

How a Publicity Blitz Created The Myth of Subliminal Advertising

By Stuart Rogers

In September 1957, I began what to me was a serious study of contemporary applied psychology at Hofstra College in Hempstead, Long Island.

At exactly the same time, in nearby New York City, an unemployed market researcher named James M. Vicary made a startling announcement based on research in high-speed photography later popularized by Eastman Kodak Company.

The Tachistoscope

Some time before, a device had been developed that could emit a flash of white light at a speed of 1/60,000th of a second. It was called the tachistoscope.

The light pulse of the tachistoscope was so fast that it was imperceptible to human consciousness—what I was learning as a psychology student to call “subliminal,” because it was below (“sub”) the threshold (“limen”) of human perception.

The work done for Kodak involved a tachistoscope providing illumination in a pitch-dark studio for a large-lens camera with an open aperture. In one series of experiments, the flash of the tachistoscope was triggered electronically by the sound of a rifle shot, and the image of a bullet in flight was frozen on color film.



Stuart Rogers

Perhaps you have seen samples of these remarkable photographs hanging on the walls of your local camera store.

Retainers and Consulting Fees

Armed with the scientific sound of “tachistoscope,” Vicary invented a sparkling new pseudoscience, and proceeded to contact the CEOs, marketing directors, and advertising managers of multimillion-dollar corporations headquartered in New York City. Basically, he offered to serve them on retainer as a motivational research consultant while he developed the process he called “subliminal advertising.”

His persuasive sales pitch was that consumers would comprehend information projected at 1/60,000th of a second, although they could not literally “see” the flash. And he sent a news release to the major media announcing his “discovery” without any scientific validation whatsoever.

Plenty of Cooperation

Ever eager to tickle the public fancies that sell periodicals and build radio and television ratings, publishers and broadcasters alike obediently ran Vicary’s stories, thus endorsing in the public mind all that he imagined.

My psychology professors were as eager as the New York reporters to espouse the gospel of subliminal advertising, and touted Vicary’s case enthusiastically in the classes I attended.

And a Little Conflict

Vicary’s veracity was further enhanced by the head of another consulting firm, Ernest Dichter, of The Institute for Motivational Research, who is said to have favored the mnemonic moniker “Doctor Dichter”—although a friend of mine observed that he was no more “an M.D., a J.D., a Ph.D. or any-damned-D than Colonel Sanders (of Kentucky Fried Chicken fame) was a military officer.” Such appropriations of lofty title are helpful, though, to those who wish to enhance their credibility—and work as consultants.

Dichter issued a public statement declaring that subliminal projection was a form of hypnosis, and would “give the whole field of motivation research a bad name.”

Although it is not a matter of public record whether Dichter was under contract to Vicary, he might as well have been. Because, almost as if he had been waiting for Dichter’s announcement, Vicary responded by holding a press conference in October of 1957 at which he announced that Dichter’s observation was “like saying a whiff of a martini is worse than a swallow.”

Ah, *conflict*, publicity’s great ally. The media loved it. With quotes like that, Vicary could tell them nearly anything and they would be simply delighted to print or broadcast it.

The Demon Rum

It is also unclear as to whether Vicary had a hand in writing their copy, but he was helped substantially when the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) immediately issued a release of their own, apparently prompted by Vicary’s martini remark.

For reasons they never explained, these teatotaling ladies suspected that the devilish subliminal techniques they had been reading about in the newspapers were being used by breweries and distilleries to “increase their sagging sales,” as their release said.

In fact, beer and liquor sales had *not* been sagging at all, but the claim made another good story, so the media ran the WCTU release with all the enthusiasm they had devoted to Jim Vicary’s fabrications.

The Famous Popcorn Experiment

His media relations program in full swing by November, Vicary issued another release which claimed that subliminal perception was “a new band in human perception, like FM [radio],” a medium then beginning to gain a modest level of popularity.

