

# Thoughts on Edutainment

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Every time we turn on the television, we are presented with edutainment. It is the basis for successful commercials around the world; and it is so pervasive that most of the time we do not even realize it's happening.

Think about the most successful advertising campaign you can remember (the measure of success in this context is that you remember the commercials and the product they were advertising.) What sticks in my mind is a campaign from Taster's Choice that ran for several years during the 1990s. The series starts with a woman crossing the hall to ask her neighbor if she might borrow some coffee because she has run out at her dinner party. Over the course of 13 commercials, they flirt, date, and eventually end up in Paris drinking coffee under the Eiffel Tower. The commercials were notable for both the chemistry of the players and the cliffhanger at the end of each 30-second spot, which left the audience wanting the next installment of the mini-soap opera. While we were drawn into this couple's drama, we were also being *educated* to drink Taster's Choice Coffee (reports at the time showed an increase of approximately 10% in sales of Taster's Choice in response to the commercial series.) At its most basic, that is what edutainment is—educating the viewer to change a behavior or attitude within the context of an entertainment experience. In commercial advertising, we are educated to be consumers of material goods. With the current explosion of commercial product placement within network television programs, video games, and big-screen movies, the line between entertainment and edutainment has blurred even further.

With so much input vying for each viewer's attention, educating a consumer about caring for themselves, preventive

medicine, disease management, and recovery from trauma can be daunting. The good news is that edutainment has the power to impart large amounts of information to an audience on stage, screen, or in print. Madison Avenue has not only provided us with wonderful models of how to sell a product; the result of years of commercial advertising entertainment is that our audience is primed to receive messages through this medium. Viewers have been conditioned to respond to edutainment, thus allowing health educators to concentrate on selling the message rather than selling the vehicle.

Because audiences have become increasingly sophisticated in their viewing habits and preferences over the past few decades, it is important that those utilizing the benefits of edutainment create work that is on par with the viewing expectations of the audience. It is of no use to have a superior message if the audience is walking out of the theater or changing the channel before they hear it. To talk *to* an audience, not *down to* them or *at* them, is perhaps the most important factor in a successful work of edutainment. Likewise, production values should be high to engage the audience at the same level of realism they are accustomed to in the current media.

Perhaps the longest-running and most celebrated forum for edutainment is *Sesame Street*. This show has continually changed with the times, introducing new characters and themes (including a more hip-hop version of the old "Sunny Days" theme song) as necessary to keep pace with the culture that young children now live in. This sensitivity to the interests and sophistication of its viewing audience, in this case a very young audience, has allowed *Sesame Street* to remain a mainstay for almost 40 years.

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