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Ever hear the joke about the Budweiser salesman who wants the pope to change the Lord's Prayer from "Give us this day our daily bread" to "Give us this day our daily beer?" The salesman gives the pope a briefcase of money and asks him to consider it. The moment the salesman leaves Vatican City, the pope asks his lawyer, "When does our contract with Pillsbury expire?"

Go ahead and laugh, but the day when bottled beverages claim to save souls may have arrived. Just last month the Mexican Conference of Bishops invited corporate sponsors such as FedEx, Pepsi and its subsidiary, Sabritas potato chips, to help finance Pope John Paul II's recent multi-million dollar visit to Mexico City.

It may be just a larger version of selling ads on the back of weekly church bulletins or holding bingo games, but the implications of the treaty between the Holy See and the Choice of a New Generation seem more arresting. If sacred Christian icons can share space with corporate logos -- like the papal trading cards in a bag of potato chips -- then where do we draw the line? Is nothing sacred from marketing?

Apparently not, as a glance around a crowded room proves. It's the rare dresser who isn't adorned in at least one obviously marked brand item. People wear Tommy Hilfiger underwear, Levi's jeans, Nike shoes (which match gold swooshes on gold chains), Ralph Lauren shirts, Abercrombie & Fitch hats, and Calvin Klein perfume -- often all at the same time.

Nor are clothes the only measure of the man or woman. Gold capped teeth with swooshes and swoosh tattooes are not just the stuff of gang members and Nike employees anymore. Brett Bryan, manager of BodyGraphics Tattoo in South Windsor, says someone asks for a Nike swoosh about every other month. His tattoo artists have rendered black swooshes, multicolored swooshes, swooshes with "Just do it," and "Just do it" alone.

People also request tattoos of Jack Daniel's, Bud, Guinness, and -- yes -- the Cigna tree. A champion sheep shearer who used an Oster electric shearer showed his brand loyalty after Oster asked him to demonstrate his techniques at various fairs by inking Oster's signature "O" on his arm.

"It's crass commercialism," Bryan says. "It's the American way. If you were a good American, you would have your favorite corporate symbol tattooed on yourself. You're buying it because it's cool. Why is it cool? Because it's got a swoosh. It's not just a swoosh, it's a lifestyle."

It's also becoming more and more common. The more savvy corporate marketers learn how to pervade Americans' consciousness, the more individualism becomes a trait to avoid. And the ramifications of that trend are disturbing, indeed. Sure, humans need to belong to a group -- how do you think we made it past the caveman days? -- but if no one is willing to even dress or buy for themselves, then how can we possibly think for ourselves? And what does that say about our future?

Given the daily inundation of advertising in our lives -- some studies suggest the typical American receives more than 3,000 marketing messages daily -- it's not surprising Americans are losing their individuality. That this susceptibility begins in utero has been known since the mid-1940s, when a psychologist demonstrated classical Pavlovian conditioning in the womb. Now pregnant women everywhere, eager to give Johnny or Suzy that academic edge, read or play Mozart to their stomachs.

The onslaught continues through childhood, where marketers spend $1 billion annually to hook underage kids on consuming. By age 20, the average American has seen at least 1 million ads. People may be aware of the stimuli, but "we don't realize an association is being formed in our minds that will exert an effect on us," says Syracuse University psychology professor Brian Mullen. People may manufacture reasons to like Nike or other products, he says, "but it might have nothing to do with real reason."

While the real reason may be seeing the logo 20,000 times before age 12, instead the individual may associate desire for the product with prior positive experiences. To represent those feelings, we wear logos as badges, says marketing expert Norm Sherman. "Native Americans carried shields with certain information that depicted who the person was that carried the shield," says Sherman, managing director of the Senior Network, a Stamford-based group that researches the 50-plus crowd.

"It was a form of communicating and a form of protection. The person who wears Nike is saying, 'I have the Nike sign, I'm like Nike.' The whole concept of wearing labels on the outside is that it makes a statement about you," Sherman adds. "There's always been that desire that people are wanting to be unique, wanting to stand out, wanting to have something that is really, really special." By making us feel a product is unique, therefore, marketers ironically divest consumers of their individuality as they all clamber for the same product.

