Instructor: Julie Sedivy; 236 Metcalf Research Labs; 3-3383
Office hours: Tuesdays, 12-1; Wednesdays 11-12

TAs: Giulia Righi;
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Course Goals:

Advertising is fundamentally persuasive in nature. It is an attempt to get you, the consumer, to act in some way that benefits whoever is doing the advertising. At times, advertising seeks to achieve an impact by appealing to your rational self-interest as a consumer in a direct and transparent way. Other times, it seeks to have an impact in less direct ways, using techniques whose effects may be difficult to consciously evaluate in real time as you absorb the ad’s message. In this course, we will use advertising as a backdrop for studying important aspects of how human communication works. You will learn some of the basic methods and findings from the scientific study of language as they apply to commonly-used advertising tools. The course will focus on using this knowledge to make intelligent observations about advertising that you encounter in daily life. Ultimately, your new expertise should enable you to more consciously evaluate the intended impact of certain advertising techniques. It should also provide you with some of the conceptual tools you need to evaluate the scientific soundness of laws and policies pertaining to advertising, and to design research projects to further study the cognitive effects of specific ingredients found in ads.

Course Content:

Week 1. Introduction and Background:
Persuasive communication, choice, and consumer rationality
Historical background

Week 2. Advertising claims, truth, and literal meaning
Evaluating literal meanings
Looking beyond literal meanings: connotation, evaluative language, specificity & vagueness

Week 3-4 More non-literal meanings: Implications
Implied vs. asserted levels of meaning
Communicative assumptions of relevance and cooperativeness
Implications involving expressions of quantity and comparison
Quiz #1

Week 5. Presupposition
“Everyone knows it” -- using language to signal common knowledge

Week 6. Speech Acts
Communicative goals in context
“We’re not selling anything” -- Disguising the communicative functions of ads
“Who says?” -- The importance of the communicative agent

Week 7. Constraining advertising practices
Evaluating current Federal Trade Commission criteria for deceptive advertising
FTC guidelines for endorsements and testimonials
Limits on legal constraints

Week 8-9. Human inference and memory
Memory for linguistic form and meaning
The importance of what is forgotten: exploiting properties of selective human memory

Quiz #2

Week 10-11: Association and memory
Association networks and memory links
What’s in a name? Word associations involving meaning and sound.
Brand names & trademark infringement

Week 12: Attention
Getting attention: incongruity, ambiguity and cognitive engagement
Managing attention: selective emphasis and de-emphasis
Tracking eye movements to study attention

Week 13: Language variation and audience targeting
Linguistic differences in dialect by geography, class, gender, register
Marketing identities

Quiz #3

Reading Week:
Review and exam preparation

Course Format
Monday and Wednesday meeting times will consist of lectures. On Fridays, the class will divide into two smaller groups for more informal discussion of the course material. Attendance at all classes is required.

Course Requirements

1. In-class quizzes 30
2. Journal 40
3. Final exam OR Final paper 30

The journal assignments will consist of responding to specific exercises set in class. These will typically involve finding relevant examples of ads and commenting on them, or conducting mini-experiments to investigate concepts introduced during class. The Friday discussions will revolve around the journal exercises.

If you have received a minimum of an average grade of B based on the journal and quizzes by April 1, you may choose either a final exam or a final paper. (If your grade averages less than a B, you must take the final exam).

The final paper is to be approximately 15 types double-spaced pages, and should consist of either

a) a research proposal for an empirical investigation of one of the course topics applied to advertising. You must clearly motivate and articulate a specific central hypothesis, and propose a method and detailed study design to address it; or

b) a policy recommendation (at any level—organizational, local, or national) based on scientific arguments, and incorporating relevant class material.

Final papers are due on the date of the final exam.
Late papers will not be accepted. Seriously.