

## **Food For Thought Article: “Look Out - There’s a Consumer Psychologist About!”**

In order to be effective, the Bible must speak into the culture of people today. Preaching, teaching, and witnessing, through any of today’s media channels whether it be publishing, broadcasting, speaking publicly, or the internet, must bridge the gap between the cultures of people living in Bible times and the different cultures of people living today.

We could define culture as ‘the patterns and characteristics of a particular people group or society in terms of their religion, language, beliefs, system of governance, lifestyles, values, arts, traditions, music, food, drink, clothes etc.’

Of course, there are many different cultures around the world, and most of us now live in countries which are multicultural, but one aspect of culture which has been increasing worldwide for decades and is now common in most countries, even the poorest, is consumerism. Consumerism is the preoccupation of a society with the acquisition of consumer goods.

Chick Yuill in his book ‘Moving in the right circles’ (IVP, 2011) p 150 writes: ‘Consumerism has now become our religion; our possessions have become our god; shopping malls our temples; advertising jingles our hymns; the logos of the multinational companies have become our icons; designer clothes our vestments; celebrities have become the saints we venerate and unlimited purchasing power has become the heaven of which we dream.’

And, whether we realise it or not, consumerism is fed and fuelled by advertising. We are all at the mercy of the advertiser’s (dark) arts, though we all like to fondly imagine that we are immune to this subtle form of pressure and persuasion!

It is true that we pay no attention to most of the adverts which bombard us daily (these are estimated to be between a few 100 and a few 1000) because we are not looking to buy what the advert is selling. For us, at that moment in time, those adverts are completely irrelevant. However, when we do want what is being offered, it is advertising that will influence our choice.

This is why companies spend vast sums of money on advertising (£35 billion in the UK in 2022 and £540 billion worldwide). And it is because adverts ‘work’ i.e., people are influenced to buy the products they see advertised, that so much money is spent on them.

Adverts are designed to appeal to our subconscious by trying to make us associate positive emotions with certain products. They are addressed to meet our needs and wants including happiness, health, appearance, sex, self-esteem, belonging, social status and identity. Consumer psychology is about how and why we buy things and what influences the choices we make.

Now you may be wondering how all this relates to our Christian faith. Well, surely it is important to ask, 'Is there anything we can learn from the advertisers that might help us to proclaim the gospel more effectively? What might assist us in promoting Jesus in a way that will reach people? Indeed, who is our target audience? How can we present our unique Jesus? What is it that makes him and the gospel 'Good News'?

But first, I will give some specific examples of how three commodities, chosen at random, are marketed and how we are persuaded to buy them: Nike trainers, Guinness beer and Cussons toiletries: -

### 1. Nike (Goddess of Victory) Trainers.

Trainers are big business. In 2021, in the U.K., we spent £3 billion on them. But do you know your uppers from your midsole and your outsole? I would be surprised if you do ~ those words and details are not going to sell anything! However, the following words and phrases will do: - 'Extraordinary comfort,' 'Supreme softness,' 'Lightweight support,' 'Sustainable', 'More responsive', 'Better Grip', 'Better Protection', 'Better Cushioning', 'Breathable', 'Flexible', 'More Support', 'More Confidence', '20% off', 'Just Do It', 'Feel It to Believe It.' These are the words and phrases that are used to sell trainers.

And what is their target audience? Who are they trying to sell their trainers to? Well, absolutely everyone, from toddlers to younger kids, to teenagers, to men, to women, but what about older people, say the over 55's?

One of the first rules in marketing trainers is never to use words like 'old,' 'older' or 'elderly.' Nike, keen to move into this growing demographic, developed the CruzrOne Trainer which was specially designed for 'those who run at a slower pace' ~ nothing to do with age. The trick is to market into the stage of life and vibrancy that a person is at! Everyone is a potential athlete, whatever their age!

Another key factor in selling is to get celebrity endorsement. This boosts sales no end. For example, in 1984, Nike did a 5-year deal with Michael Jordan, the

American basketball star, for \$ 2.5 million and Air Jordan 1 basketball shoes were born. In the first year of sales, Nike earned over \$100 million.

