

THE INHERENT NEED TO CREATE NEED

Jerry Mander

Jerry Mander holds degrees in economics and spent fifteen years in the advertising business. His book title, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, is provocative. In this excerpt, Mander evaluates the value of products advertised on television.

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Advertising exists only to purvey what people don't need. Whatever people do need they will find without advertising if it is available. This is so obvious and simple that it continues to stagger my mind that the ad industry has succeeded in muddying the point.

No single issue gets advertisers screaming louder than this one. They speak about how they are only fulfilling the needs of people by providing an information service about where and how people can achieve satisfaction for their needs. Advertising is only a public service, they insist.

Speaking privately, however, and to corporate clients, advertisers sell their services on the basis of how well they are able to create needs where there were none before.

I have never met an advertising person who sincerely believes that there is a need connected to, say, 99 percent of the commodities which fill the airwaves and the print media. Nor can I recall a single street demonstration demanding one single product in all of American history. If there were such a demonstration for, let's say, nonreturnable bottles, which were launched through tens of millions of dollars of ads, or chemically processed foods, similarly dependent upon ads, there would surely have been no need to advertise these products. The only need that is expressed by advertising is the need of advertisers to accelerate the process of conversion of raw materials with no intrinsic value into commodities that people will buy.

If we take the word "need" to mean something basic to human survival—food, shelter, clothing—or basic to human contentment—peace, love, safety, companionship, intimacy, a sense of fulfillment—these will be sought and found by people whether or not there is advertising. In fact, advertising intervenes between people and their needs, *separates* them from direct fulfillment and urges them to believe that satisfaction can be obtained only through commodities. It is through this intervention and separation that advertising can create value, thereby justifying its existence.

Consider the list of the top twenty-five advertisers in the United States. They sell the following products: soaps, detergents, cosmetics, drugs, chemicals, processed foods, tobacco, alcohol, cars, and sodas, all of which exist in a realm beyond need. If they were needed, they would not be advertised.

People do need to eat, but the food which is advertised is *processed* food: processed meat, sodas, sugary cereals, candies. A food in its natural state, unprocessed, does not need to be advertised. Hungry people will find the food if it is available. To persuade people to buy the processed version is another matter because it is more expensive, less naturally appealing, less nourishing, and often harmful. The need must be created.

Perhaps there is a need for cleanliness. But that is not what advertisers sell. Cleanliness can be obtained with water and a little bit of natural fiber, or solidified natural fat. Major world civilizations kept clean that way for millennia. What is advertised is *whiteness*, a value beyond

cleanliness; *sterility*, the avoidance of all germs; *sudsiness*, a cosmetic factor; and *brand*, a surrogate community loyalty.

There is need for tranquility and a sense of contentment. But these are the last qualities drug advertisers would like you to obtain; not on your own anyway.

A drug ad denies your ability to cope with internal processes: feelings, moods, anxieties. It encourages the belief that personal or traditional ways of dealing with these matters—friends, family, community, or patiently awaiting the next turn in life’s cycle—will not succeed in your case. It suggests that a chemical solution is better so that you will choose the chemical rather than your own resources. The result is that you become further separated from yourself and less able to cope. Your ability dies for lack of practice and faith in its efficacy.

A deodorant ad never speaks about the inherent value of applying imitation-lemon fragrance to your body; it has no inherent value. Mainly the ad wishes to intervene in any notion you may have that there is something pleasant or positive in your own human odor. Once the intervention takes place, and self-doubt and anxiety are created, the situation can be satisfied with artificial smells. Only through this process of intervention and substitution is there the prospect of value added and commercial profit.

The goal of all advertising is discontent or, to put it another way, an internal scarcity of contentment. This must be continually created, even at the moment when one has finally bought something. In that event, advertising has the task of *creating* discontent with what has just been bought, since once that act is completed, the purchase has no further benefit to the market system. The newly purchased commodity must be gotten rid of and replaced by the “need” for a new commodity as soon as possible. The ideal world for advertisers would be one in which whatever is bought is used only once and then tossed aside. Many new products have been designed to fit such a world.

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