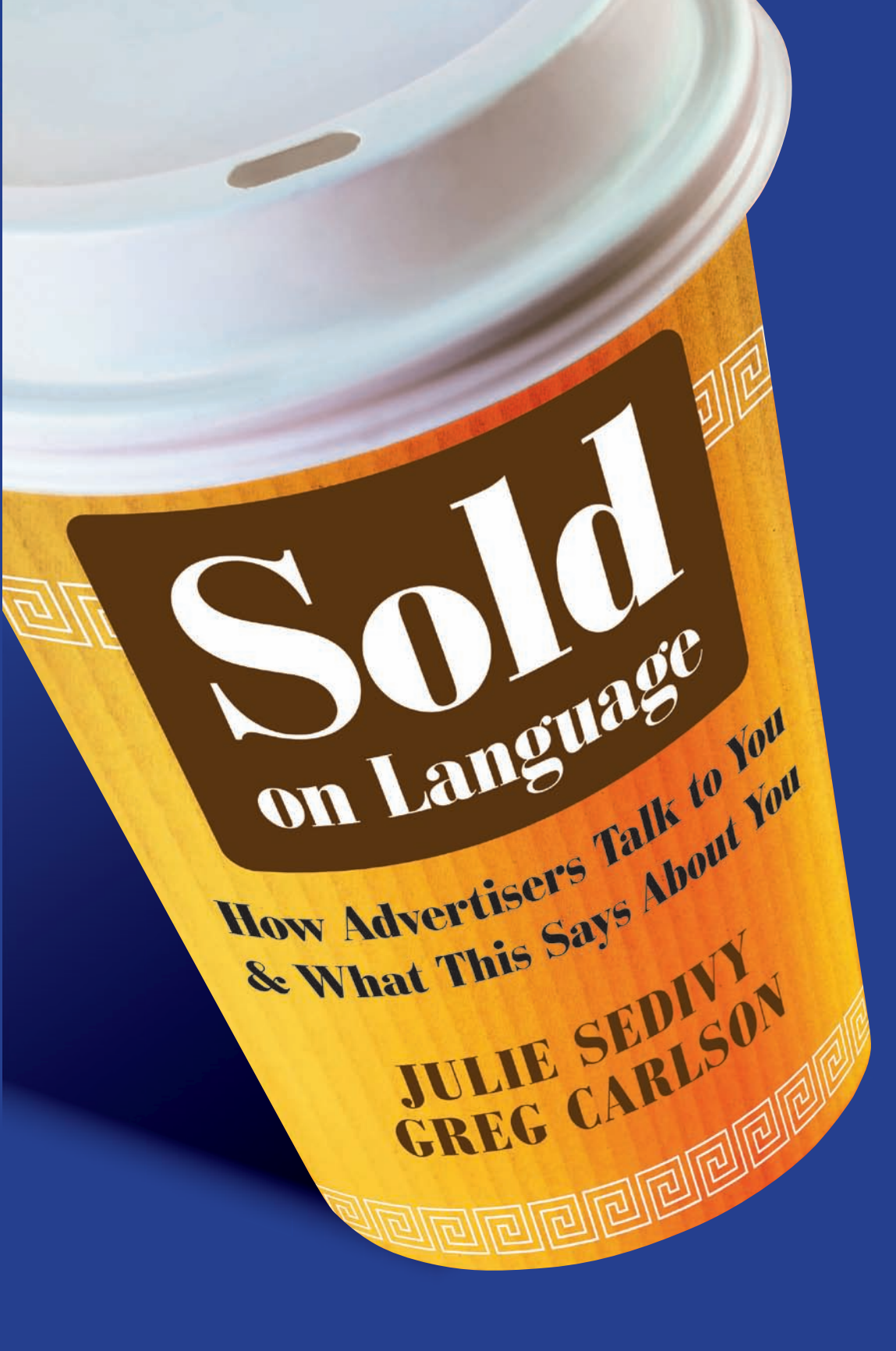
Sold
on Language
How Advertisers Talk to You
& What This Says About You
JULIE SEDIVY
GREG CARLSON

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How Advertisers Talk to You and What This Says About You

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For my parents, Vera and Ladislav, who understood
better than most the power of choice.
—JS

To sons Matthew and Geoffrey, in fondest hopes
for their world.
—GC

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About the Authors

Julie Sedivy was formerly an Associate Professor at Brown University, and is now an Adjunct Associate Professor at the University of Calgary. She has taught Linguistics and Cognitive Science for the past 15 years, and has authored and co-authored several dozen articles on language and the mind. She currently lives and writes in Calgary, and climbs nearby rocks.

Greg Carlson is Professor of Linguistics, Philosophy, and Brain and Cognitive Sciences at the University of Rochester. He has authored or co-authored more than a hundred articles on natural language semantics and psycholinguistics. He is the author of *Reference to Kinds in English* and is co-editor of *The Generic Book* with F.J. Pelletier. Professor Carlson is a former editor of the journal *Linguistics and Philosophy* and is currently editor of *Language*, the journal of the Linguistic Society of America.