And, as a follow-up, toward the end of 1957 Vicary invited 50 reporters to a film studio in New York where he projected some motion picture footage, and claimed that he had also projected a subliminal message. He then handed out another of his well written and nicely printed news releases claiming that he had actually conducted *major research* on how an invisible image could cause people to buy something even if they didn’t want to.

The release said that in an unidentified motion picture theater a “scientific test” had been conducted in which 45,699 persons unknowingly had been exposed to two advertising messages projected subliminally on alternate nights. One message, the release claimed, had advised the moviegoers to “Eat Popcorn” while the other had read “Drink Coca-Cola.”

Because Vicary was by training a market research specialist, it is not surprising that his news releases

could be generously sprinkled with the kind of terminology that gave them an air of scientific credibility.

And, although I cannot attest to it personally, I have been told by people who knew him that Vicary was particularly forceful and persuasive in person—a “natural salesman.”

He told the reporters gathered in the film studio that sales figures at the theater over six weeks of testing had been compared with previous records to check for any fluctuation in the sales of the products that had reportedly been subliminally advertised.

His media relations program in full swing by November, Vicary issued another release which claimed subliminal perception was “a new band in human perception, like FM.”

Vicary swore that the invisible advertising had increased sales of popcorn an average of *57.5 percent*, and increased the sales of Coca-Cola an average of *18.1 percent*.

No explanation was offered for the difference in size of the percentages, no allowance was made for variations in attendance, and no other details were provided as to how or under what conditions the purported tests had been conducted.

Vicary got off the hook for his lack of specificity by stating that the research information formed part of his patent application for the projection device, and therefore must remain secret. He assured the media, however, that what he called “sound statistical controls” had been employed in the theater test.

At least as importantly, too, he had observed the proven propagandist’s ploy of using odd numbers, and also including a decimal in a percentage. The figures 57.5 and 18.1 percent rang with a clear tone of Truth.

A Confusion of Fictions

Shortly thereafter, presumably on the basis of a personal interview with Vicary, *Motion Picture Daily* disclosed that the site of the experiment had been the movie theater in Fort Lee, New Jersey.

It’s interesting that we more often hear today that the site of the now-famous *Popcorn Experiment* was Grover’s Mill, New Jersey.

Grover’s Mill, of course, was the site chosen for the landing of the Martian invasion fleet in Orson Wells’ classic radio dramatization of *War of the Worlds*—an event I now believe was just as accurately and honestly

presented as Jim Vicary's subliminal advertising experiments.

When I learned of Vicary's claim, I made the short drive to Fort Lee to learn first-hand about his clearly remarkable experiment.

The size of that small-town theater suggested it should have taken considerably longer than six weeks to complete a test of nearly 50,000 movie patrons.

But even more perplexing was the response of the theater manager to my eager questioning. He declared that *no such test had ever been conducted* at his theater.

There went my term paper for my psychology class.

Soon after my disappointment, *Motion Picture Daily* reported that the same theater manager had sworn to one of its reporters that there had been *no effect* on refreshment stand patronage, *whether a test had been conducted or not*—a rather curious form of denial, I think.

That got into the New York City newspapers, too, and made Vicary furious. Information like that can be bad for consulting contracts on new advertising methods.

The Persistent Publicist

So Vicary had a meeting with Charles Moss, who was then the chief operating officer of the theater chain to which the Fort Lee theater belonged. Presumably with Vicary's assistance, Moss issued a press statement that said, as a result of "confidential" figures provided to him, he believed that "this type of sub-conscious advertising could help increase sales," but cautioned that considerable "additional testing" was needed. He clearly *did not* declare that a test had been conducted at Fort Lee, nor at any of his other theaters.

When *Motion Picture Daily* refused to run the weak Moss statement, Vicary stated publicly that his purported New Jersey test had been made *only* to collect information for his *patent application*, and that he expected advertisers and networks to test his subliminal technique thoroughly before using it commercially. This did not make many of the papers—particularly because of Vicary's implicit message that his expert services were available for additional fees to do the research work required.

