

Brian Frantz
Dr. -----
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Automobile Dealership Advertisements on the Radio and how they are Counterproductive

On Dallas/Fort Worth area radio stations, commercials for automobile dealerships are broadcast frequently – often several times in one hour. Some dealerships try to make their ads interesting and therefore stand out, with mixed results. Sewell, for example, utilizes a composed announcer who speaks in an everyday, relaxed manner while avoiding any low style elements in his diction. Barely audible in the background is calm, subdued music (often a soothing piano piece). On the other hand, Ewing attempts to elicit laughs by having the owner act like a country bumpkin who has just a sixth grade education. These commercials involve Fen Ewing conversing with an authoritative “voice of reason” who tries to figure out what the owner is talking about. While one of these commercials may be more persuasive and enjoyable than the other, too many dealerships fail to be as clever as either. Their type of commercial can be recognized by three primary characteristics. The first of these is a loud announcer. Apparently a car (and especially truck) dealer is unable to sell one of his vehicles without advertising it via a booming, digitally-enhanced male voice. In addition, car commercials generally have upbeat rock or techno music blaring in the background – so loud that it competes with the announcer for your attention. Looping every ten seconds, this music screams “inexpensive.” Finally, each ad features the typical hooks: “zero percent financing,” “cash rebates,” “zero down,” “hail damage discounts,” etc. Because these characteristics appear together so often, it may seem that they are the ideal combination of persuasive appeals. But perhaps they are actually the result of ignorance or laziness on the part of the ad’s creators – the producers. Failing to follow several important guidelines for an easily-consumed

message, these commercials are counterproductive. While one part of them seeks to catch and hold the attention of the listener, another part is driving the listener away. If the dealers would recognize this problem and make an effort to correct it, the effectiveness of their commercials could be greatly enhanced. With commercials that are easily absorbed, the dealer would reach more listeners, draw more potential customers to their showrooms, and ultimately sell more cars.

Before analyzing the advertisements themselves, it is important to determine at whom they are chiefly aimed. Clearly, the target audience is comprised of potential car-buyers who are waiting for special incentives to draw them in for a test drive. But not just any potential car-buyer is going to be interested in these commercials. The upper-class, more “sophisticated,” shopper would not be swayed by such hooks listed above. Living comfortably and well within their means, this class of buyer is financially able to put money down for a car purchase and take the shorter-term loan, if any loan at all. “Zero money down” or “zero percent financing” are not particularly compelling reasons to investigate a dealer when loans are not an issue. Additionally, the higher-income buyer would undoubtedly be turned off by the loud, obnoxious narrator used to proclaim these incentives and would likely take the initiative to seek out a Lexus or BMW dealer that maintains an aura of refinement (and which would not resort to using low-budget radio ads to promote their vehicles). On the other side of the spectrum are the economically-focused buyers. A used Pontiac Grand Am is the type of car on this person’s list. These consumers probably pay little attention to the advertisements of a new-car dealership because they know they cannot afford anything beyond a several-year-old vehicle with at least fifty-thousand miles. The minor financial benefits of rebates and low financing costs are not going to be sufficient to justify this class of shopper upgrading from a

used car to a new one. The third, and probably largest, group of car-buyers is comprised of the middle-class consumer. Living in a fairly nice neighborhood and owning a two-story house and multiple cars, this type of person may not be a CEO but certainly lives comfortably. Members of the middle-class might be unable to buy a car outright, but have the income necessary to pay off a new one over the course of a few years. They probably do not enjoy the loud music or announcers in the typical local car advertisement, but are not so sophisticated that they would be terribly disgusted by it. Finally, this group of potential buyers may indeed be willing to make a snap purchase decision based on the previously mentioned financial incentives. Thus, the middle-class is the primary target of these ads, but how skillfully are the advertisements catered to their tastes? The objective of this paper is to show that while these commercials do appeal *more* to the middle-class listener than to either of the other groups, they are not necessarily easily absorbed by anyone.

