Forgotten classics: *Motivation in Advertising*, by Pierre Martineau (1957)

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review and summarize Pierre Martineau's *Motivation in Advertising* and to assess its status as a valid forgotten classic of the marketing literature.

Design/methodology/approach – *Motivation in Advertising* is reviewed and summarized, and its contributions to marketing and advertising history, thought and practice are assessed.

Findings – Martineau was among a handful of figures behind the "motivation research" movement among marketers and advertisers during the late 1940s to the 1960s. His "new philosophy" regarding communication theory, persuasion and advertising message strategy and tactics remains highly influential and relevant. Written during a period of tremendous growth in consumption in the USA and a revolution in the use of qualitative research in marketing and advertising, Martineau's book represents much more than a work about his experiences with motivation research, but a significant contribution to advertising communication theory as well.

Originality/value – Pierre Martineau was the subject of a historical biography (Martin, 1985), which also focused substantially on the principal themes and contributions of *Motivation in Advertising*. The book was also widely reviewed shortly after its publication. This more recent review and assessment, however, reveals the work's valuable historical insights into how postmodern consumption evolved and many present-day perspectives of consumer behavior and advertising effects coalesced during the Consumer Revolution and at the outset of modern advertising's "Golden Age".

Keywords Marketing history, Advertising history, History of marketing thought, Advertising message strategy, Marketing research methods

Paper type General review

Introduction

By the time advertising researcher and theorist Pierre Martineau published *Motivation in Advertising* in 1957, he had already authored award-winning articles for prestigious scholarly journals, guest lectured at many top universities, become a widely sought-after keynote speaker for major marketing and academic organizations and been featured in *Fortune* magazine as one of the world's leading research authorities, alongside Dr Herta Herzog, Dr Ernest Dichter and Dr Burleigh Bradford Gardner (Martin, 1985). These are notable scholarly and professional achievements, especially for someone who never graduated from college.

Martineau was not entirely without formal education. The same year, he became the Director of Research and Presentations (Levy, 2016) for the county's largest media

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company research department at the Chicago Tribune (*Advertising Age*, 1964), he completed a program of readings at the University of Chicago on psychology, social psychology and communication theory (Martin, 1985). Appropriately enough, given his professional background, Martineau's influential treatise on motivation research (MR), social stratification theory and symbolic communication was written primarily for practitioners. As Martineau (1957, p. 5) explained:

> The layman […] has difficulty with the literature of the professional scientists. The answers to his perfectly natural questions about the basic premises of motivation research as well as its uses and possible applications have been obscured by the unfamiliar jargon of the scientists. Furthermore, there just are no studies generally available for him to see, inasmuch as they have been done for private use.

Several of the studies Martineau described in *Motivation in Advertising*, which were conducted by his associates at consultancy Social Research Inc. (SRI), are considered marketing research "classics" (Levy, 2006; Martin, 1985).

Some 60 years after its publication seems an appropriate time to assess why Martineau's book merits status as a forgotten classic of the marketing literature. First, Martineau was "a central figure in the history of American advertising […]" (Martin, 1985, p. 8), at least partly because of his efforts to persuade marketers to reject their sole reliance on what he called quantitative "nose-counting techniques". The origin of MR in marketing began with the work of sociologist Paul F. Lazarsfeld in the early 1930s (Fullerton, 2015). In the 1960s, the approach received some criticism for its subjectivity and supposed lack of validity and reliability (Levy, 2006). However, the tools of MR, such as the depth interview and projective techniques, remain mainstays of the account planning function at present. In addition to laying the foundation for present-day Consumer Behavior as a discipline (Fullerton, 2013), the use of Freudian psychological techniques in marketing likely helped legitimize an emergent therapeutic culture in the USA (Samuel, 2011).

