About the Author

Bob Garfield is a leading advertising critic and accomplished in multiple forms of media. Currently, he is the co-host of the NPR show, “On The Media,” part of the station’s All Things Considered block. Also, he writes the column “Ad Review” in Advertising Age, criticizing new television ads: he has become a famous advertising figure because of his criticisms. Although he has never worked directly in advertising, he has valuable experience writing about it. He has written for USA Today, The NY Times, Playboy, Sports Illustrated, and many other publications. He was a contributing editor for Civilization and The Washington Post Magazine. A compilation of his works was put together and entitled, “Waking Up Screaming from the American Dream.” Outside of the advertising and journalism world, he has co-written the country song, “Tag, You’re it,” performed by Willie Nelson, and he wrote for a short-lived television sitcom.

Garfield has a diverse track record, but he has received attention for his advertising criticisms, mostly negative. In the advertising world, he is known as one of the leading critics and has successfully made his voice heard.¹

Abstract

Throughout the book, Garfield touches on a variety of points in advertising. Most of the problems he discusses could be prevented by a company seeking outside opinions.

¹ The information for the entire paragraph is from the website http://www.onthemedia.org/garfield.html.
before proceeding with an advertisement. He writes about numerous examples of companies’ blind-sidedness when it comes to advertising. If most of the companies would have looked outside of their company and agency, they possibly would have caught themselves before releasing the damaging advertising. Although that seems to be the overarching theme, he stresses the problem of the emergence of sleazy and shocking advertising. The book, a severe criticism in itself, provides insight into a part of advertising few people know. In the end, he argues in defense of advertising and tries to reinstate hope in the field.

Chapter 1: Rules are Made to be Observed

Garfield begins the book laying down the foundations of rules and their effects. He uses the form of Shakespearean sonnets and child psychologists to show that a “lack of boundaries does not liberate, it enslaves. (p.4)” Numerous figures in advertising have claimed to be “rule breakers,” but many resulted in unsuccessful campaigns and are out of business. Garfield specifies that instead of pushing the envelope, advertisers should simply stuff it. He suggests that in order to stuff the envelope advertisers need to present information to the viewer, one of the only things the viewer values from ads. He gives the example of Infiniti’s first ad campaign featuring aspects of nature but little of the cars. The commercials were well recognized, but they weren’t given affection. The company became the laughing stock of the automobile industry but has since recuperated.

However, Garfield bashes the concept of breaking the rules, he does highlight that some of the greatest commercials broke every rule, i.e. Macintosh’s 1984. He refers to these anomalies as the “1984” paradox. Everyone in the advertising world agrees that
this commercial broke every rule and is widely considered the greatest commercial of all-time, but this doesn’t mean everyone should strive to emulate it. He thinks trying to break rules doesn’t bring greatness, but “suckiness. (p.15)” AdAge conducted listed the 100 greatest ad campaigns and 79 were thoroughly conventional. Rules are meant to be observed, not broken.

Chapter 2: Original Sin

The next topic happens to be libelous work and unoriginality. He uses the story of a famous German composer and an unnamed piano player. When the German sits down to listen to the songs, he is impressed but notices the songs are a combination of other composer’s masterpieces. The performer asks him if he liked the songs, and he replied, “I have always liked them.” He uses this example to emphasize originality. However, in advertising often almost identical ads are created, but neither of the respective parties copycatted: it was just coincidence. The Energizer campaign featuring the bunny interrupting a series of fake commercials serves as a strong factor of his argument. A small beer company had used the same concept a few years earlier, but it still didn’t take away from the brilliance of the ad. To Garfield, advertiser’s jobs aren’t to be original, they are to sell things.

Some of the most famous ads (“1984,” Nike’s “Just do it,” etc.) are original ideas; however, their originality wasn’t what made them successful. He attributes their success to the fact that they are smart, but he doesn’t totally ignore their elements of surprise and originality. Essentially, concepts and ideas are stolen and reused constantly, but when it comes to advertising, that’s okay. He prefers the terms new and improved as a substitute
for stolen. As long as the advertisement grabs the interest of the viewer it can be
effective, whether it’s original or not.

