



Advertising Energy

Students evaluate and categorize advertisements that promote the development and consumption of energy.

Grade Level: 5–8

Subject Areas: Art, English Language Arts, Family and Consumer Science, Science

Setting: Classroom

Time:

Preparation: Up to two weeks

Activity: Three 50-minute periods

Vocabulary: Advertising, Energy efficiency

Major Concept Areas:

- Consumption of energy resources
- Quality of life

Getting Ready: Obtain a variety of energy-related advertisements (see **Types and Sources of Advertisements Related to Energy**). It may take a couple weeks to collect ads. This can be a student assignment (see **Orientation**). Preparation time will be less the next time the activity is conducted because the same ads can be used. You may want to store ads in folders or a three-ring binder, filing comparable ads together. For example, ads related to kitchen appliances can be printed on the same colored paper. Ads can be laminated or stored in sheet protectors.

Objectives

Students will be able to

- analyze the effectiveness of energy-related advertisements;
- determine if energy-related advertisements promote energy efficiency; and
- design an advertisement for energy that encourages efficient energy use.

Rationale

Evaluating and categorizing energy-related advertisements helps students become better informed about energy issues and improves their ability to make appropriate decisions regarding energy use.

Materials

- Advertisements from newspapers (e.g., shampoo, cleaning agents, fast food)
- Energy-related advertisements (see **Getting Ready** and **Orientation**)
- Scissors
- Copies of **Analyzing Energy Advertisements**
- Find additional resources related to this activity on keepprogram.org > Curriculum & Resources

Background

You see them in newspapers and magazines, hear them on the radio, watch them on television, and they are all over the Internet and social media. Wherever mass media appears, advertisements are almost sure to follow: each one waiting for a break in the action or for a page to be turned; each one persuading us to buy a product, adopt an opinion, vote for a candidate, or support a cause. Since every product we buy involves the development and consumption of energy, it should come as no surprise that advertising influences our purchases, our actions, and ultimately the way we develop and use energy.

Advertising, whether or not it's energy-related, has a purpose. This purpose can entail any one or combination of the following:

- To increase awareness of a product or its benefit
- To enhance comprehension of some aspect of the product
- To promote conviction or desire so that consumers will be eager to purchase the product

- To ensure action resulting in the customer purchasing and using the product

With energy, the “product” is often a source of energy (oil, natural gas, batteries, solar panels), a service (retrofitting your home, bringing natural gas to your home, installing solar panels), or a device that uses energy (furnace, automobile, stove). All these products involve the development or consumption of an energy resource. Therefore, energy advertisements promote the development and consumption of energy resources because their aim is to sell energy-related products.

The type of advertisements that involve energy usually fall into three categories. The first includes “type of energy source” ads that aim to convince people one source of energy is better than another (for example, advertisements promoting use of natural gas over electricity, or renewable energy resources over the use of fossil fuels). The second category, which is the most common, is the “customer product ad” (for example, an oil company persuading drivers to buy its brand of gasoline,

a utility-sponsored trade organization promoting the use of electricity, a battery manufacturer claiming that its batteries last longer than those made by the competition). The final category is the “public relations ad.”

The main emphasis of the public relations ad is to increase awareness and comprehension of the product. Energy companies frequently use public relations ads to highlight their contributions to the well-being and prosperity of the community. Sometimes they merely want to convey “good feelings” toward the company, without any specific reference to a product or service. These ads also help communicate a positive position on issues or incidents that might otherwise bring a company unfavorable attention. Advertisements in this category may describe a company’s efforts to protect the environment; support the arts, education, or the community; or promote technological advances that may eventually benefit its customers. The ads may also be used to defend a controversial position such as the use of nuclear power, or to respond to an event or incident