Champions of Liberty

Politicians became alert enough by that time to insist that legislation was needed to "protect the American people."

Vicary was characteristically ready to turn that apparent threat to his advantage, too. He issued yet another news release that suggested his subliminal advertising technique would require "built-in assurance of proper usage, due to the fact that the message

cannot be seen."

One practical safeguard, he offered graciously, might be a prior disclosure of the message and a statement that it was being projected subliminally, similar to radio and television announcements at that time which identified the broadcast of transcriptions and film clips to distinguish them from material which was broadcast *live*.

Thus, Mr. Vicary once again used adversity to strengthen the case for his fiction, and also embedded his message even further in the minds of American consumers—at least one of whom, the great P.T. Barnum observed, is born every minute.

"We recognize the responsibility that grows out of our discovery and development of this process," read another of those less-than-modest releases. "We feel its commercial use eventually may have to be regulated, either by the industries which use it or by the government..." And Jim Vicary's services might be made available to tackle that project, too.

The FCC Picks Up the Gauntlet

In what might have been a collateral publicity-seeking move, WTWO in Bangor, Maine, reported to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that it had "experimented with on-air tests of subliminal projection"—albeit with *no noticeable results*.

"Having gone to see something that's not supposed to be seen, and having not seen it, as forecast, the FCC and Congressmen seemed satisfied."

At that news, the FCC ordered Vicary's firm, The Subliminal Projection Company, to conduct a closed-circuit demonstration of their secret in Washington, D.C.

In January 1958 an FCC session was held—open to Congressmen, members of other regulatory bodies, and (of course) the press and broadcasters. Reportedly an "Eat Popcorn" message was flashed for the dignitaries at five second intervals during the screening of a television program.

The advertising industry's senior publication at the time, *Printers' Ink*, observed wryly, "Having gone to see something that is not supposed to be seen, and having not seen it, as forecast, [the FCC and Congressmen] seemed satisfied."

In fact, so thoroughly did all assembled *not see anything* that the only reported response was that of Senator Charles E. Potter (Republican, Michigan). "I think I want a *hot dog*," he said.

Consumer Need the Key

Undaunted by this setback, Vicary explained to the gathered reporters—with a nice piece of self-closing pseudo-logic—"Those who have *needs* in relation to the message will be those who respond." He further emphasized that subliminal techniques would not force a Republican to vote Democratic or vice versa, but that he believed the technique could "aid in getting out the vote."

The National Association of Broadcasters boldly banned the broadcast of that which had yet to be proved to exist.

He went on to qualify his earlier claims, describing subliminal advertising as a "mild form of advertising ... a *very weak persuader*," and a method designed to augment rather than supplant traditional visual advertising.

Technological Impossibility

Vicary also informed the reporters that subliminal advertising would have its "biggest initial impact" on the television medium.

When I learned of this, I visited the engineering section of The Radio Corporation of America (RCA) in New York City—at that time the world's largest television developer, manufacturer, and network broadcaster.

I was assured by their helpful and knowledgeable engineering liaison man that, because of the time required for an electron beam to scan the surface of a television picture tube, and the persistence of the phosphor glow, it was *technologically impossible* to project a television image faster than the human eye could perceive.

"In a nighttime scene on television, watch the way the image of a car's headlights lingers; that's called *comet-tailing*," the engineer explained. "See how long it takes before the headlights fade away." Clearly, there was no way that even the slower tachistoscope speeds of 1/3,000th of a second that Vicary had begun talking about in early 1958 could work on contemporary television.

There went another term paper.

Introducing Innocence

"This innocent little technique," Vicary announced a short time later, "is going to sell a hell of a lot of goods."

In addition to this promise, he also predicted that subliminal advertising would be *welcomed* by the public because it would cut down on the time required for "interruptions for sponsor messages." He undoubtedly told the same thing to the big advertiser companies who were paying him retainers and consulting fees at the time.

