SELLING SECRETS
Miss Clairol

ADVERTISEMENT

ESsay

Ambiguity: Ambiguity occurs when a term or statement can be interpreted in several different ways, and it is not clear which meaning is correct. (For more on ambiguity, see the Glossary.)

Advertising often hinges on ambiguity—we tend to look twice at an ad that can be read in more than one way or that has a surprise hidden within it. Advertisements also often market products that promise us a key to a way of life that we would otherwise not be able to access. In the 1950s, people generally kept quiet about what they did to enhance their appearance—“respectable” women would never have admitted to coloring their hair. Today, when even major league baseball players flamboyantly dye their hair, it may seem peculiar to think that such behavior was once secretive. When an advertising firm decided to market hair coloring to women back in the mid-1950s, the biggest problem was how to persuade them that it was acceptable. The problem was handled creatively by one of the first women to make a name for herself in copywriting.

Shirley Polykoff (1908–1998) designed the “Does she . . . or doesn’t she?” campaign, which became one of the most famous and successful in advertising history. Born into a Jewish immigrant family from Russia, Polykoff detailed her immigrant background and advertising career in an entertaining autobiography, appropriately titled Does She . . . Or Doesn’t She?: And How She Did It (1975): “I remember [as a child] reading magazine advertisements with special attention. They seemed to be a window opening into a wondering world—the world of mainstream America—that I avidly wanted to be a part of.”

Miss Clairol, “Does she . . . or doesn’t she?” The “Does she . . . or doesn’t she?” campaign ran from 1956 to 1972, during which time the number of American women coloring their hair increased from 7 percent to more than 40 percent. (From Good Housekeeping, August 1963. Copyright © 1960/2001 Clairol Inc. Reproduced with the permission of Clairol Inc.)
Hair color so natural only her hairdresser knows for sure!

Are mothers getting younger or do they just look that way? She, for one, has the fresh, wholesome quality, the bright, shining hair that just naturally keeps a woman looking prettier, younger—as though she's found the secret of making time stand still. In a way she has. It's with Miss Clairol, the most beautiful, most effective way to cover grays and to revitalize or brighten fading color.

Keeps hair in wonderful condition—so soft, so lively—because Miss Clairol carries the fresh color deep into the hair shaft to shine outward, just the way natural color does. That's why hairdressers everywhere recommend Miss Clairol and more women use it than all other hair-colors. So quick and easy. Try it yourself today. MISS CLAIROL

For close-up, her hair looks natural. Miss Clairol keeps it white, honey. Completely covers grays with the younger, brighter lasting color. No other kind of hair-coloring can promise—and give up so!
James B. Twitchell, "How to Advertise a Dangerous Product." In this essay, advertising expert and historian James B. Twitchell (b. 1943) examines the origins of the Miss Clairvady campaign and explains the thinking behind Shirley Polkoff's verbal and visual strategy, one that artfully transmitted a different message to men than it did to women. A professor of English and advertising at the University of Florida, Twitchell has written extensively on advertising and material culture. He contributes regularly to Creativity magazine and has written two book-length studies of advertising, Adult USA: The Triumph of Advertising in American Culture (1987) and Lead Us Into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism (1999).

James B. Twitchell / How to Advertise a Dangerous Product

Two types of products are difficult to advertise: the very common and the very radical. Common products, called "parity products," need contrived distinctions to set them apart. You announce them as "New and Improved, Bigger and Better." But singular products need the illusion of acceptability. They have to appear as if they were not new and big, but old and small.

So, in the 1950s, new objects like television sets were designed to look like furniture so that they would look "at home" in your living room. Meanwhile, accepted objects like automobiles were growing massive tail fins to make them seem bigger and better, new and improved.

Although hair coloring is now very common (about half of all American women between the ages of thirteen and seventy color their hair, and about one in eight American males between thirteen and seventy does the same), such was certainly not the case generations ago. The only women who regularly dyed their hair were actresses like Jean Harlow, and "fast women," most especially prostitutes. The only man who dyed his hair was Gorgeous George, the professional wrestler. He was also the only man to use perfume.