Yet another moneymaker is limited edition trainers. These become 'must have' items and folks will pay high prices for a pair. Some of these then become collector's items and this generates the big business of buying and selling second hand trainers. In April this year, a pair of Air Jordan's X111's worn by Jordan fetched £1.7 m.

But there is often a darker side to the world of advertising e.g., fake trainers purporting to be what they are not. This also is big business.

And what about Rapper Lil Nas X's so-called 'Satan Shoes'? In 2021, Lil Nas, in conjunction with Brooklyn Art Collective MSCHF, modified a pair of Nike Airmax 97's to include a verse from the Bible (Luke 10:18 "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven"). Also included in these trainers was an inverted cross, the number 666, a drop of human blood and the Nike 'Tick' logo. They sold out, online, in minutes and cost £740 a pair. But Nike successfully sued MSCHF for trademark infringement!



## 2. Guinness (Made of More) Beer.

Guinness make 2.5 million pints of their stout every day. I wonder why their advertising is legendary and so successful?



I remember a 2013 advert for their product in which a group of men were playing competitive wheelchair basketball. It was fast, it was furious and the men were obviously enjoying themselves. But at the end there was a surprise.

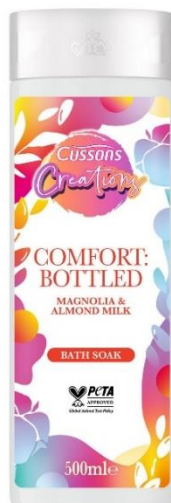
All the men, except one, got out of their wheelchairs and walked off the court accompanied by one man, still in his wheelchair. He was the only genuine wheelchair user. They all ended up together in the pub for a Guinness.

But what was the message that came through this advert? There were these three spoken words, 'Dedication' – 'Loyalty' – 'Friendship,' and then the final strap line:

"The choices we make reveal the true nature of our character."

### 3. Cussons (Message-in-a-Bottle) Toiletries.

I suppose these are self-explanatory: Peace, Energy, Comfort and Happiness are all to be found in a bottle! Peace comes to us as we use the apple and elderflower shower gel; Energy as we use the sea samphire and water lily handwash; Comfort as we soak in a magnolia and almond milk bath, and Happiness as we use the vanilla and shea butter handwash!



Just imagine, happiness bottled in a handwash!

Actually, do you know which is the happiest nation in the world? Well, it is Finland! The Finnish people have been named in the World Happiness Report as the happiest people on earth for the sixth year in a row. For the fourth year in a row the United Kingdom has slipped down the list. It is now in nineteenth position and is expected to drop out of the top twenty next year.

The quality of life criteria used in this world happiness index are things like the degree of social support in the country, how independent people feel, how healthy they are, what their income is, the degree of generosity they show and the lack of corruption there is in the country as a whole.

India are currently at number 126 and the least happy countries in the world, at the bottom of the list, are Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Lebanon and Afghanistan (137) .

So what is it that is contributing to the happiness of Finnish people? Some think it is the number of saunas they have which aid relaxation. Others think it is to do with them being an outdoor people who love going for long walks through the pine forests.

But they reckon the key thing which aids their sense of happiness and wellbeing is not 'bottled handwash' but the fact that rather than focusing on happiness they focus on contentment. Instead of striving to 'have it all', they make the most of what they already have.

They have a saying in Finland which says: 'Happiness is a place between having too little and having too much.' Personally, I think they have discovered an important biblical principle: if you want to be happy, be content with what you have.

John the Baptist said to some soldiers, 'Be content with your pay' (Lk. 3:14); Paul says, 'I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.' (Philipp. 4:12) And he gives this advice to young Timothy, 'Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.' (1 Tim. 6:6-8)

I think another reason why the Finnish people are 'top of the happiness pops' is because 66% of the population are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland.

Consumerism, aided and abetted by advertising, is, I believe, one of the major causes of unhappiness and even depression. The constant desire to have more, to have better, to have bigger, to have newer; or the constant worry that you cannot afford to have more, or better, or bigger, or newer, is stressful and breeds discontentment.

But adverts only have power over us to the extent that they can influence and exploit our carnality, our greed, our covetousness, and our credulity.

