

Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)

Volume 10
Issue 1 *Syracuse Scholar* 1990

Article 6

1990

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John P. Jones

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Recommended Citation

Jones, John P. (1990) "Advertising: strong force or weak force? A dilemma for higher education," *Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

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ADVERTISING: STRONG FORCE OR WEAK FORCE?

A Dilemma for Higher Education

JOHN PHILIP JONES



ADVERTISING AND CONTROVERSY seem to be inseparable. But there is at least one aspect of advertising about which there is little dispute: it accounts every year for very large quantities of money. In 1988, more than \$70 billion was spent in the United States on advertising in the main media alone (newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and billboards). This is equivalent to 1.5 percent of the gross national product. If such an amount of money were to be deployed in different circumstances—under an alternative type of economic organization—it would be large enough to make a significant difference in investment levels in activities with a high social priority, such as health care, or even in military hardware. To this \$70 billion should be added equivalent or greater investments (albeit more difficult to estimate) devoted to what in the jargon of the business is called “below-the-line” activities: direct mail and various retail promotions (temporary price reductions, coupons, sweepstakes, gifts, premiums), together with all the advertising used to support and reinforce these.

What return does society receive for this money and for all the noise it generates, noise whose ubiquity acts as a constant reminder of advertising’s considerable use of resources? Advertising makes two contributions to society. First, it influences the individual manufacturer’s sales to some degree. Sales have a multiplier effect by generating incomes and total demand in the economy; and insofar as advertising does influence sales it affects, to at least a moderate extent, the overall level of economic activity. It has this macro influence on the economy as a result of the sum of individual micro effects—those stemming from the productivity and growth of individual firms. At the same time advertising lubricates the competitive system by telling consumers about the differences between competing brands. (It should be understood that such differences are real and that they are both functional and nonfunctional.) Indeed, it would be difficult to visualize capitalism operating without advertising. Many people, including myself, believe that this kind of economic organization has many advantages despite its imperfections; and to the extent that capitalism yields a net gain in the economic and social equation (measured by the sum of its advantages over the sum of its disadvantages), advertising is entitled to a small share of the credit.

The second contribution of advertising is its substantial subsidy to the media, a subsidy that is overwhelmingly, although not completely, benevolent in social effects. The ability of the media to “inform, educate, and entertain” (to use Reith’s famous words, which were guiding precepts at the BBC) becomes possible in the United States because of advertising dollars. How well the media actually succeed in carrying out these admirable tasks is a different question altogether, although the media’s effectiveness is limited more by their own inefficiencies and weaknesses than by advertisers’ willingness to invest the money. Advertisers of course invest in advertising to boost their own sales, but their expenditure has the side benefit of financing the media, thereby making a transfer payment to all members of society as users of television, radio, newspapers, and magazines.

These two points have a general application, and together they represent a substantial justification for some advertising—perhaps a moderate level of it. They cannot, however, be taken to extremes to justify advertising in all its aspects, and in particular to justify completely the enormous sums of money spent on it every year. Indeed, most people, including the majority of knowledgeable practitioners, acknowledge a vast degree of waste in the advertising process. The well-known aphorism “half the money I spend on advertising is wasted, and the trouble is I don’t know which half” represents, in my experience, a gross overestimate of the amount of advertising that has a discernible effect on sales.¹

It would start a lively and provocative academic debate to argue the economic advantages of cutting out advertising altogether and of making advertisers send the subsidy direct to the media. (Think of the savings in salaries and in the energy of talented people, not to speak of the elimination of all the irritating television advertisements we have to sit through and the ulcers that grow so richly on Madison Avenue.) I have, however, resisted the temptation to take this extreme position, even for the sake of argument. But I fully intend to address the waste we all associate with advertising, and I shall do this with the object of examining specifically the contribution that universities might make to scaling this waste down to more manageable proportions. It is worth stating now that universities will only be able to make such a contribution if and when they move nearer the leading edge of knowledge than they are at present. This is an important matter to which I shall return.

