

## Some Rhetorical Tricks in Advertising

In our age dominated by marketing, a great deal of money is spent to ensure that a given product is seen as superior to all others, or perhaps desirable although unnecessary. Although the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) regulates and forbids deceptive marketing practices, advertisers have found new and interesting ways to convince you that their product is superior without outright lying about it (note the fine line: deceptive claims are alright, but false claims are not). Below are some of the most commonly used linguistic tricks in advertising, with examples taken from actual media advertising (much of what follows is borrowed from Jeffery Schrank's "The Language of Advertising").

**1. Weasel Words:** Weaslers are words used to soften the claim, often to make exaggerated or otherwise false claims without actually lying. The term comes from the eating habits of actual weasels. In eating eggs they suck out the inside from a small hole, leaving the shell nearly intact. Thus weasel claims, while they appear whole, are actually hollow: they have no content. Commonly used weasel words include comparison words 'like,' 'as much as.' Commonly used qualitative weasel words include 'virtual' or 'virtually,' 'acts' or 'works,' 'can be,' 'up to,' 'tackles,' 'fights,' 'has the feel of,' 'has the look of' or 'looks like.' They may also use vague descriptive words, such as 'fortified,' 'enriched,' 'healthy,' 'natural' or 'strengthened.'

*Examples:*

"*Helps control dandruff symptoms with regular use.*" The weasels include 'helps control,' and possibly even 'symptoms' and 'regular use,' both of which are vague. The claim is not that the product 'stops dandruff.'

"Leaves dishes *virtually* spotless." We have seen so many ad claims that we have learned to tune out weasels. You are supposed to think 'spotless,' rather than 'virtually spotless.'

"Only half the price of *many* color sets." 'Many' is the weasel. The claim is supposed to give the impression that the set is inexpensive.

"Tests confirm one mouthwash *best* against mouth odor."

"Listerine *fights* bad breath." 'Fights,' not 'stops.'

"Bacos, the crispy garnish that tastes just *like* its name."

**2. Unfinished Claims:** Ads often use unfinished claims, which make comparisons by suggestion. These do not finish the comparisons, but suggests to the reader or listener to make the inference and fill it in his or herself.

*Examples:*

"Magnavox gives you more." More what?

"Supergloss does it with more color, more shine, more sizzle, more!"

"Four out of five dentists recommend sugarless Trident for patients who chew gum." Do you think that the other dentist recommends chewing sugared gum, or no gum at all?

"Coffee-mate gives coffee more body, more flavor." Note that 'body' and 'flavor' are vague weaslers.

"You can be sure if it's Westinghouse." Sure of what?

“Scott makes it better for you.”

"Ford LTD--700% quieter." (When the FTC asked Ford to substantiate this claim, Ford revealed that they meant the inside of the Ford was 700% quieter than the outside.)

**3. Uniqueness Claims:** Imply to the reader or listener that the product is better, because it is different. For example, if a product were sold in a different color, it might be said that “there is no product like it”; different does not imply better.

*Examples:*

“There's no other mascara like it.”

“Only Doral has this unique filter system.”

“Cougar is like nobody else's car.”

“Either way, liquid or spray, there's nothing else like it.”

“If it doesn't say Goodyear, it can't be polyglas.” 'Polyglas' here is a trade name copyrighted by Goodyear. Goodrich or Firestone could make a tire exactly identical to the Goodyear one and yet couldn't call it 'polyglas'—a name for fiberglass belts.

“Only Zenith has chromacolor.” Same as the "polyglas" gambit. Admiral has solarcolor and RCA has accucolor.

**4. “Water is Wet” Claims:** "Water is wet" claims say something about the product that is true for any brand in that product category. The claim is usually a statement of fact, but not a real advantage over the competition.

*Examples:*

“Mobil: the Detergent Gasoline.” Any gasoline acts as a cleaning agent.

“Great Lash greatly increases the diameter of every lash.”

“Rheingold, the natural beer.” Made from grains and water as are other beers.

“SKIN smells differently on everyone.” As do many perfumes.

**5. “So What” Claims:** This is the kind of claim to which the careful reader will react by saying, "So What?" A claim is made which is true, but which gives no real advantage to the product. This is similar to the "water is wet" claim except that it claims an advantage which is not shared by most of the other brands in the product category.

*Examples:*

“Geritol has more than twice the iron of ordinary supplements.” Is twice as much beneficial to the body?

“Campbell's gives you tasty pieces of chicken and not one, but two chicken stocks.” Does the presence of two stocks improve the taste?

“Strong enough for a man, but made for a woman.” This deodorant claims says only that the product is aimed at the female market.

**6. Vague Claims:** The vague claim is simply not clear. This category often overlaps with others (esp. weasellers). The key to the vague claim is the use of words that are colorful but meaningless, as well as the use of subjective and emotional opinions that defy verification. Most contain weasels.

*Examples:*

“Lips have never looked so luscious.” Can you imagine trying to either prove or disprove such a claim?

“Its deep rich lather makes hair feel good again.”

“For skin like peaches and cream.”

“The end of meatloaf boredom.”

“Winston tastes good like a cigarette should.”

“The perfect little portable for all around viewing with all the features of higher priced sets.”

“Fleishman's makes sensible eating delicious.”

**7. Appeal to Authority/Celebrity:** A celebrity or authority (often athletes) appears in an ad to lend his or her stellar qualities to the product. Sometimes the people will actually claim to use the product, but very often they don't. There are agencies surviving on providing products with testimonials.

*Examples:*

“Donovan McNabb is hungry . . . for Campbell's New England Clam Chowder”

“Darling, have you discovered Masterpiece? The most exciting men I know are smoking it.” (A classic appeal to celebrity by Eva Gabor)

“Vega is the best handling car in the U.S.” This claim was challenged by the FTC, but GM answered that the claim is only a direct quote from *Road and Track* magazine.

**8. Use of Questionable Statistics or Science:** This kind of ad uses some sort of scientific proof or experiment, often with very specific numbers or an impressive sounding mystery ingredient.

*Examples:*

“Wonder Bread helps build strong bodies 12 ways.” Even the weasel 'helps' did not prevent the FTC from demanding this ad be withdrawn. But note that the use of the number 12 makes the claim far more believable than if it were taken out.

“Easy-Off has 33% more cleaning power than another popular brand.” 'Another popular brand' often translates as some other kind of oven cleaner sold somewhere. Also the claim does not say Easy-Off works 33% better.

“Certs contains a sparkling drop of Retsyn.”

“Sinarest. Created by a research scientist who actually gets sinus headaches.”

**9. “Smart consumer” claims:** This kind of claim uses flattery to butter-up the consumer. Makes you think that you're a better person for having bought the product.

*Examples:*

“We think a cigar smoker is someone special.”

“If what you do is right for you, no matter what others do, then RC Cola is right for you.”

“You pride yourself on your good home cooking . . .”

“Choosy moms choose Jiff”

“You've come a long way, baby.”

## **10. Rhetorical Questions**

This technique demands a response from the audience. A question is asked and the viewer or listener is supposed to answer in such a way as to affirm the product's goodness.

*Examples:*

“Plymouth--isn't that the kind of car America wants?”

“Shouldn't your family be drinking Hawaiian Punch?”

“What do you want most from coffee? That's what you get most from Hills.”

“Touch of Sweden: could your hands use a small miracle?”