

THE PERSUADERS

1 x 90



International

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Each year, legions of ad people, copywriters, market researchers, pollsters, consultants, and even linguists spend billions of dollars and millions of man-hours trying to determine how to persuade consumers what to buy and how to think. In *The Persuaders*, FRONTLINE explores how marketing and advertising have come to influence not only what Americans purchase, but also how they view themselves and the world around them.

"The age-old anxiety among advertisers that they are wasting their money is giving way to a confidence that they will soon have access to the core emotional needs of nearly every American shopper and voter," observes media critic and FRONTLINE correspondent Douglas Rushkoff.

Take this year's US presidential campaigns for example: both Republicans and Democrats are going to extraordinary lengths to custom craft their messages. FRONTLINE visits Acxiom, the largest data mining company in the world, where vast farms of computers hold detailed information about nearly every adult in America. Political marketers are just now discovering how to use this data to "narrowcast," or deliver tailored messages to individual voters based on their demographic profiles.

But even as marketers refine their messages to appeal to consumers' desires, they are in a race to outpace the ever-increasing clutter of ads—and the new technologies like TiVo digital video recorders that enable consumers to avoid them. New trends like "branded entertainment" allow marketers to blend product messages right into the storyline of a TV show or other entertainment vehicle.

Marketers also aim to circumvent the advertising glut by developing some startling techniques—including the hiring of anthropologists, ethnographers, linguists, and brain researchers—to plumb our unconscious desires so as to better influence our decision making. Douglas Atkin, a partner at advertising agency Merkley + Partners, compares the brand loyalty that companies are trying to create to the passionate zeal once enjoyed only by religious fanatics.

"I've interviewed people who are brand loyalists of Saturn Car Company," Atkin says, "and they will use the same vocabulary as someone who is a cult member of Hare Krishna. They will say that other car users need to be 'saved,' or that they are part of the 'Saturn family.'"

But there is reason to wonder if these emotional connections are real. Says author Naomi Klein, "You can get quite carried away in this idea that they actually are fulfilling these needs that we have for community and narrative and transcendence. But in the end it is...a laptop and a pair of running shoes. And they might be great, but they're not actually going to fulfill those needs."

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CREDITS

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