DAKOTA FOSS

Dakota Foss graduated from Cary-Grove High School. His experiences in high school and college include participating in a comedy club, Book Club, and dodgeball. Dakota has not declared a major yet at NIU. His interests vary from music to longboarding. Writing “Planning for Burial” was a familiar experience in some way for Dakota: the process of writing this analysis paper was similar to the music reviews he writes on the internet.

Dakota wrote this analysis in Nicole Smith's English 103 course during the fall semester of 2010.

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Advertising companies use many techniques to try to sell things. Some of them use humor to get their point across, while others are deadly serious in their approach. Their goal is to reach as many people in their target demographic as possible. One technique that is extremely effective at getting attention and keeping it is to play on fears and insecurities. Everyone, no matter how emotionally strong she or he appears to be on the outside, has insecurities. However, it is somewhat unacceptable in society to show these insecurities, so people often do the best they can to cover them up. As a result, people will do some pretty ridiculous things in order to hide these insecurities and prevent their fears from happening. What better way for a company to get their point across than to expose these fears and then offer a way out? It is a genius technique that could not be more prevalent than in an Albany Life Insurance print ad.

“Are you making plans for your wife’s death?” the ad boldly questions at the top. It is a ridiculous question that should hold no merit at all. Who in their right mind would plan on their spouse’s death? The thought is so morbid and ridiculous that readers should skip over it ... but they do not. This bold question is designed to be unavoidable and to make the reader think. The reader may turn the page, or he or she might read the rest of the advertisement immediately after seeing the headline. One thing is for sure: the reader will think about that ridiculous question.

Using the bold question alone, many things can be inferred about the ad. Men typically have been portrayed as the protectors and providers of their families. The mother conventionally has been the one to provide maintenance through cooking, cleaning, and healing, whereas the father has usually been the provider by going to work and raising his children to be strong by example. This ad immediately plays with these stereotypes and places fear into the man’s head by suggesting that something ridiculous could happen to his wife that could cause her to die. This message is effective for two reasons: one—the man probably loves the woman he is married to because they are a married couple, and two—the
man wants to have control of his family’s safety. He cannot let this happen and show any weakness because, as the stereotype suggests, it is his duty to be strong for his family.

The small print that follows helps to implant this fear more deeply into the man. After the man questions the ad’s question, he will be inclined to figure out what exactly the reason is for asking it in the first place. “Come on now. Own up,” the ad goes on to say. “The thought hasn’t so much as crossed your mind, has it?” This line sympathizes with the man’s viewpoint. He probably has not, but according to the ad, he probably should. “All along you’ve blithely assumed you’d be the first to go.” Male life expectancy is shorter than female life expectancy, and it is very common that the male figure dies before the woman. However, the ad suggests that this is wrong. By using fancy words, such as “blithely,” with an elegant, slow pace, the ad seems to suggest that it more knowledgeable than the reader is about matters such as the lifespans of the adults or unexpected dangers.

In decades past, it would not be uncommon for families to buy life insurance only for the father because of the shorter male life expectancy. Typically, the male figure would have the only source of income, while the mother stayed at home, so money would be tight. In order to save money, families would only get life insurance for the father since the mother would usually live longer. The ad suggests that this is a “shortsighted” idea, once again insulting the reader’s intelligence while the ad appears to be intelligent and all-knowing. “There’s no guaranteeing your wife will outlive you.” This line is as straightforward as they come and really strikes at the central fear that the advertisement is trying to evoke: the man does not know as much as he thinks he does, and he is foolish because of it.

By now, the advertisement probably has the reader believing that it has a lot of credibility. In fact, the ad practically assumes it. The next line is a statistic that says that wives only outlive their husbands sixty percent of the time. There is no source to back this up; there is no scientific merit, no proof, and no attempt to even make up a source. However, the ad doesn’t have to do so. Readers are not going to be thinking of bibliographies when they are worrying about their spouse’s very existence. Instead, they will blindly assume that this statistic is true and begin worrying even more. Sixty percent is only a little more than half, so the odds
of male readers being in that forty percent who do not outlive their spouse are a lot stronger than they previously thought.