In early 1958, the National Association of Broadcasters, in a move undoubtedly designed to forestall federal and state legislation, boldly banned the broadcast of that which had yet to be proved to exist.

And despite all the Top Secret treatment that Vicary claimed for his purported patent application, years later—in 1969, when I went to Washington to work on a project for the U.S. Patent Office—no one there could find any record of a Vicary patent application, nor anything related to a device to project subliminal advertising.

Psychological Studies

Since Vicary's announcements began in September 1957, results of psychological studies have proved the validity of the observation that "a strong stimulus produces a strong response, and a weak stimulus produces a weak response."

Messages that are projected (as Vicary proposed) at light levels significantly below the level of screen images, and for such short periods of time that they cannot even be perceived, cannot reasonably be expected to have *any effect at all* on behavior. All the behavioral studies I have read since 1957 indicate that *zero perception equals zero response*, and so "subliminal" means in practical terms "no effect."

The Corner of Your Eye

But Vicary persisted, and continued to mail news releases and hold press conferences well into 1958.

Yet his claims grew weaker and vaguer with each passing month. By spring he stated that subliminal advertising would only work as what he called "reminder advertising"—with "a level of affect similar to that of a *billboard seen out of the corner of the eye from a speeding car*" (emphasis added).

This was a far cry, indeed, from his descriptions of the irrepressible and irresistible force he had claimed to have harnessed less than eight months earlier.

His formal statement read in part: "The subliminal technique gives us a weak message which we can put on a screen quickly and to the viewer painlessly at a time when we are assured of having the greatest

number of persons in the audience. No hypnosis is involved. Since the stimulus must be weak and the message very simple, so far as we know it will not be so effective person for person as other forms of advertising. Therefore, we call it reminder advertising.”

Millions in Fees

Despite this back-peddling on the potential power and influence of his purported discovery, by the middle of 1958, James M. Vicary had reportedly signed contracts with many of the corporations headquartered in New York City which he had targeted back in 1957.

It has been estimated that he collected retainer and consulting fees from America's largest advertisers totalling some \$4.5 million—about \$22.5 million in today's dollars.

Then, some time in June 1958, Mr. Vicary *disappeared* from the New York marketing scene, reportedly leaving no bank accounts, no clothes in his closet, and no hint as to where he might have gone.

The big advertisers, apparently ashamed of having been fooled by such an obvious scam, have said nothing since about subliminal advertising, except to deny that they have ever used it.

“People Love To Be Fooled”

Although James M. Vicary has not been heard from by the marketing and advertising communities for 34 years, and may even now be enjoying his retirement on some balmy tropical beach, his legacy of *subliminal persuasion* lingers long after him.

Perhaps this is because, as P.T. Barnum observed, “people love to be fooled.” And sometimes they are even willing to pay for the pleasure.

Someone who seems to have proved this point is a man who, like Jim Vicary, was reportedly somewhat less than successful in his original career. So, forsaking sociology, he began to write books for the popular taste.

About a dozen years ago, Wilson Bryan Key took the topic of subliminal persuasion as his own, and has succeeded in expanding substantially on Vicary's work.

He sees vulgar words in Ritz crackers and on the forearms of little children, and penises and death's-heads in pictures of ice cubes.

He seems to believe sincerely that these visions are designed by marketers and advertisers to make people buy things they don't want and don't need—an interesting contradiction of the modern marketing concept, which holds that to be successful a company must provide what people *do* want and need.

The self-styled Professor Key is a man described in testimony before the U.S. Federal Trade Commission as “a man who thinks anything that is longer than it is wide is a phallic symbol.” And a Freudian-oriented friend of mine observed that Key appears to be the only man of whom he knows who seems to suffer from *penis envy*.

But this fellow's position is hardly so innocent as those two raffish quotes might suggest.

