Watchdogs are cracking down on spurious science

The environment has become especially fertile ground for scientific claims in advertising. Even the UK government was recently ticked off by the Advertising Standards Authority for language used in Department of Energy and Climate Change adverts that implied the inevitability of climate change. Meanwhile, a tidal wave of “greenwash” has been stemmed by the new CAP Broadcast Code (see “Legal eagle”, p17), which says that any claim you make for your “green” product must also be true for both your suppliers and customers. The code says: “Generalised claims for environmental benefit must be assessed on a ‘cradle to grave’ basis.” Advertising claims for a product are assessed not just on the finished article, but also on the resources used, manufacturing, packaging, distribution and disposal.

Incidentally
Science is emotional

Paradoxically, “science” works in marketing because it plugs into deep-seated social and emotional needs.

First there’s the spurious authority of numbers. A study by Southern California University shows that nearly all our decisions are emotional – but numbers allow us to cover our choices with a veneer of rationality.

Trust in experts and authority figures is a social phenomenon that has developed for our own protection as humans have evolved. Research by Nielsen found that 92 per cent of the UK public trust doctors to tell the truth, while 65 per cent trust scientists, but only 49 per cent trust adverts.

A US government poll found that although 90 per cent of people are “interested” in science, only 15 per cent consider themselves “well informed”. So credibility and ignorance combine to make science an almost irresistible selling tool.

Dos and don’ts

DO

Make sure your claims can be verified: they may be true, but if you can’t prove them you may have to withdraw them.

Beware of qualified claims: comparative statements such as “friendlier” or “greener” are regularly ruled against by the ASA. Greener than what?

DON’T

Give yourself the benefit of the doubt: even if consumers are ignorant, your competitors aren’t. They’ll soon spot wishful thinking, loose stats or scientific mistakes – and complain.

Look down the wrong end of the telescope: your R&D department may have spent months developing an idea, but that doesn’t mean that consumers or consumer protection bodies will notice or care.

Make irrelevant claims: boasting that a product does not contain harmful chemicals when it never has is irrelevant and misleading.
Fact of the month

In 2010 more products will include medical or pharmaceutical-grade ingredients and nanotechnology, and an emphasis on clinical testing to substantiate claims will move from the prestige market into the “massstige” (affordable for general consumers but positioned as luxury), says Mintel.

**Trends for “science” in cosmetics for 2010:**

1. **Mood Beauty**
   Make-up to make the wearer feel better, literally, with psychological benefits from ingredients that act on people’s neurotransmitters.

2. **Nu Natural**
   Claims such as “free from” and “sustainable” will appear on products that simultaneously contain synthetics such as peptides, ceramides or collagen.

3. **Pro-TechT**
   Marketing language for beauty products will borrow from computer technology with concepts such as “firewalls” and packaging using neoprene and concrete.

4. **Turbo Beauty 4G**
   Expect more quasi-medical results and “mix it yourself” solutions: at-home kits and “cures” that offer alternatives to cosmetic surgery.


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**Where next?**

**Must read:**

*Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*
Robert B Cialdini (Collins Business Essentials)

*The World of Consumption*
Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold (Routledge)

*“Do Nutrition Claims Matter to Consumers?”*
Stefanella Stranieri, Lucia Baldi, Alessandro Banterle (Journal of Agricultural Economics, 2010)

*“Science claims in magazine advertising”*
Treffie Cox, JS McCallum, Ralph K Watkins, University of Missouri Science Education, Vol 22, Issue 1

For more marketing books, visit the Institute’s bookshop: www.cim.co.uk/shop

**Must visit:**

[www.asa.org.uk](http://www.asa.org.uk) for what you can and cannot say in advertising
[www.popsci.com](http://www.popsci.com)
[www.badsience.net/category/adverts](http://www.badsience.net/category/adverts)

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**10 scientific “facts”**

1. Market research agency KC Blair found that ads that talk scientifically about disease make people feel worse – but marketers feel better: they create the need for relief, and sell more product.

2. For years Oil of Olay emphasised its magical ingredient “pentapeptides”, which it turns out is just a fancy term for protein.

3. In the US, Wegman’s Bread boasted that it is “bromate free”. But then so is all bread. Bromate, an additive, has never been found in bread at harmful levels, according to *Popular Science*.

4. Estée Lauder’s Advanced Night Repair Cream claimed to protect skin from UV rays – not something found in most bedrooms at night.

5. A garden care company boasted its organic compost was “100 per cent chemical free”. The Society of Chemistry was so amused it offered a £1m prize for the first ever entirely chemical-free product.

6. Psychologist William Hallman says there is strong evidence that people learn their science from science claims in adverts. A bit like learning the basics of car repair from a used-car salesman.

7. Japanese tea brand F Cup promises to enlarge breasts – “20mg of dandelion extract stimulates your female hormones and promotes a shapely female body”, says the label.

8. For decades KFC claimed to have a “secret recipe” for its coating. Lab analysis by William Poundstone for his book *Big Secrets* revealed it contains flour, salt, monosodium glutamate and black pepper. No “eleven herbs and spices” then.

9. A Dutch government study of the cereal market revealed that once rules restricting advertising health claims were lifted, people ate far more fibre and public health improved.

10. Roc Complete Lift Cream claims to make the skin look “lifted and firmer”. But in a self-defeating fit of frankness its advertising admitted “it has not been proven to have a physical lift effect”.

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**Pet topic: the psychology of persuasion**

**Famous for:** his popular books on persuasion and marketing. His most recent title, *Yes! 50 Scientifically Proven Ways to be Persuasive*, outlines different persuasive strategies including the use of statistics, science and expert witnesses. Cialdini points to the Milgram experiment as an example of how people will do almost anything if it’s sanctioned by the authority of someone in a white lab coat.

**Most likely to say:** “The most effective techniques are those that activate deeply rooted instinctive behaviours that are often inherited from before we were even human.”

**Least likely to say:** The answer’s no. Now what’s the question?