

Exploring Suburban Marketing Techniques for Enticing Home Buyers in Halifax

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"You can't logic your way into your audience's heart"
- Mark Fenske, VCU Brandcenter

In the late nineteenth century, advertisers realized that more could be sold if potential buyers were not only made aware of their products, but if products could be promoted in an enticing manner. Advertisers wanted people to want and need their products. From here, with improved technology and mass production, "advertising techniques changed from proclamation to persuasion" (Vestergaard and Schooner, 1985, p. 4). Around the same time "large scale packaging and marketing of suburbia" began to proliferate in Chicago (Ward, 1998, p. 83). Newspapers and pamphlets became popular a medium to advertise suburbs, offering romanticized ideals of suburbia to a wide audience (Ward, 1998). The availability of mass transit and realistic prospects of mass home ownership were two factors underpinning the onset of mass marketing (Ward, 1998). Operators of transportation systems were key to the early advertisement of suburbia, promoting developments outside the city in hopes of expanding transportation lines (Ward, 1998). Samuel E. Gross was an important actor in shaping the marketing of suburbia, popularizing many techniques which remain prominent today. His methods include idealizing home ownership, using promotional literature and targeting specific markets (Ward, 1998).

The onset of suburban marketing borrowed from the marketing techniques of selling resorts (Ward, 1998). "Selling the resort involved the sale of a non-exclusive and temporary right to enjoy a place in its totality" while those "buying the suburb were getting exclusive and permanent rights to a small part of the whole suburb and non-exclusive rights to enjoy a place in its totality" (Ward, 1998, p. 84). Suburban advertisements package a place as a commodity, romanticize a lifestyle, and sell it with the promise of happiness. Developments selectively choose a community's positive attributes and repackage them with an attractive place image where negative problems are played down (Ward, 1998). In her study of marketing gated communities, Maxwell (2004) discusses two primary types of appeals in advertising:

- (1) rational appeals which focus on the practical needs of the customer (e.g. communication of comfort, convenience and economy); and
- (2) emotional appeals, including positive appeals which make the viewers feel good, put them in a positive frame of mind, and thus more attracted to the product, and the fear appeal which hints if we do not buy a certain product, something bad might happen.

The social and historical context from which suburbia grew, created a uniform language for advertisers which upheld the core ideals of the suburban lifestyle. Capitalizing on the notion of packaging a place and selling the suburbs to appeal to the audience have created a method of marketing attractive to a growing part of society. In *Selling Places: The marketing and promotion of towns and cities, 1850-2000*, Ward explores the language and meaning behind marketing techniques of suburban real estate advertisements from the late 19th and 20th century. Many of the trends Ward discusses are still popular today in the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) in Nova Scotia, Canada.

Throughout HRM there are many suburban developments. Ten suburban developments, varying in location, were selected and their promotional material analyzed. These suburbs include *Brunello Estates* near Timberlea, *Governor's Brook* in Spryfield, *Governor's Glen* off Prospect Road, *Heritage Hills* in Eastern Passage, *Kingswood North* in Hammonds Plains, *Ridgewood Park* in Brookside, *Royale Hemlocks* in Bedford, *Russell Lake West* in Russell Lake, *Sunset Ridge* in Middle Sackville, and *The Parks of West Bedford* also in Bedford. Although these suburbs each boast unique features to entice homeowners to their community, their messages are written in a common language using the techniques Ward describes.

One of the most popular strategies of selling suburban real estate Ward highlights is selling nature and romanticizing the countryside (Ward, 1998). In each of the study areas, communities and/or streets are named after elements of nature, such as *Royale Hemlocks* and *Russell Lake West*. Many of the developments use names that reinforce the sense of rurality and garden city ideals using 'Village', 'Grove', or 'Park', such as *The Parks of West Bedford* and *Ridgewood Park*. Some developments even convey the illusion that their community offers a piece of countryside, tucked away from the city and surrounded by nature. *Ridgewood Park* plays on this desire by romanticizing lots as "country style home sites" (Armco Communities, n.d.). The logos and promotional imagery for all the developments incorporate forests, trees, flowers, water, and other elements of nature (see Image 1).