A second reason Martineau's book arguably merits status as a classic is that, in addition to his leadership during a revolutionary period in marketing research, *Motivation in Advertising* contributed to communication theory more broadly. One of six enduring advertising models, "advertising as seduction", can be traced directly to Martineau and Dichter's contributions, as well as Walter Dill Scott's much earlier assertion that advertising effects are often unconscious and influenced by nonverbal, emotional associations (Feldwick, 2016). Moreover, theories and research on how advertising works and responses to affective cues represent two of the foundations of advertising's body of theoretical and practical knowledge (Beard, 2002). Feldwick (2016) further confirmed Martineau's enduring influence, observing that the seduction model:

> […] resurfaced, in less Freudian language, under the auspices of the account planning movement – and during the past 20 years or so has been given a great deal more credibility through new research into neuroscience and the psychology of the "adaptive unconscious".

Third, working and writing as Martineau was during the 1950s, *Motivation in Advertising* offers historically valuable insights into the ways postmodern consumption evolved and many present-day perspectives of consumer behavior and advertising effects coalesced during a period of incredible economic growth in the USA. Martineau offered readers empirically based descriptions of important demographic and lifestyle segments and product categories [Chapter VII ("Women Are People") is especially

historically revealing]. Both the MR movement and the advertising strategic and tactical approaches based on the seduction model spread quickly around the world during the years following the publication of Martineau's book (Beard, 2016).

A "Humanistic philosophy" of marketing research

In Chapter I ("The Illusion of Communication"), Martineau established his overall vision for a "new philosophy" of advertising. Here, he initially argued that marketers should seek "A basic knowledge of motivation, reflecting a far more accurate picture of the motives that make men buy and act like people" (Martineau, 1957, p. 11). As he elaborated further in Chapter V ("Of Men and Motives"):

> The whole thesis of this book is that advertising should be helped by a clearer understanding of motives involved – conscious and unconscious, positive and negative, personal and social, dominant and subordinate motives (Martineau, 1957, p. 53).

Martineau's professional association and personal friendships with social anthropologists W. Lloyd Warner and Burleigh Gardner profoundly shaped his beliefs. Both held professorships at the University of Chicago and were partners in SRI, a consultancy they founded, with psychologist William E. Henry, to apply scientific research methods to business problems. As Martineau (1957, p. 9) noted:

> Advertising as a whole owes much to this group directed by Dr Burleigh Gardner for introducing the concepts of product image and social class into marketing and for having made motivation research truly scientific.

Martineau also learned a great deal about MR and, especially, how to respond to the challenges of traditional researchers from the University of Chicago doctoral students – such as Harriett Bruce Moore, Lee Rainwater and Sidney J. Levy – who worked at SRI and conducted the studies commissioned by Martineau (Levy, 2016). In addition, Martineau's application of social stratification theory and social class as a marketing tool was influenced by Warner *et al.* (1949) pioneering text, *Social Class in America*, and their social class typology was used in textbooks for decades (Fullerton, 2013). A key notion linking social stratification to motives was the belief that cognitions, interrelationships, perceptions of power and consumption are greatly influenced by a person's social stratum (Martin, 1985).

These influences led Martineau to focus on the social and cultural motives underlying consumer behavior, as well as the psychological and emotional ones. As he noted in Chapter XIV ("Class is Open for Discussion"):

> Each human is motivated by various compulsive forces within him – certain biological urges and certain acquired wants – to realize numerous goals. But the yardsticks for evaluating the worth of these goals are supplied by group pressures. Other people have to validate our choices. The things we buy and do that offer the most satisfaction are those which are also valued by our friends, our groups, our class (Martineau, 1957, p. 166).

Martineau saw social strata differences as barriers to effective communication and often reminded his readers they were advertising to members of social classes different than their own.

Martineau's beliefs about consumption motives and communication were also shaped by the social, economic and cultural milieu of the period. He believed widespread prosperity and leisure, as they had in the past, would lead to an increase in self-indulgent

behavior, the desire for new forms of stimulation and a greater need for self-expression. He revealed his belief in the importance of self-expression as a motive in Chapter IV ("The Psychological Label on the Product"):

> Social scientists point out – and here I could quote the psychoanalyst Freud, the social anthropologist Warner, and the philosopher Langer – that all human behavior which is not purely organic is a form of self-expression (Martineau, 1957, p. 45).