To explain the problems with the trite and unimaginative type of car commercial, it is first important to analyze the appeals it makes to the audience. Logos, the logical and factual portion of an argument, certainly plays a role. Attention to this is of utmost importance for any advertisement – without logos, an argument cannot be made. A customer cannot be expected to be impressed by “really good deals,” “long warranties” or “no payments for a good while.” Specific, not vague, reasons are necessary to attract shoppers. Thankfully, this is not ignored in these ads – they do include substantive justification for checking out the latest sale. “\$1000 off MSRP” is a factual reason to investigate the deal, as are any of the other incentives that are commonly touted: “no payments for a year,” “100,000 mile power-train warranty,” “discounted models from last year,” etc. Additionally, some advertisements will explain that “these low prices won’t be here for long” and the listener should “check out the inventory right

away,” pointing out the fact that the sales have a quickly-approaching deadline, and therefore a visit to the dealer should not be delayed. While their arguments may not be deep or profound, this type of commercial does generally have a proper emphasis on logos.

Although car dealerships tend to effectively utilize logos in their ads, they frequently overdo it when pathos is concerned. The announcer sounds as though he is on caffeine pills, talking deeply and dramatically. A high-testosterone electronic sound effect, such as an explosion or boom, is triggered whenever a recurring theme is mentioned and an upbeat, repetitive and thumping soundtrack plays in the background. These features may be intended to seem “cool” and imply power and toughness. They also yield a commercial that is hard to ignore – one that can convey a sense of immediacy and the need to quickly visit the dealership. Yet at the same time, the audience may simply be turned off by its loudness, choosing to turn down the volume instead of tune in their ears. Therefore, the “high-octane” method of selling cars (no pun intended) is in many ways a gamble. On the one hand, the customer may be driven to promptly check out the dealership (a win). On the other, this listener may switch channels so fast that he never even hears the whole commercial and thus misses the great deals contained therein (a devastating loss). Like alcohol, pathos can be good in moderation. Too much of it, though, and there can be unintended consequences.

While car advertisements often have an *overemphasis* on pathos, they tend to fall short when it comes to ethos. The announcer sounds like the same person featured in all the competitors’ ads and therefore one wonders what is so special about *this* dealer when his ads are so generic. Additionally, with heavily distorted guitar riffs blaring in the background, the dealership comes across as run by a bunch of twenty-somethings instead of responsible adults. Loud, obnoxious sound effects used over and over again along with a repeating theme such as

the announcer booming “super-saaaale” are perfect examples of this. While the listener may be willing to look past this style, it is doubtful that anyone would be *attracted* by it. By portraying themselves as childish and almost belligerently energized, dealerships lend themselves an immature and possibly even repugnant ethos. These car advertisements seem to ignore this facet of an argument and instead focus on logos and pathos – a mistake. A truly effective commercial must have a proper emphasis on each of these three aspects, otherwise it will be counterproductive. And counterproductive is just what characterizes this type of car advertisement – their message is delivered in such a way that just hearing it is difficult.

Having discussed the ethos, logos, and pathos of these advertisements, an understanding of their actual arguments is also important in determining why these commercials fail to reach their persuasive potential. One clear message is that the listener needs a new car. Obviously the entire advertisement wants the audience to feel this way. A commercial might say “you deserve a new car” or “buy the car you’ve been waiting for” to make the listener feel that such a purchase is not too extravagant or unjustified. In order to convince the consumer that *now* is the best time to buy, the producers of the ad emphasize the temporary nature of the current sales in order to encourage the customer to make a spur-of-the-moment decision. They know that if the customer feels rushed, he may not be as circumspect about the purchase. If the buyer decides to go ahead, ignoring his reasons to wait in light of the soon-to-expire incentive, the argument has done its job.

Now the question must be asked: does the audience consume or reject the car dealership’s message? If they do consume the message, is it because of these aspects or in spite of them? Clearly some listeners are successfully informed about a promotion and choose to explore the dealer as a result of hearing its spot on the radio. People do investigate and take

advantage of sales, and dealers must have some reason to continue investing in their commercials. However, the method by which these commercials' arguments are delivered cannot but hurt their overall impression on the audience. Many radio listeners, if not all, regard this type of advertisement as terribly annoying. It would seem that most would find themselves thinking "wow, that is a good deal, but that sure was a dumb commercial." Dealerships appear to think that how they deliver their message does not really affect their acceptance. After all, people are just looking for low prices, right? Yet if they would simply recognize the importance of ethos and its potential persuasive power, as well as see the danger in an excessive emphasis on pathos, the dealership's advertisement could attract many more customers, some of whom might even be a bit "classy."