Suburbs began as a movement from the city's crime, instability and increasing social diversity (Maxwell, 2004). Paired with the romanticization of the countryside, marketing targets the suburbs as places to escape the polluted city. Like seaside resort advertisements, suburbs brag of clean air, sunshine, absence of smoke and overall better health than city living (Ward, 1998). The suburban developments in HRM heavily promote outdoor activities and interaction with nature. They stress access to parks, walking trails, forests, and water. They cast country living in a positive light, offering tranquility, beautiful scenery, and a place to relax and restore.

Image 1: Logos for suburban developments in HRM depicting elements of nature. Source: Clayton Developments, n.d.; Armco Communities, n.d.; The Parks of West Bedford, n.d.



Although the advertisements highlight the advantages of country living, each development also draws attention to its proximity to downtown Halifax and services (see Image 2). *Governor's Brook's* catch phrase states: "City convenience with country view". This emphasizes that the development will offer a country lifestyle close to the benefits of the city: the best of both worlds (Armco Communities, n.d.).

As one of the factors underpinning the onset of mass marketing, Ward labels home ownership as another key theme in the language of suburban advertising (Ward, 1998). Increasingly the notion of home ownership has been taken to a new level. Advertisements sell the desire to 'trade up' homes to suit various times of one's life cycle. *Sunset Ridge* and *Royal Hemlock* offer mixed housing options for young couples, young families with children, and empty nesters. *Brunello Estates* offers "townhouses, apartments and condominiums...giving active singles, empty nesters and growing families an array of options for the enjoyment of the Brunello Estates lifestyle" (Brunello Estates, 2011).

To help sell the concept of home ownership, advertisers instill a sense of security of “the physical and financial soundness of their properties” (Ward, 1998, p. 129). The buyer’s emotional needs for financial safety are addressed in this ad from *The Parks of West Bedford*:

Picture the home of your dreams, in a serene setting, beautifully constructed to suit your lifestyle - and now, well within your grasp. Imagine a community that communes with nature and envelops residents in a blanket of convenience, safety and serenity (The Parks of West Bedford, n.d.).

Advertisers simplify the notion of home ownership, emphasizing how easily attainable it is. The advertisements promise once one buys a dream home one will be safe and happy.



Image 2: Brunello Estates advertising its proximity to downtown Halifax. Source: Brunello Estates. (2011, April 14). Classified. *Chronicle Herald*, pp. F1

Marketing suburban developments to particular audiences was a concept developed years ago by Samuel Gross in Chicago: Ward describes “the idealized construction of the suburban family in promotional literature” indicating advertisements which inscribed particular gender roles (Ward, 1998, p. 134). Depicting gender roles in the suburbs to make the suburbs attractive to both genders was popular in the 20th century, but there has been a shift to targeting families and couples (Ward, 1998). Suburban advertisements repeat the word family and refer to nearby schools and amusements for children. Advertisements display images of happy couples, smiling families and children playing (see Image 3). The advertisements describe communities as “perfect for your active family” (*Governor’s Brook*), or offer “you and your family an outdoor lifestyle choice” (*Governor’s Glen*) (Armco Communities, n.d.). Targeting families -- or more specifically active families who enjoy nature -- lures similar buyers, creating a neighborhood with a population with similar values and lifestyles.



Image 3: Happy family on the lawn of their home. Source: Alsa Construction. (n.d.). *Specifications*. Retrieved on April 18, 2011 from <http://www.alsaconstructions.com.au/specifications>

