True LIES

Daniel Somerville finds himself on the fringes of an almost truthful world.

Advertising standards authorities worldwide exist to safeguard the consumer from untruths told in order to lure customers to the services and products of unscrupulous advertisers. The system is supposed to prevent lies and therefore advertisers may not make claims about their product or service which they cannot back up. And yet a lot comes down to semantics and grammar in the telling of shady truths. Many products, for example, will claim to be ‘the best’ – how that is proven is uncertain. Presumably the advertiser has some statistic to back up the claim, some way of proving ‘bestness’, if needs be.

There is a cat food that claims that 8 out of 10 cats prefer it. What kind of research, I wonder, went into proving such a claim? Can you imagine the kind of chaos that would ensue at a kitty focus group? Anyone who knows cats will know that they are creatures of strict habits and that food is not something they will experiment with if they are already happy with their brand. If 8 out of 10 of the cats at the focus group were already devotees of the brand in question, then yes the focus group would definitely favour the 8 out of 10 brand. If 10 out of 10 of the cats in the focus group were half starved prior to the feeding frenzy, then an even better result may have been achieved.

Establishing Truths

Focus groups can be powerful but they can also be a pretty imprecise way of establishing truths and influencing direction. Imagine a hypothetical radio station that plays Kwaito, Hip-Hop and R’n’B – the focus group is comprised of members of the boeremag. The station could end up becoming a whole different kind of broadcaster unless it selects its focus group members more carefully – but then is the point of focus groups not undermined if selection is prejudicial? It’s a bit like asking vegetarians to taste burgers or testing crab sticks on people with shellfish allergies: “Oh yes, this one doesn’t make my lips swell up quite as much…” says a choking participant.

“That’s because our crabsticks have no shellfish in them,” replies a proud product manager inadvertently revealing the truth that we all suspect, which is that crab sticks contain an inherent lie in their name – reconstituted fish bits made to look and taste like fake crab can hardly be called “crab”.

Simply Untrue

My favourite lie is that told by the World’s favourite airline. The World, you see, is a large place populated mostly by people who have never, and probably will never, be able to afford to fly. The majority of the World’s population can’t even read the Roman alphabet printed on the side of the plane; very few people understand what flying would do to improve their lives and wouldn’t know a good airline from a bad one – most of the World has no opinion what-so-ever on the qualities of airlines. So the World’s favourite airline may only be the favourite airline of those privileged few who fly regularly enough to have been able to make a comparison. Most people who fly (that’s the middle classes in economy if you are one of those at the sharp end) choose their airline based entirely on cost – the favourite airline, in my experience of economy flight, rarely offers true economy and therefore avoids my custom. So who was in the focus group that decided which airline was the “favourite” – surely not those regular flyers with brand loyalty airmiles to be bribed with?

Separate Lives

Another company – and let’s name names now – that tells an obvious untruth that should be banned on principal, are those that claim “There’s a Chevy in everyone’s life.” I can honestly say that there is no Chevy in my life – no one I know owns one, I’ve never driven one, fixed one up, nor even cleaned one – none of my relatives have ever owned one and no one I know wishes to – I don’t know anyone who reminisces about a Chevy, I don’t even think that I have consciously ever even seen one. There is no Chevy in my life. Now if there is a Chevy in everyone’s life, then how can this be? How have I, and several other people I know, suddenly been relegated to a part of society outside “everyone”? In as much as the ingredients of crabsticks are probably what 8 out of 10 cats would prefer, clearly all the people who have a favourite airline are also those with a Chevy in their lives. The rest of us mere mortals can do little else but sift through the almost truths and unsubtle use of ambiguous words that describe so many products. It is no lie to say that your product is the “best” or the “favourite” – or even “crab” – if your measurement of bestness, favouriteness and crabness is allowed to be different to mine. “Everyone” is a little less ambiguous – perhaps there is a Chevy in 8 out of 10 people’s lives, I would struggle more to disprove that.

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