Chapter 3: Apropos of Something

At the start of this chapter, Garfield discusses the large presence of comedy and
humor in advertising. He praises campaigns like ESPN’s Sportscenter, Heineken, Hamlet
cigars, etc. Unfortunately, ad agencies spend too much time and money trying to be
hilarious and memorable. At some point, an idea emerged that advertisers had to joke
there way into the minds of the consumer. Although humorous ads can be effective, it
isn’t the only way to advertise. He discusses the irrelevance of several add campaigns,
 focusing on Southwest Airline’s “It must be football season” campaign. It featured
normal people who are suddenly taken over with football instincts; however, the ads had
nothing to do with flying.

The next issue he tackles after humor is the random celebrity promotion. For
example, Charles Barkley endorsing the Hyundai car has no connection whatsoever: the
ad agency simply hopes that his face will grab the attention of the viewer. He continues
this argument of unnecessary factors of advertising by attacking technology. Certain
companies spend millions of dollars to create cutting-edge commercials using the highest
technology but some fail. Like celebrities, merely having it present in the ad doesn’t
translate into success. He isn’t suggesting removing technology from advertising, simply
employing it at the proper times. The fourth main category of irrelevancy is an
advertiser’s mission for deep profundity. These irrelevancies plague the advertising
world and there is a fifth irrelevancy, but it gets a chapter to itself.
Chapter 4: Exercise Regularly and Try Cutting Back on the Sex

After a relatively awkward start to Chapter four featuring a purposely unromantic sexual encounter, he delivers his opinion about sex in advertising. Unnecessary sex in advertising is the fifth irrelevancies, because it can do as much harm as good. He compares it to salt: a little salt makes most things better but too much ruins everything. The idea of using sex to sell isn’t a new idea and has been around almost as long as advertising. The first ad using sex as its primary tool was in 1911, it featured Woodbury’s Soap. The catch phrase was “a skin you love to touch,” but it actually meant “a skin he’ll love to touch.”

The problem of using sex for attention arises when you’ve got the viewer’s attention but have nothing to say. This results in the viewer shunning away from the advertisement’s true purpose. Finally, Old Milwaukee beer ran an advertisement featuring the Swedish Bikini Team. This team, in skimpy bikinis, put in predominately male situations looking compliant, drew a backlash from the advertising industry, especially the beer industry. Anheuser-Busch publicly stated that women were too important a customer to objectify them and stopped running ads of the sort. It was a short-lived promise. Since sex usually contributes to the majority of advertisements, beauty is expectedly attached, which results in an unrealistic view of people.

Chapter 5: Ogilvy Was Wrong

Garfield begins the next chapter calling out one of advertising’s more famous innovators, David Ogilvy. Ogilvy was quoted saying, “the consumer isn’t a moron, she’s
Aside from the stereotyping, Garfield accuses the advertising world of giving the consumer too much credit. He uses examples of the National Enquirer having more circulation than the two highest academic journals combined. The ideas surrounding the consumer need to be rethought, because advertisers have begun to create ads for themselves and peers, not the consumer. This results in trophies for them, but it fails the consumer.

The perfect example of a company giving the consumer too much credit comes from three sequential Miller Lite campaigns. First, the company had the slogan, “great taste, less filling,” which made their beer the second largest in the beer market. They decided to change their ad campaign and created an ad featuring “Dick,” who was an advertising agent in the commercials who created random, clever ads. The ads, directed at a younger generation, angered their traditional customers and crushed their amazing beer run. Eventually, they decided to reach out to Daryll, the term for the average, beer drinking consumer. They created a campaign that teased the consumer about the random failures in life (ex. struggling to back into your garage with the neighbor watching). This ended their almost ten year decrease in sales. In conclusion, the campaign wasn’t too clever or smart, but it also didn’t talk down to the consumer: they had found the happy medium, a problem which advertising today fails to do.

