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Infomercial: A Marketing Odyssey

BLIGH MACDONALD



Bligh MacDonald is an English major. The work you're about to read could not have been completed

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Few forms of media are so derided as the infomercial. It seems to ooze tackiness and low production standards, coupled with shameless pandering and questionable selling points. Still, the infomercial, or "direct-response" commercial, can be an astoundingly effective selling tool. In this age of ubiquitous mass media, infomercials for products such as the "Snuggie" and the "Shake Weight" have used their inherent "butt-of-joke" qualities to make millions and to attain cultural icon status. For this project, I researched the infomercial as a genre in an attempt to explain its success and rhetorical appeal. I then applied my analysis to the writing, production, and activity-tracking of my own infomercial. The results may offer insight into the rhetorical strategies of rapidly-evolving new media genres and American pop-culture commerce.

The "product" that I developed is in the vein of the Snuggie and the Shake Weight. It is a silicone nipple, like that which goes on a baby's bottle, designed to go on a wine bottle, for adults. It is called the "Sipple." Like my muse, the Snuggie, it is a quirky product of questionable usefulness. Its infomercial is just over two minutes in running time; it includes a "demonstration" sequence, shot against a green screen, and numerous remotes, including faux customer reactions, and "slice of life" shots. I have given the spot a retro-eighties-flavored score, which increases the spot's cheesiness, and thus its potential.

Process

I began my project by reading journal articles about television commercials, infomercials, viral advertising, and genre theory, and I supplemented my research with articles from business and trade publications, and materials published by direct marketing firms. The book *But Wait—There's More!* by Remy Stern, though not an academic piece, served as a good resource. Of course, I also looked closely at a multitude of infomercials themselves.

The Infomercial as a Genre

The term "infomercial," of course, derives from the words "information" and "commercial," and it is a fairly accurate moniker—infomercials tend to contain five times as many information cues as traditional TV ads (Hope)—though the accuracy of the information presented in a given infomercial may be questionable. It originally referred exclusively to half-hour-long commercial programming which aired during off-peak viewing hours, but today, the term "infomercial" refers to any direct-response TV ad.

The infomercial is as old as television itself; infomercials actually comprised a large share of the primordial television airwaves of the 1940s and 50s. As more televisions were sold and viewership increased, the number of infomercials decreased significantly, but the genre returned to prominence in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Hope). Arguably the most prolific figure in the world of infomercials is one Ron Popeil. He has graced television airwaves selling odds and ends since the 1970s, and his contribution to the rhetoric of the infomercial is undeniable; he is credited with the phrases “operators are standing by” and “but wait, there’s more!” (Stern 1).

Before I could attempt to determine the infomercial genre’s rhetorical characteristics, I first had to determine that the infomercial does in fact stand alone as a distinct genre. In her seminal piece “Genre as Social Action,” Carolyn Miller argues that “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse, but on the action it is used to accomplish” (151). The defining characteristic of a genre is its “pragmatics,” or the rhetorical action that the discourse performs. Miller effectively argues, in other words, that we decide what constitutes a genre based on what the work aspires to do to its audience.

For instance, when we look at the sonnet as a genre, under the light of Miller’s theory, we notice that its pragmatics, or desired rhetorical action is three-dimensional: (a) the sonnet calls for an action—to enhance its audience’s perspective, (b) by a certain means—by recalling the history of the sonnet as a form, (c) at a time—sometime after we have finished reading. Thus, the sonnet’s form (iambic meter, quatrain stanzas, etc.) is a means to the rhetorical action it aims to perform, which is the defining characteristic of the sonnet as a genre.

As with the sonnet and, indeed, all genres, the infomercial’s pragmatics are three-dimensional: (a) it calls for an action—to call the number on your screen, (b) by a certain means—your phone, (c) at a certain time—right now. So, not only does the infomercial qualify as a genre, but it is a highly specialized genre based on the “pragmatics” approach of genre taxonomy. As a rhetorical action for a discourse to perform, it doesn’t get much more transparent than “Call Now!”

Per Miller, each of Aristotle’s three forms of classical rhetoric (deliberative, forensic, and epideictic) comprises a fusion of form and substance:

Each has its characteristic substance: the elements (exhortation and dissuasion, accusation and defense, praise and blame) and aims (expedience, justice, honor). Each has its appropriate forms (time or tense,

proofs, and style). These fusions of substance and form are grounded in the specific situations calling for extended discourse in ancient Greece, including the audiences that were qualified to participate and the types of judgments they were called on to make. (153)

This fusion relates to all genres, decides Miller, including infomercials. Further, as form and substance are related, there may be a relationship between the aesthetics of a discourse and the specificity of what the discourse aims to accomplish.

