

Selling Power and what 18th-century contemporaries say about it

Fielding, Johnson and Addison directly or indirectly comment on aspects relating to the Selling Power of advertisements in their respective studies of 1740, 1759 and 1710. The three authors either examine in some detail – as is the case with Fielding – or more briefly and obliquely, in the case of Johnson and Addison, linguistic devices adopted by advertisers in their attempt to sell their goods.

Fielding wrote his piece in *The Champion*, a periodical he edited between 1739 and 1740. In the 1,000 word account he humorously describes the unscrupulous lengths booksellers would go to in “Book-puffing” to enhance their publication with prestige. In particular, he exemplifies how book advertisements could be so worded as to suggest that although unnamed on the title page the author of the advertised work was in reality highly distinguished. As we see in (1), the author’s supposed renown and distinction could either be indicated through expressions such as “a Lady of Quality” or “a celebrated Physician”, or more explicitly through the provision of first and final letters of the distinguished author’s name. Thus, a book written by “By *D—r S—t*” was to be understood as a volume authored by Doctor Swift.

- (1) But the chief Art of Book-puffing is that which may be very properly call’d *Getting a Name* to a Book, I mean that Method which hath flourish’d much of late of borrowing a name for its Author. Numberless are the Arts which the Street-walking Muses make use of to lay their Bastards at the Doors of their Betters, or in other Words by which Booksellers and their bad Authors endeavor to steal the Names of good ones. [...] But the most usual Way is to throw out certain Hints in the Advertisements, such as by a Lady of Quality. By a Celebrated Physician. By *D—r S—t*. By a certain Dean, &c. By all which Means a very spurious Issue are propagated in the learned World.
(*The Champion*, 1 March 1740)

The fact that such hints at the anonymous author’s celebrity and distinction were totally unfounded is comically underlined when Fielding illustrates the ploys his own bookseller suggested in order to give greater prestige to *The Champion*. Not yet celebrated for his novels, Fielding was told that for his writings in *The Champion* to be successful they should be passed off as the writings of one of the great authors of the age, such as Addison, Steel, Swift or Pope. All that was necessary was an allusive biographical reference associating Fielding with one of these greats.

- (2) I have been often desired by my Bookseller to give a *Name* (as he calls it) to this Paper: For which Purpose, he hath drawn up several Advertisements. One signifying, that the late Mr *Addison* left a large Quantity of Papers behind him, some of which were entitled *Essays on several Subjects*.

Another importing that the Author of this Paper was in *Wales* at the Time that Sir *Richard Steel* died. Or suppose (says he) it should be insinuated that you was lately come from *Ireland* [...] ⁱ Or else if we should say you had a Lodging near *Twickenham* last Summer [...] ⁱⁱ

In short, it would be tedious to run through the several Persons which by Hints, Tokens, and initial Letters, he would have intimated to be the Authors of the *Champion*, indeed almost every one that the present Age hath ever read with Admiration.

(*The Champion*, 1 March 1740)

The above passages from *The Champion* show that not only was it important in a book advertisement to index the author's prestige, but that at that time certain authors, such as Addison, Steele, Swift and Pope, had brand quality. Booksellers were aware of this and took every opportunity, and apparently were capable of employing every ruse, to associate their own publication with a successful author *cum* brand.

In the *Newcastle Courant* there is one example of an advertisement containing similar characteristics to those mocked by Fielding. In particular, the advertisement (example 10 below) establishes a connection, even if indirect, between the collection of essays on sale and those published previously in the *Spectator* and *Tatler*. These latter essays clearly represented the gold standard in that genre and, as Fielding wrote, publishers of essays sought to associate their own volume of essays with the works of these celebrated past masters. This strategy of positive association with past literary giants could also explain the reference in the last part of the text to "the most eminent Writer among us". This could be a reference to Shakespeare, who, in the publisher's opinion, would have felt honoured to have authored some of the poems in the present volume.

Both Johnson and Addison also consider stylistic and linguistic strategies designed to increase the selling power of advertisements. Johnson ironically comments on the use of hyperbole and more generally what he refers to as "eloquence sometimes sublime and sometimes pathetic".

- (3) Advertisements are now so numerous that they are very negligently perused, and it is therefore become necessary to gain attention by magnificence of promises, and by eloquence sometimes sublime and sometimes pathetic.

(*The Idler*, 20 January 1759)

The "eloquence" which Johnson humorously identified in many middle-century advertisements had also been noted by Addison in the first years of the eighteenth century in relation to those advertisements which attempted to promote their wares through a discourse he ironically termed "Ciceronian". In his 1710 essay he gives an example of an advertisement for lavender scent written in such a style:

- (4) The highest compounded spirit of lavender, the most glorious, *if the expression may be used*, enlivening scent and flavor that can possibly be, which so raptures the spirits, delights the gust, and

gives such airs to the countenance, as are not to be imagined but by those that have tried it. The meanest sort is admired by most gentlemen and ladies; but this far more, as by far it exceeds it, to the gaining among all a more than common esteem. It is sold, in neat flint bottles fit for the pocket, only at the golden Key in Wharton's Court, near Holborn-bars, for three shillings and six-pence, with directions

(*Tatler*, 14 September 1710)

Addison believed that “the great skill in an advertiser is chiefly seen in the style which he makes use of” (1710), and there is no doubt that in the essayist's opinion the grandiose, rhetorical flourishes that characterise the description of the scent are designed to impress readers. The advertiser is using ornate, embellished language to convince sophisticated readers to buy an exclusive product. The soaring hyperbole and rhetoric (“highest compounded spirit”, “most glorious ... enlivening scent”, “so raptures the spirits, delights the gust”) are considered an integral part of the Selling Power of the advertisement.

Complementary to such rhetoric is another linguistic feature of advertising that attracted Addison's humour. This is the use of Latin, which in eighteenth-century Britain had prestige value since it was considered the language of the educated and professionally qualified. In the number of 27 November 1712 Addison ridiculed advertising discourse through a set of mock advertisements, two of which purported to be medical cures. One of the texts had as its initial words the ludicrously hyperbolic Latin tag “*Remedium efficax et universum*” while in the other we read of a medicine that cured the fashionable eighteenth-century ailment “Hypocondriack Melancholys”.

ⁱ A reference to Jonathan Swift.

ⁱⁱ A reference to Alexander Pope, who lived in Twickenham.