Other trends that led Martineau to question the value of the typical "market researcher's emphasis on how many people did what […]" (Martineau, 1957, p. 8) included the country's fascination with technology, a proliferation of me-too products, the urban flight to the suburbs, earlier marriages, a drift toward more casual living, changes in tastes (such as preferences for more vivid colors in everything from cars to clothes) and an increase in conspicuous consumption.

Martineau rejected the psychological, behaviorist-oriented "Economic Man" concept and its assumptions that consumers know what their wants are and seek rational information to guide their purchases. As he railed in the book's final summary:

> The Logical Man and the Economic Man are fictional. They don't exist. Beneath the mask of rationality that our society teaches us to wear, the consumer is a living, breathing, feeling individual. He is not a technical expert. He wants far more from life than bargains. And his behavior stems more often from emotional and nonrational causes than from logic (Martineau, 1957, p. 201).

These influences and beliefs served as a foundation for Martineau's (1957, p. 29) absolute faith in the value of MR and its reliance on methods and theory from "sociology, social anthropology, psychology, psychoanalysis, psychiatry, and social psychology". However, it is also important to recognize that neither he nor his mentors at SRI were opposed to quantitative methods (Parameswaran, 2006). As Martineau pointed out in Chapter X ("Passkey to Believability"):

> Motivation research is not offered as a new religion or a way of life. It is simply a different tool for supplying a multiplicity of 'why' answers about human behavior which are not available from any other source (Martineau, 1957, p. 28).

Martineau argued that MR was essential for at least three reasons. First, he contended that people habitually disguise their true motives with rationalizations based on a product's functional or economic attributes. As he noted in Chapter VIII ("Product Jargon"):

> Naturally people attempt to support their convictions with some rational justifications. They employ the terms from the advertising or the popular jargon as their support. They use them literally, they believe them literally; but actually, it is the deeper meanings that they are using. And it is the deeper meanings which almost invariably determine their buying behavior (Martineau, 1957, p. 94).

Second, Martineau argued that people are rarely aware of, much less able to articulate, the true motives for their behavior. Martineau (1957, p. 30) followed Freud in his belief that:

> Most motives come from the unconscious; it is the source of memory, intuitive judgment, personality structure, suggestion, imagination, attitudes, likes and dislikes. Freud fashioned a new, crude tool which opened completely different windows for peering into the psychic

> make-up of people, even though he fully realized that he was only rippling the surface of these dark waters.

Third, Martineau argued that not only was it critical to uncover emotional, attitudinal and cultural motives but also it was essential to discover what had been communicated in prior advertising:

> What are the emotive associations being created, if any? What are the various esthetic devises conveying, since these are present in all modern advertising? […] Expression becomes communication only when the audience derives the intended meanings from the advertiser's symbols. Is this taking place? (Martineau, 1957, p. 200).

Word magic, peppermint octane and consumer symbolicum

Had Martineau's new philosophy of advertising merely consisted of his evangelistic advocacy in favor of MR, it is doubtful his book would have been as influential as it was. However, he also thought advertising lacked a formal body of theory to guide the creation of the message. Consequently, his philosophy included the need for "A completely different understanding of the human process of communication which will afford entirely new insights on the attainment of meaning and persuasion" (Martineau, 1957, p. 11). It was this dual emphasis on the need for MR and communication theory that led his biographer to conclude that, "Given this unique set of circumstances, it is doubtful that history will record another lay advertising researcher whose ideas have influenced more minds" (Martin, 1985, p. 123).

Martineau saw a number of trends and limitations in advertising practice, such as rapidly evolving media delivery systems and an increase in clutter, that inspired his belief marketers needed to rely more on presentational, intuitive language to achieve higher levels of meaning (Martin, 1985). Perhaps the biggest problem, however, was:

> Literally, a belief in word magic – as if people are stunned and miraculously transformed by a mere flick of words. Like a witch tossing a blue powder on the flame and solemnly muttering, "Ali Kazam" some advertisers hopefully offer the consumer a diet of such meaningless words as "sensimatic", "double-torsion", "5-D", "Solium", "Gardol" (Martineau, 1957, p. 2).

This faith in word magic, by ignoring the true motives for behavior, created at least two serious problems. First, Martineau concluded that discursive language played only a minor part in persuasion because consumers had learned to discount its validity. "Would anybody in his right mind swallow this gem", he questioned in the book's introduction: "'It's a fact that the most courteous people in the entire food industry are right here at the Red Owl Store in Winona' (Minnesota)?" (Martineau, 1957, p. 5).

Second, he argued that the belief in word magic and overreliance on rational appeals and discursive language made it impossible to infuse brands with the affective, symbolic and aesthetic meanings that would make them more successful:

> Much packaged-soap advertising has pounded product claims entirely at the functional level. Constant repetition of chemical jargon, cliché situations, coined words, and stereotyped claims actually does little to create any depth of overtones or emotional involvement. […] It is difficult to form really profound brand loyalties when the brands

> themselves are not trying very hard to create a distinguishable identity with many shadings of meaning (Martineau, 1957, p. 81).

Key to Martineau's rejection of word magic was his conviction that few products or services consist of fixed attributes but, instead, are defined almost entirely by subjective perceptions. Consequently, he advocated focusing on the symbolic and affective dimensions of words and language – what he referred to as their "real essence" (Martineau, 1957, p. 100) – and not their surface meanings. As Martineau elaborated in Chapter X ("Product Jargon"):

> If I ask for a "mild" cigarette or a "beautiful" car, while I can't define these attributes literally, I still know that they indicate something desirable – and so do my listeners. The average motorist doesn't know if there is peppermint octane or chocolate octane. But he does know vaguely that it is something good. So he orders "high-octane" gasoline, because he wants this essence quality behind the meaningless surface jargon (Martineau, 1957, p. 100).

Martineau's theory was founded on the symbolic logic of philosophers Langer (1953, 1942) and Cassirer (1953, 1944). He (Martineau, 1957, p. 137) acknowledged the influence of Langer's work in Chapter XI ("Men Live by Symbols – Not Sense"):

> As pointed out by Dr Susanne Langer, the symbol-making function is one of man's primary activities, like eating. It goes on all the time, because it is the fundamental process of the mind.

Martineau similarly relied on Cassirer's contention that people perceive the world using two equally powerful modes of thinking – scientific thinking based on analytic reasoning and creative imagination based on intuition – and his concept of *animal symbolicum* (vs *animal rationale*). According to Martin (1985, p. 170), "Martineau's most valuable contribution was a philosophy, an imaginative, sensitized concept which shall be called 'consumer symbolicum'". In addition to Martineau's application, however, product symbolism was also discussed extensively in other important works at the time (Levy 1959; Newman, 1957).

Martineau's philosophy of advertising communication suggested at least three important implications. First, advertising should emphasize emotional symbols and meanings rather than rational and discursive ones. "Human communication is essentially an exchange of feeling, not of information" (Martineau, 1957, p. 197). Second, Martineau often warned, as he did in Chapter II ("Advertising for Information and Power"), that language is multidimensional, and, thus, ads often possess multiple meanings:

> In nearly every study of product images that I have seen, the advertising was saying many things entirely unsuspected by the advertiser. Some unimportant or irrelevant symbol was fastened onto by the audience, just as a limp handshake or an overbearing manner become a signal about the character of an individual (Martineau, 1957, p. 14).

Third, and following Cassirer, Martineau argued that visual symbols and emotional language are especially powerful means for triggering the creative imagination mode of thinking because they are processed intuitively:

> In the final analysis all of us trust these intuitive judgments far more that we do any words or facts or logic. We take all the facts available, we take the logic presented to us, but we still let our intuition pass the final judgment (Martineau, 1957, p. 20).