For instance, when we compare an infomercial to a “brand image” TV spot, or a spot that has only one marginally specific goal (e.g., to get us to feel better about the brand), we observe a contrary set of aesthetics to those of an infomercial. We see slick film images and limited text—maybe even just a logo; there is far less information and clutter than in an infomercial. The camera work of a brand-image spot involves deft panning and zooming. We get a sense of artistry. The camera work of an infomercial, on the other hand, usually involves alternating between a static medium shot and a static close up. The text graphics of an infomercial usually look tacky by comparison; the quality of film stock used is usually the lowest of industry standard; the sets look cheap; and performances tend to be over-the-top. In short, there is an obvious difference between the aesthetics of an infomercial and those of a traditional commercial, and there is also an obvious difference between the specificity of the call-to-action of the two genres. All genres have pragmatics, but the pragmatics of an infomercial are highly specific. The correlation between the specificity of what the discourse aims to accomplish and the aesthetics of the discourse as explored in my study may be of interest for future studies.

Infomercial Rhetoric and Urgency

In addition to the overarching goal of getting the audience to call, an infomercial’s working parts perform numerous other functions toward that end. A good deal of its rhetoric is used to cultivate a sense of urgency. For instance, when an infomercial purports that “this offer won’t last forever, so call now!”—it is a claim that we have all heard before, but how many of us stop to consider how nonsensical it is? Of course it will not last *forever*... but it will last as long as someone is making money from it. It makes use of what is known as “the scarcity principle” (Stern 55). Scarcity has been an important factor in determining pricing since the dawn of economics and long before. Infomercials invoke a false sense of scarcity to artificially inflate value in the minds of viewers. Thus, “supplies are limited” is a rhetorical cliché of the infomercial.

Similarly, audiences compelled by perceived value are enticed further by the notion of a ticking clock. This clock might be ex-

pressed in terms of an allegedly rapidly declining supply or by a limited window of time for which the item will supposedly be available. Sometimes the “ticking clock” is represented literally by a ticking clock on the screen. It is a shameless exploitation of human weakness. We do not see such aggressive tactics in soft-sell TV spots; soft-sell spots aim to evoke a mood—infomercials aim to evoke a specific action.

In addition to employing verbal rhetoric, infomercials use a good ration of nonverbal rhetoric to create urgency. For instance, infomercials will supplement the claim that “operators are standing by!” with a chorus of ringing phones in the background. In another example, the “Shamwow” guy wears a headset mic in his infomercials. He is working in a closed studio, so the mic is completely unnecessary, but it gives the infomercial a live (thus, urgent) feel. Also, many infomercials use studio “audiences” or canned audience noises to create that faux live urgency. Most viewers will be dubious of the legitimacy of the audience’s fascination with the product being presented. But the rhetorical situation created by the infomercial encourages viewers to join in rather than to stop and consciously scrutinize the audience’s legitimacy.

Another of the most familiar rhetorical devices of the infomercial is the customer testimonial, or man-on-the-street reaction. The raw aesthetic of the infomercial lends credibility to the testimony which traditional “slice of life” ads are not quite able to capture. In the same way that watching a person get brutally assaulted on a convenience store camera video can be more terrifying than watching a similarly brutal act take place in a movie, even if more graphically portrayed in the movie, a poorly-filmed, seemingly unscripted segment with people in the street can be more effective, as it seems more real.

Another trope of the infomercial is the use of dubious comparisons and analogies in order to demonstrate the “amazingness” of the product. For example, the infomercial for Ginsu Knives begins by saying “In Japan, the hand may be used like a knife [shows hand breaking board], but this wouldn’t work with a tomato [shows hand smushing tomato]” (Original Ginsu 1 Ad). This comparison grabs the audience’s attention in classic infomercial fashion, making use of tackiness, absurdity, and in this case, subtle racism. The spot’s apparent lack of cultural sophistication contributes to its sense of urgency and perceived value, and much like many of the tropes used in infomercials, it does not hold up to the scrutiny of a rational mind.