And of course, there is nothing that so convincingly and perfectly explodes the fantasy of money and consumerism, than inflation, where more and more money buys less and less goods and services.

This is why the Lord said to his people through the prophet Haggai: “Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat but never have enough. You drink but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.” (Haggai 1:5&6). That’s an example of inflation from 515 B.C.

And if you want a more recent example, consider the hyperinflation of Zimbabwe, once considered to be the bread basket of Africa. In January 2008, inflation there was 100,000 %; in May of that year it increased to 1 million %, and in July of that same year inflation was 250,000 million % . The largest denomination of a Zimbabwean banknote was for 100 trillion Zimbabwean dollars!

I remember a guy in Zimbabwe when I was there, he had a wheelbarrow load of banknotes which he was wheeling along and he said to me, “This will buy me a loaf of bread”. There’s nothing like inflation to reveal the fantasy of money and consumerism.

But I digress. How and why do adverts ‘work’ and what might help us to promote Jesus and the Christian faith? How can we communicate our ‘Good News’? Who is our target audience? How can we present our unique Jesus? Indeed, what makes Jesus ‘Good News’?

To go back first of all to Nike. She was the Greek Goddess of Victory and not just victory in athletics but victory in art, music, war etc. She had wings, she could fly, she was all-conquering and she definitely had no need of trainers!



But centuries after Nike, along comes Jesus and says to his disciples (Jn.16:33), “In the world you will have pressure/distress/ tribulation; but cheer up, I have overcome/had victory over/ conquered, the world. And the Greek verb ‘to overcome’ is ‘nikao’ (the noun is ‘nike’)! Jesus is the real Victor.

Nike, of course, was a mythological goddess. She never existed in real life, but Jesus is real. And probably his most important victory, as far as you and I are concerned, is his victory over death. This, of course, was, and is, unique.

The marble statue of Nike (pictured above right), dates from around 550 B.C. and is on the Greek island of Delos. But two centuries before this, around 740 B.C., we have a prophecy telling us of someone who will come who will ‘swallow up death in victory’ (Is. 25:8). This is obviously a reference to Jesus’ death and resurrection and Paul takes up this victory in writing to the church in Corinth, “Death has been swallowed up in victory (‘nikos’). Where O death is your victory (‘nikos’)? Where, O death is your sting? .... Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory (‘nikos’) through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor. 15:54-57)

So in whom are we going to put our trust for victory over death? Jesus, or a pair of Nike trainers?! I would suggest there’s only one winner!

This is one of the things that is unique about Jesus: all other religious leaders **were** alive but **now** they are dead ~ Muhammad was alive but now he is dead; Guru Nanak was alive but now he is dead; Siddharta Gautama (The Buddha), was alive but now he is dead; Confucius (still venerated by millions as a ‘god’), was alive but now he is dead.

However, Jesus **was** dead, but **now** he is alive for ever and ever! Praise God! (Rev. 1:18) And it is because of Jesus’ victory that we also can be victorious.

The blessings Jesus mentions in his letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation are for the ‘overcoming ones’ – ‘nikonti’ – those who remain faithful to Jesus in and through trials and testings.

It is this patient endurance and faithfulness, even unto death, that enables us to be victorious. Indeed, Paul makes an even more wonderful assertion in Romans 8:37 where he says, again in the context of tribulation, distress, persecution, peril and sword, that we are ‘more than conquerors (‘upernikomen’) through him who loved us’.

Moving on. What is the message, and reason for success, of the Guinness wheelchair basketball advert (which had 4 million views in its first few days) and what can we learn from it?

Well, first of all, people love a story. The most effective adverts always have a storyline. A story is a narrative which can describe real or fictitious events and the Bible is full of them. For example, the story of Jesus’ birth is real, his parables are fictitious. There never was a Good Samaritan or a man who had two sons one of whom left home whilst the other one stayed at home. Jesus’ teaching was full of stories. Any talk or sermon without stories is unlikely to hit the mark. People are looking for meaningful stories. Testimonies can be powerful.

Secondly, the advert had a surprising ending ~ there was a twist in the tale. So too with Jesus’ parables which, although fictitious, do illustrate real and important spiritual and even practical truths. So a talk, as with the parables, may contain a surprise, or even a shock, in order to impact the hearers.

