

Point of Purchase Perceptions: Selling Products with Place

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THE WORD *POINT* CAN SUGGEST A WIDE RANGE of geographic implications. Near West Seattle, Washington, there is a physiographic place called Alki point, a headland that projects into Puget Sound. The United States Coast Guard maintains a lighthouse at Alki and gives its coordinates as a *point* of latitude and longitude. The Boyce-Clark radial shape index utilizes a central *point* in the midst of some areal phenomenon. Radials in the index extend outward to a *point* of intersection with the perimeter of the model (Boyce and Clark 1964). Joel Garreau, in his discourse on the new urban “frontier,” suggests an “edge city” emerges at the *point* where a major freeway system intersects with a traffic beltway surrounding another significantly geographic *point*, the central business district (Garreau 1992). With the advent of Geographic Information Systems, the *point* supplied in a data base becomes a node, the topographic junction of two lines, the Cartesian reference *point* from which the software constructs a map (Harvey 2008, 177).

The aspect of the *point* is well ensconced in geographic thought. And the *point* in *point of purchase* advertising is of no less geographic significance. From its allusions to marketing and economic geography, POP advertising may be found at the *point* where, for example, the image of a lighthouse on a bottle of salad dressing, communicates a signal to the consumer that the product they are searching for is within view. POP advertising resides at the nodal *point* on a traffic path pursued by consumers through a sea of retail goods. It exists at a *point* where the subjective behavioral reactions of the shopper intersects with the forces of economic decision making (Simons n.d.; Beardi 2001). Additionally, POP is the *point* where some suggest that two thirds of all grocery stores sales are made (Young 2000).

However, an additional geographic aspect can emerge from POP advertising. There seems to be an increasing number of merchandisers utilizing POP, particularly on labels, that incorporate strong connections to *place* through the use of imagery and or text. In

some cases, the rationale for this is assumed to be simply mechanistic. That is, a place image or textual reference on a label might simply describe the locational connection the place has with the product's origin. However, in some product genre, territorial images have emerged on labels representing an elaborate array of perceptual and real places. Furthermore, it is suggested that merchandisers attempt to mentally transmogrify the product for the consumer and perhaps even its physical point of sale. For example, a candy bar might "become" a mountain, and the point of sale of a case of beer might be mentally geocoded to the image of a snow-covered volcanic peak expressed on the canvass of the product's cardboard box.

"Individuals and groups of people live at the intersections of numerous relative spaces. The structure of many distributions in those spaces determine the goals people have, the information they receive, and the choices open to them in fulfilling their goals" (Abler, Adams and Gould 1971, 82). POP advertising resides and communicates information at spatial intersections that are characterized by economic decision making. In contrast, perhaps the place images found in some of this advertising might be considered as a merchandising attempt to mentally adapt a portion of Tobler's "first law of geography" "...near things are more related to each other" (1970, 236). Amongst gondolas loaded with the "ambient media" (Burtenshaw 2007, 28) associated with beer, bread and dairy products, can an image of a place on a label project a consumer closer to a more satisfying form of relative space? Can the image of an extraordinary place be linked to an ordinary product in such a way so as to produce a state of mind in the consumer capable of generating an impetus to purchase the product? The central geographic question might be, why are these types of images and their *allusions to place* found on these labels in particular? These constitute some of the questions emerging from this research.

Whatever its rationale for use might be, in general terms, POP advertising has shown itself to be a highly effective means of advertising, and merchandisers depend and spend heavily in this age old medium of getting the message across (Danesi 2008; Dotz and Husain 2004; Martinez and Cardona 1997). The use of images is nothing new in this kind of advertising. However, it is suggested that image based advertising, POP or otherwise, "...is even more relevant in today's global marketplace where brands have to transcend cultural boundaries. Now language is no longer a barrier as long as the visual communicates the right message" (Burtenshaw 2007 158).

This research is limited to the consideration of *point* of purchase advertising in the context of its use of images and text, related to place. It attempts to catalog and categorize these images and, when possible, derive ethnographic data on the rationale for the use of these images by various producers. The focus of this research concentrates on POP advertising normally associated with products found in the grocery retail environment.

The video linked with this monograph was originally produced as a paper presentation for the annual meeting of the *Association of American Geographers* in Boston, Massachusetts, 2008.

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