

# Of Mice and (Mad) Men

## Desmond Harney argues that balance optimises persuasive communication, even in advertising

In 1959, U.S. Nobel Laureate John Steinbeck worked in Somerset, later saying he'd been happier there than any other place on Earth: 'I hear and smell and see and feel the earth and I ... am alone – the largest aloneness ... mystic and wonderful.'<sup>1</sup> Sixty years on, Steinbeck's earlier splendid isolation sounds unfamiliar. We are never now 'alone'. In 2005, *The Guardian* estimated we were already exposed to c. 3,500 adverts alone, on average, every day, and traffic hasn't got any lighter since then.<sup>2</sup> Much of that all-pervading communication is simply intrusive, though. It doesn't engage or persuade us. Ethan Zuckerman, one of the inventors of pop-up advertising, now profusely apologises, claiming he 'didn't realize what he was bringing into the world.'<sup>3</sup>

Luckily, within this morass of indiscriminate messaging, we all have the capability to improve the effectiveness of our own communication and its cut-through, simply by focussing on a few principles, which broadly coalesce into knowing what you want to say, and saying it concisely, in the best way possible.

One such principle is Aristotle's view that persuasive communication requires a balance of 'Three Appeals' (Ethos-Logos-Pathos).<sup>4</sup> His theory is supported, almost 2,400 years on, by the work of psychologists Petty and Cacioppo (see Lynda's article), amongst others, who demonstrated - via their work on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) – that Aristotle was right all along about the importance of these three appeals.<sup>5</sup>

Ethos is either the means by which we appeal to an audience's sense of right and wrong, or, alternatively, it can be the

way we use position or status to convince an audience to trust us. Petty and Cacioppo describe it as a prerequisite for effective communication, since you cannot easily persuade people who do not trust you. Logos is the use of logical assertions which allow listeners to follow, and agree with, our assertions and claims ('Q.E.D.?). Pathos is the degree of passion we exude, overtly demonstrating our enthusiasm - or the degree of emotion we excite in our audience. Many business communicators over-emphasise this logical component of their discourse, at the expense of their overall persuasive potential. Aristotle's genius lay in recognising that all three of these appeals are equally important and potent. He recommended their combined use, identifying that the most persuasive communication harnesses them all.

This advice remains fundamental to GPB's approach and to our clients'

successful outcomes, across the economy. So I was somewhat surprised, recently, to stumble across an old *Financial Times* article entitled 'How the Mad Men lost the plot'.<sup>6</sup> It appeared to refute this understanding, specifically in the realm of traditional media advertising, a form of communication which is

suspected of not always being entirely effective, as an aphorism attributed to William Lever famously claims: 'Half my advertising is wasted but I don't know which half.'<sup>7</sup>

The Institute of Practitioners in Advertising analysed what it considered the most successful UK adverts of the previous 30 years, claiming the most effective to be 'those with little or no rational content' (Logos).<sup>6</sup> If this were true, then surely Aristotle (and GPB) must have been wrong all along, with only ad agency



Desmond Harney

*"We all have the capability to improve the effectiveness of our own communication"*

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## Of Mice and (Mad) Men contd.

creatives truly understanding the principles of effective persuasion. I soon realised, however, that the article's claims depend upon a particular definition of the word 'successful', and a rather narrow interpretation of the role of advertising. Many of the examples used might well fail the David Ogilvy test (a Mad Man of the golden age) that: 'A good advertisement sells the product without drawing attention to itself.'<sup>8</sup>

Key advertising objectives are delineated by a wide variety of respected authorities and practitioners. *CMO.com*, for example, emphasises 'the (vital) three Cs [...] be clear, credible, and compelling,' where 'credible', relates closely to Aristotle's 'Ethos' trustworthiness appeal, and 'compelling' is covered by a combination of Pathos and Logos.<sup>9</sup> GPB wouldn't argue with this stated need for three Cs, since they so closely match elements of our own (and Aristotle's) suggested approach: communicating concisely, in the best way possible.

Some advertising patently does rely on emotional messaging (Pathos) to an extent, and this can help to make it resonant and 'sticky', or memorable. Retailer John Lewis must believe this, given the nature of their recent Christmas campaigns, which are referenced by the aforementioned FT article. Remember, though, that their heart-tugging ads do not stand in splendid isolation (unlike Steinbeck). They are built upon the shoulders of a long-established Ethos and Logos driven positioning and tagline: 'Never Knowingly Undersold'. John Lewis's customers largely trust the organisation. They also appreciate the commercial logic of a guaranteed refund. Ultimately, they're

persuaded by communication that harnesses all three persuasive appeals, not just Pathos. The retailer claims seasonal sales uplifts ahead of the department store market sector.<sup>10</sup> But they're certainly not achieving that performance based purely on communication 'with little or no rational content,' which is not a communication model we would endorse.

Aristotle's long-established,

and now highly researched and substantiated, balanced approach survives this particular 21<sup>st</sup> century challenge. Don't let your communication 'gang aft agley'<sup>11</sup> (go awry) like Mr. Lever's advertising. To maximise your persuasive power, to influence people's thinking *and* behaviour, we advise you continue with the tried and tested approach of over two millennia, of using a blend of all three appeals: Ethos, Pathos and Logos. Leave emotive, Pathos-only messaging strictly to the award-seeking (M)Ad Men!



A montage of images from John Lewis's recent Christmas TV advertising. Credit: www.joe.ie.

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