Indeed, most of the infomercial’s rhetorical characteristics do not “fool” anyone on a conscious level. We all know that \$19.95 means \$20; we know that “three easy payments” there-of means \$60; we do not really believe that a chintzy blender

and a handful of accompanying trinkets is “a \$200 value”; and we are highly skeptical that the offer will simply “expire” in the near future—they will sell until they run out of stock, and if they sell it off quickly enough, they will produce more inventory. We know that “offer” means “sell” and “receive” means “buy,” but audiences do not weigh these options rationally. The purpose of the rhetoric of an infomercial is to lull audiences into a logical coma—to spellbind—to overload our faculties until the absurd is the norm.

New Media and Virality

As a genre, the infomercial relies heavily on the telephone. In fact, infomercial phone operators do not just take orders; they do a fair amount of selling themselves. So, the one-click selling potential of “new media” (media which operate on interactive platforms such as computers and mobile devices) may be a boon for the direct-sales industry, but conversely, takes the operator-as-selling-tool out of marketers’ hands. This is likely the reason that infomercials still close with “call this number” rather than “visit this website.” However, as communication technologies continue to evolve, we are increasingly likely to see the traditional television infomercial supplanted as the industry standard by a new type of sales pitch, one that is based on interactive platforms.

In their book *Remediation*, Bolter and Grusin closely examine the evolution of media with a particular focus on new media. They propose that as a form of media becomes part of everyday discourse, it becomes less obvious. In their words, “our culture wants both to multiply its media and erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them” (5). And they claim that, in lieu of our culture’s impulse to multiply/erase our media, media types tend to blend into one another to the point where they strongly resemble one another. They give the example of how news websites are loaded with video while television news broadcasts are loaded with information on the screen, to the point where the two forms of media are nearly indistinguishable in some examples (9). The preceding parcels of information are relevant to this project because this project is a microcosmic example of media-blending: it has the aesthetic of an infomercial, but it truly is a viral video. The term “viral video,” by the way, refers to video media that is freely distributed and electronically shared between users (Porter 33). I call my video a “viomercial.”™

Humor is often used in viral advertising. Brown, Bhadury, and Pope did a study on comedic violence in infomercials in which they conclude that there are three types of humor (50): “incongruity” humor stems from a defiance of rational expectations; “relief” humor serves to relieve tension; and “superiority” humor stems from demeaning or exerting control. In my video

for “The Sipple,” I deliberately employ two of those types of humor. I use superiority humor by making my apparent ineptitude as a producer the butt of the joke, along with my apparent disconnect from consumer needs (i.e. the nature of my product). Also I could not help invoking the delicious randomness of incongruity humor. For instance, the image selected to be imposed onto the green screen behind the pitch character is that of an orange grove rather than a vineyard.

Viromercial™ Production

Taking into account all that I had learned about infomercials and viral videos, I set out to make my own viromercial. Before putting pen to paper, I had a rough idea what my video would aim to do. I would borrow some infomercial conventions to synthesize the content, form, and texture of the thing, but based on my research and reading for this project, I concluded that the tie that binds the infomercial and the viral video is the draw of incongruity. A successful viral video often draws on a juxtaposition of the unusual against a mundane, familiar context. E.g., “Here is an ordinary high school basketball game—but here is this kid banking a half-court shot off his opponent’s head! Here is a boring cable access show—but listen to that guy’s voice! Here is a reporter doing a story like you see everyday—but a bird just crapped into his mouth!” Infomercials rely on the same unexpected absurdity—certainly the more notorious ones do. After all, the Shake Weight’s infomercial (Shake Weight Commercial #2) received a huge windfall of buzz when audiences set their eyes upon women using the device, a motion which strongly evokes a sexual act, presented unflinchingly as a workout.

For my infomercial to have a chance of going viral, I had to be selling a product that lent itself to a bit of foolishness. My creation looks like the nipple from a baby’s bottle, but it is made to fit onto the top of a wine bottle, allowing adults to sip directly from the bottle. My claim is that it “enhances the drinking experience and prevents spillage.” I call it “The Sipple.” The prototype was manufactured by Acropolis Studio in Warwick, RI. It is made from food-grade silicone based on my sketches.

