



TOPIC: MARKETING & SALES

## THE GODFATHERS OF BEER CONSUMER INSIGHTS

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This coming spring will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the most important beer marketing paper you've probably never heard of.

When MIT's *Sloan Management Review* published Russell L. Ackoff and James R. Emshoff's "Advertising Research at Anheuser-Busch, Inc. 1968-1974,"<sup>[i]</sup> the authors laid out the definitive theory of the psychologies behind alcohol beverage drinking behavior, and how they influence a given drinker's choice of beer brand. Their insights powered some of the most successful campaigns in the history of American advertising. Indeed, it may be fair to say that no beer advertising has ever been successful at building the brand without incorporating Ackoff and Emshoff's ideas, even if a campaign's creators weren't conscious of doing so, so thoroughly have those ideas permeated the culture of beer marketing.

At the time of the research behind the article, Ackoff and Emshoff were both operations researchers at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, and also successful consultants. Over the years Ackoff's client list numbered in the hundreds, and while Emshoff's may not have been as extensive, he left academia by the mid-1980s to take executive positions at Campbell's Soup, and later Diner's Club.[ii] Their work with AB spanned almost eleven years, covering almost every aspect of advertising effectiveness.

Yet today the article itself is in danger of being completely forgotten – if it hasn't been forgotten already. In this article we celebrate the genius of Ackoff and Emshoff, not simply in hope of ensuring their legacy is given the recognition it's due, but to offer some practical insights into how their work can be leveraged today.

Ackoff and Emshoff identified four types of drinkers, based on their attitude toward their lives, their relationships, and their work, and the resulting role of drinking in their lives.[iii] These types were dubbed Reparative, Social, Indulgent, and Oceanic drinkers. These latter two are small groups, and so this article will focus on Reparative and Social drinkers, which together account for the majority of drinkers. It's worth noting that both Reparative and Social drinkers are controlled drinkers who seldom drink to excess. While there's much more detail underlying each classification, we'll leave it to interested readers to investigate the article for themselves. Instead we'll focus on a couple of key differences between the two.

A Reparative drinker is someone typically motivated by achievement, but who has sacrificed their own ambitions for the sake of loved ones. According to Ackoff and Emshoff, Reparative drinkers are well-adjusted to having made this trade-off. "Drinking is associated with the transition from work to nonwork environment and is seen as a type of self-reward for sacrifices made for others."

A Social drinker is motivated by the desire to get ahead, which they believe requires the approval and support of others. "Drinking [is] associated with friendliness and acceptance of and by others, as a lubricant of social situations."

These insights can be brought to life by reviewing two all-time classic beer advertising campaigns: *Miller Time* in the 1970s, which targeted Reparative drinkers by positioning Miller High Life as the best reward for a hard day's work; and *This Bud's For You* in the 1980s, which spoke to Social drinkers by positioning Budweiser as a symbol of acceptance by others. We chose these as our illustrations for multiple reasons. First, they're arguably the clearest examples ever produced of campaigns targeting the respective drinker types, in part because each endured for years with very consistent messages, and, in fact, were among the most effective campaigns ever aired in terms of growing the bottom line for their brands. And secondly, we preferred to avoid campaigns from recent decades for the simple reason that we didn't want to discuss work by people who may still be active in the industry.

For those who may be unfamiliar with *Miller Time*, here's a synopsis of a typical ad. It opens by immersing the viewer in a scene of hard-working blue-collar guys, often in a very intense situation – one memorable example portrayed oil rig workers wrestling an uncooperative steel pipe into place to "punch holes in the sea floor." But midway through the spot the mood changes abruptly, from intense to mellow, as the setting sun cues the end of the work day. The workers then moved on to the bar to reward themselves for their efforts with a Miller High Life – the core motivation of a Reparative drinker.

*This Bud's For You* came almost a decade later, and borrowed some tropes from *Miller Time*, among them blue collar workers and the trek to the bar after the workday had ended. But the spot that launched the campaign, and arguably best epitomized it, was focused not on a group of guys but a single protagonist, a recent Polish immigrant who's a newcomer to a group of skilled tradesmen building a house. From the beginning the foreman offers nothing but dubious glares at the newcomer, who starts out by dropping his toolbox and spilling the contents all over the ground. But the storyline then follows him as he does good work, and when the group later gathers at the bar and an off-camera voice calls him over, the carpenter is pleasantly surprised to find the smiling foreman handing him a Budweiser – a symbol of his being accepted into the group.

A key executional distinction between *This Bud's For You* and *Miller Time*: the former always featured someone else buying the protagonist a beer – that symbol of the acceptance sought by Social drinkers – while the hard-working men of *Miller Time* presumably bought their own beers, because as Reparative drinkers their motivation was self-reward.

These insights, and others drawn from the paper, have become interwoven into the culture of beer marketing and brand-building in many ways since 1974. But much of this perspective is implicit rather than explicit, residing in the collective unconscious of beer marketers and those responsible for creating beer advertising. As evidence of this assertion, a little over two decades ago your author had the opportunity to chat with two creatives who had worked on Anheuser-Busch's enormously successful *Make it a Bud Light* campaign in the 1990s, which I regarded as a very effective example of leveraging insights into Social drinkers. The two professed to never having heard of the Ackoff and Emshoff paper or any of the specific ideas therein, and I believed them. In my view they were leveraging these insights intuitively, because this line of thinking had become so entrenched in the fabric of beer advertising in America – no less so at Anheuser-Busch.

But I also believe that even more effective advertising can be created if the details and nuances of these ideas are spelled out for the people who earn their livelihoods developing beer marketing and advertising, and the best way to initiate that process is probably to ask them to read “Advertising Research at Anheuser-Busch, Inc. 1968-1974.” Russell Ackoff and James Emshoff deserve no less as the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their classic article approaches.

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[i] <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1302983124?sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals> Not to be confused with “Advertising Research at Anheuser-Busch 1963-1968,” by the same authors

[ii] <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/02/08/business/business-people-campbell-soup-official-to-head-citicorp-unit.html>

[iii] Ackoff and Emshoff's model builds on the work of Dr. Fred E. Emery, of The Tavistock Institute in London, who is credited throughout the article.