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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Sex of Food and Ernest Dichter: The Illusion of Inevitability

Katherine Parkin (bio)

Abstract

Market researchers and advertisers have historically encouraged Americans to make gendered and sexual associations about food. The founder of motivational research, Ernest Dichter, was a critical force in encouraging advertisers to promote a food's sex. He believed that advertisers could fulfill consumers' needs by affirming gender roles through particular foods, so he encouraged them to promote foods as feminine or masculine. Dichter also promoted a belief in the sexual qualities of various foods. Examining his research and twentieth-century food ads, however, reveals all of the ways these gendered and sexual attributes were concocted and manipulated. From his insights into Rice Krispies as a "bubbling, vivacious, young woman" to his advice on how to masculinize fish, this study analyzes Dichter's pronouncements about the sex of food and his efforts to create the illusion of inevitability.

Food advertisements and Ernest Dichter's writings contain a surprising history of concocted and encouraged associations between food and sex roles. In the second half of the 20th century, motivational researchers like Ernest Dichter encouraged advertisers to portray food as gendered and sexual. Dichter believed that by convincing Americans of a food's sex and its resultant gendered identity, as well as its sensuality, advertisers could suggest their foods to meet consumers' need to fulfill their gender roles. Using depth interviews and other techniques to understand the consumer psyche, he sought to understand what types of feelings motivated particular kinds of purchases.

Probing into consumers' inner-psyche seems, in retrospect, like an inevitable course of events. However, trying to capture those thoughts and feelings and doing so effectively required a vision and a plan. Rarely do ideas, particularly big and important ideas, find their genesis in a research proposal, and yet that was exactly what Ernest Dichter laid out in 1944, just six years after immigrating to the United States from Austria. With his PhD in psychology, Dichter published a brief, one-page research proposal in the American Sociological Association's journal, *Sociometry*.¹ Its overly complex title, "The Psychodramatic Research Project on Commodities as Intersocial Media," gave way to a fairly simple idea: study peoples' attitudes when they buy things.

Without denying the importance of researchers' traditional ways of classifying consumers, such as age, income, and education, Dichter envisioned a means by which social scientists could better understand the "psychodramatic" process of buying. He opined about the market transaction, "Every buying act is a highly dramatic event, full of spontaneity and emotion. A representation of this act on the stage under controlled conditions should prove a new tool for observing people's relation to products in all their subtle details."²

Dichter believed that by adding a psychological dimension to the market research already taking place, advertisers would have a fuller, more accurate picture of their consumers. Moreover, this motivational research would give advertisers new avenues to reach potential buyers and shore up their consumer base.

According to Dichter, factors like age, religion, or occupation could tell you a lot about a consumer, but those characteristics did not "reveal why people buy in terms of the meanings the purchased product or brand had for them." The question of *why* was the psychodrama. The mystery of *why* fueled Dichter until his death in 1991 and continues to compel researchers and advertisers into the 21st century.³

Advertisers have long turned to psychologists in their efforts to understand how to motivate human desires. Earlier than most, for example, the influential advertising couple, Stanley and Helen Resor, saw the advantages of employing someone who claimed to have some understanding of human behavior. In the 1920s, their agency, the J. Walter Thompson Company, hired the renowned father of behaviorism, John B. Watson, away from the Johns Hopkins University Psychology Department to serve as a vice president.⁴

Over the course of the 20th century, psychology and psychiatry grew in respectability. During the postwar era, they became an accepted facet of elite life in New York City, the headquarters for most advertising agencies. Many advertising historians have explored the significance of advertising heads who were disproportionately wealthy as compared...



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