Preface

This book is what happens when a couple of language scientists start talking about ads. In our case, the seeds for this book were sown more than 15 years ago. It went like this: The first author (Julie Sedivy) was working on a PhD in Linguistics with the second author (Greg Carlson). Now, the thing about language is that once you start getting analytical about it, you can't stop. So research meetings would often trail off into discussions about language and meaning in everyday life. Since everyday life happens to be saturated by advertising, it became a natural target for all this analytical excess. Eventually, we decided we'd gathered enough material that we should put it to some good use, so we developed a class on the topic. Nature took its course, Julie graduated and took a job elsewhere, but both of us continued to teach the class at our home institutions. In fact, over time, the ideas grew to preoccupy us more and more, and as we continued thinking about them, took on a seriousness that went far beyond their origins as interesting diversions.

As our original observations about advertising have rolled on through the years, they've picked up a great deal of material from fields that are outside of our immediate areas of research. They've also picked up many insights and examples from students over time, a number of whom write to us years after taking the class with just one more example of an ad that reminded them of something they learned in that long-ago language and advertising course. These students have shown us that teaching is the art of serendipity. Each of us has had the experience of finding out that something we intended as only the most casual of remarks, or the stray example, changes what some student thought to the point of changing their lives in some important way. It is experiences like these that propelled us to take the step from the comfortable activity of teaching to the torturous activity of writing a book. You never know where that stray remark will land.

A note on pronouns: Being linguists, we had lengthy discussions as to what "author voice" to use. For aesthetic reasons, we settled on the first person singular form "*I*," even though two of us stand behind the pronoun. Just think of the referent as your favorite amalgamation of a short jazz-loving, rock-climbing, Canadian/American female of Czech descent and a six-foot-five Midwesterner with Scandinavian roots who occasionally goes deer-hunting but has only ever hit one with his pick-up truck. The result will no doubt be more interesting than either one of us.

As always, thanks are in order. First and foremost we'd like to thank and formally apologize to those people who put up with us in the final (truly torturous) stages of writing this book. Gratitude to Craig Chambers, Kate Sedivy-Haley, and Ian Graham for reading sections of this book, sometimes at points when they were still unreadable. An especially warm thanks to writers Brad Somer, Nancy Hayes, Elena Aitken, and Leanne Shirtliffe for helping us make the step from academic English into English English in the writing of this book.

1
The Power of Choice

A trillion dollars is, as they say, a lot of money. A lot. Here's what you do. You take a house, yours will do fine, and remove all the furniture, rugs, dinnerware, everything. Once everything is cleared out, pack the house full of sand. Floor to ceiling. Make sure you open the closet and cabinet doors. Don't forget the medicine chest. Every inch. Now, sharpen your tweezers and start counting the grains of sand, one at a time, until you have counted every grain of sand in the house. Let's just ignore the fact it would take you maybe three or four thousand years at 24 hours a day, more if you wanted to sleep, eat, have a life, etc. Done with your house? Good! Now persuade your neighbors to move all their belongings out, and pack their house with sand and count all of those grains. You're not done yet. Go to the next house, then the next, and do the same for three more down the street. You're finally done—you have now counted a trillion grains of sand, and if you received one dollar for every grain you counted, you'd be the world's first (and oldest) trillionaire.

Your bank account now would hold as much money as is spent each year worldwide on advertising and marketing. Actually, the amount spent is a "little" more, a few hundred billion dollars more, but let's not sweat the details. Roughly 40% of this figure is in the United States. The companies typically with the largest advertising budgets, Procter & Gamble, Verizon Wireless, General Motors, Johnson & Johnson, etc., each spend in the ballpark of two billion annually on advertising. Two billion is nothing to sneeze at. If you had this money and invested it unimaginatively, you could retire on an income of maybe $100 million per year and buy that fleet of helicopters you've always dreamed of. Come to think of it, if P&G didn't advertise at all for a year, the execs there could just keep that two billion, invest it, and grab that extra 100 mil for themselves to split with their golf buddies (and since they wouldn't invest it unimaginatively, probably a lot more).

But companies typically choose not to keep the money for themselves. That money spent is, like most other company expenditures, an investment. It's expected to yield returns. If your company spends $10 000 on advertising your new juice squeezer, you expect to get in return more than $10 000 in profits coming

Sold on Language: How Advertisers Talk to You and What This Says About You. By Julie Sedivy and Greg Carlson

from increased juice squeezer sales. Like investing in new plants to produce truck transmissions, or new machinery to put the toothpaste in the tube, the expectation is return on investment—you spend the money in order to make even more money. And the annual worldwide investment of a trillion dollars plus change is expected to yield more than that in profits.

Looked at this way, advertising is responsible for a great deal of economic prosperity. Just consider momentarily what might happen if all advertising suddenly disappeared. Let's not dwell on the unemployed advertising executives forced to retire early to their condos, but look at the potential broader effects. We know several things for certain. You'd have to pay a lot more for your suddenly much thinner newspapers and magazines, and doubtless many would go out of business. You'd also have to pay a lot to watch television (though you'd have an extra 15–20 minutes per hour of actual programming to watch instead of commercials). Sales of existing products would plummet, and new products would be few and far between. With far more than a trillion dollars in decreased profits, unemployment would soar, tax revenues would dry up, and investment would lag. A worldwide depression would set in, one we would never recover from—except by reintroducing advertising. From this view, the presence of advertising is not merely a sign of prosperity—it's a major cause of it. Raise a glass to Madison Avenue.

