

The 'Pseudoscience' and 'Biobabble' of Skincare: Advertising Communication and the 1987-88 FDA Crackdown

Maureen E. Hupfer, Michael G. DeGroot School of Business, Canada

More frequently than ever before, cosmetics advertising during the 1980s featured extravagant claims concerning the effectiveness of products for improving skin tone and elasticity, as well as for repairing or even reversing the damage caused by exposure and aging. Such claims conflicted with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) definition of cosmetics as products intended for use in altering appearance "without affecting the body's structure or function" (Allen 1981, p.168). When heart-transplant pioneer Dr. Christiaan Barnard proclaimed that the Glycel skin care line could actually grow younger skin, the FDA took action. During the spring of 1987, the FDA sent warning letters to 23 major cosmetics firms, advising them that unless they wished to submit their products for validation as drugs, these drug-like claims had to be withdrawn. They followed up in 1988 with a much stronger letter that threatened injunction and seizure of products (Begoun 1991, p. 12; Goodman and Young 1988, p. 37; Sherrow 2001, pp. 12-13; Sloan and Freeman 1988a; 1988b; 1988c; Wolf 1990, p. 112).

What led skincare advertisers to make such inflated promises? Why had the language of science become so important to cosmetics manufacturers during the 1980s? The kinds of advertisements that prompted the FDA's actions in 1987-1988 are better understood if they are situated within the development and expansion of scientific rationale in twentieth-century cosmetics marketing.

The 'pseudoscience' of skincare advertising can be traced to the promotional tactics adopted by late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century cosmeticians and manufacturers. While American beauty culture entrepreneurs such as Elizabeth Arden and Helena Rubinstein touted systems and methods to achieve beauty through the proper application of skin-care products and make-up, mass market producers made claims of purity, naturalness and even professional medical endorsement in order to distance themselves from dubious and often dangerous patent medicines (Peiss 1990; 1998; Scanlon 1995, pp. 32, 205). By the 1930s, the scientific rhetoric of beauty was well established. "A judicious mixture of the scientific appeal in 'value for money' copy has been more successful during the last two or three years than any other

type of cosmetic advertising. Most of the conspicuously successful cosmetic houses have used or at least are beginning to employ it" (Mayham 1938, pp. 111-112). The 1938 Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act set cosmetic safety standards and attempted to curb false therapeutic claims (Peiss 1998, Allen 1981), but cosmetics marketers continued to manipulate scientific jargon to their own ends. Wartime ads for Pond's Vanishing Cream, for example, spoke of its "sanitizing base" and "keratolytic action" (Davis 1988, p. 26).

Women's cosmetic and skincare use during the 1950s was heavily influenced by Hollywood glamour (Berry 2000), but beauty regimes became highly politicized during the 1960s. The industry responded with "organic cosmetics" and a "new focus on scientific skin care" (Peiss 1998). Product names and advertising copy that suggested "clinical simplicity", "medically analyzed ingredients, vitamin-packed goodness or herbal purity" proliferated during the early 1970s (Gunn 1973, pp. 172-175).

After the enactment of 1970s labeling legislation that required manufacturers to disclose ingredients, leading department store brands moved toward evidence-based claims of effectiveness in order to justify higher costs for products that seemed much the same as those found in drug stores (Davis 1988). Beauty editorials adopted a more scientific tone by the early eighties and cosmetic house promotional literature began to resemble scientific studies or biology textbooks (Davis 1988; Warner 1987). Packaged in ampoules, vials and medicine bottles, the products themselves became more medical in appearance (Lord 1982, p. 543). Demographic, lifestyle, and technological trends in the 1980s provided additional impetus to the scientific rhetoric of beauty. Increased numbers of women in the workforce, 'baby boomers' who wanted to keep age at bay, and a new emphasis on physical and skin fitness contributed to the need for anti-aging skincare as well as its scientific positioning (Fine and Vogel 1987; Hebner 1985; Lord 1983).

Considered in this context, an escalation in the anti-aging promises being made by leading manufacturers seems almost inevitable. An examination of advertisements appearing in *Vogue* magazine prior to the FDA's regulatory action demonstrates that by the mid-1980s, skincare manufacturers were promising to turn back the

clock on aging skin. Estée Lauder, for example, touted Age-Controlling Crème while Revlon's Ultima II line included ProCollagen Anti-Aging Complex. In 1987, Dr. Barnard announced the Glycel Age – "It is a time when the visual effects of aging will no longer be inevitable."