“THE POWER OF ADVERTISING”²

Our knowledge of advertising, in particular our knowledge of how it actually works, is imperfect. Many of its aspects have been studied for a long time but with results that are far from conclusive. One sensible inference that has been drawn from all this investigation is that certain types of advertising work in one way, and other types in another. The case-by-case inductive approach that has been used is probably the means by which our corpus of reliable knowledge will be significantly augmented in the future; but we have made little real progress to date along the path to enlightenment. Many people have made efforts to discover a general theory. However, the fact that none of those hypotheses have been proven suggests that

1. This saying was attributed first to Lord Leverhulme, the founder of Unilever, and subsequently to the prominent Philadelphia department store owner John Wanamaker (David Ogilvy, *Confessions of an Advertising Man* [New York: Atheneum, 1984], 59).

2. Title of a special issue of *Advertising Age*, 9 November 1988.

advertising's effects may eventually be demonstrated by a multiplicity of specific theories, each relating to small numbers of circumstances, rather than by any single unified theory. Recent empirical work supports this view, although it admits of important interconnections and similarities in the way advertising works in disparate cases.

An assumption underlying most studies of advertising's effectiveness is that advertising *is* effective; we only need to develop more sophisticated measurement tools, and we shall then be able to quantify the payoff. In particular, we shall do better if and when we separate more efficiently than at present advertising's effects from the influences of other stimuli on sales of a brand. Strangely enough, nobody is much interested in the circumstances where advertising has *no* effect, although reliable knowledge of these circumstances would be interesting to manufacturers, for if manufacturers managed to eliminate ineffective advertising, the money saved would increase profit, sometimes dramatically.

An instinctive (and in most cases unsubstantiated) belief in the power of advertising is a truism of the advertising business and an article of faith devoutly accepted by observers of all persuasions, both defenders and opponents of the art. It permeates the trade press and the professional schools in universities where advertising is taught. Study the following randomly selected quotations:

3. Fred Danzig (editor of *Advertising Age*), "Advertising and Progress," *Advertising Age*, 9 November 1988.

4. Philip Kotler, *Marketing Management, Analysis, Planning and Control*, 5th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 658.

5. Arthur A. Winters and Shirley F. Milton, *The Creative Connection* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1982), 4.

6. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State*, 2d ed. (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1978), 213.

7. Frank Whitehead, "Advertising," in *The Three Faces of Advertising*, ed. M. Barnes (London: Advertising Association, 1975), 54.

8. Joan Robinson, *The Economics of Imperfect Competition* (London: Macmillan, 1950), 90.

9. I am grateful to Professor Andrew Ehrenberg of the London Business School for the arresting notion that a belief in the power of advertising is pretty well the sole point of agreement uniting many of its protagonists and antagonists. Professor Ehrenberg made this point at a seminar in which we both participated in Geneva, Switzerland, in October 1988. His name will appear again in this essay.

*Turn off the advertising spigot and see what happens to sales, production, jobs, to the all-important marketing strategy that was carefully pieced together.*³

*Advertising—the use of paid media by a seller to communicate persuasive information about its products, services or organization—is a potent promotional tool.*⁴

*The marketing process depends upon advertising and promotion for its dynamic energy.*⁵

*Radio and more especially television have . . . become the prime instruments for the management of consumer demand.*⁶

*[I]t is tempting to put one's faith in education, and to hope that as fresh generations grow up to be more discriminating and critically-minded in their reading, viewing and spending, the mass-persuaders will be compelled to raise their sights and to reduce their reliance upon cheap emotional manipulation.*⁷

*[T]he customer will be influenced by advertisement, which plays upon his mind with studied skill, and makes him prefer the goods of one producer to those of another because they are brought to his notice in a more pleasing or more forceful manner.*⁸

Readers will have no difficulty in inferring that the first three of the above quotations were written by protagonists of advertising and the last three by antagonists. But note the similarity in each author's belief in advertising's potency as a persuasive force. The quotations are typical of how advertising is viewed by many observers who are interested enough in the business (quite often at an emotional level) to publish their words of praise or condemnation.⁹

Readers may also guess (although they may not be closely familiar with the works of these authors) that they are all well-known commentators on advertising or on economic matters in which advertising plays a role. The authors are, however, all either academics or journalists, and not advertising practitioners (past or present). If they were, it would add a measure of credibility to their words, since the authors would be in a position to evaluate firsthand just how powerful a force advertising actually is.

