

Joseph Turow, "Hidden Messages: Is New Technology Empowering Consumers—or Marketers?" [The Boston Globe](#), Aug 27, 06: A10.

OVERVIEW

New technologies allow consumers to select what and how they watch, screening out forced advertising upon mass viewers, and therefore "giving consumers unprecedented leverage over the market." But marketers are using this consumer advantage to "enlist, equip and harness the power of trusted, informed and credible messengers."

Increasingly, as marketing executive Dave Balter noted last year in [Advertising Age](#), this can mean "hiring actors, or shells"—apparently ordinary people who reflect the target audience—in clandestine campaigns that "may consist of seeding chat rooms, blogs and forums with paid-for messages."

Even real space isn't safe: such hired messengers might be seen, Balter goes on, "hanging out in a Starbucks with product conspicuously displayed, awaiting the unwitting passerby to start a dialogue."

Proctor & Gamble's Tremor program, for example, solicits teens to talk up products to friends online and off—without... disclosing that they are being compensated.

Marketing executives admitted to this writer that the practice of "seeding" is commonplace. A few in the industry have admitted (in the words of [Marketing](#) magazine) that "seeding" is "an ethical quagmire."

Increasingly marketers are intruding into our space and demographic tastes:

- if you are looking up information about cars, a method called "behavioral targeting can track you over hundreds of websites and throw car ads onto your screen.

- based on your demographics (age, living location, education, movements—especially purchasing online and off), they will tailor articles and videos to recommend and send your way.

A firm called [Visible World](#) already has technology that can customize cable TV commercials on the fly. And Stop & Shop supermarkets in New England has tested a “shopping buddy” that can change the discounts it offers you as you walk through the store based on your buying history.

The author of this article’s point is to acknowledge the history of hidden advertising strategies, but to warn of new strategies going far beyond. Advertisers insist that such sophistication is necessary—as Benjamin Palmer, president of [The Barbarian Group](#) (a hot Internet ad firm) was quoted in a recent Advertising Age:

We are not in control anymore, but that’s O.K. If we do this right, we can actually have a good relationship with “the consumer” for once.

No longer is advertising a “one-way communication from creators to audience.” No longer do people generally pay attention to ads. Given these realities, and the new power of the consumer, marketers are driven to interact with the public, using techniques seemingly pleasing to everyone, while delivering short term, efficient and profitable results.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- Would you admit that marketers know more about you than you realize and are using techniques which tend to fly below—or ahead of—our radar?
- Do you agree that there are two levels of consequences in this matter of advertising sophistication and hidden techniques: first, the subtle way it may get us to buy what we may not need, and secondly, the way consumerism is affecting our lifestyles and personal identities?
- How will children growing up in this advertising age tend to differ from those 10, 15, and 25 years ago?

- What are your personal impressions and opinions about this article and issue?

IMPLICATIONS

1. It is important for each of us to be aware of the forces, overt and covert that influence our lives and characters.
2. Living in an age of consumerism, we must be prepared to think, discuss and make life choices based on the way our world is changing.
3. Biblical religion speaks not only of idolatrous living, but of powers behind the systems and forces of this world. This, too, needs thought and discussion.

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