Thirdly, the advert challenges preconceived ideas. Young, beer-drinking men are often thought of as being nothing more than antisocial lager louts creating mayhem. But not the young men who drink Guinness!

Those men are sensitive, strong, mature, caring, sociable types who know how to have a good time. Any talk or sermon, or witness which doesn’t challenge the status quo may well leave people sleeping and inert.

I was greatly encouraged when, after I had spoken as a visiting speaker in a traditional Anglican church, an elderly lady came up to me after the service and said, “I normally have a sleep during the sermon but I didn’t this morning!”

Fourthly, the best way to influence or persuade someone is through emotion. I am not talking about emotionalism – whipping people up into an emotional state – I am talking about the importance of communicating in a way that



involves and conveys feelings of joy, sadness, pain, longing, disappointment, anger, love, anxiety, frustration, patience etc.

Any talk, sermon, or witness, which isn't communicating on an emotional level is likely to be dry, dusty and uninspiring.

### Who is our target audience in sharing Christ?

The Nike brand is targeted at everyone who wants to be active. The particular Guinness advert I mentioned was targeted at young, active men. So who is our target audience as Christians?

On the one hand we know that God has no favourites and wants everyone to come to a knowledge of the truth and be saved. Having said this, however, we also know God tends to have a bias towards the poor; it is easier for them to enter the Kingdom of God than rich people who tend to be more self-sufficient. It is also true that God has a bias towards simple folk rather than the worldly wise and sophisticated.

Also, especially in the UK, more young people come to Christ than people in old age and more women become Christians than men.

So, in our appeal, maybe we should think about focusing on those groups who are more likely to be open whilst also thinking about how to reach those who are less responsive.

And perhaps we should make more of our 'celebrity' Christians: Rapper Stormzy; England footballers Bukayo Saka, Raheem Sterling, Marcus Rashford; Adventurers like Bear Grylls etc.

And who are our social media influencers? Much advertising takes place through social media.

### But I return to the Cussons (Message-in-a-bottle) Toiletries advert.

This is really about packaging. Can peace, energy, comfort and happiness really be contained in a bottle? Can what we apply to our bodies externally, produce peace, energy, comfort and happiness internally? Maybe to a certain extent they can, but it is likely to be superficial and transient in its effect.

Contrast this with the words of Jesus, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world (Cussons toiletries?) gives.” (Jn. 14:27). It is because our God is the God of Peace that we can know the peace of God.

And what about energy? Paul writes to the church in Colossae, “In order to present everyone mature in Christ, I strive with all the energy (‘energeian’) which Christ works in me so powerfully.” (Col. 1:29)

And then there is comfort; not bottled comfort, Divine comfort. “God comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we have ourselves received from God.” (2 Cor. 1:3&4)

Finally. I sometimes imagine the apostle Paul going to an advertising agency and saying, “I’ve got this new religion to promote and I wonder if you can help me please?”

The marketing man says, “ Well, yes, what you need Paul is a logo, a motif, a symbol of this new faith. Something that will make it stand out from the rest, give it a ‘unique selling point’ if you like.” Paul says, “Yeah, I’ve got one of those already” and pulls out of his pocket a cross and shows it to them. The marketing man says, “You must be joking Paul. That’s never going to work. How is a symbol of death, suffering and torture ever going to attract anyone?”

I’m afraid that is the end of the conversation as Paul says to them, “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” (Gal.6:14)



And we know, of course, that the cross of Christ has continued to draw millions and millions of people, down through the ages and all around the world, to believe and put their trust in the Jesus who died, who rose again and who is now seated at the right hand of the Father.

Jesus' words have been, are being, and will be fulfilled, "'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die." (Jn. 12:32&33)

The next time you feel a bit low because you are the only Christian in your family, or in the classroom, or in the office or wherever, remember there are 2.4 billion other Christians around the world who are worshipping God, through Jesus in the Spirit.

The victory, the refreshment, the fellowship, the peace, the energy, the comfort, the belonging, the self-esteem, the contentment, the identity we need, are all to be found supremely in Christ.

And so Paul's advice to us is this: "Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God." (Rms. 12:2 – The Message).

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George Irving – October 2023

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