Salvation Through Advertising

But some people go even further than this in singing the praises of advertising. The greatest cheerleader for the ad industry may well have been none other than a long-ago president of the United States. It was the Roaring Twenties, a time of unprecedented economic growth and optimism in America. The stock market was booming, with no end in sight—at least for the time being. Reigning over this euphoria was President Calvin Coolidge from Vermont, nicknamed "Silent Cal" for his sparing use of Yankee words. But in 1926, addressing a group of admen at their annual convention, Cal was far from silent. He got downright lyrical about the unparalleled virtues of the advertising industry:

> *Advertising ministers to the spiritual side of trade. It is a great power that has been entrusted to your keeping which charges you with the highest responsibility of inspiring and ennobling the commercial world. It is all part of the greater work of the regeneration and redemption of mankind.*

This is religious language full force. It might appear somewhat out of place in our era. After all, he's talking about the very people who brought us Ronald McDonald, the Jolly Green Giant, and the Pillsbury Doughboy. Hardly religious iconography. But Coolidge saw in advertising's fruits the salvation of mankind:

> *The uncivilized make little progress because they have few desires. The inhabitants of our country are stimulated to new wants in all directions. In order to satisfy their constantly increasing desires, they necessarily expand their productive power. They create more wealth because it is only by that method that they can satisfy their wants. It is this constantly enlarging circle that represents the progress of civilization. If we proceed under the present system, there would appear to be little reason to doubt that we can maintain all of these high standards in wages, in output and in consumption indefinitely.*

Coolidge was very clear that advertisers do much more than just cater to people's existing wants and needs. Advertising is *regenerative* because it creates entirely new wants and desires, ones that would never visit our neurons were it not for advertising. And, this creation of new wants is a good thing as it civilizes and enriches everyone. It is the engine of progress. Unlike the Buddhists' Nirvana which results from the absence of desire, the capitalist's Nirvana is achieved by reveling in want and desire, by fully embracing it.

Coolidge's glittering remarks contain some perfectly valid points, leaving aside for a moment the gathering clouds of the Great Depression, or the fact that eventually, we would need to colonize nearby planets in order to continue this endless regenerative trajectory. But as Coolidge continued his speech, he went on to say a few things that would make even the less cynical among us squirm a bit. Advertisers, it would seem, belong on the same pedestal as that first-grade teacher who taught you to sound out your words, or that college professor who enflamed a simmering intellectual passion:

> *When we stop to consider the part in which advertising plays in the life of production and trade, we see that basically it is that of education.*

Coolidge's key assumption about how consumers and advertisers related to each other was that the whole thing was all about the transmission of information; the advertiser provided it, and the consumer evaluated and considered it. Teachers (advertisers) would act out of a sense of responsibility to their students (consumers), and students (consumers) would act out of trust. With this bond firmly in place, positive business practices would flourish. Because they served as the pipelines of information between companies and consumers—and who wants to serve as a pipeline for sewage?—advertising would apply gentle pressure on the business world, giving more room to its angels than its demons:

> *My conception of what advertising agencies want is a business world in which standards are so high that it will only be necessary for them to tell the truth about it. It will never be possible to create a permanent desire for things that do not have permanent worth. It is my belief that more and more of our country is conforming to these principles.*

History has a way of making all predictions seem either prescient or clueless, and Coolidge's over-the-top jubilation about the economic situation of the time now seems badly off the mark. It's also hard to buy into the idealistic and sentimental portrayal of advertisers as conduits of truthful and useful information to a receptive, discerning, thoughtful public.

The problem is that the notion of advertising as education only limps along for a block or two before tripping over some fundamentally flawed assumptions.

"Education" as we know it these days brings to mind things like seminars, instructional videos, NOVA television series, news articles, books, informational websites, and so on. But using such educational materials has a very different feel than our typical interactions with advertising. Think about tuning in to an educational program about emperor penguins, for example. Imagine what a "documentary" on emperor penguins might be like if it were presented in the format of a typical television commercial:

Panning shot of the frozen wind-blown wasteland of Antarctica.
Cut to shot of the sea by the ice shelf.
Sound: "plop"
Cut to another shot of water by the ice shelf: nothing.
Sound: "plop, plop"
Cut to still another shot of the sea on an ice shelf: still nothing.
Sounds: "plop, plop . . . plop plop plop . . . plop plop . . ."
Cut to shot of a flock of Emperor penguins diving into the sea, each one making a "plopping" sound when they hit the water.
Cut to one "tobogganing" into the water on its belly.
Voice-over: Emperor penguins. Hundreds of them.
Cut to shot of penguins swimming underwater gracefully (graceful music here).
Voice-over: Emperor penguins, ballet artists in the water. . .
Cut to shot of penguin waddling across the ice (bouncy simple music here).
Voice-over: . . .but out of the water, they walk like Charlie Chaplin. . .
Voice-over: Emperor penguins: In Antarctica and at selected zoos and aquariums.
Cut to close-up of penguin apparently laughing and clapping its flippers.

To watch something that went on and on like this for even half an hour would feel really strange. Yeah, penguins are cute, but what else did you learn? The "educational" aspect of modern ads obviously doesn't measure up to the content we see in media broadcasts that everyone agrees are truly educational.

