

Questioning Ads Heard On The Radio

Questioning Claims Made in Radio Advertising

by Frank W Baker (August 2019)

In 2011, many movie goers were taken by the movie "Limitless" in which a down-on-his-luck man (played by actor Bradley Cooper) takes a drug that wakes up his brain and gives him mental acuity to become more adept and successful. (A short-lived TV series by the same name aired on CBS in 2015 and 2016.) Could such a drug do what it claimed? Apparently, many people think so.

The use of so-called "brain boosting" supplements have become popular on some college and university campuses as some students seek to gain an advantage over those who don't take the supplements. [See ["Students Turn To 'Smart Drugs' To Boost Grades"](#)] Not everyone is convinced of their effectiveness.

For the past several months, I've heard a commercial for "miracle" pill for the brain called "Limitless." The one-minute spots are frequently aired on national radio newscasts, for example, at the top of the hour. In fact, that's when I heard it, while driving in the car.

I wondered: do students, listening to commercials, ever question what they hear? If they do, great. But what if they don't? Are they susceptible to being fooled? Could they be persuaded to purchase a product basely solely on the claims made in these types of ads? In this column I aim to call attention to some of the techniques used in the ads and to encourage your students to think twice.

Active [listening skills](#) become increasingly important when students encounter ads they hear on the radio and online. For example, can they name the product being advertised? Can they recognize the gender of the person(s) pitching the product? Can they recall any words, phrases or slogans the advertisement used or repeated? Can they recognize other techniques (like music, sound effects, etc.) that might have been incorporated into the ad?

I wrote down what I heard in the Limitless radio ad, and you can download the script [here](#).

One of the first things that caught my attention was the claim that neuroscientists call it “the biggest advancement in brain science to date.” (Have your students research that phrase and see what they come up with.) I immediately Googled that phrase and here is what I discovered: several websites use that quote to describe their product—none of which is called Limitless.

The names of the neuroscientists are never provided, even though other so-called experts might be quoted.

The spot also claims that athletes, teachers and students say it is “a secret weapon for the brain.” I did not find that phrase anywhere online. (Are you beginning to get suspicious?)

The websites I found also claim that “CNN broke the news first”, and they use photos of anchorman Anderson Cooper as well as quotes attributed to him. Other recognized names, like Bill Gates, Stephen Hawking and others, are also used in these ads, each claiming that the pill works.

The use of well-known names is one of the more popular “propaganda techniques” known as “testimonial.” Testimonials from well-known persons are meant to persuade and convince the consumer that if _____ says it works, then it must be good enough for me. Testimonials are powerful and they often work. (Ask your students to locate a product that is currently being promoted by a singer, celebrity or sports figure. It

should not be hard for them to do.)

Another testimonial is heard in this radio commercial, but this one is not attributed. It's a man's voice who says "I took LIMITLESS and it started working in minutes. All of a sudden it felt like a dark cloud had been lifted up right before my eyes. I have a mental clarity I've never felt before."

The customer, testifying about the success of the pill, is known as the "everyman" or "plain folks" propaganda technique. People listening usually assume that this is a real customer and that if it worked for him, then I should try it as well. (Ask your students to locate a print, broadcast or online ad for a product that is currently being promoted by someone who looks or sounds like them.)

Researching Other So-called Brain Enhancement Products

Using the well-known SNOPEs "fact checking" website, I found that a similar brain boosting product was judged unreliable.

"We could find no proof that the supposed brain supplement IntelliGEN enhances brain function or is even safe to use."

([Source](#))

The Federal Trade Commission is another reliable source for students to consider. In April of this year, the FTC settled with twelve corporate defendants because they had deceptively marketed "cognitive improvement" supplements using sham news websites containing false and unsubstantiated efficacy claims, references to non-existent clinical studies, and fraudulent consumer and celebrity endorsements. ([Source](#))

Examining Limitless Online

I located two products on the popular shopping site Amazon that used the name LIMITLESS. One of them says "AS heard ON the radio." You might challenge your students to deconstruct the claims made there as well.

Here is [a link](#) to the first LIMITLESS product. Here is a link to [its website](#). Here is [a link](#) to the second product.

Questions for students to consider:

1. Are the actual ingredients contained in these products listed? If so, what do they know about how these ingredients work, if they do at all?
2. Did they consider the “legal disclaimer” about whether the product had been evaluated by the FDA (Food and Drug Administration)?
3. Did they read/consider the comments from people who claimed to have used the ads? How might these be verified?
4. Do students know the procedure for reporting a deceptive or misleading ad to local, state or federal authorities?

Conclusion

It is clear that advertisers and marketers, who use many different media formats to reach their audiences, use persuasive and sometimes deceptive techniques to sell their products and services.

In a world where we want our students to become better critical thinkers, viewers and listeners, it’s important that they be exposed to many different media formats as well as the techniques they use to convince consumers.

Media literacy becomes more important than ever I think you’ll agree. I’d love to receive your feedback on the topic discussed here. You can comment below or reach me via email: fbaker1346@gmail.com or via twitter @fbaker

Sources and resources

[“Students Turn To ‘Smart Drugs’ To Boost Grades”](#)

[Listening skills](#)

[Limitless Radio Script](#)

[Snopes Weighs In on Brain Boosting Pills](#)

[FTC Ruling Cites Brain Pill Producers](#)

[Do Brain Boosting Supplements Actually Work?](#)

[Nootropics, or 'Smart Drugs,' Are Gaining Popularity. But Should You Take Them?](#)

(TIME Magazine)