Marketers convince us products are unique using psychologist Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, according to Jeff Smith, a senior associate at the Chicago consulting firm Kuczmarski and Associates. Developed in the 1970s, Maslow's theory of human needs and potential says that people must meet basic needs before reaching their creative pinnacle.

In his theory's pyramidal structure, physiological demands (food, clothing, shelter) occupy the bottom. The next level of safety and security is followed by love and belonging, then self-esteem and self-respect, which leads to the ultimate self-realization of a vocational calling.

Ads promising to fulfill Maslow's hierarchy appeal to emotion over reason, Smith says. "What does the brand offer? It makes me run faster, jump higher, and perform better. Nike has been able to elevate themselves to a level of a lifestyle decision. If I have Nike, I know I can be the best that I can be. People are buying this shoe based on its brand and lifestyle decision," he says. A brand fails if it can't fulfill its basic promises. When it succeeds, the brand develops a personality, Sherman adds.

Celebrity endorsements further add personality to products, with their words often outweighing product performance. "Cool works from the top down. The fact that all of a sudden that two or three cool guys are wearing Nike, that has incredible power," says Kalle Lasn, founder of *Adbusters* magazine. "The branding people know that. They go for the trendsetting types, because if you can convince the young trendsetters in high school to go for Nike, all the other people follow like sheep."

Lasn compares the phenomenon to reading a book, when a quote with a kernel of truth sparks some internal ecstasy. "It changed your life to a degree," he says. "That's what happens when somebody spends $250 million and creates a Nike swoosh, and everybody starts wearing it. It is happening on a cultural level."

And it's happening worldwide, according to researcher Andrew Erlich. "When marketing works, the world is a shrinking place. If something is tried, it will be used in different places," he says. As head of Erlich Transcultural Consultants in Woodland Hills, Calif., he examines how companies can sell across cultural barriers.

"There is always a desire for people to associate themselves with something heroic, or something that is desired by others," he says. "People are wanting to, in a great many ways, to imitate the American experience," Erlich says. Exposure to movies, music, entertainment, sports or travel only accelerates this process.

Cross-cultural marketers use more than the traditional marketing tools of demographic studies, spending habits, psychological profiles and test marketing to push ideas, according to Saul Gitlin, the vice president of strategic marketing services for the New York agency Kang and Lee Advertising. "The essence of the brand doesn't change," he says. "The way that brand will be conveyed needs to be done in a way relevant for audience."

For example, in 1997, AT&T broke a branding campaign targeting the general market. The theme "It's all within your reach" suggested how a combination of AT&T products and service could empower and enhance lives. After opening on prime-time TV, AT&T went to Kang & Lee to translate the theme for the Asian segment.

They tweaked the ad to give AT&T cultural significance among Asians, Gitlin says. The American spot showed how AT&T products help heroic, working mothers raise a family. The Asian spot showed AT&T keeping Chinese students in America in touch with significant others at home, complete with symbolic references to the moon and love. "The message is the same," Gitlin says.

It's a message that's only growing as cultures merge. Humans worldwide endure a $500 billion annual marketing storm, according to Lasn. "Every institution has bought into marketing," he says. "It is the most powerful way of getting these things done, whether you're marketing Coca-Cola or marketing religion."

The pope's decision to call on Pepsi rather than simply prayer isn't that surprising. Like 500 years ago, when the Protestant Reformation broke up the papacy's monopoly on God, Roman Catholicism needs help as it is loses priests and followers.

With other brands of God gaining ground, Pope John Paul II had to act. But his church's Faustian bargain with capitalists goes against the very message in his recently published report, "The Crisis of Meaning," which decries corporate greed. "The pope buys into the very thing he is talking against," Lasn says of the theological tract. "It is one of the incredible contradictions of our postmodern era."

