

Brushing Our Teeth: More Than a Daily Ritual

Sara Y. Nunez de Herrera

English Discipline, El Paso Community College

English 1301: Composition I

Professor Kelli L. Wood

July 19, 2020

Brushing our Teeth: More than a Daily Ritual

A man walks toward the bathroom in the morning, reaching for his toothbrush to clean his teeth, expecting to start the day with a clean and fresh smile, but during the process he keeps the tap running. This is the way Colgate introduces its 2014 commercial “Colgate: Water.” Brushing our teeth every day to maintain a healthy and fresh smile is part of our regular daily routine, but according to Colgate's commercial, brushing is more than a daily ritual, it's a way to be part of the change: the water conservation movement. This advertisement is directing us to close the tap while brushing our teeth with Colgate toothpaste, and at the same time is enabling us to help others to have access to suitable water. With their emotional appeal, a tube of toothpaste does more than taking care of our dental health; brushing our teeth and closing the tap empowers the consumers to take a noble action: to help. According to Fowlers (1996), “Human beings, it is presumed, walk around with a variety of unfulfilled urges and motives swirling in the bottom half of their minds,” and Colgate is trying to use these vulnerabilities by inducing us to do the “Good”—the moral obligation to help ourselves and others—by closing the tap and stop the waste of water while doing the “Evil,” by spending our money, but on a good product with a good cause (p. 2). This ad is a good example of an emotional appeal to our better nature, and its power carries on beyond just watching the ad, seeking to change our actions and encourage us to buy a product based on our desire to do better. However, emotional appeals like this need to be viewed carefully, and not simply taken at face value.

The setting of the commercial, “*Colgate: Water*” (2014a), takes place in the bathroom of an apartment. The advertisement begins in a sunny morning, with a man in his sleeping clothes walking to a small, white, basic, bathroom, which is painted mainly in white with aqua blue, evoking a sense of water. The man walks to the sink, grabs his toothbrush and a plain tube of

toothpaste from the clear cup in front of the mirror. He places a fair amount of toothpaste on his toothbrush, opens the tap, wets the toothbrush, and starts to brush his teeth. The camera never captures the face of this man, but instead moves in front of him to focus on the white sink and the water running from it. The commercial lasts about one minute and seven seconds, and during this time the audience can hear water constantly running in the background and the man still brushing his teeth.

The first hands to reach for the running water in the sink belong to a young person who is holding half of an old plastic water bottle; his hand covered with dust approaches the sink to fill the plastic container with water. The second set of hands that reach out looking for water belong to an elderly man; with both hands he is holding an old and rusty metal bowl and he fills it. Then a third person's dirty hand appears on the screen holding a dirty, bruised, ripe pear and washes it. Finally, a cute little girl in old, worn out looking clothes, uses her tiny hands to grab water and to drink directly from the running water coming from the faucet; simultaneously on the bottom of the screen text appears saying, "We recommend to drink water in suitable conditions for human consumption" (Colgate, 2014a). Then the camera focuses on the nameless toothpaste, the running water, and then moves back to capture the whole bathroom, showing the man from behind as he continues to brush his teeth. The following lines appear: "When you brush your teeth with the tap running, you waste over 10 liters of water. That is more than many people in the world have in a month. Close the tap" (Colgate, 2014a). The commercial closes with a red screen and the Colgate logo in white letters. There is no verbal communication or interaction between the participants of this commercial.

Commercials these days have the power to attract us or detach us to a product by the advertisement's first visual and emotional appeal. By exposing us to enough images of poor

people—especially the image of this cute little girl using her tiny hands to drink water or the elderly man reaching for water—who have little or no access to water, this Colgate advertisement is appealing to our “need to nurture,” our “need to take care of small, defenseless...children and pets” (Fowlers, 1996, p. 6). As a result of this constant exposure, sometime later while walking throughout the aisle of a store looking for dental care products, we will end up associating Colgate with this emotional need to protect the little girl and the old man gathering water and be more likely will purchase Colgate products. In Simler’s (2014) opinion, “Almost every ad works, at least in part, by informing [...] about a product. And if it makes a *memorable* impression, even better” (“Truth in Advertising,” para. 4, original emphasis). This Colgate (2014a) commercial is suggesting that by not closing the tap while brushing, we are contributing to the misery of those who do not have enough water available for their basic needs. Simultaneously, Colgate is providing us with information by saying that ten liters of water are wasted every time we brush our teeth with the tap open, and by affirming: “That is more than many people in the world have in a month” (Colgate, 2014a).