Conflict of Interest

Why is it that your typical TV commercial is so different from a documentary program? The differences stem from this single essential fact: advertising is a form

of persuasion. This means that from square one, your goals and interests are often very different from those of the advertiser. Let's say your goal is to buy the best dishwashing machine you can afford. I don't have to be the first to break it to you that this is not the main concern of an advertising copywriter for Maytag. He's unlikely to suffer a single pang of failure upon finding out that, by buying the washer in his beautifully-crafted ad, you've passed up a wiser purchase. If you really want to read something that's written with your best interests in mind, you pick up a copy of *Consumer Reports*, you don't go flipping through *Good Housekeeping* to find that Maytag ad you saw last week. When you do read the ad, you take it for granted that any comparisons it makes to the competition are not necessarily "fair and balanced."

You're well aware that the whole point of ads is to try to get you to align your *perception* of your own interests with the interests of the company doing the advertising. But when you watch a documentary, your goals in watching it are already aligned just about exactly with the communication goals of the people who made the program. You watch mainly to learn something about penguins (and to be entertained); the goal of the program's creators is mainly to teach you something about penguins (and to entertain you). There's a reason why documentaries aren't required to remind you, "*You are watching an educational program. Its content has been approved by the National Geographic Society.*" A message to that effect wouldn't cause you to suddenly revise how you view that footage about emperor penguin dads hatching baby chicks on their feet. You wouldn't suspect the program of being thinly-veiled penguin propaganda. On the other hand, ads *are* legally required to be readily identifiable as such, because the mindset you bring to persuasive communication is very different.

It seems to take small children some time to learn that persuasive messages are different from ones that provide helpful information, which is one reason some people have raised concerns about advertising aimed at kids (and some places, such as Quebec and the UK have outright forbidden ads targeted at children younger than 13).[1] It was, therefore, a point of parental pride when I watched the following interaction between my then five-year-old daughter and her young friend who was visiting for breakfast and coveting her cereal.

Friend: *You should try my cereal. It's much better than your cereal. Here. Let's trade.*

Daughter *(barely looking up from the bowl):* *Naaah. That's just advertising.*

Interestingly, the skill of persuasion-detection appears earlier in kids who have older siblings (and, I would guess, friends who attempt manipulation). Seems that there are learning benefits to being thrown into social interactions in which there are flagrant conflicts of interest.

[1] The prohibition in the UK, though, had more to do with the impact of advertising on childhood obesity than with general concern about kids' critical abilities.

Looking back at Coolidge's speech, he seems to be assuming that the goals of advertisers and consumers are more or less synced up. It's easy to see how, given this rosy view, you might reach the same conclusion Coolidge did, and have faith that advertising would exert a noble pressure on the business world for higher standards. If advertising is basically a mutually beneficial transmission of information, the best ad will be the one that is able to transmit the most glowing information about the product. This depends on there being positive things about the product to transmit, which puts pressure on companies to make good products.

But the collision of interests makes persuasion quite a bit different from not just things like teaching math, but almost anything else you might do with language, such as reciting a poem, gossiping, news reporting, helping someone fix their car, or taking a medical history.

It turns out that persuasion isn't the only act of communication in which the goals of the hearer and speaker are out of sync. There are other times when the interests of the speaker may veer off from those of the hearer.

For example, consider this excerpt from a news article about Russia's lackluster performance in the 2010 Winter Olympics:

> *Russia suffered its worst ever Olympic performance, coming 11th in the medal table with just three golds. Mr. Medvedev said that the trainers and coaches who had prepared Russian athletes for the Vancouver games 'should take the brave decision and submit their resignations,' he said. 'If they cannot do it, we will help them,' Mr. Medvedev added.*

It's doubtful that the ensuing resignation of trainers and coaches could truly be deemed to be due to an act of *persuasion* (even though it might euphemistically be called that). It doesn't count as persuasion unless the persuadee has some choice in the matter in the first place; absent that, he's been coerced, or commanded, not persuaded.

Some other examples of nonpersuasion: a boss tells an employee to write a tedious report, a parent orders a resistant child to unplug himself from his videogame and play outside, a professor instructs perspiring students to turn in their exam papers. In these cases, the speaker's goal—as in persuasion—is also to affect the hearer's actions, and it doesn't much matter whether this is what the hearer *really* wants in the first place. But the hearer does as he's told because he accepts that the speaker has authority over his actions (or at least some of them) simply by speaking. This is part of the implicit ground rules.

Things get more complex—and more interesting—when the hearer hasn't abdicated control over his actions. To successfully persuade, the speaker has to do more than simply utter some words under the cloak of authority. She has to change not just the hearer's actions, but also the internal state that leads to those actions. She has to impact the hearer's *choice*. These two elements—potential misalignment of goals, and the power of choice—set persuasion apart from all other types of

communication, and run through every aspect of our interactions with advertising.

So, there's no persuasion without choice. And the instant there's choice, the door is flung wide open for persuasion.