Types and Sources of Advertisements Related to Energy

Type	Source
Familiar energy resources (gasoline, electricity, natural gas, propane, fuel oil)	Newspapers, magazines, radio, television, Internet
Promotional advertisements	Some popular magazines; certain business; industrial, and utility trade magazines; grassroots organizations; fliers, Internet
Energy companies and the community	Newspapers, magazines, radio, television, Internet
Energy and environmental issues	Newspapers, magazines, television, Internet
Batteries	Newspapers, magazines, product catalogs, television, Internet
Automobiles and other forms of transportation	Newspapers, magazines, radio, television, brochures from dealers, Internet
Home heating or air conditioning systems	Newspapers, magazines, radio, television, brochures from dealers, Internet
Consumer reports and fuel economy guides	Magazines, brochures, product tags, radio announcements, Internet
Appliance	Newspapers, magazines, radio, television, product catalogs, brochures from dealers, Internet

the company may have been involved in, such as a power outage, an oil spill, or a discrimination suit.

With all three categories, different advertising strategies are used. Rarely does an advertisement simply say, “buy this brand of gasoline,” “install these energy-efficient light bulbs,” or “drive this kind of car.” Instead, more subtle approaches are used to get and keep people’s attention. Advertisers use different strategies as well as creative artwork, imagery, and graphic design to be noticed (see **Strategies in Advertising**). Artwork pertains to visual as well as auditory techniques (for example, music in television and radio commercials). Advertisers use a variety of strategies and creative designs because they know there is no such thing as a mass audience. While some people like humor, others prefer tenderness.

People in the United States, including Wisconsinites, are increasingly interested in energy efficiency. This interest is often because they can save money by consuming less energy. Therefore, many energy companies and services are making conservation a component of their ads. For example, an electric utility might offer reduced rates in exchange for interrupting a customer’s energy use during times of peak demand. Producers of energy efficient light bulbs like CFLs and LEDs will advertise that consumers

can save money by buying their more efficient, longer-lasting light bulbs (compared to incandescent light bulbs).

On the other hand, the amount of energy used by many items is often downplayed or omitted in advertising. One clear example is automobile advertising, where the automobiles’ style, features, size and speed and the sense of freedom they bring are often emphasized over their fuel efficiency (an exception to this occurred during the energy crisis of the 1970s—fuel efficiency was more prominent in automobile advertising then). Ironically, advertisements for many items that use significant amounts of energy do not mention its use at all. Examples include how well houses are insulated or how much energy is used when traveling by air or by train.

Advertising that appeals to peoples’ emotions and desires may not provide enough information about a service or product. It may also obscure critical issues, such as energy resource depletion, environmental effects, social justice, or long-term economic security that may be related to the use of a product or service. Some advertisements deliberately omit or mislead people on these issues, while some make an effort to address them. Citizens, including students, need to develop a critical sense of how advertising is used to promote products and energy services. They can do so by learning how advertisements are designed to influence desires and emotions, and by getting additional information about services or products from independent sources. Doing so will help citizens make choices that will not only benefit them, but will also benefit their community and the environment as well.

Strategies in Advertising

- Claims superiority without comparison to competition
- Claims superiority with comparison to competition (no brand name mentioned)
- Positions product or service directly against the competition (cites other brand name)
- Appeals to a common culture (nostalgia, the wild west, the computer age)
- Focuses on cost-saving qualities and economic improvement
- Emphasizes emotion (love, fear, sadness, joy)
- Promotes feelings of comfort and well-being
- Appeals to certain values, such as environmental concerns or health and safety concerns
- Utilizes humor, fun, or both
- Entails a gimmick, such as a jingle, to grab attention

Procedure

Orientation

Show students sample advertisements that are not necessarily related to energy. Ask them to identify what is being sold. Have the class create a list of the advertising strategies used (see **Background**). Review the purpose of advertising and discuss reasons for advertising and its importance. Do students think energy resources need to be advertised? Have students suggest reasons for advertising energy.