By buying Colgate products, we are making a monetary compromise, based on a moral obligation (do good), because it is our belief that part of the money we are investing in buying the product is used by the company to work with local and global organizations to help promote access to clean water (Colgate, 2014b, p. 6). Dachis (2011) believes that “an ad succeeds at making us feel something—whether it’s good or bad—and that emotional response can have a profound effect on how we think and the choices we make,” and in this advertisement, we can relate to Dachis’ beliefs (para. 2). By manipulating our emotional responses, Colgate makes us, the consumers, believe that by buying its product we are partnered with them in an effort to provide clean and suitable water for those less fortunate people of the world, through the “Water

for People's Everyone Forever Program" (Colgate, 2014b, p. 8). Colgate is trying to change consumers' logic, by saying that we can contribute to water conservation and make every drop of water count by the simple act of closing the tap while brushing our teeth, and implicitly by buying Colgate toothpaste (Colgate, 2014b, p. 6).

The "Colgate: Water" (2014a) advertisement is encouraging viewers to believe we can be part of a positive change by emotionally and morally identifying us with a product. While using our emotions to persuade us of the idea that we are investing in a good cause, the advertisement is still achieving its primary objective: selling a product. Colgate's commercial is raising awareness in viewers about the global problem of wasting water, especially while brushing our teeth with the water running. By closing the tap we will not provide water for people in other parts of the world, but by exposing us to the reality about water not being available in every home around the world and by suggesting that we are amongst the privileged that have water at the turn of a knob, Colgate is trying to create consciousness on how detrimental our bad habits can be when it comes to saving water.

Colgate wants us to make smart decisions and not forget that water is a scarce resource and needs to be treated like one, while remembering that conservation of water is everybody's job. After viewing this ad, every morning when we open the faucet to brush our teeth, they hope we will picture the little Peruvian girl reaching for water, and hopefully our first instinct will be to close the tap each time we brush our teeth. After all, according to this ad, brushing our teeth is more than a daily ritual: it is a noble action.

While Colgate is definitely in business to make money, and that's part of what this ad works toward and may also be part of why Colgate has dedicated resources to this issue, understanding that this is also part of an advertising technique to sway us toward their product is

an important part of being a thoughtful consumer. We all make choices about which products we use; making a "moral" choice makes us feel better about it. Knowing whether a company really stands behind their advertising in terms of their community outreach programs is an important part of our decision making when trying to make a choice that does good in the world with our simple purchases; thankfully, Colgate's water sustainability initiative is a well-funded and ongoing project. But not all corporations stand behind the positive images they create in their ads. Making sure we dig behind the emotion created in ads like this helps us to make sure we are actually being part of something bigger.

References

- Colgate [Advertisement]. (2014a). *Colgate: Water* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/7TdLnW74qxc>
- Colgate- Palmolive. (2014b, May 18). *Colgate Sustainability Report 2014* [Press release]. Retrieved from www.colgatepalmolive.com/sustainability.
- Dachis, A. (2011, July). How advertising manipulates your choices and spending habits (and what to do about it) *Life Hacker*. Retrieved from Lifehacker website: <http://lifehacker.com/5824328/how-advertising-manipulates-your-choices-and-spending-habits-and-what-to-do-about-it>
- Fowels, J. (1998). Advertising's fifteen basic appeals. In M. Petracca and M. Sorapure, (Eds.) *Common Culture: Reading and Writing about American Popular Culture*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, Retrieved from Kelli dot Ninja website: http://kelli.ninja/1301/e3/Fowels_Advertisings_Fifteen_Basic_Appeals.pdf
- Simler, K. (2016). *Ads don't work that way*. Retrieved from Melting Asphalt website: <http://www.meltingasphalt.com/ads-dont-work-that-way/>