The Downside of Choice

It would be fun to put Calvin Coolidge in a time machine so that he could see for himself the glorious result of that upward spiral of stimulated wants and expanded production. I'd like to assign psychologist Barry Schwartz, author of *The Paradox of Choice*, as his tour guide. A stroll through Barry's neighborhood grocery store would reveal the following:

285 varieties of cookies (including 21 chocolate chip varieties)
13 "sports drinks"
65 "box drinks" for kids
85 other flavors and brands of juices
15 flavors of bottled water
80 different kinds and permutations of pain relievers
29 different chicken soups
120 pasta sauces
175 salad dressings
15 extra-virgin olive oils
275 varieties of cereal
175 types of tea bags

And the local electronics store offers up:

45 different car stereo speakers, with 50 different speaker sets
42 different computers, most customizable in various ways
27 printers
110 televisions
50 DVD players
20 video cameras
85 telephones (not counting cell phones)
and enough components to combine into 6,512,000 differently-configured stereo systems.

It's hard to imagine that in the 1960s and 1970s, when factories were spewing out battalions of the same model of car or television set, people actually worried that the age of mass production and mass consumption would usher in the *end* of choice. There was much fretting by cultural commentators that the technology of

mass standardization would turn all consumers into uniform, undifferentiated, robotic automatons who would all drive the same vehicles, serve the same TV dinners, read the same magazines, and watch the same shows. The sun was about to set on the age of the individual.

What bunk, wrote Alvin Toffler, author of *Future Shock*. His book, published in 1970, correctly predicted that technological advances in production would bring about a super-industrial age in which it would soon be possible to produce a jaw-dropping *variety* of products very cheaply. Rather than being on the threshold of the death of choice, society was on the brink of overchoice. Toffler was much less worried about there being too little of it, and far more worried about there being too much.

Living as we do in a culture that worships choice, it might be hard to lose sleep at night over the idea of too much choice. After all, a time-traveling Coolidge might go slightly and temporarily catatonic in the face of all these purchasing decisions, but once he got over the culture shock, he'd surely adapt and revel in the multitude of consumer possibilities.

But some psychologists these days think that when it comes to the impact of choice on well-being, more choice is often less happiness. For instance, Barry Schwartz, who's been kind enough to take the time-traveling Coolidge shopping, can provide a litany of reasons why too much choice diminishes happiness. For one, the process of making decisions is actually not all that enjoyable. People often experience stress when they have to decide, and in many cases will jump at the chance to avoid the whole hassle. Too much choice can even induce buyer-paralysis; in one study, when researchers allowed people to sample different varieties of jams in a grocery store, 30% of customers made a purchase when they were offered six samples. But when facing down a dizzying 24 options, only 3% bought anything at all. And nowadays, consumer products are often marketed and perceived by consumers as not just useful or desirable *things*, but as tools for expressing who you are. This raises the stakes—a bad purchase doesn't just saddle you with a lousy product, it can leave you stuck with a crummy identity as well. Do you buy the plain yellow French's mustard, the honey mustard, or the Dijon made with white wine and tarragon for your guests? And what does it all say about *you*?

Moreover, the more choices you have, the greater the opportunity for regretting all the things you could have chosen but didn't. The pain of regret can be so sharp that people are often happier with situations in which they've had little choice, which may explain why arranged marriages can be surprisingly successful. And all the time and energy you spend on navigating your way through a sea of choices in life—choosing the right school for junior, updating your wardrobe, figuring out what health plan is best for you, deciding how to invest your retirement savings—may take you away from the things that truly make people happy in life: cultivating friendships and spending quality time with family and loved ones.

There are many reasons to think choice might be overrated.

But for Alvin Toffler, the consequences of too much choice went beyond just the stresses and anxieties that come with making a zillion decisions, large and small, on

a daily basis. He hinted that beyond a certain point, too much freedom would lead to unfreedom.

He may have had a point. When pollster Louis Harris asked people in 1966 whether they agreed with the statement "What I think doesn't matter anymore," 36% agreed. In 1986, with the super-industrial age in full swing, 60% agreed.

To see how too much choice can eventually lead to a loss of control, imagine yourself in the greatest possible position of power—suppose you're a benevolent dictator with unchallenged control over the nation you govern. The ultimate choice over any important matter of policy lies in your hands alone. But this also sets you up as the nation's biggest persuasion target. There will be lots of people seeking to influence you for a number of reasons that may or may not be consistent with your own goals. These interactions will come in many guises. In some interactions, you'll still able to maintain a good deal of control over the decision-making process and its outcome. For example, you'll hold meetings with trusted consultants whose advice you'll seek out. You'll set these up at a special time when you're not distracted by other things, and you'll decide who to invite. You'll tell them what you're hoping to accomplish, and they'll come prepared to make a reasoned case with detailed information to present to you. You'll understand that they may have their own interests and they might argue passionately for one solution over another, and you take this into account. Because they really want to impact your choice, they in turn will put pressure on others to be able to deliver on promises they'd like to be able to make to you.

This is the kind of scenario that Coolidge had in mind for consumers, a situation in which the consumer's power to choose and the advertiser's desire to influence yield the greatest good for the greatest number. But this idealized set of conditions happens in only a pretty narrow set of consumer situations. Shopping for a dishwasher is probably not a bad example. You've identified certain features as important to you: You need something that will fit in a specific space in your kitchen, and you really want it to be quiet. You're on a tight budget, so it has to be pretty inexpensive and reliable. You don't care if it can wash pots and pans, as you normally do these by hand anyway. Armed with a checklist of your needs, you set about finding out which model of dishwasher best fits them. You read spec sheets and talk to salespeople about the features of the dishwashers. You expect that the information provided to you is accurate, and you can check it against consumer reports, so you can easily hold the salespeople accountable for what they tell you.