The advertisements in HRM offer examples of packaging and selling a place. The goals of the ads are to package the community as a lifestyle. One is not just buying a home, but a ready made life filled with

happiness. Woven into the advertising of the suburbs is the rational appeal, addressing prices and home details, but there is also much more; the suburban advertisements are poetically envisioning how a widening section of the population think they want to live (Ward, 1998). What comes through is “the idea of a home as an emotional construct, imbued with idealized notions of family life and of relationships to nature and a wider community” (Ward, 1998, p. 110). This commodification of place is most prominent in the marketing of *Brunello Estates*. *Brunello Estates* is depicted as “a place to call home...a place to relax with friends and family”, with an “array of options for the enjoyment of the Brunello Estates lifestyle”; it is a “community [which] gives you a strong sense of place” (Brunello Estates, n.d.). *Brunello Estates* uses resort

selling techniques to imagine a Brunello Estates lifestyle. The development brags of walking trails “through the pristine woods to a professionally-designed 18 hole golf course”, a place for “canoeing in the morning and playing tennis in the afternoon”, and finishing the day by “enjoying a dinner at the Brunello Estates Golf and Spa” (Brunello Estates). Every day will be like a vacation.

The advertiser’s goal is to seduce the audience by displaying elements which make consumers want the product (Maxwell, 2004). The advertisement for *Brunello Estates* draws the audience emotionally: who would not want a life that is like a vacation every day? It plays on the ‘need versus want’ scenario: one needs a place of shelter, but one desires a home with a particular lifestyle. Emotionally connecting with an identified audience sells real estate. “Real estate advertisements constitute a good source of information about the lifestyles and values of the people whose desires they elaborate and help to shape” (Maxwell, 2004, p. 4). The target market of HRM suburbs appears to be mostly young families.

To what extent do the marketing used in these advertisements succeed in attracting young families? The 2006 population data from Statistics Canada census tracts were consulted to determine the population age characteristics of suburban and urban areas in HRM. Every local suburb had a population pyramid with a high percentage of infants to 19 years old and another peak in population between 30 to 54 years of age (Statistics Canada, 2009). The average census family size in suburban areas ranged from 2.8 to 3.2 members, with an average between the ten study areas of 2.97 (Statistics Canada, 2009). Several census tracts on the Halifax peninsula, an urban area, provided a contrast. The population pyramids for urban areas were quite different to the suburban areas, with generally the largest cohorts of the population aged 20 to 29 and 70 years and older (Statistics Canada, 2009): these reflect the university-aged population and aging urban residents. The average census family size is smaller in the urban areas ranging from 2.3 to 2.4 (Statistics Canada, 2009). Thus, the composition of the population in the suburban developments reflects a high percentage of young families with children, contrasting with the household profile in the urban downtown.

This data poses the question, if the real estate advertisements of the suburban developments are reflective of the target market, which came first: the developers creating advertisements to appeal to young families, or is it mostly young families demanding characteristics of a lifestyle blending the city and country? Maxwell (2004, p. 6) makes an interesting and relevant point:

The relationship between messages in advertising and a target market’s values, attitudes and ideology is most likely a cyclical one. Advertising must resonate with the core values and beliefs held by consumers, and the messages must appeal to them, while advertisements also influence the consumers’ desires.

Thus both the target market (young families) of HRM suburban real estate desire a home with the best of both country and city living, and the advertisements influence young families to want a suburban lifestyle.

The suburbs constitute a readily commodified product, like a resort, the language used to sell suburbs addresses the audiences’ needs, and makes them want the lifestyle being sold. The marketing techniques of suburbs reflect a cyclical pattern of marketers responding to ideals and values of the audience, while at the same time, selling the suburbs to create a market for their product. The suburban advertisements in Halifax Regional Municipality use a poetic language, painting pictures of lifestyles where people are happy, “promised emotional and financial security through ownership, safety from the disturbing influences of the city, and a closeness to

the comforting world of nature and rustic tradition” (Ward, 1998, p. 143). The main target market of HRM’s suburban real estate is young families. The demographic makeup of the HRM suburbs reflects this target market, with a population composition of families with young children. The unique language captivating audiences over the last century and a half proves the “sheer artistry” of how suburbs and their promoters sell themselves (Ward, 1998, p. 143). “The suburb is still, in the words and illustrations favored by its promoters, a realm of romance. There is still something of the same air of an imaginary happy land” (Ward, 1998, p. 143).

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