

Braxton, G. (1993, October 29). Infomercial of the Year: The Envelope Please... Los Angeles Times, pp. F20, F22.

OVERVIEW

Toys R Us and Kmart, two of the nations leading retailers of kids' toys and youth recreation equipment, are blurring the line.

Not just the line between reality and fantasy, which is already hard enough to discern as most young people tune into the TV. What is becoming even more vague is the line between programming and advertising, entertainment and information.

Toys R Us purchased thirty minutes of airtime on stations across the country, at 7:30 p.m. on Thanksgiving, to air "Nick & Noel," a half-hour holiday story animating two new stuffed animals available only at the giant toy store chain. There are two sizes of cuddly "Nick" the dog and "Noel" the cat, which also happen to be the cover items on the Toys R Us catalog. There are also "Nick and Noel" books and videocassettes.

NBC aired an 8:30 p.m. showing of "The Twelve Days of Christmas," a half-hour cartoon whose characters are linked to an ambitious promotion by Kmart.

Some claim these shows are really "infomercials" subtly disguised as TV programs. But many Americans, especially young people, are not totally sure what infomercials are.

Viewed a few years ago as an eclectic and isolated brand of sales pitch artists, infomercial advertising has become a multi-billion dollar industry, complete with its own producers, directors, a yes, even its own awards show.

(This year, the Mirage Hotel in Las Vegas hosted the "Emmys of Infomercials," complete with Vegas singers, dancers, celebrity presenters, and categories such as best documercial, best director, best production, and male and female presenters of the year.)

Infomercials developed as program length advertisements that would run after midnight or during other inexpensive time slots on television. Now, they can be seen on major stations in prime markets. Prime time is likely

not far away, and perhaps is already here, considering the Kmart and Toys R Us commercials.

"These people want to turn the world of children into a giant mall," charged Peggy Charren, a media consultant who founded Action for Children's Television. "It's the beginning of the end of broadcast responsibility to children. I think this is worse than violence on adult television."

If adults even have a hard time understanding the difference between docudramas and the news, between fiction and movies "based upon a true story," imagine how undetecting children are. And, to the degree that these introductory ventures hike Christmas sales, expect the trend to expand rapidly—not just during the Christmas season.

Infomercials are a proven success. Since 1990, the Nordic Track infomercial has earned over \$225 million. Jay "the Juiceman" Kordich has sold over \$160 million worth of juicers. Victoria Jackson's cosmetics have grossed more than \$200 million.

While the selling of products is the primary use of infomercials, they can be applied on a wider scale. Anthony Robbins, through his "Personal Power" series, advertises elected officials, athletic players and teams, and major business leaders who have had their thinking transformed by his philosophies. For one half hour at a time, his infomercial, which includes Hall-of-Fame quarterback Fran Tarkenton, shows images of wealth, money, and power, all attainable through subscribing to his view of life.

Mike Levey, President of Positive Response Television, is obviously optimistic about the future of infomercials:

Two years ago, people didn't even want to use the word infomercial. Nobody wanted to say it because it meant negative things. Now it's the hottest word on Wall Street.

As infomercials become more successful, the demand warrants increases in the spending and technology applied. Greg Renker, president of Gunthy-Renker Corporation, a top five infomercial company, compared making infomercials to the motion picture industry:

I feel like I'm making movies. These things are becoming more and

more expensive to produce. The last 'Personal Power' infomercial cost \$550,000 to make. The first one cost \$150,000. I'm like a movie studio. I'll probably make 15 'movies' next year. I'll look for big stars and the right script, the perfect location. Then I'll pray for a few of them to hit. I'll hope for a few 'Jurassic Parks.' I don't want a 'Last Action Hero.'

And the medium itself is spawning new products and new enterprises, such as an Elvis Presley project launched by Tony Hoffman of Maui Productions. He says:

We own the rights to two Elvis Presley songs that he recorded at 19 years old, before the words Rock 'N Roll existed. We've got interviews with his high school girlfriends, teachers. We're hoping to get a big name to tell the story.

Plans include a video package, compact disc package, cassettes, and souvenir books.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is your experience with infomercials: Have you bought items as a result of this form of TV advertising? What is your image of those who market these things?
2. Unlike traditional advertising, this medium has produced superstars (Tony Robbins, Susan Powter, et al.). What does this say about the nature of longer advertisements?
3. With no rating system to regulate them (they pay for their own time), how could an advertising medium like this overstep its moral obligation to youth?
4. What would be extreme (in today's thinking) ways in which marketers of products, services, or value systems could utilize the infomercial medium?

IMPLICATIONS

1. If Kmart, Toys R Us, and other retailers can afford to buy half-hours (rather than half-minutes) they can likely gain a greater influence in the lives of their audience.
2. While the effect of infomercials on today's audience are, at worst, the selling of children's toys to an impressionable audience, future

marketeers might not offer such harmless products; steps should be taken to protect future audiences.

3. Seeing a product demonstrated for a half-hour, rather than "pitched" on a 30-second spot, implies a more discerning and intelligent target audience. Or an audience that will watch whatever is put before it.
4. Since toll-free numbers are always shown and audiences are urged to call, "shopping" is very convenient. Also, however, as with all TV shows, the time to "process" and arrive at good decisions is likely minimal.

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Braxton, G. (1993, October 29). Operators are Standing by...all Over the Place: The National Infomercial Marketing Association's Annual Gathering in Las Vegas is where Susan Powter Meets Vanna White. Los Angeles Times, pp. F1, F20.

Rosenberg, H. (1993, November 17). Not Your Standard Television Special: Two Holiday Programs Aimed at Children are Blurring the Lines Between Infomercial and Entertainment. Los Angeles Times, pp. F1, F9.