

Book Review: Hucksters in the Classroom

BY KIM MARSHALL

Reading Sheila Harty's *Hucksters in the Classroom: A Review of Industry Propaganda* (Center for Study of Responsive Law, 1979) was a shocking experience for me. I had no idea of the extent to which corporate propaganda has penetrated our schools.

There are good reasons why teachers use industry's freebies: insufficient budgets for standard instructional materials; the convenience and attractiveness of many of the packaged industry materials; the ease of ordering directly from the industry rather than going through a school system's bureaucracy. As one junior high school teacher (quoted by Harty) put it: "Teachers are so overwhelmed with their total job that they welcome anything that will aid them in making their subject area more attractive to the students, easier to grasp, and save the teacher time in making up original material. If an industry can offer all of those things, a teacher is just grateful—to hell with where it comes from."

Many teachers feel they can handle commercial materials in a balanced way. Others feel that kids are far too sophisticated to be seduced by commercial propaganda. But Harty disagrees. She refers to something called "imprint conditioning"—the subliminal impact of advertising. We are unaware that a huckster has made an impression, but "the next time we go shopping, one brand name or label looks more familiar and we choose it like an old friend." Excerpting from Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*, she quotes a marketer's exhortation to fellow advertisers:

Eager minds can be molded to want your products! In the grade schools throughout America are nearly 23,000,000 young girls and boys. These children eat food, wear out clothes, use soap. They are consumers today and will be the buyers of tomorrow. Here is a vast market for your products. Sell these children on your brand name and they will insist that their parents buy no other.

Hundreds of corporations are pursuing these impressionable consumers, reaching thousands of teachers and millions of students. On the surface, some corporate services seem benign, as does McDonald's sponsoring a "fun bus" to take students in Washington, D.C., to museums and historical sites with a stop for a free meal at one of the restaurant chain's franchises. In another instance, a soap company gives away free samples of its product along with gentle lectures about body odor. Harty cites these and numerous other examples of corporate propaganda and suggests the following reasons for *not* using industry's free handouts in our classrooms:

- Some commercial materials present misleading information on one side of a controversial issue, such as General Motors' booklet about air pollution, an electric company's material about nuclear and solar power, and the Tobacco Institute's literature about the history of tobacco and smoking.
- Companies have been known to send out materials that contain sexist and/or racist references.
- Food companies tend to push their products without proper warnings about the dangers of too much sugar, salt, cholesterol, etc., and often misrepresent their products' nutritional value by making misleading references to the four major food groups.
- Corporations may engage in subtle political lobbying for a particular cause: an extreme case involved Mr. Quaker, who traveled to hundreds of schools in the early 1960s to lecture about the dangers of communism and the virtues of Quaker Oats.
- Even seemingly straightforward educational efforts, like the Phillips Petroleum film series "American Enterprise," contain underlying biases toward the political, social and industrial status quo, according to Harty.

All this propaganda has a powerful effect on children because most youngsters believe that what they are taught in school is factual and bal-

anced. Even worse, kids in school are a captive audience; they can't turn the channel, flip the page or leave the room.

What Can Be Done?

Harty wants the Federal Trade Commission to be more actively involved in monitoring and regulating classroom materials from industry. She also urges teachers and parents who spot offensive, misleading or propagandistic commercial materials to write to the offending companies. (She herself has had several sets of materials withdrawn by taking such action. One item excised from classrooms because of her efforts was a Pepsodent dental hygiene poster that did not mention flossing; dental floss is not manufactured by the Pepsodent Division's parent company, Lever Brothers.)

But what about broad policy recommendations, and what about our position as educators? *Hucksters in the Classroom* offers no clear-cut solutions, and this is unfortunate, because guidelines are clearly needed. My own conclusion is that, except for use as case studies in advertising and hidden persuasion, commercial propaganda does not belong in our schools, and this should be reflected both in school boards' policies and in teachers' professional ethics.

Furthermore, our curricula should make students aware of propaganda—political and religious, as well as commercial—and help them become more discriminating consumers. To provide for this need, as well as currently standard instructional courses, materials budgets should be generous and flexible enough so that teachers don't feel the need to depend on corporations. ■

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