In the twentieth century, prostitutes have had a central role in developing cosmetics. For them, sexiness is an occupational necessity, and hence anything that makes them look young, flushed, and fertile is quickly assimilated. Creating a full-lipped, big-eyed, and rosy-cheeked image is the basis of the lipstick, eye shadow, mascara, and rouge industries. While fashion may come down from the couturiers, face paint comes up from the street. Yesterday's painted woman is today's fashion plate.

In the 1950s, just as Betty Friedan was sitting down to write The Feminine Mystique, there were three things a lady should not do. She should not smoke in public, she should not wear long pants (unless under an overcoat), and she should not color her hair. Better she should pull out each gray strand by its root than risk association with those who bleached or, worse, dyed their hair.

This was the cultural context into which Lawrence M. Gelb, a chemical broker and enthusiastic entrepreneur, presented his product to Foote, Cone
& Belding. Gelb had purchased the rights to a French hair-coloring process called Clairol. The process was unique in that unlike other available hair-coloring products, which coated the hair, Clairol actually penetrated the hair shaft, producing softer, more natural tones. Moreover, it contained a foamy shampoo base and mild oils that cleaned and conditioned the hair.

When the product was first introduced during World War II, the application process took five different steps and lasted a few hours. The users were urban and wealthy. In 1950, after seven years of research and development, Gelb once again took the beauty industry by storm. He introduced the new Miss Clairol Hair Color Bath, a single-step hair-coloring process.

This product, unlike any hair color previously available, lightened, darkened, or changed a woman’s natural hair color by coloring and shampooing hair in one simple step that took only twenty minutes. Color results were more natural than anything you could find at the corner beauty parlor. It was hard to believe. Miss Clairol was so technologically advanced that demonstrations had to be done onstage at the International Beauty Show, using buckets of water, to prove to the industry that it was not a hoax. This breakthrough was almost too revolutionary to sell.

In fact, within six months of Miss Clairol’s introduction, the number of women who visited the salon for permanent hair-coloring services increased by more than 500 percent! The women still didn’t think they could do it themselves. And Good Housekeeping magazine rejected hair-color advertising because they too didn’t believe the product would work. The magazine waited for three years before finally reversing its decision, accepting the ads, and awarding Miss Clairol’s new product the “Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.”

FC&B passed the “Yes you can do it at home” assignment to Shirley Polykoff, a zesty and genial first-generation American in her late twenties. She was, as she herself was the first to admit, a little unsophisticated, but her colleagues thought she understood how women would respond to abrupt change. Polykoff understood emotion, all right, and she also knew that you could be outrageous if you did it in the right context. You can be very naughty if you are first perceived as being nice. Or, in her words, “Think it out square, say it with flair.” And it is just this reconciliation of opposites that informs her most famous ad.

She knew this almost from the start. On July 9, 1955, Polykoff wrote to the head art director that she had three campaigns for Miss Clairol Hair Color Bath. The first shows the same model in each ad, but with slightly different hair color. The second exhorts “Tear up those baby pictures! You’re a redhead now,” and plays on the American desire to refashion the self by rewriting history. These two ideas were, as she says, “knock-downs” en route to what she really wanted. In her autobiography, appropriately titled Does She . . . Or Doesn’t She? And How She Did It, Polykoff explains the third execution, the one that will work:
COMMENT

"There was a time, not so long ago—between, roughly speaking, the start of Eisenhower's Administration and the end of Carter's—when hair color meant something. . . . Between the fifties and the seventies, women entered the workplace, fought for social emancipation, got the Pill, and changed what they did with their hair. To examine the hair-color campaigns of the period is to see, quite unexpectedly, all these things bound up together, the profound with the seemingly trivial. In writing the history of women in the postwar era, did we forget something important? Did we leave out hair?"

