

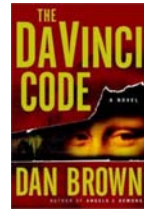


Erectile Dysfunction and The Da Vinci Code.

By Max Sutherland

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What is the secret of [The Da Vinci Code](#) which has been on the [NY Times Best Seller list](#) for an amazing 77 weeks and is still number one?



Answer: The bystander effect – the power of 'persuasion by proxy'.

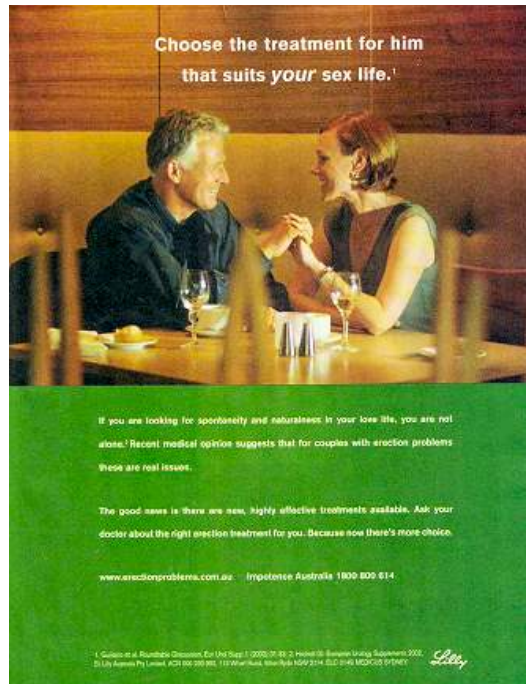
Conventional advertisements treat readers and viewers as customers and talk *directly* to them. For example, Pfizer's 'direct-to-the-consumer' ads for Viagra are aimed at men and here's one urging men to take control of their problem. The message is direct: '*talk to your doctor*'.



Pfizer (Viagra) talks directly to males.

In contrast, some ads do *not* talk to the customer directly. The way they work is more subtle. Take a look at the second ad, this time from Lilly, marketers of Cialis, one of the newer drugs taking share from Viagra.¹

It depicts a man and a woman at a romantic evening and the headline says "Choose the treatment for him that suits *your* sex life." It appears to be talking to *her* - a kind of 'persuasion by proxy'.



Lilly (Cialis) talks to the female - applying pressure to males indirectly.

But all is not quite as it seems!

While the message is *ostensibly* not directed at him, think about this: Readers of this ad are *both* male and female. The message to her is 'overheard' by male readers. The difference is subtle but important.

So the communication is doing *double duty* by impacting him as well as her. Moreover, when you overhear something, it

can be even more influential than if you're being told directly.

When we overhear information incidentally, as bystanders, we process it differently and often apply less-defensive processing to it. My [book](#) talks about this as '*vicarious experience and virtual reality*' (Ch7). The effect is to transform this ad from direct 'hard' sell (if you'll pardon the expression) into a 'pressure' that is less direct but more effectively applied.

Information that is overheard instead of being delivered as a direct message can be quite powerful. But what has this got to do with The Da Vinci Code?

They are both 'communications in camouflage'. Both apply persuasion and information, indirectly. The style is to romanticize rather than proselytize.

The plot of the Da Vinci Code tells of a secret society poised to expose the early Christian church in its distortion of the 'facts' about Jesus. These 'historical facts' are embedded in the plot and further revealed through the dialogue and the interactions that take place between the novel's characters. The reader looks on from outside the pages - an enthralled bystander.

Smear fiction with reality and it can be hard to tell the difference, especially when that information is encountered vicariously by overhearing the dialogue between the characters - in a book (or even a website²).

In contrast to non-fiction books that pitch information directly at the reader, The Da Vinci Code informs *while it entertains*. (James Michener, the master of the genre did this with books like [Hawaii](#), [The Source](#) etc.) Like the Lilly ad above that pitches information not directly but indirectly, The Da Vinci Code does the same as part of an entertainment experience while the reader is enjoying the novel.

When the reader is engaged in an entertainment experience like this, there is not the same motivation to *evaluate* 'information' that there would be with a non-fiction book. With a novel, readers are focused on wanting to read on - to find out what happens next - rather than pausing to evaluate every bit of information they encounter.

When the book was published in April 2003, Christian leaders seemed to shrug off the author's introduction claiming the documents described in the story as accurate - after all it was only a backdrop to a fiction novel. That was, until parishioners began talking about leaving the church because of what they had "learned" in Dan Brown's bestseller.

Eventually they were forced firmly onto the defensive with some churches having to run [seminars](#) to try to discredit this newfound 'knowledge' that had embedded itself in their parishioners' minds - namely:

- To minimize the influence of women, the early Christian church *fabricated* that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute.
- That she was really the wife of Jesus and bore him children.
- That the Catholic church suppressed "the divine feminine" in order to protect its masculine ecclesiastical power.

Challenges to religious canons that underpin peoples' faith, if pitched directly by a non-fiction author, would be automatically met with derision and rejection because the direct

approach galvanizes psychological defense. However, millions read the information in The Da Vinci Code and millions began to wonder. Because they read it as a novel, they absorbed the information vicariously in the way that bystanders do...and that is an important difference.

The Da Vinci Code is a message in masquerade. The viewer is not focused on getting a message so much as being entertained. Mini-drama commercials (TV or cinema) that are experienced like plays or movies, work the same.

Counter-arguing:

There is a world of difference in being a bystander and not being the obvious target of a communication.³ When the intent to persuade is less obvious, the communication can be more persuasive because it doesn't engage the same protective defenses.

The more we are in bystander mode the more it reduces the motivation for us to engage our normal defensive reactions. We have less reason to critically examine what is being said and less motivation to assess it for validity. Hence when a communication is experienced this way, it has a better chance of 'seeping in'.

Now, we can see why other novels of the same ilk as The Da Vinci Code have had such profound social impact over the years. Think of books like Ayn Rand's '[Fountainhead](#)' (1943) and '[Atlas Shrugged](#)' (1957). Or, more recently, 'The [Celestine Prophecy](#)' (1993).

Common to all of them is the use of the 'bystander' style.

Conclusion:

Persuasion by proxy works for books as it does for ads - via the bystander technique - a form of 'communication in camouflage'.

"Too much zeal offends where indirection works."

Euripides (Greek playwright 480-406BC)

References

¹ "Viagra and the Battle of the Awkward Ads" by Stuart Elliott, New York Times, April 25, 2004

² Persuasion through overheard communication by life-like agents
<http://research.nii.ac.jp/~seiji/publication/Conference/2004/IAT-2004-ssv.pdf>

³ E. Walster & Leon Festinger, 'The effectiveness of "overheard" persuasive communications', *Journal of abnormal and Social Psychology*, vol. 65, 1962, pp. 395-402