Once they were compelled by the FDA to withdraw or at least temper their high-flown claims, manufacturers started to hedge their assertions with language such as "lessens the signs" or "reverses the visual damage of aging", and "leaves the skin looking smoother" (Begoun 1991, pp. 12-13; Sloan and Freeman 1988a; 1988b; 1988c). However, even as they were obliged to soften their age reversal rhetoric, skincare manufacturers also had to face the looming threat of 'cosmeceutical' preparations that could in fact improve facial wrinkling (Lord 1988).

Skincare advertising copy during the aftermath of the FDA regulation and the advent of pharmacology was a curious mixture of simple fact and science fiction. Careful to respect the boundary between cosmetic and drug claims, many marketers adopted 'pseudoscientific' jargon to compensate for their loss of language like "repair, rejuvenate and renew". They touted evocative ingredients, such as Estée Lauder's Microsomes™ or Firmex™, and featured high-tech ingredient delivery systems such as Revlon's gel matrix suspension.

Perhaps even more important to cosmetics advertisers than 'bio-babble' was the development of seemingly scientific visual imagery that suggested much while meaning little. Biology textbook-style diagrams and scientific-looking charts with the graph-grid imagery of medical journals began to figure more prominently in skincare advertising. Taking on the task of persuasion once text was constrained, these images became more refined in appearance while their meaning became ever more ambiguous (Begoun 1991, pp. 12-13; Blonsky 1985; Wolf 1990, p. 109). In a much more restrictive regulatory climate, these visual claims offered an important strategic advantage in that they could not be easily contested.

REFERENCES

- Allen, M. 1981. *Selling dreams: Inside the beauty business*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Begoun, P. 1991. *Don't go to the cosmetics counter without me: An eye opening guide to brand name cosmetics*. Seattle: Beginning Press.
- Berry, S. 2000. Hollywood exoticism: Cosmetics and color in the 1930s. In *Hollywood goes shopping*, edited by D. Desser and G. S. Jowett, 108-138. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Blonsky, M. 1985. Getting down to the basics of ad intentions. *Advertising Age* 56 (14): 14-15.
- Davis, A. 1988. Face lift. *Public Relations Journal* 44 (5): 24+.
- Fine, P. and M. Vogel. 1987. Brand report No. 148: Skincare treatment products. *Marketing and Media Decisions* 22 (12): 109+.
- Goodman, T. and S. Young. 1988. *Smart face: A dermatologist's guide to saving your money and saving your skin*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Gunn, F. 1973. *The artificial face: A history of cosmetics*. Newton and Abbot, England: David Charles.
- Hebner, P. 1985. The youth (preservation) market. *Madison Avenue* (September): 129+.
- Lord, S. 1982. Beauty report 1982. *Vogue* 172 (10): 542+.
- . 1983. Skin power: The beauty of it. *Vogue* 173 (1): 229+.
- . 1988. New-age skin, new-age color. *Vogue* 178 (4): 344+.
- Mayham, S.L. 1938. *Marketing cosmetics: A guide for the manufacturer in placing his products before the stores and the public*. New York and London: McGraw-Hill.
- Peiss, K. 1990. Making faces: The cosmetics industry and the cultural construction of gender, 1890-1930. *Gender* 7 (Spring), 143-169.
- 1998. *Hope in a jar: The making of America's beauty culture*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Scanlon, J. 1995. *Inarticulate longings: The Ladies' Home Journal, gender, and the promises of consumer culture*. Routledge: New York and London.
- Sherrow, V. 2001. *For appearance' sake: The historical encyclopedia of good looks, beauty, and grooming*. Westport, Connecticut: Oryx.
- Sloan, P. and L. Freeman. 1988a. FDA plans to expand crackdown to skincare product advertising. *Advertising Age* 59 (15): 12.
- 1988b. Skincare 'drug' claims challenge FDA. *Advertising Age*. 59 (40): 80.
- 1988c. FDA ready to slap skincare claims. *Advertising Age*. 59 (43): 73.
- Warner, L. 1987. Creaming beautiful profits. *Marketing* (November 12) 22-24.
- Wolf, N. 1990. *The beauty myth*. Toronto: Random House.