Consider the Marlboro Man. What does this cowboy teach us?

The repetition of simple messages, images, and slogans can create our knowledge of the world, defining what is truth and specifying how we should live our lives. Consider the Marlboro Man. What does this cowboy teach us? First that smoking is for the rugged, self-confident individual [as opposed to being a health hazard]. Second, that American men should be macho [as opposed to, say, caring and sensitive]. And finally, that you can be rugged and macho simply by smoking Marlboro's — it is that easy.

propaganda [noun]
‘the systematic propagation of a given doctrine. ‘ideas, information, or other material disseminated to win people over to a given doctrine.
American Heritage Dictionary

Persuasion and propaganda have existed since human beings began to communicate. The term itself stems from the root “propagate” and evolved into its present-day meaning from the Catholic Church’s quest to propagate the faith in the 17th century. During the 20th century it has been used to describe persuasion tactics used during wartime and by totalitarian regimes, from which it has earned negative connotations. Propaganda is the communication of an idea with the ultimate goal of having the audience “voluntarily” accept a position as if it were his/her own. In the context of this study, I view persuasion and propaganda as synonymous, referring to persuasion on a conceptual level and propaganda as a tangible product.

CATEGORIES OF PROPAGANDA + PERSUASION
Persuasive communication can be broken down into six subcategories which are defined by their primary purpose.

ideological
the selling of a system or philosophy [politics or religion].

political
an individual or group trying to achieve power [related to ideological].

antagonistic
demoralizing an enemy [war propaganda/political campaigns].

protagonistic
[diplomatic] to promote a civil relationship with an ally or potential ally.

didactic
intended to instruct and educate the public [combating illiteracy or promoting pre-natal care].

economic
intended for economic gain [selling goods and services].

MESSAGE + DELIVERY
The manner in which a message is presented is integral to its success. This includes the synthesis of image and text used to convey the message.

repetition
creates its own truths — in communication that relies on repetition, the audience does not have to think deeply about the information they are consuming. Consumed repeatedly, it eventually gains credibility and is believed to be true.
location
a message must reach the audience for which it is intended.

packaging how the subliminal messages sent are packaged [formal qualities].

presentation
what is aesthetically appealing is more likely to draw and hold attention – the vulgar will repulse, the unappealing will not attract attention.

TECHNIQUES
How propaganda is presented is primary to its success. The following are ways in which information is presented to influence opinions.

good guy
[representations of heroes and martyrs]

testimonial
consists of celebrity and authority endorsements.

bandwagoning
support something because everyone else is [to jump on the bandwagon].

common people
not elitist, just like everyone else. Get things down to basics and it will be wholesome.

flag waving
promoting the concept that we are all in this together.

bad guy
[representations of villains and tyrants]

name calling
the use of visual metaphors, parody and satire to degrade the opposition.

stereotyping
to project certain qualities on a group based on myth, not fact [this is the general basis for racism, sexism and other types of discrimination].

visual/verbal rhetoric
[the art of language]

vivid appeal
makes a strong argument even more persuasive by using bold statements.

generalizing
making broad, unjustified statements such as “the best,” “new and improved,” etc.

double speak
to obscure the truth though wording [example – Orwell’s 1984].

bald appeal
to do something for no apparent reason other than just doing it.

syllogism
a form of reasoning whereas a minor detail shapes the entire image, the pathway from premise to conclusion is not a logical one.

The rank and file are usually much more primitive than we imagine. Propaganda must always therefore be essentially simple and repetitious. In the long run only he will achieve basic results in influencing public opinion who is able to reduce problems to the simplest terms and who has the courage to keep forever repeating them in this simplified form despite the objections of intellectuals.
– Joseph Goebells
Semiotics is the science of signs founded by French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Applied to visual communication, it is a useful tool because it aids in understanding the way people assign meaning and respond to a sign. Successful communication relies on the comprehension of sign systems, both in their production and interpretation. We assign meaning to signs based on cultural connotations and personal experience.

Signs are always grounded in culture, for without culture and a language system they cannot exist. The sign has two components – the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the physical entity which expresses the sign and the signified is the concept or emotion conveyed by the sign. A sign stands for something not physically present; it is the physical embodiment of thoughts, objects, or events to be transmitted for the purpose of clearer understanding. In everyday language, a sign is understood to have a physical quality, but in semiotic terms, it is an abstract concept.

**icon**
- A sign which has features in common with the object and characterizes, pictures or imitates the object.

**index**
- A pointing sign which has a direct, causal or real relation to its object.

**symbol**
- A sign which does not depend on likeness, correspondence, or real connection with its object.

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object is the physical thing (for example, a tree).
representamen is how we refer to it, a symbol in either written or visual language.
interpretant is the receiver, the audience.