

Refuse and Resist with Jean Kilbourne

How to Counteract Ad Messages

Laura Barcella / WINTER 2001

JEAN KILBOURNE KNOWS ACTIVISM ALMOST AS WELL AS SHE knows advertising. Best known for the documentary *Killing Us Softly* (now in its third edition), Kilbourne is an expert in analyzing advertisers' exploitation of female desires and insecurities for profit, and the ways corporate power has come to dominate our lives through marketing. "In this culture, the real authorities are huge corporations—the tobacco industry, the alcohol industry—and we tend to be unaware of that," she says. "We have a great deal more to fear from corporate power than from the government, yet it's kind of invisible because they're so smooth. We have a lot of kids these days who are drinking and smoking because they think they're rebelling, but what they're really doing is following orders from these corporations."

Her most recent book, *Can't Buy My Love*, takes this analysis a step further, exploring the advertising industry's inculcation of an addictive mentality—one that persuades us that low-fat cookies are a perfect substitute for self-love and that even if men don't respect us, our ultraslim cigarettes always will. Kilbourne's extensive experience with advertising's psyche-invading images makes her the perfect woman to dole out a few handy antiadvertising tips to you. Here's what she has to say:

- The first thing is to pay attention. We all believe we're not influenced by advertising. The longer we believe we're not influenced, the more likely

we are to be influenced, because we don't pay conscious attention. We need to really focus and look at the TV commercials and the print ads, and ask ourselves, "What's really being sold here?"

- We [must] get advertising out of our schools. There is no excuse for allowing corporations to control our kids' attention and time at school. That means getting rid of Channel One and other media that encroach on education. Young kids don't have the cognitive abilities to process advertising, so they're sitting ducks. [We need] to have a comprehensive media-literacy program in our schools, to help kids become critical viewers starting in kindergarten. The United States is one of the few developed nations in the world that doesn't do this.

- When you're reading a magazine and those irritating subscription cards fall into your lap, write on the card something like "stop exploiting women" or "feed your models" and mail it. It costs them something like 30 cents for every one that's sent back. It takes about 10 seconds, and it cleans up litter.

- Try not to buy products that are advertised in ways you find offensive. I try not to buy products from the tobacco industry, which doesn't just include cigarettes (for example, Philip Morris owns Kraft). [Research the business practices of the companies you're buying from] and you can put your money where your values are.

- Work for political measures. For example, the European Union will be debating a bill to ban all advertising directed at children—wouldn't that be wonderful? Write to congressional representatives and take part in such activities as a protest of the Golden Marble Awards, which is what the advertisers give to each other for their success in targeting children.

- Counter-advertising can be extraordinarily effective, whether it's an individual writing something on an ad, or a group such as the ones in Massachusetts, Florida, and California that have come out with phenomenally effective antitobacco advertising. The smoking rates in those states are way below the national average, and part of the reason is the counter-advertising. That's very effective because it's a way of getting us to look at advertising with new eyes.