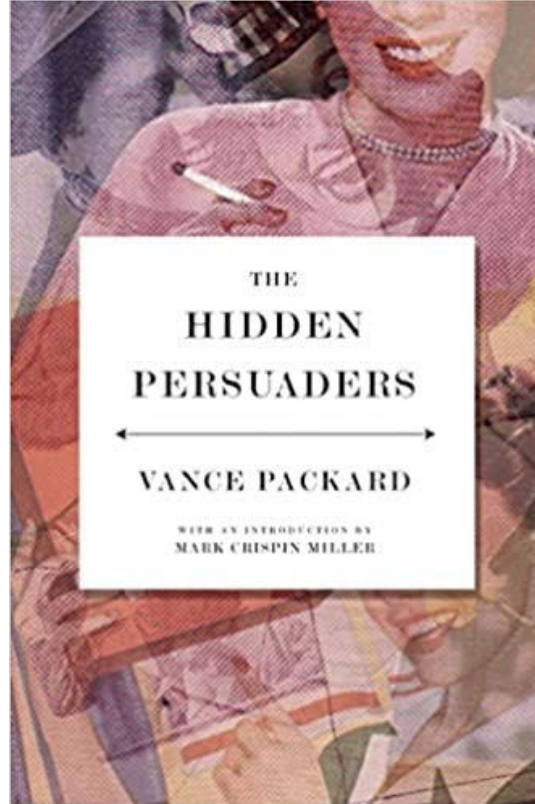


***The Hidden Persuaders* by Vance Packard**



As World War II ended, America's productive capacity was greater than ever. By the 1950s, Americans had five times as many discretionary dollars as they did before the War. Yet products being produced were often very similar. Most beer was beer, most toothpaste did the same thing, most cars got you there and back, and consumers were not absorbing the product outstream as fast as companies wanted. What to do?

In his 1957 book, *The Hidden Persuaders*, Vance Packard, a respected journalist and social observer, drew upon his extensive contacts in industry and the advertising business to reveal what the companies started doing to get their products off the shelves. Until then, much of advertising had been an attempt to rationally convince consumers that Coke tasted better than Pepsi, that Pepsodent toothpaste was better than Ipana, that they really needed a new Chevy. Yet in blind tests, people often could not tell the difference between many consumer products. Swearing they preferred butter over margarine, when they were

offered pats of margarine colored like butter and butter colored like margarine, they picked margarine as better, proclaiming how lard-like the butter tasted.

As one advertising executive observed, people were not doing what they said they believed in, and traditional consumer surveys weren't reliable. Out of such concerns, business turned to something called Motivational Research (MR). This involved using psychiatrists and sociologists to find out what really guided consumers' actions, and the traditional advertising industry was turned on its ear.

Having found that men were drawn to automobile showrooms that had glamorous convertibles in their windows, but they mostly bought plain sedans, these new analysts dug into what really made people tick. They found that most people had little interest in the technical specifics of particular cars, but were motivated by unstated attitudes toward various brands, partly based on social class. People who wanted to seem conservative, responsible or serious bought Plymouth, Dodge, DeSoto four-door sedans, dark colors, and minimum accessories. Those who wanted to appear sociable and up-to-date bought Chevies, two door coupés, light colors, and more gadgets.

The development of social class concepts was fostered by a prominent sociologist and anthropologist from the University of Chicago, W. Lloyd Warner, and used as a basis to categorize target customer populations.

In another instance, researchers used hidden cameras in super markets to track eye movements, and found that most shoppers did not bring lists with them, and as they progressed down the aisles, soon their eye blinking patterns revealed they were in a light hypnotic trance.

How to get them to grab the Wheaties rather than the Cheerios in such a situation? One branch of the new MR industry involved analysis of how different people react to color. In one test, subjects were given three boxes of the same detergent to try at home. One was in a blue box, one a yellow, one a combination of both colors. The testers reported that one was ineffective, another abrasive, and one just right, yet it was the same detergent!

There arose the Color Research Institute, which conducted extensive tests and advised manufacturers as to what packaging would cause the best sales.

Packard noted that companies were not so much selling products, as marketing things like economic security, ego-gratification, a sense of power, a sense of roots, and even a feeling of immortality, and often used subtle sexual motivations. He was concerned over what he called the psycho-seduction of children, and the fact that voters were not as rational as they proclaimed, but could be manipulated by calculated illogical appeals. He quoted Adlai Stevenson who said: "The idea that you can merchandise candidates for high office like breakfast cereal ... is the ultimate indignity to the democratic process."

Packard's book was widely seen as ripping open the hidden sales methods of corporate America. Among his other best-selling books were *The Waste Makers* and *The Status Seekers*. He died in 1996, before the widespread use of the Internet, cookies, tracking methodologies, database mining, and the targeted popup ads in everything you view.

-- Jim Alexander