Product lingo and the literatures of knowledge and power

Having established the importance of MR and the roles of symbols and affective appeals in persuasion, the principal purpose for advertising and its creators in Martineau's (1957, p. 11) new philosophy became clear: What was needed was "A clear articulation of the fundamental purposes of the creative person". In the process of defining this purpose, he at least partly rejected the "news" approach of John Wanamaker and John E. Powers, the "salesmanship in print" of John E. Kennedy, the "reason why" of Albert Lasker and Claude Hopkins and the "Unique Selling Proposition" of Rosser Reeves.

Martineau argued that too much advertising was based solely on the product "lingo" or jargon and should, instead, communicate multiple meanings and associations. As he (Martineau, 1957, p. 139) observed:

> It is extremely important for any person in advertising to realize that meaning is being communicated simultaneously at several levels. Advertising combines the forces of both logical thought and emotive, esthetic thought. Because it is communication from one set of humans to another set of humans, part of the meaning will be rational; but also there will be much meaning conveyed by non-rational symbols.

Martineau made it clear that he was not telling creatives to abandon or even significantly reduce their use of rational, discursive language or product lingo. In Chapter XI ("Men Live by Symbols – Not Sense"), for instance, he (Martineau, 1957, p. 144) argued that it was:

> […] imperative to see that advertising is communicating simultaneously with two sets of symbols, both of which are powerful, both of which are contributory to the product personality, both of which are creating desirability for the consumer. If one level of language sways the consumer's economic logic, the other set of symbols is equally important as the access to emotions and intuitive meaning.

However, throughout the book, Martineau remained consistently clear that affective elements contributed most to persuasion: "The more powerful these affective, evocative, emotive, or esthetic meanings are, the better chance the advertisement will have to establish desirability, persuasion, conviction, and product loyalty" (Martineau, 1957, p. 118). Similarly, and key to his belief in the importance of almost always including discursive language based on the product lingo, was that consumers would use it to rationalize their purchase decisions. "He wants to justify his choice in terminology which sounds reasonable to himself and to others, terminology which is understandable and acceptable" (Martineau, 1957, p. 102).

Martineau was also a strong advocate of branding. As he (Martineau, 1957, p. 147) proposed in Chapter XII ("Creating the Product Image"):

> The long-rang task of achieving permanent brand loyalty devolves on advertising which is capable of creating a minimum base line of acceptance, which does have an individuality in my conscious or unconscious mind.

In the book's summary, he repeated his assertion that advertisers should emphasize the creation of powerful brand images because of the prevalence of me-too competitors:

> Other manufacturers can match ingredients or engineering features or bargains. But they can never match the nonrational psychological overtones in the product image, the collar of subjective attitudes (Martineau, 1957, p. 199).

To achieve effective branding and communication on multiple levels, Martineau proposed the "literatures of knowledge and power", which he attributed to nineteenth-century British essayist Thomas de Quincey. Whereas the function of the literature of knowledge is to teach, the literature of power can be used to move people. As Martineau (Martineau, 1957, p. 12) explained in Chapter II ("Advertising for Information and for Power"):

> We are not just putting together information; we are not writing cookbooks and railroad timetables; we are not organizing scientific descriptions or engineering reports. On the contrary, we are using a form of mass communication which does literally have the power to move people, because it can reach them at far deeper levels than rational understanding. […] This is what the creative people are trying to create – a message which will incorporate this power to move human beings just because it *can* get at their primitive, fundamental prelogical motives and impulses.

Included in Martineau's definition of the creative person's fundamental purpose was strong support for the period's "slice-of-life" advertising. By the 1950s, this tactic – pioneered by agency J. Walter Thompson and founded on the idea that advertising should make the product appear to fit naturally into consumers' lives by portraying supposedly real-life situations – was spreading around the world as part of the "Americanization" of the global advertising industry (Arvidsson, 2003; Beard, 2016). Martineau's (1957, p. 54) consistency with this approach is evident in Chapter IV ("The Psychological Label on the Product"):

> Besides any practical purposes, advertising must help the individual integrate the product with his psychological goals and self-conceptions. How can he use it for self-expression? What inner goals can he satisfy through its psychological overtones? What does it say about his good taste? Does it clearly define his social status? Does it help him to define himself as serious and responsible, as adventurous, as carefree, or as whatever he thinks himself to be?

