it was born with might need to change, if the business is to thrive in the future.

Later that same evening, after dinner with some colleagues, we were sitting together again and I ventured to return again to the impression I (as a customer) had taken from that lingerie company's advertising, thirty years ago. By now I was pretty sure that it was Veronique's art that had made such a lasting impression.

"What I remember getting from the advertising was something like: 'I expect your respect and your best attention, even though my beauty may distract you.' I mean, that's what the model seemed to be saying. Wearing glasses, and reading aloud from a book."

Veronique showed no inclination to own this impression, and regarded me with what I took for tolerant amusement.

"I mean, what I don't get is: how did you manage to

convey that in a photograph? It's so subtle!"

"As distinct from, say, the ad we saw on the TV in the bar?"

"Yes! The beach volleyball thing was more like 'We are spectacular, you are watching!'"

"So you think we girls have been projecting messages into your head?"

"Isn't that how advertising is supposed to work?"

"So you are blaming me for how you felt when you looked at my picture?"

"Blame? No, I'm giving you credit! This was all very positive! The appeal of an intellectual life with a beautiful woman? That's what it communicated to me. And I marvel at how you were able to do that... I mean, OK, obviously you are beautiful and you turn out to be brilliant too, but: how did you communicate that in a picture?"

I have found that it is a reliable sign of trouble when, the more I praise a woman,

the more she seems irritated. That is what I felt happening here.

However, much to my surprise, in the next ten minutes Veronique turned my understanding of what I had experienced upside down, and even left me feeling hopeful

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about Lottery advertising.

She started:

“You realize that I have thought a lot about this.

“When I stopped being the ‘content’ and started being the user of the content, I had plenty of time to consider what had been happening when I was on the page.

“I’ll tell you what: I do not think that I projected any of those things you mentioned. I think you projected them onto me. My talent was to be a good sort of screen.”

She gave me a searching look, and she must have been able to read that she had my full attention.

“I believe that I had some success as a model because some people could read, after they had projected something onto me, some sort of sharing or agreement or affirmation. That is, I represented a “yes” to a question that probably was not even clearly formulated. And of course, different people will have had different questions.”

She deliberately corrected her posture, gave me a warm smile, and said, “Do I seem agreeable to you?”

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This affirmation is brought to you by the product I am representing, which by the way is artful underwear.”

Veronique’s performance proved her point for me, even while she was explaining it. I felt cheerful, even if she was telling me I understood nothing about advertising.

“You do have a real talent there,” I murmured.

She continued in a reflective tone, “Advertising is just communication; there are lots of ways for it to be good. But I’ll tell you, I like that style where we provide an affirmation and sort of give the brand credit for it. I have come to think that this is how a lot of good advertising works: it doesn’t tell people what to want, but it affirms that what they want is achievable, with the help of something we can provide.

“And practically speaking, I like the kind of ad that is affirming because they seem to lift people, you know? They generally have a positive vibe, whether you get the brand association or not. They’re fun to work on.

“And once they’re done, I think they work well for you in the lottery industry, because gamblers are optimistic. Sometimes, maybe, to a fault. But really, isn’t that an asset of character, to be optimistic? I remember some famous psychologist saying that if he could wish for any character trait for his kids, it would be optimism.”

I recognized the reference. “That was probably David Kahneman, in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Brilliant. I remember too, he had some thoughts about a particular kind of optimism that it takes to be a researcher. ‘The ability to sustain a delusional sense of the importance of one’s work.’ Delusional! Who’s to say that researchers are any better than gamblers? But you’ve got to have the delusion, in order to keep at it.”

Veronique gave me a big smile. “I like a man who knows when he’s delusional.”

“It’s a kind of sanity. There’s more than one kind.”

Veronique continued, “Anyway, as to brand, I suppose the lottery has to feature its products, sometimes, but,

but I think the brand is really about how sweet it is to be an optimist. Do you remember the last scene in the movie *Being There*?”

“Where the Peter Sellers character- Chance, the Gardener- walks across the pool?”

“Yes! I wish that movie were better known. That last image of Chance on the water could be the icon for the lottery player.”

(Dear reader: if you don’t know that film, please take a look. It’s another one of those eighties things.)

“And you know,” she continued, “you may be able to resonate with both the player you have, and the player you don’t have yet, if you stick to optimism.”

“Like the Minnesota ads?”

“Chance is a Beautiful Thing? Yes, those were great!”

Now, although I myself am capable of delusional optimism, I generally maintain what I think is a realistic point of view. When I came into the lottery industry I recognized that there are times when even a textbook economic man would buy a lottery ticket. That is to say, sometimes the prize is so high that even given the very slim chance of the win, the expected value of the ticket is bigger than its price. But these once-in-a while situations are created by the steady optimism of the regular players, who know that the most important thing is to be in the game.

Without them, the opportunity

that attracts the jackpot-chaser would never arise.

“So, you would want to support the attitude of optimism with advertising...do you think you can make people more optimistic that way?”

“Of course not! Remember, I am not projecting messages into your head! But even optimists are sensitive to people telling them they’re silly. They could use some affirmation. After all, often enough events don’t really go their way. They may get the message from others that they’re dumb to keep on trying. I think the real opportunity is to celebrate their willingness to try.

“I mean, look at what we do with sports,” she continued. “Most people who run do not win races, but we give them lots of respect for trying. We are perfectly

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willing to recognize the attitude and the effort as positive, even if they have nothing to show for it.”

“You picture ‘Just do it’ as a slogan for lottery players?”

She smiled as she replied, “No, but I think there’s probably something to learn from thinking about why that seems funny to us. Are athletes virtuous because they make a physical effort, and gamblers are not because they don’t? That doesn’t seem right. I think lottery players could probably lay claim to a better vibe than many people give them.”

This is where we left that conversation. I have thought about it several times since, wondering what would be an image that would provide a “yes!” to what players probably know but are no better able to articulate than I am – something about the virtue of accepting chance. I have not come up with anything good myself, but sometimes I see it in the work of various creative folks in our industry. And, as I feel that positive vibe, I connect it back to this conversation with Veronique. ■

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