

3-2011

Review of Freud on Madison Avenue: Motivation Research and Subliminal Advertising in America, by Lawrence R. Samuel

Philip Manning

Cleveland State University, p.manning@csuohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clsoc_crim_facpub

Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)**How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!**

Original Citation

Manning, Philip. 2011. "Freud on Madison Avenue: Motivation Research and Subliminal Advertising in America, by Lawrence R. Samuel." *American Journal of Sociology* 116(5):1662-1663.

Repository Citation

Manning, Philip, "Review of Freud on Madison Avenue: Motivation Research and Subliminal Advertising in America, by Lawrence R. Samuel" (2011). *Sociology & Criminology Faculty Publications*. 12.
https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clsoc_crim_facpub/12

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology & Criminology Department at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology & Criminology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

Philip Manning
Cleveland State University

Although the obvious way to read this book is as a concise history of the rise of innovative (but scientifically suspect) ways of advertising the flotsam and jetsam of consumer society, Lawrence Samuel also teaches us something about the role sociologists played in the development and application of these new advertising techniques. Interestingly, intradisciplinary arguments about the merits of qualitative and quantitative research turn out to have their own parallels in the world of marketing. Further, Samuel's *Freud on Madison Avenue* offers a valuable window into life in the United States in the 1950s, a time when consumerism was being rethought and Freud's influence was at its zenith.

Clearly, however, the main focus of this book is the history of the sudden fascination American corporate executives developed for a loosely connected set of psychoanalytic ideas that were thought to hold the key for mass sales. One of the main proponents of this newfangled "motivation research" was Ernest Dichter, an Austrian psychologist who arrived in the United States in 1938. Showing great entrepreneurial awareness, Dichter was able to establish himself as a new guru of the emotional components of consumer decision making. Fighting against the quantitative approach of the conventional market research of his day, Dichter claimed to have a special insight into what would sell and why. His pitch was that he had a way of delving into the collective unconscious of the marketplace. Through focus groups, in-depth interviews, and his own gut checks, Dichter changed the way Madison Avenue did business while building an empire for himself. Some of his advertising slogans are genuinely memorable, such as the terrific "Put a tiger in your tank." Some of Dichter's other observations are also interesting. For example, he told an insurance company not to rebrand itself as "Town and Country" because this indicated high-priced insurance for the wealthy. Instead Dichter advocated "Nationwide."

However, some of his other marketing insights are wonderfully odd—the stuff it would be hard to make up. For example, Dichter invented a new field—Soxology—to study the emotional and unconscious aspects that go into the buying of socks. It's a wonderful story. Indeed, the general reader can read this and many other sections of this book for their entertainment value alone.

Samuel also retells the story of subliminal advertising. At times this appeared to Americans to be a frightening form of mind control in which flashing messages during television shows might, in Samuel's examples, lead Americans to socialism or make them amenable to homosexuality. However, subliminal advertising was a dismal scientific failure. In one experiment carried out in the 1950s, for example, the message "Telephone now" was flashed 325 times during a television program. Only one respondent reported the urge to make a telephone call after the program and others reported a range of urges, including the urges to eat, take off their shoes, drive safely, and even to buy an electric frying pan. By 1959, the judgment of the scientific community was that subliminal advertising had no persuasive powers. Be this as it may, these oddities show us something about the culture of the United States in the 1950s and offer an interesting way to view people's everyday perceptions during the post-war period.

Freud on Madison Avenue also casts light on the role of the social sciences in advertising. Sociologists and other social scientists (and also investigative reporters) became well-known whistle-blowers, alerting Americans to the threats to liberty and individualism posed by advertising and consumer culture. Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* may have overstated the powers of advertising and motivation research, but this book and others like it touched a nerve. William Whyte and Erving Goffman (the latter not mentioned, I think, by Samuel) also captured the popular imagination by reminding their readers that they might be victims of deceptions of varying kinds.

But sociologists were not only whistle-blowers. They were also producers of the research methods and data that advertisers relied upon. Curiously, Robert Merton receives no credit for his work on focus groups. Goffman is also not discussed, but the research company Social Research, Inc., is—and Goffman had worked for them and even written a report prior to his more established research output. Paul Lazarfeld is another key figure. These social scientific interventions raised another interesting parallel: just as motivation research had challenged the primacy of quantitative research in marketing, sociologists were also engaged in similar methodological disputes.

One final observation: it strikes me that today many people treat advertising as part art form, part entertainment genre, part identity maker. We retain a certain guardedness about these hidden persuaders and manipulators but it is also true that we welcome them in, even while understanding what they do and what they want. This process, it seems to me, is also one that could be subject to both a sociological and a psychoanalytic investigation.