

Commitment: A Closer Look at a GMC Advertisement

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### Abstract

This essay examines a 2011 GMC advertisement and looks at the way in which the company uses terms of commitment to create a bond with the consumer. Using emotional cues like “I vow” further anthropomorphizes the truck and is another level of building connections. Drawing on the works of Gerbner and Kavanagh, this reveals an attempt to create relationships between people and material objects that are personified in the same way interpersonal relationships are using association and repetition. This is a common feature of modern advertising and suggests a growing push toward valuing ownership and consumption over human connections.

*Keywords:* GMC, advertising, consumerism, anthropomorphizing, material culture

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Advertisement is meant to sell a product or renew an interest in a newer version of a product. Advertisements work to capture the consumer's attention in seconds, but sometimes the message that is being portrayed has a different meaning. Sometimes the values that human beings cherish and hold dear are being portrayed through an object that has no way of responding. In "Idols of the Marketplace," Kavanaugh (1986) states that "in the most general sense, values always are a function of the culture that forms them, since culture explains all the expressions of who we are." Public views on certain values are in part made by the advertisers that decide to take any particular ad in a specific direction, some by giving an object human-like qualities, as in a commercial by GMC for the 2011 Sierra pickup truck; the truck is speaking to its owner and promising things it could never do. This personification will affect human values and in this case, how commitment is perceived.

The commercial starts with a dark screen and the headlights of the Sierra turning on, while the owner is walking toward the truck. The words *I VOW* flash on the screen, and the narrator states, "I vow to get up as early as you" (GMC, 2011). The next shot is of two men loading metal bins into the bed of the truck. As the truck is driving away with the bins the words *I VOW TO HAUL* appears on the screen, and at the same time the narrator says, "I vow to haul whatever you can fit in my bed and tow whatever you hitch me to." The owner is then loading fencing material into the truck bed. The truck is next shown with a large horse trailer attached to it. The narrator goes on to say, "I vow to never complain, never give up, and never say never." Throughout this part of the narration, a large load of rocks is being dumped on the bed of the truck by a tractor used for construction, the scene then changes and the words *NEVER SAY NEVER* flash on the screen with the background being of the truck going through muddy terrain.

The commercial ends with the Sierra on top of a cliff next to the ocean and the words *THE BEST SIERRA EVER* behind it. At the same time, the narrator says, “I vow to be the best Sierra ever.” A white background with GMC and Sierra written below it appears, and then switches to the corporation slogan “We Are Professional Grade.” The instrumentals throughout the whole commercial are the opening instrumentals to a song called “The World I Know” performed by Collective Soul (GMC, 2011).

In the commercial, the “I vow” statements are rather powerful. Vows are meant to be words exchanged as a promise or an oath to someone. Vows show commitment. The Sierra cannot possibly commit any of the vows stated, but in this case, GMC is associating its product with these deep commitments. The truck is reliable because it is a new model and therefore shouldn’t have any mechanical problems or issues, but the advertisement goes to another level by giving the truck a voice and a conscience. The potential consumer may hear “I vow” and will think of a treasured bond, or a cherished relationship. This is how advertisers sell their products using the vulnerability of the consumer and displaying how values have developed and changed in importance and meaning in the advertising world. Gerbner (1993) notes in his article that, “There seems to be no doubt that television’s appeal is based on its intimate connection with viewers’ needs and aspirations.” To generate a commercial with such deep meaning, but on the surface just selling a truck, shows advertisers skill and knowledge in finding what the viewers of the commercial will think. Having the ability to use images and text assists in the overall reaction that is expected from viewers. Seeing a big beautiful truck vowing to be dependable and always reliable connects with the usual use of the word *vow*, and shows the truck making the commitment that whatever the obstacles or circumstances the truck will never hurt, leave or let

its owner down. This diminishes the idea of vows when they can be bought and sold as easily as a vehicle.

Adair (2011) makes us aware of a rare but extreme case of object admiration in his article, "The Car Lover." Adair interviews a man named Edward who says that he is in love with his cars. Adair writes that, "Vanilla [Edward's Volkswagen Beetle] is definitely Edward's favorite car and he immediately referred to 'her' as the 'love of his life.'" Although Edward's case is extreme, it does show that what someone sees on television will have some sort of influence on them, whether it is minor or not. Having deep emotions for materialistic things and a need or want for them will influence the meaning of values. The opinion that the GMC advertisement gives is just that: it is okay to make vows to objects. The truck committing itself to its owner imitates the relationship of a spouse; therefore, the viewers are able to relate with the extreme guarantee that this vehicle will never let its owner down. Considering that statement, it emphasizes the untruthfulness of the narration in the commercial because no matter what, unfortunately, people are let down at least once.

Advertisements are designed to influence the audience, but when advertisers give human-like qualities to an object and relay the message that having a relationship with the object is acceptable, where then can the line be drawn? The vows that are stated in the commercial reflect statements exchanged between two people in a marriage ceremony. The perception of commitment is not held as valuable because of the commercials comparison to marriage vows, and the contradiction of its own words, promising what should not be promised. There are many values that people hold dear, and commitment is one of them. The lack of consideration for commitment in the advertisement for the GMC Sierra shows false hope because the viewer already knows that it is not possible to honor those vows.

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