The Mexican Conference of Bishops knew aligning itself with Pepsi and Sabritas potato chips would help its marketing efforts, says Frito-Lay spokesman Todd MacKenzie. "They were looking for support in hoping to deliver the pope's message. They identified companies that had the ability to do that. Sabritas has 400,000 points of distribution, and it is certainly among the top five consumer brands of packaged goods in Mexico. It was an effective way of reaching the faithful," he says.

Sabritas labeled the bags "Papas" -- Spanish for "pope" and "potatoes." They included papal trading cards, and an offer to buy a commemorative holder. The estimated $200,000 in proceeds from the holder will go to the construction of a hostel for pilgrims visiting the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadeloupe, MacKenzie says.

Beyond granting kitsch licenses to pencil, keychain and pope-on-a-rope vendors, the Mexican bishops created an ad campaign with Pepsi. The television spots and outdoor signs feature the pope, the Pepsi logo and the phrase, "Mexico: Always Faithful." Billboards, telephone booths and bus kiosks greeted the pope as his motorcade entered the city.

Once again the church did the approaching, according to Pepsi spokesman Jon Harris. He wouldn't say how much Pepsi spent on the campaign and the pope's visit. "As

long as we could do it in a tasteful way, which we did, we wanted to be a part of it," he says. "I think it was a positive experience for us and for the people of Mexico."

Pepsi's goal was not so much brand imaging and being associated with the Holy See, he says, but more to support the "powerful consumer message of 'Mexico: Always Faithful.'"

The breakthrough of marketing into religion caused a furor in Mexican media, but consultant Erlich contends it is a natural step. "Part of the pope's reason for visiting Mexico was marketing," he says. "With the Protestant and Evangelical movements making inroads, this provides a way of saying 'We want to keep true believers true to the faith.' What you see is just as government is using marketing, religions are using it. There will be cross-pollination where both of them are coming together."

Pepsi wins, says University of Massachusetts professor Sut Jhally. "Some people think religion is the only alternative to commercial culture, but this shows [commercialism] can even move into religion," Jhally says. "In one sense it is the ultimate triumph. The religious view is based on spirituality, and the corporate view is based on products and the material world -- you are what you buy -- which is the opposite of Catholicism."

Marketing will always continue to push the envelope, according to University of Dayton, Ohio adjunct professor Sister Fran Trampiets. "What they did successfully last season is a big yawn this season," she says. "They have to come up with something more eye-catching and more attention-grabbing. It's pretty hard to say where they are going to go next. But educating young people, that is one of the important principles."

Educating them to what, however, is the question, as more and more corporations infiltrate school systems via advertising. Where once local merchants handed out book covers filled with ads, now entire businesses are built on the premise of getting advertising into classrooms.

The granddaddy of them all, ChannelOne, opened this pandora's box about ten years ago when its parent company, Whittle Communications of Knoxville, Tenn., announced plans to donate televisions if teachers tuned in every morning for a 10-minute "newscast" financed by two minutes worth of ads. The newscasts feature casually dressed college-age journalists covering foreign and domestic stories in greater depth than networks. Pop music hooks and snazzy graphics don't add much content, and each show ends with a short quiz. One recent broadcast questioned the origin of AIDS and explained why Monica Lewinsky testified before the Senate. Neither story mentioned sex.

Today, ChannelOne, now owned by PriMedia, beams its news along with candy, soda, and breakfast cereal ads to an estimated 8 million students into 12,000 schools nationwide, 59 of which are in Connecticut. PriMedia literature brags that more teens watch ChannelOne than all three network nightly newscasts combined.

Alex Molnar, who heads up the Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education, worries that the clash in educational messages harms children. "There is a clear distinction between the purposes of marketing and education," he says. "Advertising makes no claim to telling the truth. Education attempts to tell the truth, and not because of a special interest but the interest of the entire community. The community and children don't come first in advertising. The sponsor does."

PriMedia spokesperson Susan Tick considers Molnar's message hogwash. She points to such accolades as a recent letter from the Citizens Against Government Waste praising ChannelOne.

But installing televisions in classrooms isn't the only way corporations brand students. It's the increasingly rare school these days whose hallways, cafeteria and computer lab isn't inundated with advertising of some sort.

