



# Appealing to the imagination: Effective and ethical marketing of religion<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper defines and develops the concept of ‘appealing to the imagination,’ a type of marketing communication designed to engage the imagination of the target audience, which presents aesthetic, poetic, and truthful characteristics. The paper proposes ‘appealing to the imagination’ as an effective and ethical technique for marketing religion, arguing that appeals to the imagination persuade audiences effectively and communicate religious claims with authenticity and tolerance. The case of the Focolare, a rapidly growing religious movement that uses appeals to the imagination extensively and successfully, illustrates these propositions.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper proposes ‘appealing to the imagination’ as an ethical and effective technique for marketing religion. An appeal to the imagination is defined as a type of marketing communication with aesthetic (visual), poetic (story form), and truthful (truths relevant to the audience) characteristics designed to engage the imagination of the target audience. Appealing to the imagination is particularly relevant for marketing religion because the transcendent, non-physical nature of most religious claims means that the marketing of religion must depend heavily on the consumer’s imagination.

## 2. Literature review

This section reviews the research on imagination in marketing, on perception and imagination, and on the marketing of religion.

### 2.1. Imagination and marketing

Throughout history, philosophers and other scholars have analyzed the imagination, seeking to understand its nature, purpose, and impact. Cocking’s (1991) study of imagination notes that Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Descartes, and Hume all contributed significantly to the understanding of the imagination. Consumer experts and marketing scholars study the

imagination of managers (e.g. Andrews and Smith, 1996; Gartner, 2007), consumer researchers (e.g. Larsen and Wright, 1993; Murray and Ozanne, 1991; Murray, Ozanne, and Shapiro, 1994; Ozanne and Murray, 1991), and consumers (e.g. Schau, 2000).

Schau (2000) provides a survey of theories of the imagination through history, and observes that research into the consumer imagination is important for marketing because “the way in which people make sense of corporeal perception is useful in understanding and explaining consumption motivations, techniques, and strategies” (Schau, 2000, p. 53). Even so, Schau notes a theoretical disagreement about the imagination’s role in human information processing:

Although the precise nature of imagination (body or mind) and process detail are contested among theorists, imagination is at least informed perception (Descartes) and at most the central intellectual endeavor (Hume), which is integral to the construction and expression of identities (Schau, 2000, p. 51).

Schau favors a broad understanding, in which the imagination “make[s] sense of sensation” and “construct[s] and express[s] individual and group level identities and realities by manipulating signs, accumulating possessions, and developing consumption practices” (Schau, 2000, p. 53). Jenkin, Eccles, and Molesworth (2010) proposes a similarly broad role, while Martin (2004) addresses only the imagination as a source of imaginary phenomena.

Despite general scholarly interest in the imagination, there has been very little consumer or marketing research on the topic. The few studies available suggest that the imagination plays an important role in consumers’ interactions with products. Consumers use their imaginations to engage with products and to make product choices (Chronis and Hampton, 2004; Small, 2008), particularly for hedonic products (Dewi and Ang, 2001). Imagination-focused visualizations can improve

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consumer evaluations of new products that provide novel benefits (Dahl, Chattopadhyay, and Gorn, 1999; Zhao, Hoeffler, and Dahl, 2009); imagining whom one will be rather than what one will experience produces the most positive effects (Ostinelli and Bockenholz, 2009).

## 2.2. Perception and imagination

Recent research in psychology, cognitive science, and philosophy suggests why the imagination appears to play such an important role in consumer decision-making. While research on the imagination focuses on imagination as mental simulation—the creation of images and alternate realities in the human mind (see e.g. Markman, Klein, and Suhr, 2009)—recent scholarship suggests that the imagination also may play an important role in perception, creating much of what a person thinks he or she perceives. Rather than absorbing all the sensory input available and then processing it, the brain captures sensory input selectively and imagination creates the rest (Ballard, 2002; Bridgeman, 2002; Noe, 2002; Noë, 2004).

Research on the interplay between imagination and perception grew, in part, from attempts to explain ‘change blindness’ (failure to perceive obvious, immediate changes), and ‘inattention blindness’ (failure to notice something in plain sight). For example, in one ‘change blindness’ experiment, an actor stops a random person in a public place and asks a question (e.g. directions to a nearby building). While the subject is speaking, two people carrying a door walk between the actor and the subject, momentarily hiding the actor from the subject. In that intervening moment, a new actor with significantly different physical features and dress replaces the first actor. In many instances, subjects fail to observe that a different person is now standing in front of them (Simons and Levin, 1998). Similarly, in an ‘inattention blindness’ experiment, participants see a video of two teams practicing basketball passes and must count the number of times the white team makes a pass. Halfway through the video, a person wearing a gorilla suit walks among the basketball players, beats her chest, and then walks off camera. When asked, approximately 50% of participants say they never saw the gorilla (Simons and Chabris, 1999). Another very simple ‘inattention blindness’ experiment requires the subject to look at two dots spread 3 inches apart on a page. With one eye closed, the subject slowly brings the page closer to his or her eyes. At some point, one of the dots disappears because of the ‘blind spot,’ the part of the retina that cannot capture light because it has no receptors.