Although practitioners know an insufficient amount about how advertising operates, they are more knowledgeable than laypeople about the sometimes unexpected and subtle ways that advertising works. Practitioners also have the great advantage over members of the general public, even intelligent and educated ones, in that their minds are less confused by the myths that advertising has always generated.¹⁰

TWO THEORIES

For obvious reasons, we can use the phrase “the Strong Theory” to describe advertising as it is illustrated by the six quotations in the previous section. The implications of this theory can be summarized along the following lines:

—Advertising increases people’s knowledge and changes people’s attitudes; as a result, it is capable of persuading people who had not formerly bought a brand to buy it, at first once and then repeatedly.

—Advertising is a prime mover in the capitalist system and acts as a driving force for the engine of demand.

—Advertising is capable of increasing sales not only of brands but also of complete product categories (e.g., cigarettes).

—Advertising is often able to manipulate the consumer by the use of psychological techniques that destroy the consumer’s defenses; in some cases, these techniques are not even perceptible to the conscious mind.

—If advertisers are to be successful, their strategic posture must generally be attacking and aggressive—they should “sell hard” and increase advertising pressure with the expectation that sales and profits will rise as a direct consequence; as a rule, repetition pays.

—In general, consumers are apathetic and rather stupid.¹¹

It is not too extreme an extrapolation of these points to conclude that advertising deserves (depending on one’s point of view) the most exalted praise for its contribution to the benefits of the capitalist system, or the most trenchant condemnation for its contribution to capitalist evils. According to the Strong Theory, advertising plays a central role in the economic system of a country like the United States.

As I have pointed out, the Strong Theory is the theory of advertising that receives the widest support, although I believe it is accepted more by default than by active endorsement. Observers of advertising, strangely enough, do not dwell much on how advertising works (which is why we have learned so little that is reliable). When they do so, they are mostly just inclined to accept advertising as a powerful force because they have never contemplated any alternative.

10. I once heard advertising referred to by a thoughtful and educated member of the public as “psychological engineering,” a description intended for other people to take entirely seriously.

Of all the common misconceptions about advertising, the most delightful is the notion of “subliminal” effects: the supposed ability of advertising to sell by flashing words or images onto a cinema or television screen so rapidly that the viewer’s eye cannot pick them up. This “technique” was first described in an article in the *Sunday Times* of London in 1936 and given wide publicity in the United States by Vance Packard in 1957 (V. Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* [Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1979], 41–42). Interest in the subject has not flagged during the past three decades, and the notion has become all but universally believed by the public. At an early stage in the history of subliminal advertising, skeptics pressed its proponents for evidence of its effectiveness. Under rigorous scrutiny, it was discovered that the original “test” of subliminal advertising in a New Jersey cinema never in fact took place. Indeed, the cinema in which it was supposedly held never existed. The whole thing was a journalistic hoax, a minor “Piltown man.” The *Proceedings of the 1987 Conference of the American Academy of Advertising* contains a perfectly serious paper on subliminal advertising, which includes fifty footnotes referring to papers on the subject in academic journals. See also n. 20.

11. The ancient adage “no one ever lost money by underestimating public taste” is one of the better-known catchphrases associated with advertising.

There *is*, however, another theory that has been articulated in Europe and developed with increasing confidence and persuasiveness over the course of the last three decades, and that is strongly rooted in empiricism: “the Weak Theory.” It is associated exclusively with the name of Andrew Ehrenberg, who holds a Research Chair at the London Business School. He is a mathematician and statistician with a formidable battery of business experience. According to the Weak Theory, advertising has the following characteristics:

—It is capable of increasing people’s knowledge. But consumers are not very interested in viewing, hearing, or reading advertisements; most people who do watch are users of the brand advertised (a phenomenon associated with selective perception). These advertisement watchers already know the characteristics of the advertised brand. Therefore, despite its ability to transmit information, the amount actually communicated is limited.

