

# Appearances; Poetry in Lotion

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We all read labels. we must read hundreds in the course of our commodity-saturated day, but we use a special part of our brains, a junkyard reserved for background noise, that allows us to imbibe messages, even act on them, without being aware. Anyone who thinks these messages are not having an influence because they are short-circuiting the conscious mind has missed Sigmund Freud and the entire body of psychoanalytic thought in the 20th century.

Consider the cacophony of bottles, jars and tubes in the average bathroom. Printed on each is a koan designed to insinuate itself into the fabric of the brain. It is written so simply, so succinctly, that it seems part of the product, as if it materialized without benefit of human hand.

In reality, composing a label is an arduous task. Because the space is limited, the molecular weight of each word is exponentially greater than it would be if it were buried someplace in the middle of "War and Peace." Before going to press, copy is

reviewed by more people than reviewed Tolstoy's original manuscript, which was probably read by only his wife and his publisher.

Take for example this haiku found on the back of Christian Dior's latest antiaging formula: "Capture Essential Time-Fighting Serum Apply morning and night to face and throat, before your regular treatment." These words, in small pink type, were written by Sandy Baron, a diminutive brunette with vast reserves of inner strength.

Because Dior products originate in France, Baron's task is cross-cultural. She must find American meaning in French *raison d'etre*. For inspiration, she is given a literal translation of the French label and accompanying package insert, "which isn't really English," so she has learned to ask for the original French as well. Translating into idiomatic language is only the beginning. Many claims that are legal in France, especially those that promise to rejuvenate and regenerate, can't be made here because of Food and Drug Administration rules. Where French copy valiantly vows to improve the structure of cells, American copy pallidly promises to reduce the appearance of wrinkles. "We have to tame it down a great deal," Baron says. Even when writing for

products like makeup when the F.D.A. is not involved, Baron cannot relax her guard against Gallic enthusiasm. Americans will hold a product to its word much more literally than Europeans, who "take everything with a grain of salt."

Once Baron has devised copy bland enough to escape censure by the F.D.A. and vigilant American consumers, she must submit her creation to the marketing manager, the marketing director, the vice president of marketing and the legal department for approval. Then it is sent to France, "and they have their whole hierarchy over there." For an important new treatment product like Capture Essential, copy "can go all the way to the top."

With such constraints, it is no wonder that labels generally have all the spontaneity of a Pravda account of a Politburo session during the height of the Stalin trials. But occasionally a voice pierces the early gray light of the bathroom, and the somnambulant reader is suddenly brought up short by a turn of phrase.

For instance: "Power cleanser excavates deep-down grime, debris and pollution. Flash-foam with enzymatic action purges pores and hair shafts of dirt and oil." The action verbs "excavates" and

"purges" and the surprising choice of the noun "debris" set apart this label for Lab Series for Men Lift Off! Power Wash. A cleanser described as a piece of heavy machinery is enough to make you pick up the phone and ask to speak to the anonymous poet of the pump bottle.

When confronted, Fayette Hickox, executive director for copy advertising at Aramis (label writers are never called label writers), is evasive at first. The main objective, especially when talking to men, is to keep the message simple, he says. "The last thing you want a person to think is that someone wrote this." But after some warming up, Hickox concedes that the Lift Off! copy may have been one of his finer moments, especially his choice of the verb excavating. "It's so dumb it's brilliant. It makes you rethink without having to think too much."

Hickox, who comes from The Paris Review, Vanity Fair and Interview, also writes for Tommy Hilfiger, Aramis, Tuscany for Men and Tommy Girl, using a different voice for each. Although he considers himself a minimalist -- his hero is the unsung genius who first wrote "shake well" -- he feels labels are getting more elaborate and reflective. "Marcel

Proust was a great loss to the cosmetic industry, although he would have needed editing."

Spearheading the movement toward loquacious cosmetics is Philosophy, whose generic white plastic containers with black lids and black lowercase lettering offer such wisdom (on a foot cream) as: "You own your values, your integrity, your thoughts, your words, your actions and therefore, your destiny." Philosophy's founder, Cristina Carlino, says the package concept "came from having no budget and a lot of Dear Diary entries." She writes most of the labels herself, and finds that the words flow easily. "If it doesn't come in a minute it, it doesn't go on the jar."

As the trend evolves, we may soon be seeing Kierkegaard on shampoo, Wittgenstein on bubble bath. Anyone who thinks the bathroom is a most unlikely place to find enlightenment obviously hasn't heard of Martin Luther or Archimedes.

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