

Avalanche-Level Liar Trump Learned Art of Deception from the Pros: US Corporations

Before there was Trump there was a corporate stranglehold on false claims and campaigns that had a singular purpose to mislead

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For avalanche-level lying, deceiving, and misleading, mega-mimic Donald Trump need look no further than the history of the corporate advertising industry and the firms that pay them.

Dissembling is so deeply ingrained in commercial culture that the Federal Trade Commission and the courts don't challenge exaggerated general claims that they call "puffery."

Serious corporate deception is a common sales technique. At times it cost consumers more than dollars. It has led to major illness and loss of life.

Take the tobacco industry which used to sell its products in the context of health and facilitating mental concentration. Healthy movie stars and athletes were featured in print and on TV until [1970](#).

Despite studies showing that sugary soft drinks can damage health, increase obesity, and reduce life expectancy, the industry's ads still feature healthy, fit families in joyous situations guzzling pop. Fortunately, drinking water has regained its first place position as the most consumed liquid in the U.S.

Whether it is the auto industry's false inflation of fuel efficiency or the e-cigarette companies deceiving youngsters about vaping, or the food industry selling sugary junk cereals as nutrition for children, or the credit banking companies misleading on interest rates, truth in advertising is oxymoronic.

To counter these "fake ads," the consumer movement pushed for mandatory labeling on food and other products. The Federal Trade Commission is a chief enforcer against deception in advertising, but it has waxed and waned over the decades. The FTC describes its duties to protect consumers from unfair or deceptive acts or practices as follows:

"In advertising and marketing, the law requires that objective claims be truthful and substantiated. The FTC does not pursue subjective claims or puffery — claims like "this is the best hairspray in the world." But if there is an objective component to the claim — such as "more consumers prefer our hairspray to any other" or "our hairspray lasts longer than the most popular brands" — then you need to be sure that the claim is not deceptive and that you have adequate substantiation before you make the claim."

A few times, companies, caught engaging in false advertising, were compelled by the FTC to announce the correction in their forthcoming ads and apologize. Those days are long gone.

Another way consumers fought back is the spectacular success of Dr. Sidney Wolfe and his associates at Public Citizen's Health Research Group. They researched hundreds of prescription drugs and over the counter medicines and found they were not effective for the purpose for which they are advertised. Relentless publicity on such dynamic mass media as the Phil Donahue Show led to the withdrawal of many of these products, likely saving consumers billions of dollars and protecting them from harmful side-effects (see [Pills that Don't Work](#)).

When large companies are fighting regulation their lies become "clear and present dangers" to innocent people. I recall at a technical conference in the early nineteen sixties, a General Motors engineer warned that seatbelts in cars would tear away the inner organs of motorists from their moorings in sudden decelerations as in collisions. For the longest time, lead, asbestos, and a whole host of chemicals were featured as safe, not just necessary. All false.

Someone should write a book about all the prevarications by leading spokespersons of industry and commerce justifying the slavery of the "inferior races," arguing against the abolition of child labor in dungeon factories, and predicting that legislating social security would bring on communism.

Interestingly, corporations can lie vigorously and not lose credibility. Artificial corporate personhood comes with immunity from social sanctions that apply to real human beings.

In 1972, The People's Lobby in California, led by the impressive Ed and Joyce Koupal, qualified an initiative called "The Clean Environment Act." Corporations threw millions of dollars and made false claims to defeat the Act. Their public relations firm, Whitaker and Baxter, put out a fact sheet reaching millions of voters. The oil companies declared that "lowering the lead content of gasoline would cause automobile engines to fail, resulting in massive congestion and transit breakdowns." They also claimed that "reducing sulfur oxide emissions from diesel fuel would cause the state's transportation industry to grind to a haul," with huge joblessness and "economic chaos."

Other companies said a "moratorium on nuclear power plant construction" would lead to "widespread unemployment and darkened city streets." Banning DDT in California would "confront the farmer with economic ruin and produce critical shortages of fruits and vegetables" and more lurid hypotheticals.

The lies worked. Voters turned down the initiative by nearly two to one. All these reforms have since been advanced nationwide with no such disasters.

The media did not distinguish itself by separating the lies from the truth. Later in 1988, the media, led by the *Los Angeles Times*, did not let the auto insurance industry get away with lies about Prop 103, pushed by a \$70 million television/radio buy. Prop 103 won and has saved California motorists over \$100 billion according to leading actuary and consumer advocate J. Robert Hunter (see [here](#)).

Corporate fibbing pays monetary rewards. Informed consumers, their champions and regulatory agencies at the national, state, and local level must continue to make these companies pay a price, especially over social media. Madison Avenue calls the effect of such

pushback “reputational risk.”

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Ralph Nader is a consumer advocate, lawyer, and author. His latest books include: [To the Ramparts: How Bush and Obama Paved the Way for the Trump Presidency, and Why It Isn't Too Late to Reverse Course](#), [How the Rats Re-Formed the Congress](#), [Breaking Through Power: It's easier than we think](#), and [Animal Envy: A Fable](#)

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