—Malcolm Gladwell, critic

#3. Now here's the one I really want. If I can get it sold to the client. Listen to this: "Does she . . . or doesn't she?" (No, I'm not kidding. Didn't you ever hear of the arresting question?) Followed by: "Only her mother knows for sure!" or "So natural, only her mother knows for sure!"

I may not do the mother part, though as far as I'm concerned, mother is the ultimate authority. However, if Clairol goes retail, they may have a problem of offending beauty salons, where they are presently doing all of their business. So I may change the word "mother" to "hairdresser." This could be awfully good business—turning the hairdresser into a color expert. Besides, it reinforces the claim of naturalness, and not so incidentally, glamorizes the salon.

The psychology is obvious. I know from myself, if anyone admires my hair, I'd rather die than admit I dye. And since I feel so strongly that the average woman is me, this great stress on naturalness is important [Polykoff 1975, 28-29].

While her headline is naughty, the picture is nice and natural. Exactly what "Does She . . . Or Doesn't She" do? To men the answer was clearly sexual, but to women it certainly was not. The male editors of Life magazine balked about running this headline until they did a survey and found out women were not filling in the ellipsis the way they were.

Women, as Polykoff knew, were finding different meaning because they were actually looking at the model and her child. For them the picture was not presexual but postsexual, not inviting male attention but expressing satisfaction with the result. Miss Clairol is a mother, not a love interest.

If that is so, then the product must be misnamed: it should be Mrs. Clairol. Remember, this was the mid-1950s, when illegitimacy was a powerful taboo. Out-of-wedlock children were still called bastards, not love children. This ad was far more dangerous than anything Benetton or Calvin Klein has ever imagined.

The naughty/nice conundrum was further intensified and diffused by some of the ads featuring a wedding ring on the model's left hand. Although FCB experimented with models purporting to be secretaries, schoolteachers, and the like, the motif of mother and child was always constant.

So what was the answer to what she does or doesn't do? To women, what she did had to do with visiting the hairdresser. Of course, men couldn't understand. This was the world before unisex hair care. Men still went to barber shops. This was the same pre-feminist generation in which the solitary headline "Modess . . . because" worked magic selling female sanitary products. The ellipsis masked a knowing implication that excluded men. That was part of its attraction. Women know, men don't. This you-just-don't-get-it motif was to become a central marketing strategy as the women's movement was aided and exploited by Madison Avenue niachie meisters.

1 Shirley Polykoff, Does She . . . Or Doesn't She?: And How She Did It (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975).
Polykoff had to be ambiguous for another reason. As she notes in her memo, Clairol did not want to be obvious about what they were doing to their primary customer—the beauty shop. Remember that the initial product entailed five different steps performed by the hairdresser, and lasted hours. Many women were still using hairdressers for something they could now do by themselves. It did not take a detective to see that the company was trying to run around the beauty shop and sell to the end-user. So the ad again has it both ways. The hairdresser is invoked as the expert—only he knows for sure—but the process of coloring your hair can be done without his expensive assistance.

**MESSAGE**
In her memo, Shirley Polykoff worries that she might not be able to sell her client on the question “Does she . . . or doesn’t she?” as a hook for the campaign. What obstacle do you think she anticipates? Where does the phrase come from? Has Polykoff made it up?

**METHOD**
Twitchell discusses the ad’s ambiguity. What makes the headline ambiguous? In what sense is the ambiguity intentional? From the advertiser’s perspective, what positive effects will the ambiguity produce? How could it help sales? Besides the headline, what other ambiguities does Twitchell find in the ad?

**MEDIUM**
Advertisements are a careful combination of words and image. Consider the ad’s image. Why do you think Polykoff wanted to focus on mothers? How does the ad’s copy reinforce the image? Since the product is called “Miss Clairol,” why do you think Polykoff didn’t picture younger, single women? Why might that not have worked? Why do you think she intentionally eliminated the presence of a husband? Find a contemporary Clairol print ad, and analyze the relationship between copy and image. How has Clairol’s message changed from the “Does she . . . or doesn’t she?” campaign?