Chapter 6: Be My Guest

Last chapter featured the consumer, but he discusses the diversity of the audience through the context of “shockvertising.” Television reaches a mass audience that ranges from toddlers to very senior citizens. Often times advertising agencies don’t take into
account this diversity, resulting in super-offensive ads that target a specific audience, but disregard the majority. He uses the metaphor that advertising is a shotgun not a rifle. Everything in front of the ad gets hit, and it can’t be accurately directed solely at certain people. Advertisers often forget that it isn’t programming. People don’t choose to watch advertising, it’s merely shown, and so it is something that needs to be considered when trying to determine your target audiences.

He singles out Calvin Klein and attributes the creation of “shockvertising” to them. Their ads feature adolescent adults and teenagers in sexually provocative ways, which shock the audience; however, the audience responds by buying millions of dollars worth of CK products. Finally, CK ran advertisements that crossed the line, resulting in them being pulled from television and creating an uproar. It may be justified in advertising to offend few to impress many, but it is never justified to offend many to impress few. Essentially, advertising has the ability to enter people’s homes essentially uninvited and say what they want: this means they have a certain responsibility, which many agencies have failed to recognize.

Chapter 7: Are You Doomed? Take This Simple Quiz.

Throughout the next chapter, the quiz is broken down into seven reality checks. First, he states that consumers aren’t waiting for a breakthrough: they aren’t waiting to be awed by a simple advertisement. Second, advertising isn’t an art, and advertisers aren’t artists. It needs artistic tools, but advertising is commerce, not art. When it comes to the production and creativity, the audience doesn’t care how complicated and difficult it was to produce. Often times agencies will be so proud of their creative accomplishments they
miss the objective of their advertising. The fourth reality check is that trying to create a ridiculous ideology of their company and presenting it to the consumer can do more harm than good. A critically renowned advertisement that receives trophies does nothing if it fails to reach the consumer. The next rule piggy-backs off of the fourth rule, in that an ad can fail, especially if it isn’t real (a “ghost” ad). Garfield discusses a time when he proclaimed a certain ad to be the best of the year, but its purpose was to fetch an award. Only advertising that is presented to the consumer is advertising.

The sixth check addressed Nike and their issues with Asian sweatshops producing their shoes and apparel. The problem comes when companies develop the idea that their infallibility is immune to the perceptions of the outside world. Nike’s arrogant and invincible attitudes resulted in plummeted sales. The final check states that if someone raises a “red” flag, it means stop, not proceed with caution. He used the example of a terribly racist and neocolonial ad, featuring five white men chasing a Kenyan jogger and detaining him. The purpose of these rules isn’t to provide a system of success, but it serves to awaken agencies consciousness throughout the process of developing an ad. He recommends consulting a focus group or just an outside source to keep open minds.

Chapter 8: Hold the Sleaze, Please

Unfortunately, he begins the next chapter discussing a Gallup Poll that ranked professions by their honesty and ethical decision making, and advertising professionals only ranked higher than car salesmen. Although some advertising spokesmen try to separate real advertising from sleazy advertising, they live in denial. All advertising is advertising, so whether or not it’s sleazy, inevitably, it is advertising. A prime example
exists in a planter’s peanuts advertisement, featuring a man and his monkey on a deserted island. When a crate of nuts washes ashore text comes onscreen that implies nuts are entirely health conscious, when in reality they are loaded with fat. This illustrates the difference between truth and facts. It’s a fact that nuts are considered no-cholesterol, but it’s not true to give the impression that you can healthily eat to your hearts content.