Martineau advocated two techniques for achieving such outcomes – "identification" and "suggestion". The first is most clearly linked to the slice-of-life tactic. "Identification", Martineau (1957, p. 125) explained in Chapter X ("Passkey to Believability"):

> […] is an extremely important avenue for persuasion and teaching in advertising. If the reader or viewer can identify with the users of the product, if he can see himself in the situation, then his feelings become involved and the process works toward conviction and believability. Otherwise, it remains dull and impersonal, and nothing happens. It is identification which makes it "for me".

Martineau also encouraged advertising's creators to remember that ads often work by suggestion and that people respond differently, depending on whether the suggestion is direct or indirect. People are sometimes willing to accept direct suggestion, such as when they consult a doctor or attorney. However, in most other instances, including advertising, they resent it, considering it an attack on their "ego integrity" (Martineau, 1957, p. 129). Consequently, Martineau warned creatives that consumers are rarely persuaded by a direct expression:

> "You're always welcome at Walgreen's is" empty protestation to me. My native power of intuition tells me I am only welcome if I have money in my pocket and if I behave myself […] (Martineau, 1957, p. 130).

The real motives for purchase – social status, sex appeal, desire for praise or power – are best addressed by indirect suggestion. "This is why the most effective advertising", Martineau

(1957, p. 131) concluded, "like successful public relations, is the art of saying one thing while the important meaning is often sailing out in another direction to appeal to the real motive".

Assessment and conclusion

This review and assessment of *Motivation in Advertising* offers a compelling case that it represents a timeless, unique and "classic" contribution to the history and literature on marketing and advertising. Not only was the book's advocacy in favor of MR influential at the time it was published but also Martineau's rationales for his promotion of qualitative methods and theories from cultural anthropology and psychology are consistent with the foundations of the account planning movement. British agency executive Tony Stead, in fact, coined the term "account planning" just 10 years after the publication of Martineau's book (Tungate, 2013).

A contemporary assessment of Martineau's work also reveals the important and lasting contribution it made to advertising theory, especially in regard to persuasion, affective cues and symbolic language. As Feldwick (2016) recently observed, "Today, it's hard to argue with the idea that advertising largely works through subconscious associations and emotional triggers, symbols and metaphors". More significant, however, is that Martineau was one of the first lay researchers to criticize advertising for lacking "a decent body of theory as to its real purposes" (Martineau, 1957, p. 2) and did so in a work specifically targeting practitioners. His decision to present his theory to practitioners – including numerous applications of MR to some of the most important products and marketing and advertising problems of the day (e.g. beer, cars, cigarettes, soap and retail merchandising) – helped ensure both its influence and future status as a classic.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that *Motivation in Advertising* has had an enduring impact in another way. For some, such as freelance writer Vance Packard, such revelations about the "hidden" uses of psychological and anthropological theories and psychoanalytical research techniques contributed to their beliefs that the ultimate goal was consumer manipulation. Packard had been an occasional guest at SRI (Levy, 2016), likely during the same time he was writing an article about MR commissioned by the editors of *Reader's Digest* (but never published) (Fullerton, 2015). As Martin (1985, p. 75) observed: Packard (*The Hidden Persuaders*, 1957) was just one of "a legion of consumer whistle blowers who viewed the application of social science to mass media advertising as ominous". Mills (1956) had indignantly written on a similar theme the year before Packard in *The Power Elite*, and James Vicary announced his bogus but widely believed claim of subliminal messaging the same year Martineau and Packard published their books. Vicary's fabrication, in turn, provided fertile ground for the subliminal advertising attacks of Wilson Bryan Key in the 1970s. Martineau rejected "these irritated intellectuals" (Packard, 1957, p. 187) and their "rather silly argument" with the following cogent observation: "Wasn't advertising trying to create wants long before motivation research was ever heard of?" (Packard, 1957, p. 32).

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