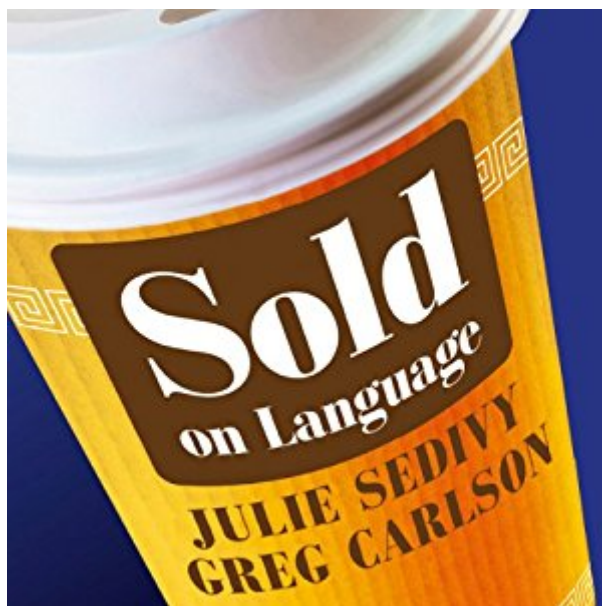


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# Sold On Language: How Advertisers Talk To You And What This Says About You



## Synopsis

As citizens of capitalist, free-market societies, we tend to celebrate choice and competition. However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as we have gained more and more choices, we have also become greater targets for persuasive messages from advertisers who want to make those choices for us. In *Sold on Language*, noted language scientists Julie Sedivy and Greg Carlson examine how rampant competition shapes the ways in which commercial and political advertisers speak to us. In an environment saturated with information, advertising messages attempt to compress as much persuasive power into as small a linguistic space as possible. These messages, the authors reveal, might take the form of a brand name whose sound evokes a certain impression, a turn of phrase that gently applies peer pressure, or a subtle accent that zeroes in on a target audience. As more and more techniques of persuasion are aimed squarely at the corner of our mind which automatically takes in information without conscious thought or deliberation, does 'endless choice' actually mean the end of true choice? *Sold on Language* offers thought-provoking insights into the choices we make as consumers and citizens - and the choices that are increasingly being made for us. For the authors' blog visit: [www.psychologytoday.com/blog/sold-language](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/sold-language)

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Interestingly, this book starts with a discussion of Edward Bernays, Sigmund Freud's favourite nephew and avid reader of his uncle's work. In this, it is similar to John Pilger's 'The War You Don't See' and Adam Curtis' 'The Century of the Self'. All three relate how Bernays effectively 'invented'

public relations and also, as a first demonstration of the power of his uncle's theories, started women smoking in public in the U.S. So why this interest in Bernays? Because of the effects and effectiveness of the vast advertising and media industries that have grown up in this last century of 'extreme individualism'. This book is an attempt to unpack the mainly linguistic 'tricks of the trade' of these industries and, in doing so, to inoculate us against them. The book's main themes centre around the ways in which we are becoming aware of how our minds work and how they may be manipulated. To start with, the authors consider 'The Unconscious Consumer': 'According to Sigmund Freud...we live in constant danger of having our unconscious memories and longings grab us by the throat and lead us down a path of irrational choices...Freud probed these hidden motivators by having people lie on a couch and relate their dreams and memories. Today, scientists of the mind probe them with clever experimental tasks in labs and use expensive devices to measure the gaze patterns of eyes, and the electrical activity and blood flow in the brain. All this technological proliferation just emphasises how elusive our own minds are to us.' (P15) The authors are linguists and so the evidence they cite is largely linguistically based - but since we have so much of our being in language, this seems eminently justified. And the experiments are fascinating. They go on to consider the active role of the unconscious in 'The Attentional Arms Race'. It seems that overt attention is not a prerequisite for successful manipulation - in fact, in many ways, it's what you perceive peripherally that has more effect, as this is absorbed into the unconscious for further processing, while our conscious minds are taken up with the task in hand. Yet more experimental evidence backs up this proposition. The next chapter - 'We Know What You're Thinking' sounds ominously like an Adam Curtis documentary. The authors concentrate on linguistic formulations that can radically alter perceptions of statements. The use of 'presuppositions', of leading questions, manipulation of memories and 'Mindless Agreement and Unconscious Individualism' (P120) make it appear that we have freedom and independence of action whereas in reality, even our much-vaunted individualism may be subverted. Slowly the book unpacks many of the tricks, traps and tips of the persuasive industries. It is all told in an informal and readable style, but it still packs a punch. However, much of it seems kind of 'anecdotal'. Apart from the initial references to Freud, there is no outline of a consistent theory here. It's as if this science is still in the 'gathering evidence' stage. It's still very interesting, but slightly frustrating at the same time. Finally, the authors turn their attention to the growing role of advertising-style practices in politics. This, for me, was by far the most interesting section of the book. Even if, after reading up to here, you think you're aware of the techniques used by advertisers, you can't help but feel that it is far too easy for those 'in the know' to manipulate and control us. Thus, it is no surprise to find the

