

## Marketing Eight Hidden Needs

### Vance Packard

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"The home freezer becomes a frozen island of security."

-From a report, Weiss and Geller advertising agency.

In searching for extra psychological values that they could add to products to give them a more potent appeal, the depth merchandisers came upon many gratifying clues by studying our subconscious needs, yearnings, and cravings. Once the need was identified, and certified to be compelling, they began building the promise of its fulfillment into their sales presentations of such unlikely products as air conditioners, cake mixes, and motorboats. Here we will explore some of the more picturesque applications in merchandising eight of our hidden needs.

**Selling emotional security.** The Weiss and Geller advertising agency became suspicious of the conventional reasons people gave for buying home freezers. In many cases it found that economically, the freezers didn't make sense when you added up the initial cost, the monthly cost added on the electric bill, and the amount of frozen leftovers in the box that eventually would be thrown out. When all factors were added, the food that was consumed from the freezer often became very costly indeed.

Its curiosity aroused, the agency made a psychiatric pilot study. The probers found significance in the fact that the home freezer first came into widespread popularity after World War II when many families were filled with inner anxieties because of uncertain ties involving not only food but just about everything else in their lives. These people began thinking fondly of former periods of safety and security, which subconsciously took them back to childhood where there was the mother who never disappointed and love was closely related with the giving of food. The probers concluded: "The freezer represents to many the assurance that there is always food in the house, and food in the home represents security, warmth, and safety." People who feel insecure, they found, need more food around than they can eat. The agency decided that the merchandising of freezers should take this squirrel factor into account in shaping campaigns.

The same agency found that the air conditioner has a hidden security value of another sort that can be exploited. Some people, its psychiatric probers found, need to feel protected and enclosed and to keep the windows closed at night while they sleep so that nothing "threatening" can enter. These people, it seems, are subconsciously yearning for a return to the security of the womb.

While the womb-seekers are a highly vulnerable market for air conditioners (already a half-billion-dollar-a-year business), another type of person offers a real challenge to the conditioner salesman. The agency's probers found that there is a latent claustrophobia in many of us. For those of us in this class the conditioner, far from being a symbol of security, becomes a threat. Its sealed world gives us a feeling of being closed in. The agency concluded that a way would have to be found to give such people open windows and still persuade them to buy air conditioners, but didn't say how to do it. (Another agency man advised us that many people still feel guilty about installing an air conditioner because "God made bad weather so you should put up with it." He said, "There is a lot of that attitude, amazingly, left in America.")

Dr. Dichter advised marketers of do-it-yourself tools and gadgets that they were missing a bet if they were not selling men security as well as gadgets. He advised: "A man concentrating on his tools or his machinery *is* in a closed world. He is free from the strains of interpersonal relationships. He is engaged in a peaceful dialogue with himself."

At a showing of children's furniture in mid-1956 (National Baby and Children's Show) a combination of high chair, bathinette, and toilet trainer was displayed. The president of the firm said it was calculated to give the child a "home" and a "feeling of security." Then he added: "Things are getting to the point where manufacturers are getting more and more to be psychologists."

**Selling reassurance of worth.** In the mid-fifties *The Chicago Tribune* made a depth study of the detergent and soap market to try to find out why these products had failed to build brand loyalty, as many other products have done. Housewives tend to switch from one brand to another. This, the *Tribune* felt, was lamentable and concluded that the soap and detergent makers were themselves clearly to blame. They had been old-fashioned in their approach. "Most advertising," it found "now shows practically no awareness that

women have any other motive for using their products than to be clean, to protect the hands, and to keep objects clean." The depth-wise soap maker, the report advised, will realize that many housewives feel they are engaged in unrewarded and unappreciated drudgery when they clean. The advertiser should thus foster the wife's feeling of "worth and esteem." His "advertising should exalt the role of housekeeping -- not in self-conscious, stodgy ways or with embarrassingly direct praise -- but by various implications making it known what an important and proud thing it is or should be to be a housewife performing a role often regarded . . . as drudgery."

Dr. Smith, in his book on motivation research, makes the point that luggage makers can increase sales if they remind the public that they are selling a form of reassurance. Nice new luggage he advises, gives a man a feeling of being important and gives him more bearing when he goes out into the world.