But consumers and powerful leaders alike are targets of persuasion whether it's invited or not. As our fearless leader, you'll be bombarded on all sides by attempts to get you to make certain decisions. Some of these will be overtly aggressive, with implicit or explicit threats of terrible things happening if you don't choose some course of action. But many of these will be covert and manipulative. Some may zero in on your desire to be flattered and admired by people you care about. Some may work by sowing seeds of distrust in you towards other people who might have influence over you. Some may be so subtle and carefully concealed that you won't

even recognize them as attempts to influence you at all. You'll simply encounter a set of circumstances that seems to lead to a single obvious solution. You'll believe that it was entirely your own conclusion, reached entirely through your own judgment. In order to truly maintain control, rather than a self-delusion of control, you'll have to be very alert to all of these sources of influence. You'll also really need to understand your own vulnerabilities and possible weaknesses that might expose you to being manipulated against your will.

Likewise, as a consumer, advertising comes at you whether you want it or not, and whether or not you have the time, mental energy or interest to really process the information it contains. Advertising interrupts the TV shows or radio programs you *have* chosen to tune in to. It's peppered throughout the articles you're trying to read. It pops up on your computer screen with attention-grabbing animations. It floods your physical and virtual mailboxes. It interrupts your dinner through perky telemarketers' phone calls. It has to compete with other advertising, or with other information that you may or may not want to attend to at the moment.

So, the problem of too much choice is not just that there are too may decisions to make. It's that as consumer choice escalates, it sets off an arms-race-style chain of consequences. By holding the power of choice in your fist, you become a target for persuasion. Because of the endless profusion of your choices, there's ferocious competition to influence your decisions. Modern communication technology makes it easy for advertisers to fill every nook and cranny of your life with ads. You get blasted with more information than you can sift through in any thoughtful or deliberate manner, so you try to screen much of it out. In order to penetrate this screen, advertisers become more and more savvy at getting through. They develop techniques to bypass your attentional defenses with ever harder-to-ignore ads, or by placing ads in new, unexpected places. Ads proliferate. They get more compressed. Denied an appointment with your deliberate attention, they start to rely less on facts and arguments, and more on gut-level feelings that can be stirred up even when you're not paying that much attention. More and more persuasive messages are covert, affecting you outside the sphere of your conscious, rational decision to exercise your powers of judgment. Advertising comes to work more and more on the edges of your awareness.

At what stage does your power of choice bring you down a path to the point where you're less and less able to actually be the true agent of this power, like a puppet dictator whose strings are pulled from backstage?

The Illusion of Choice

It's worth asking: What does it mean to choose? Some fuzziness arises. When in 1997, 39 members of the Heaven's Gate cult drank poison and wrapped their heads in plastic bags so that they could be beamed up to a higher plane of existence, it was hard not to see them as victims of their charismatic leader, Marshall Applewhite.

And yet, they left behind videotapes in which they grinned with joy as they described how they were about to advance "beyond human." Several members of the sect posted "Earth exit statements" on the Heaven's Gate website (which was still up as of 2010, by the way). One statement, by a member who took on the name of "Glnody" reads:

> *First let me explain that our Older Members have upon numerous occasions given us each the task of carefully examining and deciding if we are absolutely sure that Ti and Do [Applewhite and his partner leader] are indeed from the Next Level and that we want to continue on in this classroom. The door out of this classroom has always been wide open. Those who have decided to leave have never been asked to reconsider or coerced to stay in any way. We never expressed animosity at their leaving but instead sent them off with hugs and best wishes, wanting only the best for them.*

Like many cult members, the Heaven's Gate group fervently believed they were acting of their own free will. How do we know they were not? Why can't we take their insistence at face value?

Though little is known about the inner workings of the Heaven's Gate cult itself, nowadays, psychologists who study cult behavior can usually point to a number of specific persuasion methods and group dynamics that can lead people to extreme behavior they might never agree to in a different environment. These methods tend not to be that different in kind from run-of-the-mill techniques that might be used by your typical gifted salesman. They're just applied much more aggressively and systematically so that members experience total immersion in the persuasive environment. All of which suggests that persuasion and coercion—and choice and nonchoice—can begin to shade into each other.[2]

What's striking about many cult members, though, is that they themselves are usually blind as to *why* they're making the choices they are. They can't acknowledge that there are extreme aspects of the group environment—insulation from alternative messages, intense social approval or disapproval by the group, a shedding of individual identity to be replaced by a group identity—that are playing havoc with their thinking. When experts try to deprogram these victims, they focus a lot of effort on getting them to understand how such external factors affected their decisions. Once the victim is able to do this, the "choice" to belong to the cult often evaporates.