Colorado Springs School District 11 may not allow ads into classrooms, but the district broke marketing ground in September 1997 by signing an exclusive, $8 million annual contract with Coca-Cola. The soft drink giant handles the district's 250 soda vending machines, and teachers have been directed in memos to encourage students to drink Coke. A Sept. 23, 1998 memo, written by administrator John Bushey and published in *Harper's*, tells teachers to allow students to drink soda throughout the day, and asks principals to position machines for easy accessibility.

The contract guarantees $25,000 per high school, $15,000 per middle school and $3,000 per elementary school for seven years, if once during the first three years they sell 70,000 cases of product. That's roughly a can of soda every other day for the 35,000 or so staff and students. Bushey says the idea was hatched 10 years ago, when the state legislature left the district strapped for cash.

"We needed to be entrepreneurial in getting some monies for us to operate in our individual schools," Bushey says. "We began to provide to businesses in our community space for advertising."

Signs needed educational messages, such as the Army's "Be all you can be: stay in school," or Mountain Dew's "Dew the right thing -- get good grades." The soda machine contract, he says, was a natural extension. Principals retain the power to decide ad placement, and the money generated goes back to the school to buy items they could not otherwise afford.

The number of Connecticut schools using advertising as a financing mechanism is unknown, according to Nick Caruso, the spokesman for the Connecticut Association of Boards of Edu-cation. CABE doesn't keep statistics regarding advertising contracts or schools outsourcing food services to franchised restaurants.

CABE has written a sample policy, says Caruso, who eight years ago helped write an anti-ad policy while he was a member of Bloomfield's Board of Education. The

policy still stands. "CABE isn't going out there and saying let's everybody take ads," he says. "Before you allow it, look at it, look at how it would be intrusive and look at the decision that would be best for your kids."

The East Lyme and Stonington school boards, for instance, have passed ad prohibitions. Hartford school officials aren't sure if there is a policy. At Hartford Public High School, the profits from Coke vending machines go into a fund for student activities to be distributed at Principal Joe Wall's discretion.

The Greenwich school board recently accepted a scoreboard for its football field from Coca-Cola, Caruso says. Other schools, like Bristol, are battling the advertising problem now.

Molnar, meanwhile, worries about the mixed messages students ingest. "I know in Colorado Springs, without ever looking at their curriculum, I know that in health classes, children are being encouraged not to consume junk food," he says. "At the same time, the school is engaged in a contract with direct financial benefits, which result from asking students to consume beverages. It's shameful behavior. It's untenable."

The intensity of the message is only likely to increase, thanks to the burgeoning Internet market. Take ZapMe!, an Internet service provider working from the ChannelOne model to offer schools 15 free Internet-ready computers. ZapMe! started in 1996 when California parent and entrepreneur Lance Mortensen wanted to equip technologically-poor schools with high-grade hardware, according Frank Vigil, president and chief operating officer of ZapMe! The for-profit company gives schools multi-purpose labs with high-speed satellite access to 10,000 educational websites. Normally the lab would cost $9,500 a month, Vigil says.

The catch: Students log on using anonymous demographic data such as age and sex, and in the lower left corner of the 17-inch monitor, ads rotate every 15 seconds in a 2-by-4 inch box. ZapMe! then compiles user profiles and offers advertisers valuable target markets.

One in every three ads will sell consumer goods, Vigil says, although he hasn't signed any contracts yet. Public service announcements from groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving or DARE would fill the remaining slots. The cost structure is private, but he envisions students clicking on a Nike image, and guys seeing a Michael Jordan dunk, while girls would see soccer star Mia Hamm's latest goal. None of the ads will be for alcohol or tobacco.

"What we provide is different than commercialism," Vigil says, noting commercialism already exists in schools via unfiltered magazine ads in libraries. ZapMe! is in about 80 schools nationwide now, including Bristol, which installed 15 last fall. Granby schools are considering ZapMe! and East Hartford has already committed to installation. East Hartford Assistant Superintendent Jim Fallon says his district already has well-stocked computer labs, but ZapMe! will add another dimension.