This concept has not gone completely unheeded, but it seems that only luxury car dealers have taken it seriously. For example, I personally find Sewell's commercials much easier to listen to (and therefore consume) because they employ a calmer, more mature-sounding announcer who is not a noise pollutant. He gives a short, often witty, spiel about how the dealership is committed to vehicle performance and quality, mentions the financial incentives, and then ends with the company trademark. Sewell's ads contain reasonably clever arguments and easily digestible information – and they conclude before becoming tiresome or redundant. But Sewell is a luxury car dealer and is targeting a slightly different market than the previously mentioned ads. The question must then be: do only sellers of high-end vehicles, such as a Mercedes-Bens or Cadillac, realize the problems with annoying commercials? Is a good ethos only advantageous when appealing to consumers in the market for expensive vehicles? Certainly not: maturity, intelligence, friendliness – these have a significant

persuasive affect on everyone, not just those with a high income. For some reason, this concept appears to have been lost on most auto dealers.

Most owners of dealerships also seem to ignore the fact that the same people who hear their commercials also hear ads for other products and services – ads which at least make an effort to be humorous, clever, or appealing. I for one actually smile and *enjoy* listening to most Gieko Auto Insurance radio advertisements because of their humor, and as a result I have a relatively favorable opinion of the company. For example, one Gieko commercial began with a man calling into a phone help line. Upon the operator's inquiry, the man explains that he is having trouble potty-training his son. Initially thinking that the issue is rather minor, the operator asks of the child's age. The man replies, "twenty-six." There is a pause, and the operator says that he has bad news and explains the obvious – it is nearly impossible to potty-train someone that old. "But I do have some good news," he says before the ad concludes, "I just saved a bunch of money by switching to Gieko." Yes, Gieko is a large corporation with a significant advertising budget, but this should not mean that humor, cleverness or a good ethos can only be obtained at great financial expense. A dealership on a budget could utilize the concept of "quality over quantity" when buying ads. Instead of running cheap and annoying ones multiple times in an hour, they could spend a little more money on the writer and producer, reducing the frequency of the ad to balance out the cost. To have one clever commercial every hour that the audience finds appealing and interesting would be far more effective than several annoying ones.

If the typical car ad is so impractical and unattractive, why would any dealer opt for them? Some dealers might use these ads because they have always done so and they see little reason to change their entire advertising strategy when business is proceeding as usual. But to

choose this course of action is to be lazy – to settle for less than what may be achieved with a little extra effort. Sales, public opinion, reputation – all this could be improved by a simple change in marketing strategy. Other dealership owners may remain with these ads out of fear that the expenses of changing them would not be justified. This fear is not altogether without merit, as the dealers Ewing and Jupiter have gone to some effort to be “different” only to end up with ads that are just as obnoxious as the typical “loud announcer” ones, if not more so. The owner of Jupiter Chevrolet’s son might have been cute the first time he showed up in the ads, but his blatantly scripted lines are getting more inane every time. “Those are great deals, dad, but lets make them even better!” “Alright, son, how about two-thousand dollars off all 2003 trucks?” These ads were made with good intentions, but in reality failed to be engaging or enjoyable. This fate, however, can be avoided if the dealer only utilizes some discretion and wisdom – perhaps trying an idea out on honest friends before making it into an ad would be a successful strategy. Another explanation for the abundance of uninspired car commercials could be that the owners are merely unaware of what is necessary or beneficial for persuasion. Disseminating information about a sale involves more than simply shouting it out every fifteen minutes. The manner in which it is announced is also very important. The audience must be made ready to accept a message – it cannot simply be rammed down their throat. Humor, cleverness, wit – these can be effective tools in catching one’s attention and preparing them to absorb the message that follows. Repetition of the same thing over and over again in an obnoxious manner, however, will most likely cause listeners to divert their attention or turn down the volume – ultimately rendering the advertisement a failure.

Regardless of the reason for having such an unattractive advertisement, a car dealer could increase the number of visitors to his dealership and strengthen his sales figures if he

would only invest a little additional time and money into his business's marketing efforts. Owners of dealerships must realize the ineffectiveness of their current advertising strategy and recognize the financial benefits that a well-written and interesting commercial could bring. Until that happens, car commercials will continue to be a constant annoyance to the vast majority of radio listeners and will be at war with themselves. Though the advertisement aims to attract listeners with great deals, the manner in which this is done only serves to discourage the audience, myself included, from ever absorbing the message.