

# **How to Analyze an Advertisement: Finding Ads' Hidden Messages**

**By Arthur Asa Berger**

There's more to advertising's message than meets the casual eye. An effective ad, like other forms of communication, works best when it strikes a chord in the needs and desires of the receiving consumer -- a connection that can be both intuitive and highly calculated.

The following questions can help foster an awareness of this process. Use them for class or group discussions or your own individual analysis of ads or commercials. You may be surprised by the messages and meanings you uncover.

1. What is the general ambience of the advertisement? What mood does it create? How does it do this?
2. What is the design of the advertisement? Does it use axial balance or some other form? How are the basic components or elements arranged?
3. What is the relationship between pictorial elements and written material and what does this tell us?
4. What is the use of space in the advertisement? Is there a lot of "white space" or is it full of graphic and written elements?
5. What signs and symbols do we find? What role do they play in the ad's impact?
6. If there are figures (men, women, children, animals) what are they like? What can be said about their facial expressions, poses, hairstyle, age, sex, hair color, ethnicity, education, occupation, relationships (of one to the other)?
7. What does the background tell us? Where is the advertisement taking place and what significance does this background have?
8. What action is taking place in the advertisement and what significance does it have? (This might be described as the ad's "plot.")
9. What theme or themes do we find in the advertisement? What is it about? (The plot of an advertisement may involve a man and a woman drinking but the theme might be jealousy, faithlessness, ambition, passion, etc.)
10. What about the language used? Does it essentially provide information or does it try to generate some kind of emotional response? Or both? What techniques are used by the copywriter: humor, alliteration, definitions" of life, comparisons, sexual innuendo, and so on?
11. What typefaces are used and what impressions do they convey?

12. What is the item being advertised and what role does it play in American culture and society?
13. What about aesthetic decisions? If the advertisement is a photograph, what kind of a shot is it? What significance do long shots, medium shots, close-up shots have? What about the lighting, use of color, angle of the shot?
14. What sociological, political, economic or cultural attitudes are indirectly reflected in the advertisement? An advertisement may be about a pair of blue jeans but it might, indirectly, reflect such matters as sexism, alienation, stereotyped thinking, conformism, generational conflict, loneliness, elitism, and so on.

**Footnotes:**

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