—Advertising is not strong enough to convert people whose beliefs are different from what is claimed in the advertisement. Advertising is generally *not* capable of overcoming resistant attitudes. The difficulty that advertising faces is twofold. First, an advertising argument is constricted: to thirty seconds—sixty words—for most television commercials. Second, and even more important, people easily switch off their mental engagement (again through selective perception). Without enticing the audience, advertising cannot communicate. Without an interested audience, the advertiser will indeed find it difficult to lure and seduce, let alone browbeat.

—Most advertising is employed defensively; it is not used actively to increase sales by bringing new users to the brand advertised. It more commonly serves to retain existing users and sometimes to increase the frequency with which they buy the brand. These people are already fairly well disposed toward it (because they buy it), and advertising merely reinforces this preference. The high cost of advertising is paid reluctantly, but paid nevertheless from fear of the consequences if the advertiser were to stop or seriously reduce it. Achieving continuous business from existing customers is a lucrative marketing strategy for many brands, particularly large ones, which have an extensive user base. Advertising is a driving force for continuity rather than for change.

—Advertising that attempts to operate in an opposite direction to existing psychological and behavioral tendencies is, in effect, attempting to fight human nature. Such advertising will not be effective, and a devastating waste of resources will result.

—Members of the public commonly claim to be uninfluenced by advertising. Why should we assume that they are always telling lies? Most practitioners and ex-practitioners, including myself, are only too conscious of the difficulty of persuading the public to do anything at all.

—In general, consumers are apathetic and rather intelligent.

Some readers of this essay may consider the whole question of whether advertising works according to the Strong or the Weak Theory to be essentially an unimportant matter, comparable with the debates of the disputatious medieval philosophers about how many angels can stand on the head of a pin. To most of the general public, advertising is an activity of trivial importance. They are conscious of the waste that is inseparable

from it and may believe instinctively that it is not worth the effort to do anything about this.

As a student of advertising and a former practitioner, however, I cannot in any way share this view. This essay opened with an illustration of the massive quantity of resources devoted to advertising. If advertising is to be carried out at all, the size of the investment requires that it should be planned and executed with the highest skills we can bring to bear and with the most economical use of resources. The endemic waste in the system can be brought down to less unacceptable levels only by following this course; and knowledge of how advertising works is a *fundamental first step* to more efficient planning of specific campaigns. It is difficult to comprehend how a business that has been practiced increasingly widely and with supposedly enhanced sophistication for more than a century has taken such a time to realize basic truths.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ESSAY is not to attempt to prove the general validity of either the Strong Theory or the Weak Theory, although I shall shortly give a personal view. This essay's purpose is to consider the role of the university in advertising research and education in relation to the waste engendered by the system. But before I get to this, there are a few additional points about the two theories that must be made. Let us start with some facts.

We know a number of things at a detailed level about the degree to which people respond behaviorally to advertising; and other things can be strongly inferred. What we know, however, is neither comprehensive nor directed enough to prove decisively that either the Strong or the Weak Theory is definitive. Nevertheless, some robust evidence can be brought to bear:

1. A majority of new brands fail. There is some controversy about the actual figure (depending as it does on the criteria for success or failure), but it has been estimated to be as high as 95 percent.¹² In many of the failures, advertising has been directly responsible; and in all other cases, advertising has not proven itself a strong enough force to compensate for other weaknesses in the marketing "mix."
2. There is evidence that in about 70 percent of a large sample of cases, any sales effect (however small) generated by advertising is the direct and exclusive result of the amount of money that is spent. There is a good statistical regression linking variations in advertising pressure and sales, irrespective of campaign changes.¹³ The creative content (i.e., persuasive power) of the advertisements themselves does not, therefore, appear to exercise any influence. Furthermore, there is much experimental evidence from tests of unusually elevated advertising pressure that such increases have a disappointing effect on sales and are rarely profitable (i.e., sales increases are small and generate far less profit than is needed to fund the increased advertising).
3. In the market for repeat purchase packaged goods (the product category that accounts for the largest single share of total advertising dollars), consumers' purchases show an astonishing degree of regu-

12. John Philip Jones, *What's in a Name? Advertising and the Concept of Brands* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1986), 64–66.