"Society has changed so much, for example when you go to cafeterias today, there are different stations, like you could have Papa John's Pizza," Fallon says. The fast-food chain is part of Marriot's food contract with East Hartford. "The point I'm making, is it is not an issue anymore. For God sakes, every time you go on the Internet, you've got advertisements all over the place. Why are you having a major problem with seeing an icon?"

Colorado Springs' Bushey agrees schools will never be ad free. "People see schools as the last sanctuary for purism. They say it's free from any type of distraction and we shouldn't be doing this sort of thing," Bushey says. "If in fact people are concerned about the fact their children's minds may be tainted by ads in schools, then we should meet every kid at the front door, and take off their Tommy Hilfiger shirts, Reebok shoes, Nike hats and Sony Walkmans."

And if parents are really upset, he says they would never let their kids watch Saturday morning cartoon shows. "Children are the captive audience of Kellogg's, Mattel and all other toy and cereal companies. If you don't think they are influenced, stand in a toy aisle or cereal aisle when mom and dad are shopping. Kids will tell you 'I want Cap'n Crunch.'"

Ironically, Bushey draws the line with ChannelOne. "From my point of view, ChannelOne has invaded the classrooms, the point where education is delivered. We have no signs or ads in classrooms," he says. "It's ubiquitous, and the difference between soda machines and ChannelOne is that soda machines remain in the hallways."

That schizophrenic attitude sets a bad example, according to Molnar. "Many adults have lost the ability to create a boundary between themselves and the commercial world that engulfs them minute by minute," he says. "People who go to shopping malls as a relaxing activity are less likely to be upset by commercial activity in schools. For a very large number of Americans, life begins and ends with what they buy."

The odds are against changing this cultural tendency, Molnar says, although he hopes state legislatures will stop the proliferation of in-school ads. "Everybody is feeding off the children as a resource," he says. "Our children are being turned into colonies, exploited the same way Africa and Asia were. If children can't imagine a world in which they are not objects of commercial exploitation, how are they ever going to change the world? How are they ever going to be their own person?"

Certainly not by going to the movies. Unlike years ago when movie and television moguls covered labels on cereals and other products, now companies pay big bucks to have their product prominently placed. It's no coincidence that America Online plays matchmaker for Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan in the new *You've Got Mail*.

"The whole movie is based around America Online," says product placement agent Stacy Jones. "Basically, that's product placement. Each brand has its own

demographic, and it could easily become its own person and own identity. The more defined the brand is, the more character potential."

In fact making the product become a character within the movie is one of the goals of product placement, according to Jones, who manages production resources at Creative Entertainment Services, Inc.

Her firm -- one of a dozen or so that specialize in product placement nationwide -- wove Mont Blanc pens into the plot of *Enemy of the State*,and it tries to do the same for 26 other clients, among them Lexus, Ben & Jerry's, and Fiji water. For an annual retainer, Jones and her staff pore over thousands of scripts, sent by studios, seeking the perfect spot for Cinnibuns or Toyota.

Trademark laws require filmmakers to ask permission to use products, (except in documentaries). Having a star hold a can of Veryfine juice is worth hundreds of thousands of dollars in ad space. Jones says every agency has a different way of calculating value, but much of it depends on the star power and the audience size.

At this point, society is so conditioned that not having the ads would decrease a film's verisimilitude, according to Syracuse University television, radio and film professor Robert Thompson. "For a film not to have product placement in a contemporary social setting is almost creating a world, a parallel universe, that doesn't exist," Thompson says.

The irony is that the choice of products is almost solely market-driven. "Product placement is done for unscrupulous marketing profit driven goals," Thompson says. "It has placed into films a lot of stuff supporting the culture it represents."

Product placement started with movies, when directors filmed scenes in their favorite restaurants. By the time television evolved, corporations sponsored shows such as Milton Berle's *Texaco Star Theater*. "Soap operas became known as soap operas because of Proctor and Gamble," says film critic Anthony Montesano, who writes for *Cinefantastique*. "At those times, even up to Johnny Carson, the star of the show would hold up a brand name. That intertwined the brand into the artistic endeavor."

