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ANALYZING ADVERTISING

Grades: 5 and up (modify for different ages)

Time: 45-60 minutes

Materials: Poster board (scrap poster board is usually available free from frame shops) with advertising slogans written on one side and enlarged first letters or logos from company names on the other; a variety of print ads aimed at your students' age group (Alternatively, recorded copies of television commercials)

Relevant Subjects: Social Studies and Language Arts

1. To illustrate the pervasiveness of advertising in your students' lives, "test" their advertising knowledge by holding up a poster you've composed that has familiar advertising slogans written on it. Have each slogan be missing a word. Ask your students to supply the missing word (e.g., "Got ____?" Answer: milk). On the other side of the poster tape enlarged letters from products, such as the "M" from McDonald's, the "G" from the Gap, and the "C" from Crest, as well as company logos. Show your students this side of the poster and have them shout out the product/company names just from seeing a single letter or logo.
2. Ask students to consider which ads have influenced them to want specific products. Invite them to be very honest with themselves as they reflect upon advertising's impact on their desires. (They may consider radio, TV, web or print advertising.)
3. Spread advertisements from popular and teen magazines over the floor of the classroom. Demonstrate how to analyze the messages embedded in them, using the following questions:
 - a) What product or service is the ad selling?
 - b) What deep need or desire is the ad appealing to? (In other words, does the ad appeal to your desire to have love, happiness, wealth, beauty, friendship, joy, etc.?)
 - c) Who is the intended audience, and what do you suppose their reaction to the ad might be?
 - d) Who is excluded by the ad? (i.e., what classes, races, body types, etc.)?
 - e) What suffering, exploitation, or destruction is hidden from view? (In other words, what suffering to people or animals does the production of the product or the generation of the service lead to and/or what destruction to the environment does the product or service cause?)

f) How does the ad affect your personal desires, self image, beliefs, and consumer choices?

h) What would life be like without the product or service that the ad is selling?

4. Organize groups of four or five students and distribute a small stack of ads to each group. Ask each group to analyze several ads, using the questions above.

5. Have each group report on one of the ads to the class.

6. Facilitate a discussion about how students perceive advertising in a different light now that they've done the exercise, and how their critical thinking skills might enable them to resist advertising messages.

Alternatives:

1. This activity can also be conducted using recordings of television commercials. For elementary-age children, record the commercials during children's programming (e.g., Saturday morning cartoons). For teens, record the commercials during shows that appeal to their age group. Show the commercials during class and analyze them in the same ways as print ads. In addition, have students note the speed at which the images in the commercials change, and discuss the effects of this technique with them.

2. Have students bring in their favorite ads from home and analyze these instead. Refer to their own preferences in discussions of the ways that advertising targets specific genders, races, age groups and classes of people.

3. This activity can also be conducting using ads on the web. Use commercial websites of interest to the age group (e.g., Disney, TeenPeople.com, MySpace, etc.)

Activity from *The Power and Promise of Humane Education*