13. *Ibid.*, 83–92.

14. This has been Ehrenberg's main field of study. He has assembled and synthesized a formidable volume of data covering consumers' purchasing habits in more than thirty product fields in different countries over a thirty-year time span. The regularity of the purchasing patterns he discovered enabled him to model them mathematically, and the models have been widely and successfully used for predictive purposes. The operational applications of Ehrenberg's work are discussed in Jones, *What's in a Name?* chap. 5.

15. See, for instance, Editorial, "The Ad 'Crash' of '85," *Advertising Age*, 17 October 1988; and Jones, *What's in a Name?* chap. 11.

16. The reader should note that the word "marginal" is used here and in the following paragraph in its precise meaning (which originated in microeconomics), i.e., at the margin, or incremental, particularly as it describes a dependent incremental change following an incremental change in an independent stimulus. It does not necessarily mean a small change.

17. John Philip Jones, *Does It Pay to Advertise? Cases Illustrating Successful Brand Advertising* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989).

larity and predictability. During the course of a year, each consumer buys a group of competing brands (known technically as the consumer's repertoire). The proportions of total purchases represented by the different brands within the repertoire show little variation over time, and new brands join the repertoire only in exceptional circumstances. Most significantly, it appears that the consumer's habits are a more important determinant of brand purchasing than either advertising or promotions.¹⁴ The majority of individual markets for consumer goods in industrialized countries do not increase by more than 1 or 2 percent in any year (a situation known technically as stationary conditions), indicating that all marketing activity in such categories is entirely concerned with manipulating brands' market shares. Advertising is generally unable to increase the size of any market (nor does a reduction in total advertising cause a decline in the size of any market).

4. If advertising generally worked according to the Strong Theory, advertising investments should increase continually over time. In fact, when measured in real terms, the opposite is true.¹⁵

Where does all this wide-ranging but rather fragmentary evidence take us? I have an opinion, and although it is based on prolonged study of much empirical material, readers should bear in mind that they are reading a personal view in this paragraph and the three succeeding ones. I believe the Strong Theory probably works in a minority of circumstances (in certain defined product fields and with certain media). The Weak Theory, however, has a far wider application; it operates universally in fields in which advertising investments are considerable—where consumer purchasing is high and where advertising is an important component of the marketing "mix." But it is going too far to suggest that even in these fields the Weak Theory operates in quite the way described by Ehrenberg. It is too much to claim that advertising is *never* a prime mover, *never* a dynamic force. My particular field of study is the empirical evaluation of specific cases in which advertising might be shown to have a measurable marginal effect in the marketplace.¹⁶ Such examples are to be found in important product categories, and markets like these can sometimes contain minor dynamic elements within the overall pattern of stationary conditions.¹⁷ This provides advertising with an opportunity to yield a dividend.

In these narrowly defined circumstances, advertising often has a pronounced effect that can be accurately tracked and evaluated, sometimes even by a relatively precise estimate of the marginal increment of profit generated. But the circumstances in which such demonstrable results are apparent are exceptional, even though they are intensely interesting to advertising practitioners. It would be fair to say that these exceptions—important though they may be—serve generally to prove the rule that most advertising can be more persuasively explained by the Weak Theory than by the Strong Theory. Ehrenberg is far more often right than wrong.

Where advertising can be shown to have an effect, many cases demonstrate that advertising can pay for itself by achieving a behavioral response from only a tiny proportion—perhaps 1 percent or less—of the audience to which it is addressed. But such a response can only be achieved by

evoking some sort of intellectual or emotional involvement. In general, strongly persuasive advertising (“hard selling”) cannot achieve this; advertising normally acts as a simple and low-key reminder stimulus to purchase, so that when consumers are shopping for a brand in the category (ideally in the supermarket the next day), they will pick up the brand advertised and not one of the two or three other brands they commonly use. In most product fields, choosing one brand rather than another is not a weighty decision (i.e., it is a “low-involvement” process). Rational consideration of the pros and cons rarely takes place.