After building up all that fear, the ad begins to make the advertisement more personal. It challenges the reader to think about what would happen to his wife, “not in the dim and distant future, but tomorrow,” and it gives a date. This brings a sense of immediacy and urgency to the situation, so the reader cannot sit back and think things through but must act as soon as possible. The first thing it asks is if the reader could cope. That question alone could make the reader worry, but then the ad brings more practical questions to the forefront in the text: could the man cook? Clean? Take care of his kids when they are sick? The ad seems to pile up these problems on top of the fact that the reader is going to need to come to terms with his wife’s death. This makes things seem overbearing and impossible to overcome by himself.

By now, the reader should be at rock bottom: his wife is dead, his kids are sick, his house is a mess, and he is in more financial woes than he could have ever imagined. The ad even tells the reader he is going to need a lot of help, though that kind of help is expensive “these days.” Luckily, however, the ad directs the reader to Albany Life Insurance. The company can provide the reader with all the help he could need in his darkest hour. The company can even cater to the reader with a “Husband and Wife policy.”

That is it, though. After paragraphs and paragraphs of instilling fear into the reader, the company provides barely two paragraphs worth of salvation. At the very end, there is a small card with their mailing address and spaces for the reader’s name and address. This is, again, a very effective way to get the reader to act immediately. With barely any information about protecting his family, the reader must hurry to gain this precious knowledge before something bad happens, before he can think things over and realize just how ridiculous this advertisement is.

Another integral element to the advertisement is the pictures it displays. There’s a large butcher knife, bleach, pills, and a pillow. All of these images are large and imposing, drawing the reader’s attention. At first glance, these appear to represent only chores that the wife would do. The wives, after all, are usually the ones who cook, clean, medicate, and comfort. However, under the surface, the pictures serve a far more sinister purpose. Each of
these pictures could also portray an unexpected way for the spouse to die. A spouse could cut herself, overdose, or even accidentally drink bleach. The ad even puts captions under each of the pictures describing the extended duties to make the horror closer to reality. Both of these angles are designed to, once again, stress the reader out with his spouse dying and his household responsibilities reaching an impossible high.

In the end, the ad says a lot about a little. It plays off of fears, creates paranoia and immediacy where there is none, and even makes nods and nudges to several stereotypes that are cemented into the minds of the general public. Disregarding all the print and pictures, the ad informs about (and creates) fear while providing a possible solution. Most people should see right through this, but the key word there is “should.” Paranoia is a strong emotion and thinking rationally is a difficult task while being pelted with possible futures in which loved ones are dead and in need of help. In that sense, the ad does its job in selling its product. The problem is that the ad focuses on the problems and fear, rather than on providing any actual information regarding benefits or any other sort of logistics. Obviously, these are of little importance to Albany, a company that is probably more concerned with making money. Still, it seems a little unethical to prey off of such a large human emotion to sell “safety.”

Safety is one of the biggest concerns in any consumer’s life. In fact, it would not be a stretch to say that nearly every purchase made has the idea of safety in mind. Safety could be protection from financial woes for a loved one’s death, as evidenced in this Albany Life advertisement, or even something as simple as safety from hunger for a Big Mac burger at McDonald’s. The game is always the same—companies make money and consumers are satisfied, but as time goes on, the game is played differently. Instead of informing consumers of the benefits, companies like Albany Life fuel curiosity with ambiguity. The problem is that these issues that companies like Albany Life deal with can be quite serious. If a loved one were to pass away, life insurance would certainly play a big part in the family’s recovery. Choosing which company to buy life insurance from should be a big, well-thought-out decision, but that would be difficult to do when ads do little to nothing to provide beneficial information. Instead, consumers have to bend over backwards just for
information that should be plastered everywhere the company can afford to advertise.

Companies *should* use the quality of their product as their selling points; instead, ridiculous advertisements like this one are created in an attempt to captivate the reader’s mind and almost trick them into buying whatever is being sold. It is a sad reality, but one that could easily be changed by voting with the almighty dollar and choosing to buy from companies that properly inform their customers. Companies should be working for the consumer, not the other way around. Consumers should do the best they can to learn about company policies and focus on cold, hard facts, not ridiculous scenarios that probably will not happen.