After developing the product, the next step was writing a creative strategy that would serve to instruct the writing of the script and other production decisions involving graphics, filming, and editing. The overall objective of the spot, as stated on my creative strategy, is to drive traffic to The Sipple’s website. However, the additional, unstated goal of the project is to demonstrate an understanding of the infomercial genre by executing familiar tropes. The product is positioned as a novelty gift, and its target audience is primarily women ages 21-40, as they tend to be the most frequent givers of novelty gifts. Its key benefit is humor, and I describe its personality as “refreshingly unsophisticated.”

Having nailed down a creative strategy, I proceeded to write the script. The following excerpt demonstrates the classic infomercial scenario of framing a problem and presenting the product as an ingenious solution. Here it is:

EXT. BEACH - DAY

A COUPLE is sitting on the beach; their picnic spread is laid out before them, complete with wine, poured, in glasses. The WOMAN goes to take a sip, and she recoils from the glass. We see that there is a considerable amount of sand in the glass. (GIUSSEPPE is the name of the presenter/narrator character.)

GIUSSEPPE (VOICE OVER)

As nice as it sounds, you just can’t keep the sand out of your glass! And your glasses are always falling over!

MAN

Observing the WOMAN’S difficulty with sand, he leans in to comfort her and kicks HIS glass over.

GIUSSEPPE (VOICE OVER)

Enter, The Sipple!

A CLOCK-WIPE resets the scene. This time, there are no glasses poured; there is only a bottle, topped with The Sipple. The couple is laughing gaily. SHE grabs a pull off the bottle and sets it down. HE goes to pick it up and accidentally knocks it over. BOTH shrug it off and laugh again. He picks the bottle up and pulls.



GIUSSEPPE (VOICE OVER)

The Sipple always keeps your palate sand-free, and costly accidents are a thing of the past.

INT. STUDIO - DAY

GIUSSEPPE stands before the DEMO DESK with THE SIPPLE and a bottle of BRAND X wine.

GIUSSEPPE

You might say, “But Giusseppe, what’s the difference between using The Sipple and just drinking out of the bottle?” Shame on you! You’re not a wino, you’re a young professional!

We see a SHOT of a homeless-looking MAN drinking wine from a bottle; he is stamped with a CIRCLE-WITH-A-LINE-THROUGH-IT.

GIUSSEPPE

The Sipple is more than just a cap -- it is an advanced flavor delivery system. In fact, it is the ultimate tool for wine on the go!

Conclusions

Once I had completed and finished editing the video, I published it on YouTube and built a website for the Sipple (www.thesipple.com). I promoted it aggressively on the web, using social networking sites such as Facebook and numerous other web forums to “get the word out.” I had an initial surge in viewership, due in no small part to support from friends and colleagues. YouTube views reached several hundred early within the first week of posting. By week 3, views had reached nearly 500, but viewership began to slow down after that, and currently it has stagnated at just over 700 views. The video did not have the viral “legs” that I hoped it would have.

I have a theory about why my video was not a viral phenomenon: it was a hybrid project. As mentioned earlier, the pragmatics of an infomercial are pointedly precise and aimed at motivating a reader to buy. The pragmatics of my video, on the other hand, were multifold and less precise. While I wanted to synthesize the look and feel of a typical infomercial, my video is somewhat satirical as well. It had the body of an infomercial, but the soul of a fiction piece. It was not written as a pure comedy piece, so it did not gain traction as such, nor did it fully capture the deadpan earnestness of a true infomercial. Most importantly, I did not have an actual product to sell, so the video inherently lacked the serious call to action on which infomercials rely to become the cultural icons they are.

Although this study is limited in its focus on one video piece, it has provided me with insight into the rhetorical strategies of a selling tool that annually nets more than the television, film, music, publishing, and gaming industries combined (Stern). In the early 21st century, the Major League Baseball team the Oakland Athletics famously employed a system called “sabermetrics,” which uses a bottom-line (i.e. run-scoring) based formula to calculate player value rather than the traditional scouting approach, which heavily weighed “intangibles,” such as charisma and physical grace. The “A’s” had tremendous success with it, and the method has been adopted by the majority of today’s MLB franchises. The story has been made into a critically-acclaimed film, *Moneyball*. Direct-selling is the “moneyball” of advertising. As an art form, it is not aesthetically graceful; the art of an infomercial is in its rhetoric. While “it is generally dismissed as a ‘trash’ genre, or as a vulgar form

of advertising” (Hope), it is a genre that has survived many cultural shifts and will be around, in one form or another, for a long time.

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