There is also evidence that advertising often works on a “single exposure” basis: fresh advertising exposures have little perceptible cumulative effect on the psyche of the consumer.¹⁸ (Repeated “hard selling” is not only distasteful; it is unnecessary.) And although advertising can on occasion communicate in subtle ways, by emphasizing certain emotional stimuli rather than others—matters that are usually carefully researched—it does not employ the black arts (e.g., “subliminal seduction”).

18. Advertising does, however, have a secondary, or lagged, effect; but this is the result of a repeat purchase that follows the initial purchase stimulated by an advertisement.

“HOW RIDICULOUSLY LITTLE WE REALLY KNOW . . .”

“. . . despite the bravado of lecture and textbook.”¹⁹ It is obvious from the issues discussed in this essay that although we know a few things about how advertising works, we have vastly more to learn. Nevertheless, it is a sad fact that universities—the organizations that are usually the torchbearers in the pursuit of knowledge—are not especially interested in contributing to this particular debate. Three reasons are behind this.

19. Joseph L. Lilienthal, Jr., “Liberal Education and Medicine,” *Freedom and the University* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1950), 89.

The first reason is by far the most important: the Weak Theory has not penetrated. It originated in Europe; and although it is believed (at least partially) by some of the more important advertisers and advertising agencies in the United States, the theory is terra incognita in at least 95 percent of business and communications schools. It is not easy to comprehend why this should be so, but I have no doubt that it is true. This symbolizes dramatically the position of business and communications educators in relation to the advertising profession: in all substantial respects, the profession leads and the universities follow. Although most people in advertising education will find nothing uncomfortable or surprising about this, they should sometime consider the position of their colleagues in the natural sciences, and in particular in medicine. It would be bizarre to think that the work carried out in the research laboratory and teaching hospital, in its contributions to increasing our knowledge, is less important than that done in general practice. Yet this is accepted as the norm in advertising.

We should also remember that Ehrenberg’s seminal work was carried out in an academic environment. Admittedly, his work has been sponsored (both financially and through the supply of empirical data) by more than forty American and British companies, including Procter & Gamble, Colgate-Palmolive, General Foods, General Mills, and M&M/Mars. But his analyses, syntheses, and model-building were and are carried out in a place detached physically and psychologically from the pressures of the business world.

The second reason why some professionals have not pursued the Weak Theory is that some people who are aware of the theory reject it on non-rational grounds. This is true, from my personal observation, of people in some advertising companies, agencies, and professional organizations—men and women whose resistance comes from their emotional commitment to the advertising enterprise. Advertising represents the mainspring of their lives and professional endeavors, and these people reject notions that devalue or undercut it. I suspect that some university professors also should be included in this group.

The third point is a practical matter: universities where advertising is studied are not fully geared (technically at least) to handle the type of research needed to advance our knowledge. The advertising faculty in communications schools have developed instructional skills, but for the most part they have not practiced in the professional world except perhaps as juniors or interns. As a result, they are not as conscious as practitioners of the most salient issues that call for investigation. Not surprisingly, academics are unused to handling the data bearing on these issues (even if they manage to obtain access to it). Their own research activities range over many topics and are often related to advertising's social effects (although this again involves begging a question—they assume that advertising *does* have social effects). Their inquiries are, however, not usually germane to improving the efficiency of professional practice.²⁰ I emphatically believe—on the basis of the academic research I read every day from business and communications schools in all parts of the United States—that the interests of academic researchers are in fields far removed from those covered in the routine research done by major advertisers and agencies, of which little is published. These latter investigations, however, have led to the progress (small though it is) that we have made toward understanding advertising.

20. Here is one example (from among many I could have chosen) to illustrate this point. U.S. professors who teach advertising belong to an organization called the American Academy of Advertising. In the *Proceedings* of the 1988 conference of this body, forty-two papers were published.

