

When Academics Become Salesmen

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"College enrollments are down. Classes now have empty seats, what with the recession and guys no longer going to college to avoid the draft. What does all this mean? It means that to save their jobs, professors are being forced to 'sell' their courses to prospective students."¹

Thus begins "The Alfred E. Neuman University Competitive Hard-Sell Catalogue," a *MAD* magazine satire of advertisements for college courses. Some of the course advertisements it parodies are very funny indeed: "Learn Russian! 250 million people can't be wrong!" "Learn Chinese! 830 million people can't be wrong!" "Learn Arabic! Two sheiks who control 68% of the world [oil] production can't be wrong!"

One ad warns, "Attend Dr. Morris Mertzworthy's Introduction to Mythology, Paganism and Witchcraft or you shall be cursed forever and DIE!" Another promises, "You'll make out with her better when you speak French!" The instructor of a psychology course advises, "It's not for everybody (but it should be)."

I found the satire, parts of which are reprinted on the following pages, very funny if a bit overdone--until I was shown a real item taken from the student newspaper at the University of Colorado. It was this classified advertisement for an economics course:

CHANGING YOUR schedule? — Try Economics 312 (T-Th 2-3:45 p.m.)—study social problems from a multidisciplinary perspective. (Spring: Social Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology) — students evaluated this course last spring 3.58 (UCSU Course Evaluation average 2.79).

Similar advertisements are appearing throughout the United States--not only in student, community and metropolitan newspapers, but also on youth-oriented radio stations.

I have often wished that I could advertise my course in information retrieval at the University of Pennsylvania. I'm sure that if I did, more students would be taking it. Perhaps it is a good idea for some teachers to advertise their courses. Well-written ads might eliminate the disparity between terse catalog descriptions of courses and their actual content. Ads might draw attention to courses which are little-known but nevertheless interesting and valuable. Advertising might also help promote adult education programs.

Many professors do not face this problem because their courses, especially in science curriculums, are required. The student has no choice. But the recent trend is toward greater flexibility in choosing a major field of study, elimination of foreign language and other requirements, and the adoption of pass-fail grading systems. It is reasonable to assume that the proportion of discretionary electives will continue to grow.

Given the present financial condition of many institutions of higher education, the trend toward advertising is far from surprising. Nevertheless, it is profoundly disturbing to some academics. Like some lawyers and doctors, these traditionalists feel that advertising demeans their profession. Competing in the marketplace through advertising, they say, is suitable to the marketing of consumer goods like toasters and automobiles--and even books, magazines,

SCIENCES

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MICROBIOLOGY
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★ **ON EARTH!** ★

BREATHAKING MAGNIFICENT PRODIGIOUS
BACTERIA! MICROBES! PROTOZOA!

GASP!

As The Amazing Amoeba Divides Before
Your Very Eyes!

SEE!

The Prolific Paramecium Devour The
Dreaded Bacilli!

THRILL!

To The Protracting Pseudopods Of The
Secreting Arcella!

MARVEL!

As Dr. Fernfeather Explains The Meaning
Of The Above Sentence!

An Outstanding Offering Of The Most Omnivorous Organisms Ever To Be Openly Observed

ALL BROUGHT TO LIFE THROUGH THE
AMAZING OPTICS
OF THE
GIANT ELECTRON
MICROSCOPE!

—ONE TERM ONLY—

3 p.m. Tuesdays & Thursdays—Science Hall!

Chem Lab Professor
Wanda "Tubes" Edgely Says—

"I HATE ICKY SMELLS JUST
AS MUCH AS YOU DO!"



"That's why my Chemistry course
is equipped with the latest in ven-
tilation systems that instantly re-
move any irritating smell. If you
are especially sensitive, I'll fit
you out in your own custom-made
personal Stench-and-Stink Stopper
©Body Tent & Super Oxygen Mask."

ORGANIC CHEMISTRY 2

"Who Says It Has To Stink?"

10 a.m., Monday-Thursday, Science Hall!

You May Have Already
Gotten A Passing Mark In

PREHISTORIC
ARCHAEOLOGY!

(If You Have The Winning
Number In Professor Alvin
Wimbert's "Prehistoric
Archaeology Sweepstakes"!)

Sale Drawing
Before
The Mid-Term

Your Number Is:

750446

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Only MY Course in American History I Offers

- Comfy Coeducational Barcalounges To Relax On During Lectures!
- Classrooms Decorated In Soft, Eye-Soothing Pastels!
- Stereo Background Music By John Denver And Other Top Recording Stars!
- Twelve—Count Them—Twelve Convivial Class Assistants To Attend to Your Every Need
- Lectures Automatically Recorded on Individual Cassettes You Can Listen To At Your Leisure!
- Free Cokes After Each Weekly Quiz!
- Free Booze After The Mid-Term!
- Free Grass After The Final!

Prof. Willy Loman 11 a.m. 1-Th. Green Hall
"Super Courses for The Springing Semester"

or encyclopedias. They assert, however, that advertising inexorably leads to the predominance of images over ideas. The result is exaggeration, hyperbole, and tastelessness. And there is a subliminal feeling of guilt, almost of corruption, that accompanies the mere mention of fees.

Of course, this description fits the worst advertising. We have all seen and heard too many mindless jingles, absurd claims, annoying (but somehow unforgettable) tunes, and other downright obnoxious intrusions on our sensibilities. But must advertising be tasteless? I think not. Some ads demonstrate that advertising *can* be informative, visually interesting, and even entertaining.

There is a small, elite group of scholars who are so witty and personable that their lectures will always find a large audience.

These are the exceptions, it's true, but even the greatest lecturers want to share their knowledge with the largest possible audience. So why not advertise?

In one way or another, all scientists are salesmen. We all advertise. Instead of selling cars or appliances, however, we try to sell ideas. We "advertise" our ideas in our conversation and correspondence, at scientific meetings, and in scientific journals. Those who are given a chance, like Barry Commoner and Carl Sagan, even "advertise" their ideas on the boob tube.

Like any salesman, the success of our sales pitch depends mainly on the quality and relevance of our product—the idea. The rewards of successful salesmanship are not necessarily monetary, although it does seem that our greatest scholars are usually quite comfortable.

Sometimes the selling of an idea coincides with the selling of a product. This is the case, for example, with ISI's information products and services. I am amused by academic colleagues who interpret any lecture in which I mention ISI as a "sales" oriented lecture. Do they think it possible to discuss the organization of scientific information without acknowledging the existence of the *Science Citation Index*[®] or *Current Contents*[®]? To neglect ISI's existence would be intellectually dishonest—just as it would be dishonest to eschew mention of *Chemical Abstracts* or *Index Medicus*. Omitting any of these would be unconscionable.

The image of Willy Loman, the pathetic hero of Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman," is hard to forget. But the image of one who prostitutes himself to survive simply does not fit the modern scholar trying to perform a useful service to society. Advertising did not make Willy Loman what he was. Constructive advertising, even for the academic, is proper and useful dissemination of information.

1. Jacobs F & Reagan D. The Alfred E. Newman University competitive hard-sell 1976 catalogue. *MAD* March 1976, p. 33-9.