Along with sleazy advertising comes the influence of exploitative advertising. Saturn’s campaign featured them recording playgrounds being constructed in New Jersey streets, documentary style. They could’ve used that money to build many more playgrounds. He states that if you brag about charity, then it is promotion with poster children. Other and more severe examples of this include events like the Oklahoma City bombing and September 11. He finishes the chapter discussing the coordination of win-win advertising. For example, a diaper company partnered with a charity that enabled terminally ill children to visit Florida for a week. The commercials showed a terminally ill child Jared, and no matter who benefited, it exploited a terminally ill child to increase diaper sales. He thinks it is utterly despicable, and to him, it is just as bad sending Jared door-to-door selling diapers.

Chapter 9: Bless Me, Garfield, For I Have Screwed Up Bigtime

Garfield starts this chapter with an anecdote about a group of students asking his opinion on an advertising project. After he respectfully railed them, they pointed out that he had never been in advertising. He didn’t take offense, but he did decide to consult other advertising experts on the issue and features the interviews in this chapter. First, he talks to Jeff Goodby about an unsuccessful Nike campaign. Next, he spoke with Dan
Wieden, the co-founder of Wieden & Kennedy, about an unsuccessful Subaru account. The Subaru account failed from its conception, mainly because the agency hadn’t handled an account so large. One of the unique things about a car account is that you don’t have one client, you have hundreds of clients because every single dealer acts like a client. Wieden said that they weren’t expecting the account to be quite so decentralized, only adding to the difficulty. Lastly, he spoke with Phil Dusenberry, the now retired chairman of BBDO. The main idea that Dusenberry put forth was a warning to not be blinded by your own brilliance. He discussed Pepsi’s “GeneratioNext” campaign, targeting a younger, teen audience. They focused too narrowly on the teens, alienating the majority of Pepsi drinkers. Dusenberry concluded that you should step back and have a reality check to make sure the ad is effective to everyone, reinforcing a point Garfield had made earlier.

Chapter 10: Go Forth and Advertise

After almost 200 pages of critiquing advertising from every direction, Garfield sets out to provide its benefits. Advertising serves as a great method to study anthropology, because it serves as a perfect representation of social and culture of its respective time. Another benefit is that advertising is effective: it builds brands, encourages consumerism, and has benefited the entire world. Advertising has benefited the country and world with ads like Smokey the Bear and several other public service ads. He tells the readers that anyone in the advertising world has nothing to be ashamed of and commissions people to go out and advertise, “but for [goodness] sake, do it my way. (p.195)”
Review

Garfield’s “And Now a Few Words From Me,” lives up to his reputation as a ranting advertising critic, but I don’t think that is reason to dismiss. He rants about everything from government regulation to sleazy advertising, but he never just talks: he backs it up with facts. If Calvin Klein released an ad featuring an adolescent Brooke Shields speaking suggestively, then there is little to deny. He prods at examples such as this to show the main shortcomings of advertising today. The book has received mix reviews because some people like his upfront arrogance and others can’t get past it to see what he is trying to say. Thankfully, I could get past his witty arrogance enough to enjoy his 200 page rant.

I would recommend this book to people in the advertising business and people who aren’t. Garfield wrote this book cleverly and chock-full of humor. For the people who aren’t in advertising, we see advertisements everyday, everywhere. This book offers up numerous examples of ads, interesting in themselves, that can give an innocent consumer insight into the advertising world. For the person in advertising, this book offers a glimpse into some of advertising’s darker days. Having a book written about the other side of advertising from an objective source, who hasn’t worked in it, can greatly affect your perception. I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in advertising, period. The quick-hitting humor, combined with the numerous examples, makes the book a roller-coaster of a ride. It educates the reader on famous ad campaigns and provides opinions, one man’s opinion, on what successful advertising looks like. Garfield has successfully made me an advertising critic but not in a negative way. After
reading this book, I feel better prepared to not only create advertisements but evaluate them: a integral skill for every student of advertising. Hopefully, this book will pull you out of advertising denial before you’re in too far, like a majority of the field.