[2] Sometimes this shading poses very subtle legal challenges. In 2004, a Massachusetts court acquitted a mother who acted under the "leading" of a fellow sect member, and starved her child by feeding him nothing but breast milk. Being pregnant, she failed to produce enough milk, and the child died. The defense case was built on arguments that the mother had lost the capacity for free choice, as she was being brainwashed by the cult. Demonstrating the shades of gray inherent in such a ruling, her husband was convicted and sentenced to life in prison, as the court deemed that his ability to choose was not compromised to the same degree.

So a good test of what it means to make a real choice might be whether the choice would be the same or different depending on whether you're aware of exactly how and why it was made.

Having some *awareness* of the things that are causing your internal state seems important. So is being able to have some control over them. When both of these are missing, you have the sense that your power of choice is seriously undermined, even when the ultimate decision to act rests in your hands.

To bring us back from the realm of cults and into the world of commerce here's a hypothetical news story for you: let's say the beef industry has developed a tasteless and odorless chemical that causes intense cravings for red meat. The industry cuts a deal with Pepsi, and pays to have this chemical dissolved in Pepsi's products. The practice is, strictly speaking legal, as the chemical has been proven to be completely harmless, and is listed under its scientific name in the list of ingredients, along with all the flavorings and additives. Anyone is free to look up the properties of this chemical on the Internet, and decide not to drink Pepsi, should they be inspired to research the ingredients. Chances are, though, that if this practice were discovered, it would result in a public outcry and legislators would scramble to regulate the use of such substances. There's something about this that makes us feel that choice is violated.

This scenario sounds like science fiction. More science than fiction, though. Everyday science tells us that it's entirely possible to understand and alter internal states in targeted ways, here and now. For example, in 2005, neuroscientist Michael Kosfeld and his colleagues at the University of Zurich had subjects sniff a nasal spray containing oxytocin. This is the hormone that plays a starring role in enhancing bonding behavior – mothers who have just given birth or are nursing are awash in it, and having an orgasm causes it to spike nicely. The Zurich team had their subjects play an investment "game"—with real money at stake— in which "investor" participants chose how much money to entrust to "trustee" participants, who then freely decided how much of the invested money they would return to the investor. Subjects who'd been given a squirt of oxytocin risked more money than those who'd inhaled a placebo. The oxytocin seemed to specifically home in on the investor's willingness to trust the other participant. It wasn't that it just made the subjects more willing to take risks. To rule this out, the researchers ran a comparison study in which the investors' return was determined purely randomly, rather than by human participants. If oxytocin affected risk-taking, rather than trust, it should make the oxytocin-sniffing subjects invest more money, but it didn't.

Studies like this always attract the attention of the mainstream media, as this one did, and invite speculations about possible sinister abuses of this knowledge. Nightmarish speculations ensue: imagine politicians misting the crowd with oxytocin at political rallies. Imagine banks piping in oxytocin during clients' meetings with financial advisors. Surely, the public needs to be protected from such possible assaults on individual freedom.

Hang on, say the neuroscientists. What's missing from this dystopian speculation is the fact that oxytocin is *already* likely being manipulated in all kinds of ways by marketers and politicians and the like. It's a chemical produced by the brain. All kinds of things can cause it to be released, including *information* we take in subconsciously or consciously that leads us to size up someone's trustworthiness. A sales person chit-chatting about your cute kids, and using your first name. The firmness of a canvasser's handshake. The fact that a political candidate uses the same regional accent you do. The connotations that slogans evoke. The uproar over the oxytocin study ignores the fact that brain science's greatest discovery over the past couple of decades has been this: our brains are shaped by more than just our DNA, or the drugs we ingest. They're also shaped by our *experiences*, and by the information we take in. As neuroscientist Antonio Damasio wrote in a commentary about the Zurich hormone study, "current marketing techniques—for political and other products—may well exert their effects through the natural release of molecules such as oxytocin in response to well-crafted stimuli. Civic alarm at the prospect of such abuses should have started long before this study."

In fact, the trajectory of advertising in the super-industrial age, in which more and more ads fight for smaller and smaller slivers of your attention, shifts the balance steadily towards the use of techniques that affect our brains without our awareness. It's important to realize that all this isn't part of some grand conspiracy in which malevolent corporations and ad agencies purposely set out to deceive and control you. It comes from a dynamic pattern of communicative moves and countermoves in which both consumers and advertisers try to preserve their own often conflicting interests. It can arise in any situation where someone has a choice that others want to influence.

Philosophers as far back in time as Plato were aware of this connection (though Plato certainly didn't couch it in terms of brain chemistry), and flagged it as a troublesome side effect of the freedom of choice in a political democracy. In his classic essay "The rhetoric of democracy," author Daniel Boorstin writes:

> *One of the tendencies of democracy, which Plato and the other antidemocrats warned against a long time ago, was the danger that rhetoric would displace or at least overshadow epistemology; that is, the temptation to allow the problem of persuasion to overshadow the problem of knowledge. Democratic societies tend to become more concerned with what people believe than with what is true, to become more concerned with credibility than truth. All these problems are accentuated in a large-scale democracy like ours, which possesses all the apparatus of modern industry. And the problems are accentuated still further by universal literacy, by instantaneous communication, and by the daily plague of words and images.*

Plato, as you'll see in Chapter 8, had some rather creative and radical solutions to this conundrum, all involving a dramatic reduction of choice for the general

population. This kind of strategy doesn't fly too readily in most Western societies, but the problem remains: what to do when apparent choice is not necessarily true choice? There's some grappling to be done.