(i) Not a *single* paper includes data on the sales effect of any specific advertising campaign. (ii) There is no reference to the possibility that advertising may ever work according to the Weak Theory. (iii) In the 620 source references in the published papers, Ehrenberg's name appears only once (as a coauthor of a technical paper dealing with the duplication of television viewing between stations). Because of the absence of any references to Ehrenberg's most important work, we could never guess that he is one of the most widely published and respected authors in the marketing and advertising fields, having been responsible for 6 books and more than 200 papers that have appeared in professional and research journals.

There is no point in lamenting this situation; proselytizing and crusading would be a frustrating and probably fruitless endeavor. The advice I give myself is to pursue my own research, which (as readers will have no difficulty in guessing) is devoted to analyzing hard data from the real world, with the aim of exploring the Strong and Weak Theories on a case-by-case basis, and to operating inductively to tease out general patterns. I intend to say more about research after giving some attention to a different but closely related topic.

There is a substantive matter that stems directly from the dispute about the relative validity of the Strong and Weak Theories and that has an immediate bearing on what goes on in universities in general and in communications schools in particular (as the places where the majority of advertising instruction is concentrated): how the controversy affects our *educational* endeavors. Are there significant differences in what we will be teaching our students according to whether our doctrine is embedded in the Strong Theory or the Weak Theory? I believe there are significant differences indeed.

Since the Strong Theory receives wider endorsement in universities than the Weak Theory, I shall first hypothesize the sorts of beliefs that graduates who have been imbued with the Strong Theory will take into the real world as part of their intellectual baggage. Such graduates will believe instinctively in the great power of advertising. They are likely to be imaginative

and have some talent; they will also be energetic and aggressive. They will be proponents of “hard selling” as a means of switching consumers from brand to brand, and they will push the general policy of increasing advertising investments. If they manage to stay in the business and if their professional status improves in it, their recommendations to their clients will gain progressively in weight and authority. Most of the advertising industry is not efficient at, nor very interested in, evaluating scientifically and rigorously the effectiveness of campaigns. As a result, optimism and enthusiasm may be accepted uncritically for extended periods, and the consequences of wasteful overexpenditure may take years to come home to roost.

However, in the inflationary conditions of the 1970s and the heated competitive climate and profit pressures of the 1980s, the folly of overpromise and the gross waste to which it contributes have frequently become evident sooner or later. This overpromise has always seemed to me the best explanation for two unpleasant phenomena of the advertising business. The first of these is the lack of stability in the relationships between clients and their advertising agencies. It is difficult to make accurate estimates of the average number of years advertisers work with their agencies, and the figures are biased, to some extent, by the deliberate policies of a small number of important advertisers to build relationships to last for decades. Outside these cases, observation of the business discloses plentiful evidence of volatility; there is little doubt that the average length of manufacturers’ relationships with their advertising agencies is far shorter than their relationships with other professional advisers, such as accountants and attorneys.²¹ For the agencies, lost business is followed almost immediately by lost jobs.

This second phenomenon—reduced employment levels in the industry—is of considerable significance to individuals (and in consequence to the universities that educate them). There have been two other important influences on this reduction in numbers and the resulting threat to employment prospects for new graduates. The first influence is a lack of growth in advertising when measured in real terms, which has been caused mainly by manufacturers reducing their advertising in the main media to enable them to increase their expenditure on promotions—something that has meant relatively less advertising and more price-cutting. The second influence has been amalgamations among major agencies during the 1980s, signifying the business’s response to overall lack of growth, excessive competition, and pressure on profits.

As a result of these forces in the market, the advertising business is characterized—to a far greater degree than any other business with which I am personally familiar—by abruptly and sometimes tragically terminated careers. I shall avoid dwelling on the scores, perhaps hundreds, of specific cases that I have encountered. It is enough to say that it should cause disquiet in all universities where advertising is taught to contemplate the extraordinary number of graduates who find themselves stranded “on the beach” in their thirties and forties, often with only the smallest prospects of reentering the profession.