When E.T. ate those Reese's Pieces, Jones says, the placement firms followed. "After the E.T. phenomena, a lot of people started throwing their products around, saying 'We'll give them anything,' because they wanted another E.T.," Jones says.

E.T. represented another turning point as well: After the spontaneous marketing of *Star Wars* and *E.T.* toys and memorabilia, studios learned to line up kitsch sales beforehand. "Merchandising precedes the films into Happy Meals," Montesano says. "It doesn't matter if it is good or bad, it is a big commercial for its merchandising."All of which means more marketing.

The inherent sales pitch kills controversial editorial content, Jones says. "I guarantee AOL had some sort of controlling factor over how they could be used," she says, agreeing that AOL would not have been used if Tom Hanks' character had been surfing the net for porn. In the future, "you're probably going to be looking at the fact that editorial content will be controlled."

There aren't many artists making real films anymore, Montesano says. "The film is as much a commercial for merchandising as the other way around," he says. Before the era of film commercialization, he says, artists didn't have to change their visions according to who pushed the right button at test screening. Entire films weren't scrapped because the corporation didn't think it was a good enough commercial for the product. "A film sells the studio. Twenty years ago, nobody knew what a film grossed in its opening weekend. The question was 'Was it a good film or not?' Not 'How much did it make?'" he says.

With the same corporations making the movies and the news, Montesano only fears the line between entertainment and reality will blur further. Although NBC's Dateline faked the gas tank explosions on GM trucks in 1993, Montesano says that the threat of fictionalized news still looms.

In a way it's our own fault. "Americans really like the lifestyle they've grown accustomed to, like air-conditioned houses and all kinds of choices for food," Syracuse University's Thompson says. "To support the kind of life Americans demand requires sophisticated marketing, sales and socioeconomic culture. If one really wanted this stuff to go away, it would begin to move the culture away from its excessively commercially driven priorities. I'm not sure people are ready to do that."

Considering the stranglehold on the marketplace of ideas, what could be next? Direct marketing to individuals -- the next wave, according to industry experts -- is already rippling through society.

Magazine ads include subscribers' names, Internet cookie cutters track Web surfers' individual habits, and supermarkets track individual purchases through the club cards people carry on their key chains. "You filled out that card, they know who you are, they know what you purchased," Erlich says. If you bought diapers, in 3.2 weeks you'll need another package, and you'll need a discount, too, he says. When you walk through the door, the store will offer a discount on diapers and baby food just for you.

"Because we know it will be your hot button," he says. "With more information, consumers are more targeted, more manipulated, and more useful." This personal approach fits into the branding phenomena. A consumer will remain loyal to one store because it will appear to know them. "If the products fill those needs and the brand can carry them, people are going to want to identify with the store," he says.

Is the commercialization of the White House next? If former New York City Mayor Ed Koch's Doritos ads or the Duchess of York Sarah Ferguson's Weight Watchers

shtik are indicators, President Clinton hawking mattresses or prophylactics can't be too far off.

And that fits right in with the transformation of about 90 percent of citizens into consumers, *Adbusters*' Lasn says. The marketing machine has altered our society from a grassroots democracy to a consumer culture devoid of personal sovereignty. "We are no longer the fierce individuals of a few hundred years ago who started the American Revolution. We are now docile consumer drones in this consumption system," he laments.

Even American patriotic pride is co-opted into a commodity. "America itself is a brand, the United Kingdom is a brand, the city of Atlanta is brand," Lasn says. Soon, he promises, "Instead of Planet Earth, we will have Planet Inc."

Despite the contradictions of Planet Earth vs. Planet Inc., Lasn sees the next decade as the most interesting time in human history. "We're making the really big choices right now that decide how we live in the third millennium," he says. "I see it as a time when we can have these incredible paradigm shifts that get the people back in the saddle."

Individuals must start the process, says Sister Trampiets. "Finding your own identity and having an authentic sense of who you are calls for being a somewhat reflective person, it calls for willingness to enjoy solitude once in a while, to reflect on our thoughts and conversations that we have with other thoughtful people," she says. "Our media environment doesn't encourage that. It kind of breeds shallowness."