His proposition is a simple one, but trouble-

some to marketing and advertising professionals. He holds that dark and sinister forces in the form of greedy corporate executives are manipulating people through national advertising. Without the consumer's knowledge, these activities consistently make the public do foolish things against their wills. The argument seems to take class warfare to a new level of hatred.

Key has written four books last time I took a count. And, although mildly entertaining, they are hardly books one would describe as “scholarly.” His popularity among college students and their more disaffected professors is therefore remarkable, considering that academics tend to favor people who put letters after their names—and to a lesser degree people with professional credentials.

Key reportedly has neither significant degrees, nor has he ever worked in the professions about which he writes.

Judging by the lack of specificity in his books, he must know no one in positions of responsibility in the marketing, advertising, or promotion business, for he quotes no authorities or other sources for his claims, and cites no names except the brands in whose advertisements he envisions obscene embedments.

Relative to scholarly works, his books are unique in that they contain neither footnotes, nor indexes, nor bibliographies—features generally required in learned literature.

Nevertheless, he has reportedly made in book royalties roughly what Vicary is said to have made in retainers and consulting fees—some \$4.5 million at last count.

Not bad compensation for coattailing on an idea that should have been debunked 35 years ago!

—S.R.

Considering that the technique never existed outside of Mr. Vicary's imagination, this is certainly a reasonable claim, and not at all surprising.

Would That It Were True

But what an intriguing fiction was created!

Just think of what it would mean if subliminal advertising could really make people unwittingly do things they did not want to do, as is commonly believed. Think how marvelously easy it would be to make people stop taking drugs, stealing cars, abusing children, driving drunk, and cheating on their income taxes.

We could even run subliminal messages in the videos we show in our college classes and get students to study hard, stop going to parties and staying up late, give up smoking, be courteous and attentive, and absolutely idolize their instructors.

Ah, would that advertising could be so simple and so easy as Jim Vicary and my psychology professors promised me 35 long years ago!

The Legend Lives On

So popular are fragments of the story of Jim Vicary's proficient and highly publicized confidence game that an entry about the scam appears in *The Choking Doberman*, a collection of what have been termed "urban legends," presented and annotated by Jan Harold Brunvand of the University of Utah.

Now that you know the true story, see how many of the details have been changed through transmission by rumor:

"And, incidentally, there wasn't a 'Popcorn Experiment' in the 1930s (or any other time either) embedded into feature movies so that you were unconsciously seduced into buying more popcorn at the theater because images of hot buttered popcorn were flashed quickly by during the screenings. It didn't happen, and it wouldn't work, according to psychologists."

The urban legend has it that the Popcorn Experiment took place in the 1930s—not in 1958 as Vicary claimed. Perhaps this (like the mistake about the name of the New Jersey town mentioned earlier) is connected with *The War of the Worlds* radio broadcast, another upsetting psychological fiction—but one that really *did* occur in the 1930s.

Vicary never claimed to have embedded images in films, but only to have *superimposed* words with a tachistoscope onto screen images.

Vicary never claimed to have experimented with *images* (or pictures) of hot buttered popcorn, or any other visual object. He claimed that merely projecting *words* would have the desired effect.

In fact, the only accuracies in *The Choking Doberman* account seem to be the facts that Vicary's famous

experiment with subliminal advertising *never happened*, and wouldn't work even if it *had* happened.

But then, those details certainly take all the fun out of the story, and therefore form no part of the legend as it's been told over the years—and as it continues to be told even today by those who should know better. □

Stuart Rogers teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in marketing management and communications at the University of Denver. While at Benton & Bowles advertising agency in New York City, he served accounts that included Crest toothpaste, BeechNut/LifeSavers, Liquid Prell shampoo, Post cereals, Allied Chemical and IBM. He spent more than 16 years in the marketing division of Eastman Kodak Co. He left there to become director of public liaison for the U.S. Information Agency, which he left in 1984 to found his own agency and to teach. His latest book, with Richard H. Thompson, M.D., is *The Medical Marketing Plan* (Business One Irwin, 1992).
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