How would the situation be different if we made an effort to teach our students (at the very least) that the Weak Theory exists and that it may

21. In one investigation covering the relationships between advertisers and their agencies from 1981 to 1985, more than one-half of the advertisers in all of the product fields examined had changed agencies at least once. In most fields the rate of change was much higher (Paul Michell, “Account Switching,” *Journal of Advertising Research* [June–July 1988]: 38).

apply to some, or most, of the brands on which they will be working during their professional careers? I can only hypothesize the likely long-term effect of this change in our teaching emphasis, but I have no doubt that graduates would approach their professional endeavors with a far greater realism, sense of caution, and willingness to experiment.

We should begin by emphasizing to our students that advertising is a tough and competitive business to break into and to maintain a career in with any upward progression. Although advertising is unquestionably exciting, interesting, and well paid, it is a calling that makes high demands on brains, imagination, and resilience. We should always test the strength of our students' motivation as well as their understanding of the realities of the business.

Students who comprehend the Weak Theory will have a greater technical understanding of the business than those people who understand only the Strong Theory. Specifically, they will be skeptical of the value of "hard-selling" advertising. They will be open-minded about the possibility of increasing their clients' profits by *reducing* advertising investments. (The resultant effect on sales can be evaluated with reasonable accuracy by marketplace experimentation.) They will learn to operate advertising, and also to encourage their clients to operate advertising, with economy of force. They will use advertising as a rapier and not as a bludgeon. They will learn by experience and will base recommendations on cool evaluation and increasing knowledge rather than on unremitting bullishness.

The business will most likely operate at a lower and less heated level than at present, with less advertising overall. The force of competition will continue strongly, but it will be based on objectively verifiable performance more than it is now, and the probable result will be less neurosis among both clients and agencies. It is inevitable that waste will be reduced as a general result of these changes; and there will be less "career fallout" among advertising practitioners. The overall result will represent significant social benefits.

One factor that is working in favor of practitioners who apply finesse and caution to their clients' advertising is the rapid decline of the agency commission system. When this system was universal, advertising agencies could only increase their incomes by persuading their clients to push up their advertising budgets. This system is giving way to more sensible procedures in which agencies earn fees based on the actual time spent operating their clients' advertising.²²

The methods described in the preceding three paragraphs represent major changes; and for universities to play a part, they must of course tackle the problem of educating the educators before they focus on the students. We now come back to the all-encompassing role of the university, specifically in the quest for knowledge.

To my mind, it would be inadequate for educators simply to learn about the Weak Theory (or any other theory) and then to teach it. The university cannot earn its corn in good conscience unless it participates in the frustration and excitement of the exploration and the discovery. It is only by doing this that the university will say anything new and provide insights that practitioners will be interested in learning about. And I cannot see how educators can, without deep inner dissatisfaction, accept their present

22. William M. Weilbacher, *Current Advertiser Practices in Compensating Their Advertising Agencies* (New York: Association of National Advertisers, 1983).

subordination to practitioners, who are so clearly the people at the leading edge of knowledge. If inhabitants of the communications schools, because of weaknesses in their enterprise and skills, have to continue to accept the technical leadership of the profession, there is the inevitable prospect that their status will continue to sink. This decline will have an obvious bearing on the respect accorded to the educational programs offered by advertising departments and on the quality of the students whom these will attract.²³

Unlike most schools of medicine, architecture, engineering, and advanced technology, the advertising departments of university communications schools are in a vulnerable position and will remain there until at least some practitioners are persuaded to beat a path to the doors of at least some universities to learn something new about the "state of the art." The traffic is much too much in the opposite direction at the moment. ♦

23. It has always been and continues to be true that a large number of entrants into the advertising business have been graduates in the liberal arts.

John Philip Jones is a student of the behavioral effects of advertising. He is British and was educated as an economist. He spent twenty-seven years in the advertising agency business, managing the advertising for many major brands of consumer goods in a number of countries. He came to Syracuse University in 1981 and is Professor and Chair of the Advertising Department in the Newhouse School of Public Communications. He has published two books, many papers in professional journals, and some pieces of national journalism. He was editor of the Syracuse Scholar from 1986 to 1989.