Even the all-wise doctor is sometimes badly in need of reassurance, and according to Dr. Dichter, the shrewd pharmaceutical house will sell it to him, and thus win the doctor's gratitude and recommendation of at least its general type of medication when a prescription is to be ordered. Dr. Dichter made a depth study of 204 doctors for pharmaceutical advertisers in order that they could be more effective "in influencing the prescription motivation of physicians." The drug houses should understand, he counseled, that the doctor feels a little threatened by the growth of factory-compounded, ready-mixed medicines. The doctors probed revealed deep resentment of drug ads that relegated the doctor to the position of a pill dispenser (rather than chief diagnostician and healer). The shrewd drug house, Dr. Dichter counseled, will not claim too much credit for the good results or go over the doctor's head to the public. Instead, it will seek to re-enforce the doctor's self-image as the "all-powerful healer," and put the spotlight in ads on the doctor rather than overstress the "medical qualities of the drug."

**Selling ego-gratification.** This in a sense is akin to selling reassurance of worth. A maker of steam shovels found that sales were lagging. It had been showing in its ads magnificent photos of its mammoth machines lifting great loads of rock and dirt. A motivation study of prospective customers was made to find what was wrong. The first fact uncovered was that purchasing agents, in buying such machines, were strongly influenced by the comments and recommendations of their steam-shovel operators, and the operators showed considerable hostility to this company's brand. Probing the operators, the investigators quickly found the reason. The operators resented pictures in the ad that put all the glory on the huge machine and showed the operator as a barely visible figure inside the distant cab. The shovel maker, armed with this insight, changed its ad approach and began taking its photographs from over the operator's shoulder. He was shown as master of the mammoth machine. This new approach, *Tide* magazine reported, is "easing the operators' hostility."

One of the most forthright instances of selling ego-gratification is that done by the vanity press that brings out books completely subsidized by the author. During the early fifties 10 per cent of all books published in America were of this variety. One of the most active of the vanity publishers, Exposition Press, brings out as many as two hundred books a year. Its publisher, Mr. Edward Uhlman, states: "Our authors must be prepared psychologically and financially to lose money. Other houses may promise riches . . . We just offer immortality!" He not only prints the author's words and name in deathless type but sets up author luncheons, autographing parties in local bookstores, newspaper reviews and radio interviews. Mr. Uhlman says he has had authors so anxious to get themselves in print that they have expressed willingness to sell their automobiles and mortgage their homes to pay Uhlman for publishing their books. One offered to sell his 150-acre ranch in New Mexico. Mr. Uhlman, a candid man, comments: "I have often felt that the desk in my office might be exchanged profitably for an analyst's couch."

**Selling creative outlets.** The director of psychological research at a Chicago ad agency mentioned casually in a conversation that gardening is a "pregnancy activity." When questioned about this she responded, as if explaining the most obvious thing the world, that gardening gives older women a chance to keep on growing things after they have passed the child-bearing stage. This explains, she said, why gardening has particular appeal to older women and to men, who of course can't have babies. She cited the case of a woman with eleven children who, when she passed through menopause, nearly had a nervous collapse until she discovered gardening, which she took to for the first time in her life and with obvious and intense delight.

Housewives consistently report that one of the most pleasurable tasks of the home, is making a cake. Psychologists were put to work exploring this phenomenon for merchandising clues. James Vicary made a study of cake symbolism and came up with the conclusion that "baking a cake traditionally is acting out the birth of a child" so that when a woman bakes a cake for her family she is symbolically presenting the family with a new baby, an idea she likes very much. Mr. Vicary cited the many jokes and old wives' tales about cake making as evidence: the quip that brides whose cakes fall obviously can't produce a baby yet; the married jest about "leaving a cake in the oven"--the myth that a cake is likely to fall if the woman baking it is menstruating. A

psychological consulting firm in Chicago also made a study of cake symbolism and found that "women experience making a cake as a gift of themselves to their family," which suggest much the same thing.