Not to push the cult analogy too far, but for the average consumer, much of the cognitive action that happens in the face of persuasion falls below a threshold of awareness. We rarely truly understand exactly how and why we respond to advertising. The analogy has its limits—brilliant or subtle advertising may move us, but it doesn't usually reduce us to cult-like followers. It rarely has the power to make us do something we weren't kind of inclined to do anyway, and if it ever caused someone to become fully detached from a sense of right and wrong, there was surely a pre-existing psychiatric condition. But it works at the margins of our actions, and, like the hormonal nasal spray, it often works in parts of our brains that are hidden to us.

Just as deprogramming can sometimes restore choice to cult members, having a clearer sense of how our minds work when advertisers talk to us can only bolster our own power for choice. Stringent regulation isn't the answer—how on earth could you regulate how someone dresses, or the emotional content of the words they use, or whether they call you by your first name? But scientific understanding of the processes that underlie persuasive language—while still primitive in many ways—does offer a starting point for awareness. In knowing our own minds a bit better, we just may put ourselves into a better position to choose how we choose.

2
The Unconscious Consumer

According to Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, we live in constant danger of having our unconscious memories and longings grab us by the throat and lead us down a path of irrational choices. Even worse, these lurking drives can shape our decisions even while we fool ourselves into thinking that we are rationally sizing up the piles of pros and cons we've meticulously gathered. By throwing a glaring spotlight onto the unconscious, Freud reshaped the study of the mind. Not all modern psychologists buy his theories about penis envy and little boys wanting to marry their mothers. But they do agree that a lot of the machinery that drives the decisions we make or even the way we process information lies outside of our conscious control or awareness. Freud probed these hidden motivators by having people lie on a couch and relate their dreams and memories. Today, scientists of the mind probe them with clever experimental tasks in labs and use expensive devices to measure the gaze patterns of eyes, and the electrical activity and blood flow in the brain. All this technological proliferation just emphasizes how elusive our own minds are to us.

"Torches of Freedom"

The implications of Freud's ideas for persuasion were immediately snatched up by none other than his nephew, Edward Bernays. It's hard to imagine these two men as related. Freud was a thoughtful, articulate, scholarly man in the traditional European mold. American culture left a bad taste in his mouth. His American nephew was a brash entrepreneur who not only embraced the ideals of consumerism and capitalism, but did a great deal to advance them. Just as Freud can be seen as one of the great innovators in the field of psychology, Bernays played a founding role in the field of public relations as

Sold on Language: How Advertisers Talk to You and What This Says About You. By Julie Sedivy and Greg Carlson

we know it today. He did so by borrowing many of his uncle's ideas and applying them to the practice of persuasion—and then returned the favor by promoting his uncle's books, helping Freud achieve the stature he enjoyed in America.

At the time, much of advertising tried to persuade by appealing to the intellect, enumerating good reasons to buy a product. Bernays was fascinated by the possibility that persuasion could work best by cutting a wide loop around the rational intellect and drilling straight into the mother lode of those unconscious desires his uncle Sigi talked about. He began what would turn out to be some of the most defining experiments in persuasion.

Bernays understood that to sell a product, a company could do much more than promise to satisfy a need or desire for that product—it could promise consumers that they could use the product to satisfy a *deeper* need. Sometimes he created such a link by exploiting symbolism and attitudes that were already present. For example, in 1929, Bernays was consulting for Lucky Strikes cigarettes. The company had recognized that wads of money could be made by inducing women to smoke—only problem was, there was a pesky social taboo against females smoking in public, seriously cutting into potential sales. Bernays made tracks to a local psychoanalyst, who informed him that women equated cigarettes with masculine power, and that for some, cigarettes could be seen as "torches of freedom". Bernays had his angle. He snagged a list of 30 debutantes from a friend at *Vogue* magazine, and sent each of them the following telegram, signed by his secretary:

> *IN THE INTERESTS OF EQUALITY OF THE SEXES AND TO FIGHT ANOTHER SEX TABOO I AND OTHER YOUNG WOMEN WILL LIGHT ANOTHER TORCH OF FREEDOM BY SMOKING CIGARETTES WHILE STROLLING ON FIFTH AVENUE EASTER SUNDAY. WE ARE DOING THIS TO COMBAT THE SILLY PREJUDICE THAT THE CIGARETTE IS SUITABLE FOR THE HOME, THE RESTAURANT, THE TAXICAB, THE THEATER LOBBY BUT NEVER NO NEVER FOR THE SIDEWALK. WOMEN SMOKERS AND THEIR ESCORTS WILL STROLL FROM FORTY-EIGHT STREET TO FIFTY-FOURTH STREET ON FIFTH AVENUE BETWEEN ELEVEN-THIRTY AND ONE O'CLOCK.*

An ad with similar wording, signed by a prominent feminist, also urged women to participate in this "protest". The recruitment efforts picked up 10 willing debutantes. Bernays was ready, having alerted the papers. The next day, their front pages reported on this parade of 10 young female radicals lighting up their "torches of freedom". The American public was outraged and delighted, and independent-minded young women everywhere lit up their cigarettes to express their emancipation.