These experiments make a significant point: subjects do not perceive a hole or gap in place of the unperceived phenomena; the mind fills in that space (cf. Noë, 2004). While people tend to “believe that what we see is reality rather than something we create inside our heads” (Wind, 2004, p. 5), research strongly suggests that human beings imagine significant parts of what they think they see. Collectively, this research on persuasion suggests that imagination creates not only the imaginary objects in our minds, but also a significant proportion of our “perceptions” of the real world.

The research on change or inattention blindness does not claim to conclude that “all ‘realities’ are subjectively constructed and evaluated” (Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p. 306). Instead it indicates that the brain is frugal: rather than capturing all sensory data, it captures only what it deems important and imagines the rest.

## 2.3. Marketing of religion

This paper avoids current debates about the precise definition of religion (e.g. Fitzgerald, 2003; Smith, 1988; Wilson, 1998), by following Cavanaugh (2007) and defining ‘religion’ very broadly, as any worldview or ideology that makes or implies absolute claims or assumptions.

Increasingly, churches use marketing to influence prospective or current adherents, “to change their behavior with respect to religion

in some way” (Mottner, 2008, p. 93). These behavioral changes include: (a) joining an organized religious group, either from another religion (conversion) or from having no religion; (b) maintaining or increasing ‘loyalty’ to a certain type of religion; (c) increasing the level of ‘religiosity’ and conformity to a specific religion’s norms; (d) increasing one’s depth of belief or faith in a religion; and (e) financial support of religious organizations (Mottner and Ford, 2010, p. 93).

Recent research on the marketing of religion focuses on a variety of topics: the impact of a church’s marketing orientation on participation (Mulyanegara, Tsarenko, and Mavondo, 2011); effectiveness of advertising and promotional vehicles for attracting and retaining church members (Joseph and Webb, 2000; Webb, Joseph, Schimmel, and Moberg, 1998); the “God Speaks” advertising campaign (Lancendorfer and Reece, 2010); the Catholic Church’s use of World Youth Day events to reach young people (Pfadenhauer, 2010); the growth of Evangelical megachurches (Kuzma, Kuzma, and Kuzma, 2009); and the Unification Church’s use of sports marketing (Lee, 2010).

The marketing of religion falls within the purview of social marketing (e.g. Fine, 1981) and thus draws on research in social marketing. Research focused directly on the marketing of religion remains rare (Cutler, 1992) and, as a result, “many areas of the marketing of religion ...lack academic research” (Mottner, 2008, p. 105).

Though clergy and members of the public increasingly accept the marketing of religion, some discomfort remains (cf. Ann and Devlin, 2000; Cutler and Winans, 1998; McDaniel, 1989). Shepherd (2004) summarizes debate among scholars about whether the marketing of religion is appropriate. Einstein (2008, p. 210) raises the concern that such marketing will lead religious leaders or others to sell religions as “quick and easy fixes.”

Because the marketing of religion attempts to change or reinforce religious beliefs and practices, it carries important personal and societal implications. Religious differences correlate with differences in consumption orientation (Lindridge, 2005) and consumer purchasing behavior (Delener, 1994); consumer reactions to advertising of controversial products tend to differ based on the consumer’s religion (Fam, Waller, and Erdogan, 2004); and religion plays an important role in consumers’ ethical beliefs (Cornwell et al., 2005; Rawwas, Swaidan, and Al-Khatib, 2006). Most significantly, Vitell and collaborators (Vitell, 2009; Vitell and Paolillo, 2003; Vitell, Paolillo, and Singh, 2005, 2006; Vitell, Singh, and Paolillo, 2007; Vitell et al., 2009) explore extensively the relationships between religiosity and consumers’ ethical orientations, concluding in part that “enough evidence exists to state that individuals who have stronger religious beliefs, whether business practitioners or consumers, tend to have stronger ethical norms and judgments than those with weaker religious beliefs” (Vitell, 2009, p. 165).

As a result, ‘acquisition’ of a religion—conversion from one worldview to another—has implications for the convert that are much more significant and wide-ranging than the acquisition of other products or services. Even major purchases that consumers consider most carefully—a car or a house—do not tend to change their ethical beliefs.

Consequently, the marketing of religion raises ethical issues, some of which are shared with the rest of social marketing. Brenkert (2002, p. 16) notes that attempts to change people’s behaviors through social marketing can “involve modifications in their attitudes, values, norms, and ideas.” The implication is that the attitudes, values, norms, and ideas that the social marketer (of a particular religion, in this case) proposes are superior to the attitudes, values, norms, and ideas currently held by the people receiving the marketing messages. The “proximate end” (or goal) of a social marketing campaign implies a “general end” or desirable state of affairs (Brenkert, 2001, p. 49). For example, a campaign to educate women (its proximate end) implies the importance of equality between the sexes (the general end). Social marketers inevitably make value judgments, consciously or not, about general ends—they make judgments about which goods and rights are superior to others—and propose that certain general ends replace others.

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