The food mixes — particularly the cake mixes ; soon found themselves deeply involved in this problem of feminine creativity and encountered much more resistance than the makers, being logical people, ever dreamed possible. The makers found themselves trying to cope with negative and guilt feelings on the part of women who felt that use of ready mixes was a sign of poor housekeeping and threatened to deprive them of a traditional source of praise.

In the early days the cake-mix packages instructed, "Do not add milk, just add water." Still many wives insisted on adding milk as their creative touch, overloaded the cakes or muffins with calcium, and often the cake or muffins fell, and the wives would blame the cake mix. Or the package would say, "Do not add eggs." Typically the milk and eggs had already been added by the manufacturer in dried form. But wives who were interviewed in depth studies would exclaim: "What kind of cake is it if you just need to add tap water!" Several different psychological firms wrestled with this problem and came up with essentially the same answer. The mix makers should always leave the housewife something to do. Thus Dr. Dichter counseled General Mills that it should start telling the housewife that she and Bisquick *together* could do the job and not Bisquick alone. Swansdown White Cake Mix began telling wives in large type: "You Add Fresh Eggs." Some mixes have the wife add both fresh eggs and fresh milk.

Marketers are finding many areas where they can improve sales by urging the prospective customer to add his creative touch. A West Coast firm selling to home builders found that although its architects and designers could map houses to the last detail it was wise to leave some places where builders could add their own personal touch. And Dr. Dichter in his counseling to pharmaceutical houses advised them that in merchandising ready-mixed medical compounds they would be wise to leave the doctors ways they could add personal touches so that each doctor could feel the compound was "his own."

**Selling love objects.** This might seem a weird kind of merchandising but the promoters of Liberace, the TV pianist, have manipulated -- with apparent premeditation -- the trappings of Oedipus symbolism in selling him to women past the child-bearing age (where much of his following is concentrated). The TV columnist John Crosby alluded to this when he described the reception Liberace was receiving in England, where according to Mr. Crosby, he was "visible in all his redundant dimples" on British commercial TV. Mr. Crosby quoted the *New Statesman and Nation* as follows: "Every American mom is longing to stroke the greasy, roguish curls. The wide, trustful childlike smile persists, even when the voice is in full song." TV viewers who have had an opportunity to sit in Mr. Liberace's TV presence may recall that in his TV presentations a picture of his real-life mom is frequently flashed on screen, beaming in her rocking chair or divan while her son performs.

**Selling sense of power.** The fascination Americans show for any product that seems to offer them a personal extension of power has offered a rich field for exploitation by merchandisers. Automobile makers have, strained to produce cars with ever-higher horsepower. After psychiatric probing a Midwestern ad agency concluded that a major appeal of buying a shiny new and more powerful car every couple of years is that "it gives him [the buyer] a renewed sense of power and reassures him of his own masculinity, an emotional need which his old car fails to deliver."

One complication of the power appeal of a powerful new car, the Institute for Motivational Research found, was that the man buying it often feels guilty about indulging himself with power that might be regarded as needless. The buyer needs some rational reassurance for indulging his deep-seated desires. A good solution, the institute decided, was to give the power appeals but stress that all that wonderful surging power would provide "the extra margin of safety in an emergency." This, an institute official explains, provides "the illusion of rationality" that the buyer needs.

The McCann-Erickson advertising agency made a study for Esso gasoline to discover what motivates consumers, in order more effectively to win new friends for Esso. The agency found there is considerable magic in the word power. After many depth interviews with gasoline buyers the agency perfected an ad strategy that hammered at two words, with all letters capitalized: TOTAL POWER.

This need for a sense of power, particularly in men, has been observed and very thoroughly exploited by marketers interested in the boat-buying habits of Americans. Although the owner of a pleasure boat is not going anywhere in particular or at least not in a hurry, Americans prefer power boats to sailboats by a margin of eight to one. The Institute for Motivational Research studied American attitudes toward boat buying and concluded that the average buyer sees his boat as a very satisfying way of fulfilling his need for power. One man, an executive, who was invited to chat at length on the subject said that with a good power boat "you can show you

are all man and let her rip — without having the fear you are bound to have on the road." The institute found that many men seem to use their boats to express their sense of power in "almost a sexual way," and it outlined what it found to be a "power profile" in the average enthusiast's boat-buying habits. If the man has owned five boats the "power profile" structure is apt to shape up like this: first boat, 3<sup>1/2</sup> horsepower; second boat, 5 horsepower; third boat, two tens; fourth boat, 20 to 25 horsepower; fifth boat, the sky is the limit in horsepower. The institute counsels: "Manufacturers, eyeing profits, should explore to the fullest the psychological ways and means of tapping these motives."

