

LINGUISTICS

Everything for Sale

Linguist Gregory Carlson investigates how language influences consumer choices.

By Kathleen McGarvey

LOOK OUT AHEAD OF YOU. WHAT DO YOU see?

However expansive the scene you might describe, you only see with acuity that which is directly before you.

“If you hold your thumb out about arm’s length, that’s the size of the area where you’re getting most of your information,” says Gregory Carlson, a professor of linguistics, philosophy, and brain and cognitive sciences. “What is beyond that, which you feel like you’re seeing perfectly well, you’re not seeing *perfectly* well. You’re processing it in a slightly different way.”

And advertisers know how to appeal to

both sorts of perception. In a new book to be published in April, *Sold on Language: How Advertisers Talk to You and What This Says about You* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), Carlson and fellow linguist Julie Sedivy ’97 (PhD), an adjunct professor of linguistics and psychology at the University of Calgary, turn a spotlight on the cognitive processes that advertisers exploit to influence our choices in matters large and small.

More than a trillion dollars is spent on

▲ **DECISIONS, DECISIONS:** Linguists Gregory Carlson and Julie Sedivy ’97 (PhD) examine the ways we make decisions—and how advertisers exploit those processes—in their new book, *Sold on Language*.

advertising worldwide every couple of years, with roughly 40 percent of that money expended in the United States.

“We’re exposed to thousands of commercial advertisements every day—most of which we don’t try to pay attention to,” Carlson says. In the face of this commercial clamor, and the general information glut of contemporary culture, we can give our steady attention to only some matters. We make many of our decisions, and take in much of our information, at the outer edges of our attentiveness—what Carlson and Sedivy call “peripheral processing.”

It operates at the level of “feelings and ideas that are fairly general, that you can’t articulate very clearly. Peripheral processing is often below our level of awareness,” Carlson says. “If you ask most people why they buy a brand of toothpaste, or a brand of car, they might give you a reason—but it probably won’t be the real reason. The real reason is they feel most comfortable with that brand of car, or that brand of toothpaste, and they don’t know exactly why they feel that way about it.”

In their research, the coauthors burrow beneath consumers’ reactions and advertisers’ methods to delineate the ways we respond—emotionally, neurologically, and more—to the dilemmas of ever-proliferating choices, especially as they are influenced by language.

“Scientific understanding of the processes that underlie persuasive language—while still primitive in many ways—does offer a starting point for awareness” of how our minds respond to advertising, Carlson and Sedivy write in their book, which is aimed at the general-interest reader. “In knowing our minds better, we just may put ourselves in a better position to choose how we choose.”

They’re not suggesting that every decision needs to be held up for reasoned examination. It’s simply not possible to operate with that level of attentiveness, and much decision making can be conducted effectively without it. “We judge and we evaluate, and we also act reflexively. Our brains are built to do both,” they write.

But as people process more and more information peripherally, advertisers and others in the business of persuading become more adept at appealing to the peripheries of our minds—and more insistent in influencing our thinking that way even on subjects where we’d prefer to keep our rationality in the driver’s seat.

Advertisers play on our insecurities and our sense of self. Carlson and Sedivy relate the story of a couple who decide that a Volkswagen Passat is the car that best suits their needs—but they buy a Subaru Outback instead, because they conclude they're just not "Passat people."

Advertisers employ tools such as puzzles and incongruities that attract our attention, and they use artfully condensed language that speaks to our unconscious, playing on similar words, evocations of words, memories of how words have been used before, and even the sounds of which they're made. The Edsel, that historic automotive failure named for Henry Ford's own son, was doomed not just by its unattractive de-


sign, Carlson and Sedivy contend, but by its name. At the peak of popularity, the name "Edsel" was given to just 220 American baby boys, and the word reminded car buyers of terms like "*pretzel*, *hard sell* and *dead cell*."

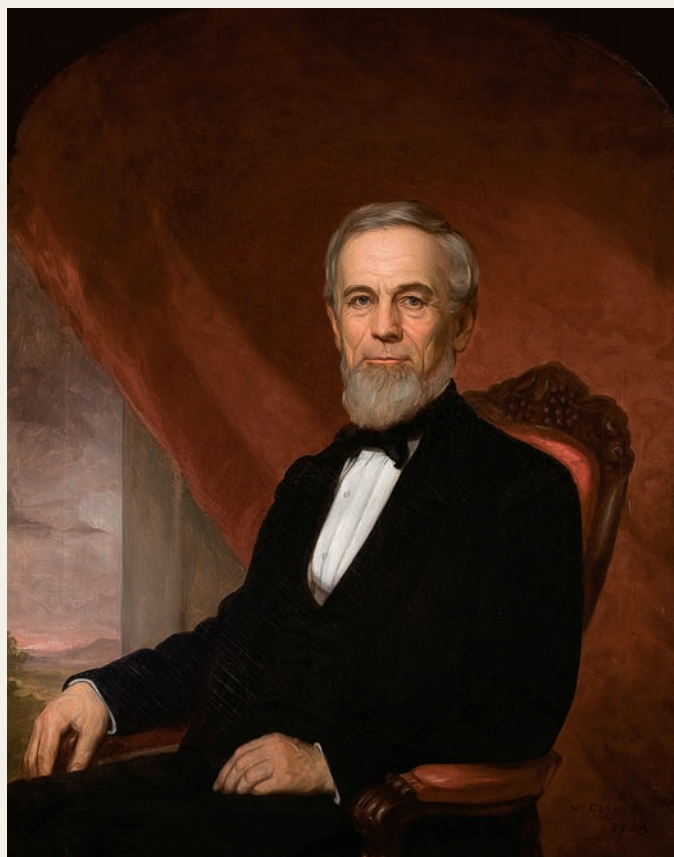
In the final chapter of the book, Carlson and Sedivy consider the implications of advertising for democracy. How do we reconcile participatory politics with the methods of subconscious manipulation that fill our public lives, and even our private sense of our own identity?

"So much of the political process is wrangling about the language we're going to use," Carlson says. Word choice and metaphors profoundly influence the way people view issues. Think, for example, about the

very different connotations of "tax cut" and "tax relief," or "estate tax" and "death tax."

For the past decade, Carlson has taught an undergraduate course on advertising and language. He hopes that the course, like the book, helps people to become more aware of the factors that influence their choices and to exercise a greater measure of control over how they make decisions. The difficulty, he says, is that our unconscious responses—those through which we're most effectively manipulated—are precisely those that are least visible to us.

"If something's important to you," he says, "try to think about what's going on in the messages and in your motivations—to the level that's accessible to you." 



MEMORIAL ART GALLERY

Conserving University History

BURBANK STUDIOS: Portraits of 19th-century University benefactor and trustee Gideon Webster Burbank (1803-1873) and his wife, Mary Goodrich Burbank (1806-1888), are on exhibit at the Memorial Art Gallery. Thanks to a grant from the American Art Program at the Henry Luce Foundation, the oil paintings—donated to the University in 1973 by the Burbanks' great-great-grandson—have been restored by the Williamstown Art Conservation Center. The exhibition of the paintings highlights the conservation process itself, with before-and-after images and explanations of the steps involved in restoration.

The 1863 paintings are by William Cogswell (1819-1903), best known for his portrait of Abraham Lincoln, a work that's held in the White House art collection. A flour-milling magnate, Burbank gave the University \$20,000 in 1854, the largest gift in the then four-year-old University's history. Burbank also designed and operated a steamship on the Erie Canal, and he sent barrels of flour as Rochester's contribution to the first World's Fair, held in London in 1851.

The Burbanks, along with some of their 11 children, are buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery.