



Pseudoscience formula helps sell bogus products

Most romance novels follow a basic literary formula that has proved successful in selling books. By following the formula, an author just needs to change the details and characters to produce a new romance novel.

Successful formulas are not just the tool of romance authors. There also seems to be a standard formula for selling magic potions in a bottle that can cure anything that ails you and enhance your health and performance at most anything you want.

According to retired philosophy professor Robert T. Carroll, from Sacramento City College, the formula for this type of marketing is primarily based on "pseudoscience." Carroll has published the formula for this type of pseudoscience on his website, the Skeptic's Dictionary, to help the rest of us spot questionable sales techniques when we see them.

Carroll defines pseudoscience as "a set of ideas based on theories put forth as scientific when they are not scientific." Basically, it is like using a scientific smoke screen. Scientific jargon is used inappropriately to say

things that sound convincing and impressive but are not based on sound science.

Here are some of Carroll's guidelines on creating your own pseudoscience:

» Appeal to people's basic fears and desires. This makes it easier to make big promises that you have scientific proof your product can solve virtually all problems. It can relieve pain, cure most anything, promote a long life and, of course, enhance relations with your loved one.

» Use plenty of scientific-sounding jargon. Of course, don't forget to make claims that government entities and big business have conspiracies to hide important truths from the public. Align yourself with great scientists of the past who were persecuted before their discovery was accepted by other scientists. So that you can present yourself as a doctor, purchase a doctoral degree from a diploma mill and wear a white coat in photographs of you conducting research. It's the image that sells.

» Keep the perceived value of your product high by overpricing it. After all, your discovery

is so special that no other scientists understand it, and by buying your product, the consumer is supporting a great cause that can ultimately benefit the health of the world. Another option to the formula is to claim you have rediscovered ancient knowledge known only by a little-known culture where everyone lives past 100 years.

» Use testimonials from people who claim to have solved lifelong problems by using your product. Better yet, hire sports stars and other celebrities to promote your product. People trust celebrities more than scientists.

» Count on the placebo effect. Some studies have shown that about 80 percent of people with common health problems will get better after given sugar pills they think are real medicine. This placebo effect may be the major reason why useless products can stay on the market for decades.

For more of Carroll's perspectives on pseudoscience and other flimflam, visit his website at www.skeptdic.com.

Joannie Dobbs, PhD, CNS and Alan Titchenal, PhD, CNS
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service