Optional: For the next week, assign students to collect energy-related advertisements (see **Types and Sources of Advertisements Related to Energy**). Tell them to look through newspapers,

catalogs, and magazines; to record announcements from the radio and television; or to contact organizations that sell energy products (like utilities and appliance stores).

Steps

1. Show students samples of energy-related advertisements. Identify the types of products that are usually found in energy advertisements. Review the different categories of advertisements (see **Background**) and help students place the samples in one or more categories.
2. Emphasize that energy advertisements promote the development or consumption of an energy resource, because they sell products that use energy. Briefly discuss issues related to energy development and consumption. Ask students to provide a definition for efficient use of energy and why it is important.
3. Divide the class into working groups of two to four students. Provide each group with energy-related advertisements or have them use ads they collected themselves (see **Getting Ready** and **Orientation**).
4. Give each group a copy of *Analyzing Energy Advertisements* and ask them to use the questions to examine their advertisement. To answer the fourth question, students should refer to the list of strategies developed during the **Orientation**.
5. As a class, discuss responses to Questions 8 and 9 of *Analyzing Energy Advertisements* (related to energy efficiency). Work together to develop three characteristics that are common among advertisements that promote energy efficiency.

Possible characteristics

- Provides information about efficiency
- Highlights economic incentives for using efficient products
- Emphasizes convenience and comfort the consumer receives from using the product

- Stresses environmental benefits of using the product
- Mentions the durability of the product
- Features technological quality of the product

Closure

When students have answered all the questions, ask one student from each group to post the “efficient” advertisements along one wall in the classroom and the “inefficient” advertisements along another wall. (You may need a sign on a third wall titled “not applicable.”) Ask a spokesperson from each group to explain why the ads do or do not promote efficiency. Have students summarize what general messages energy advertisements convey about energy production and use.

ACME

Reduce your energy bill

Acme's panels outshine the others.

Dependable, easy to install and low-maintenance. Call for estimate, 555 - 2356

Assessment

Formative

- Can students explain why energy advertisements promote the development and use of energy?
- Were students able to identify strategies used to sell energy products?
- To what extent did students thoughtfully complete *Analyzing Energy Advertisements* to help them determine the effectiveness of energy-related advertisements?
- Did the characteristics that students identified help them discriminate between advertisements that do and do not promote energy efficiency?

Summative

Have groups of students create a service, product, or company that uses or sells energy. Instruct groups to exchange their creations with each other. Challenge the groups to design an advertisement for the imaginary service, product, or company that promotes efficient use of energy.

Related KEEP Activities

Use this activity to help students further analyze the presence of energy resources or products in their lives. For example, after learning about petroleum development in “Get That Gasoline!” students can use this activity to learn how oil companies use public relations advertisements to inform consumers about their services. While participating in the activity “Don’t Throw Energy Away,” students can also investigate how advertisements influence what products they buy. Adapt the activity “Energy Use Then and Now” to compare energy-related advertisements from previous years.

© 2020 Wisconsin Center for Environmental Education

The Wisconsin K-12 Energy Education Program is supported through funding from



Wisconsin K-12 Energy Education Program (KEEP)
College of Natural Resources
University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point



Analyzing Energy Advertisements

1. What energy product is being advertised?
2. Write a brief description of the advertisement, including its purpose.
3. In what category would you place this advertisement? (Circle one.)
Type of Energy Source Customer Product Public Relations Other _____
4. What strategies are used in this advertisement? (Consider design elements such as artwork, visual images, music, and color.)
5. To what type of audience does this advertisement appeal? Why?
6. What groups of people might not like this advertisement? Why?
7. How does this advertisement affect you? (What does it make you think or feel?)
8. What is your definition of efficient energy use? (If the class worked together to develop a definition, use that definition.)
9. Write three characteristics that are common among advertisements that promote energy efficiency.
10. Which of these characteristics, if any, does this advertisement have?
11. Does this advertisement promote efficient use of energy? Why or why not?