**Selling a sense of roots.** When the Mogen David wine people were seeking some way to add magic to their wine's sales appeal (while it was still an obscure brand), they turned to motivation research via their ad agency. Psychiatrists and other probers listening to people talk at random about wine found that many related it to old family-centered or festive occasions. Some talked in an almost homesick way about wine and the good old days that went with it. A hard-hitting copy platform was erected based on these homey associations. The campaign tied home and mother into the selling themes. One line was: "The good old days — the home sweet home wine — the wine that grandma used to make." As a result of these carefully "motivated" slogans, the sales of Mogen David doubled within a year and soon the company was budgeting \$2,000,000 just for advertising — the biggest ad campaign in the history of the wine industry.

**Selling immortality.** Perhaps the most astounding of all the efforts to merchandise hidden needs was that proposed to a conference of Midwestern life-insurance men. The conference invited Edward Weiss, head of Weiss and Geller, to tell members of the assembled North Central Life Advertisers Association (meeting in Omaha in April, 1955) how to put more impact into their messages advertising insurance. In his speech, called "Hidden Attitudes Toward Life Insurance" he reported on a study in depth made by several psychologists. (In an aside he, pointed out that one of the serious problems in selling insurance to women is how to do it without reminding them that they are getting older. If they start brooding about their advancing age the whole sales message may be lost on them. He further agreed this called for real "creative" thinking.)

The heart of his presentation, however, was the findings on selling life insurance to the male, who is the breadwinner in most families and the one whose life is to be insured. Weiss criticized many of the current selling messages as being blind to the realities of this man who usually makes the buying decision. Typically, he demonstrated, current ads either glorified the persistence and helpfulness of the insurance agent or else portrayed the comfortable pattern of life the family had managed to achieve after the breadwinner's death, thanks to the insurance. Both approaches, said Mr. Weiss, are dead wrong. In a few cases, he conceded, the breadwinner may be praised for his foresight, but still he is always depicted as someone now dead and gone.

One of the real appeals of life insurance to a man, his probers found, is that it assures the buyer of "the prospect of immortality through the perpetuation of his influence for it is not the fact of his own *physical* death that is inconceivable; it is the prospect of his *obliteration*." The man can't stand the thought of obliteration. Weiss reported that when men talked at the conscious and more formal level about insurance they talked of their great desire to protect their loved ones in case of any "eventuality." In this their desire for immortality was plain enough. But Weiss said there was strong evidence that this socially commendable acceptance of responsibility was not always the real and main desire of the prospective customer. Weiss said it appeared to be true for many men but not all. "In many instances," he went on, "our projective tests revealed the respondent's fierce desire to achieve immortality in order to control his family after death. These men obtain insurance against obliteration through the knowledge that they will continue to *dominate* their families; to *control* the family standard of living, and to guide the education of their children long after they are gone."

Then Mr. Weiss asked how advertising could be more effective in reassuring both these types on the prospect for the kind of immortality they yearned for. In short, how could the appeals promise both protection and control without alienating one or the other of the potential buyers? He said: "I suggest that such advertising may become more effective as it is concentrated on the emotional problems of the buyer himself rather than picturing the comfort of his surviving family." He proposed that in picturing the security and unity of the surviving family, the "living personality" of the breadwinner always be present by picture or implication. Not only should he be there in the family picture, "but he, and he alone, is the hero — eternally shielding, providing, comforting and governing."

[Vance Packard](#) is best known for his popular book, *The Hidden Persuaders*, concerning the psychological and motivational techniques in advertising. He is also author of *The Naked Society*, *The Sexual Wilderness*, and *Nation of Strangers*.