

Our Changing Economy

Firms Pick Image As Reveler a Mask

By Philip Stoddard Brown

IT'S A SHOCKING thing, these allegations about TV contestants being given the answers and about the world's beauty queen having secret padding where a broad should be broad without padding.



Brown

When I was a boy, I was taught that it's wrong to cheat. This I still believe, despite all I hear about the cheating that goes on in classes and on the golf courses these days. It's just unfair to take unfair advantage of one's competitors. I remember the aversion I felt some years ago when I read, in a column by Norman Vincent Peale, how God walked by Ben Hogan's side (unseen, I suppose) and directed his every swing—thus enabling Ben to win some big championship with a juicy payoff.

At business school, I learned that honesty pays, and I know from attendance at many a Rotary luncheon and from having read many advertisements that "service" is the key to success.

Dishonest Dealer Prospers

Like other people, I've wished that retribution would come sooner to some people. The dealer who told me several untruths about a used car I bought from him some years ago still prospers. But, in the long run, he'll lose everything.

Deceit is a terrible thing—unworthy of so noble a creature as man (and woman, too). I've tried to impress upon my children that deceit is an animal trait. We've read the Uncle Remus stories about the deceitful fox. We've watched the wicked spider snare the unwary fly. We've observed the patient guile of the toad and the tricky camouflage of the chameleon. We've seen sneaky cats deliberately murder song birds that eat the nasty worms. Even the seemingly-innocent Venus flower, we've noted, is a deceitful trap for harmless insects . . . Oh, how I've drummed it into their dear little ears that only Nature is vile.

But, as the children have grown older, this nobility-of-man theme hasn't seemed to stir them. Even my youngest has sold articles to his playmates above cost and without informing them of his gains. He has made bets on questions to which he knew the answers.

In my older children, I have detected a trace of sarcasm in their reading of an advertisement (in this very newspaper) describing a house they consider drab as "glamorous, with spacious living room, huge foyer, glorious sun deck, charming powder room and pine-panelled rumpus room, all done in Williamsburg style—an immaculate dream house on a lovely tree-shaded lot." I tell them this reflects enthusiasm and that no misrepresentation is intended.

Sometimes when we listen on TV to the claims of manufacturers of weight-reducing pills, deodorants and soaps of remarkable cleansing qualities, these claims disturb me. Again I tell the children that any false claims will be corrected in time and I'm glad to be able to cite Carter's Little Liver Pills, which henceforth by order of the Federal Trade Commission will be known only as Carter's Little Pills.

Another problem I have is with my wife who tends to be cynical about those beautiful golden oranges, the printed markdown on packages of toothpaste and all the "fabulous buys" that are advertised daily in my favorite newspaper. I tell her that no misrepresentation is intended and that nobody is really deceived, but she replies: "Why then do they do it?"

Then too, some of my friends devote more time than I think proper to writing speeches for respected businessmen and men in public office. It's proper, I admit, for a man to get ideas from other people and even a little help in expressing his ideas, but it does seem to me that occasionally a man ought to take a hand in writing his own speech.

Times have surely changed. These days, people are given not only words to speak, but whole personalities. If a product has defects, the manufacturer instead of correcting them may simply instruct his advertising department to stress the role of craftsmanship in the making of his product. A corporation has only to select its "image," as a reveler seeks his mask.

Long ago, a man in the show business remarked that all the world's a stage and that businessmen, politicians, clergymen and all the rest of us, actors. But not until recent times, did it begin to look as though the purpose of all this acting was to entertain.

The former producer of *Twenty-One* says: "The only function of entertainment is to entertain" and in the context of his remarks, this implies that entertainment covers a lot of territory that we used to designate "the distribution of goods and services." The prevailing view in this greatly expanded business of entertainment is that "anything goes:" misrepresentation (some people in this field prefer the word "illusion"), payola and double dip (an expression they use in the South, I believe).

Who Pays Whom

Well, this isn't right. Even if we are all actors and if entertainment is the main purpose of life, we actors should have some loyalties one to another. Actions should be in character. And it keeps the record straight to know who is paying whom.

As Suzy Parker has said: "Don't hold me to anything I've said." I've just remembered that I better strike a paragraph in a memorandum for a client, which contains an observation he might not like—or, shall I say, might not appreciate for lack of understanding . . . Then, I think I'll go home and help my son with his algebra, even though this may serve to deceive his teacher. After all, in our society where equality of opportunity and freedom of competition prevail, an "A" is important . . . Besides, I don't want him to get his answers from some boy or girl outside the family. That would be cheating.