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SCIENCE, founded in 1880, is published each Friday by the American Association for the Advancement of Science at Business Press, Lancaster, Pa. Entered at the Lancaster, Pa., Post Office as second class matter under the Act of 3 March 1879.

SCIENCE is indexed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* and in the *Industrial Arts Index*.

Editorial and personnel-placement correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C. Manuscripts should be typed with double spacing and submitted in duplicate. The AAAS assumes no responsibility for the safety of manuscripts or for the opinions expressed by contributors. For detailed suggestions on the preparation of manuscripts, book reviews, and illustrations, see *Science* 125, 16 (4 Jan. 1957).

Display-advertising correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, Room 740, 11 West 42 St., New York 36, N.Y.

Change of address notification should be sent to 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C., 4 weeks in advance. If possible, furnish an address stencil label from a recent issue. Be sure to give both old and new addresses, including zone numbers, if any.

Annual subscriptions: \$7.50; foreign postage, \$1; Canadian postage, 50¢. Single copies, 25¢. Special rates to members of the AAAS. Cable address: Advancements, Washington.

Rates effective 1 January 1958: \$8.50; foreign postage, \$1.50; Canadian postage, 75¢. Single copies, 25¢.



The Invisible Word, or No Thresholds Barred

As Vance Packard tells us in his recent book, *The Hidden Persuaders*, advertisers are currently paying a good deal of attention to motivational research. The aim of such research is to find out what motives lead people to purchase one product rather than another.

If motivational research shows that what people really want is a car that is recognizably this year's model, then designers can plan a car that is distinctively different from last year's. Cigarette manufacturers have a more difficult problem. The onlooker can't tell whether someone is smoking a king-size *Whosis* or a king-size *Whatsis*. One approach is for the advertiser to convey the idea that the right kind of people smoke the brand they are pushing. Thus one brand may go after the outdoor type by showing a contented cowpoke flipping the lid of a box of their cigarettes, while the other appeals to the romantic type by showing a couple of happy-looking, clear-eyed youngsters heartily inhaling theirs. Of course, one or the other may try to capture both types by showing a couple of happy-looking, clear-eyed youngsters pausing for a puff at timber line.

This has its disadvantages: the advertising has to be fairly elaborate, motivational research may go astray, and some mental activity on the part of the customer is required for him to get the point. How much simpler it would be if all conscious activity could be bypassed entirely! If ready-made motives could be fed into the region of the brain where motives are generated, the potential customer would not even have to make the mental effort required to identify himself with the fortunate alpinist at timber line.

The day for this may be at hand. Psychologists have known for some time that messages may be conveyed to a person without his being aware of the fact. This can be done by showing a message at such an intensity that it is just below the threshold for conscious awareness; a word flashed momentarily on a lighted screen will serve. Two companies have recently perfected devices that will project words at subthreshold intensities on a movie or television screen while a show is in progress. One company claims to have increased the sale of popcorn by flashing appropriate invisible messages to an unwitting movie audience, and another found that people could solve anagrams more rapidly if they had been exposed in advance to invisible solutions.

Editorial comment about the use of these devices has varied: the *New Yorker* reacted mildly, the *Saturday Review* vigorously. The *Review* was especially fearful about the prospective invasion of the mind's privacy and the possibilities that presidential candidates might be marketed like popcorn.

We don't take the invisible word so seriously: technical control of its use offers no great difficulties, and it may even be that the advertisers themselves will shy away from its use in time. According to the results of one company, the reaction to the invisible word is affected by the content of the accompanying show: if the word accompanies a movie people like, they favor the word; if it accompanies a movie to which they are neutral or hostile, they reject it.

This paves the way for an interesting variation in advertising technique. Suppose the manufacturers of car A want to reduce the sales of car B. They would flash the name of car B on the screen when a Bad Guy was in action; the makers of car B would retaliate. The sales of both would drop and before long nobody would buy either car—unless he happened to like Bad Guys.—G. DuS.