authors discussing Plato's reservations on democracy. They talk of 'Democracy in the Age of the Mackerel Mind' (P250) where the 'mackerel mind' refers, if you like, to a 'herd' or 'collective' mind. They examine the increasingly fragmented tribalism of society, the way that beliefs are perpetuated even in the face of completely contradictory and factual evidence (they don't mention it, but I can't help thinking of Obama's birth certificate). But, at the same time, they start to develop Freud's ideas of the unconscious. What they suggest is that, far from being at the mercy of our unconscious, the interplay between conscious and unconscious mind is a far more active, dynamic and two-way affair. As such - and this is really the crucial point - a conscious recognition of the ways in which the unconscious may be manipulated can go a long way in inoculating us against just this manipulation, making us all, perhaps, Philosopher Kings. All in all, an illuminating, readable and rewarding book.

The human brain is a wondrous thing -- especially that huge subconscious part that hums along without us giving much thought to it. We go through the day without having to think about the mechanics of breathing, digesting our food, walking, running, smiling laughing. We respond to all sorts of stimuli in our environment without having to give them much (if any) conscious thought: when we hear something funny we smile or laugh without first figuring out what makes it amusing or having to think through which muscles in our face we need to move in order to accomplish the task; when we're walking along and reach a set of stairs, we don't have to consciously think about lifting our leg higher; if someone throws a rock in our direction we instinctively duck or move out of the way without having to consciously process the danger of the situation and figure out how to move out of the way. In fact, most of our actions are determined by our subconscious brain. Yet when it comes to language and advertising, most of us operate on the assumption that the normal functions of our subconscious brain are magically suspended. Not so, according to this insightful book. The authors weave together a broad range of research and examples to demonstrate just how much of our behavior is determined below our conscious minds. They show that our responses to language, non-verbal cues, and emotional images are rarely the result of conscious and reasoned thought, but rather reflexive reactions based on a combination of hard-wiring and our internalized observations of how the world around us operates. Advertisers then use the latest scientific knowledge of our brains' 'default' processing mechanisms to hawk their merchandise. Fortunately, just as we can train ourselves to override our reflexes in various spheres of life, we can do the same when it comes to advertising. But in order to do so, we need to be aware of what those reflexes are and make conscious choices to respond differently. I always thought of myself as relatively immune to advertising, but I had no idea just how 'sneaky' ads can be, and the degree to which they exploit the

hard-wired settings in our brains. If you want true and meaningful choice when it comes to your shopping and voting behavior, I highly recommend you read this book.

Do you think you're immune to deception and manipulation at the hands of advertisers? Sold on Language will show you how you're wrong. With easy-reading humor and insight the authors use many concrete examples to show us how even subtle shifts in language can have enormous impact on how we perceive the messages of advertisers, especially at levels of consciousness that lie below our rational level of thinking. You will be shocked by some of the techniques advertisers use to mess with our heads. The final chapter is like a punch in the gut. While it's easy to nod your head when recognizing the influence commercial interests have succeeded in having on your buying habits, it's very distressing to be shown how little public policy content really counts in the voting booth. We have the capacity to choose. Sold on Language strives to arm us as well as possible with the ability to choose also \_how\_ we choose.

This was for my son's IB class. It was just what he needed. Much cheaper than at his school book store.

The most interesting information was toward the end of the book when it discovered the connections between governance and advertising. Some of the writing is a book folksy with bad jokes, but the information is good.

It's a cheaper alternative but would prefer the actual book

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