Selling Dreams:
Catholicism and The Business Communicator

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A few years ago, in an ethics course for business communications professionals, we were discussing a particular sort of ad that is very common today, the ad that works by association and subtle implication rather than by overt claim or statement. We focused on a set of ads targeting young women, ads for a well-known brand of jeans; the ads, as is common, said nothing about the product itself--nothing about quality, materials, price, or the like--but instead operated on the implication that by being associated with this brand, the wearer would somehow become more glamorous, more desirable, and more fulfilled than she could ever be otherwise. I was making the point that seemed to me to be rather obvious--that the ad was in fact making a claim, that it was implying that the jeans would effect some sort of profound transformation in the person who wore them. And I went on to say what also seemed to me to be indisputable, that this claim was clearly ridiculous and amounted to a species of lying. But at that point, I began to feel that many in the class were no longer with me. The room grew quieter than it had been, and then one student, who seemed particularly troubled by the discussion, raised her hand and asked with some poignancy, "But what's wrong with selling dreams?"

Jonathan Swift sardonically defined happiness as "the condition of being well-deceived," and my student seemed to be willing to accept a definition rather like Swift's and to proceed from there. Her question raises a number of issues relating to business communicators today, to how one ought to think about their graduate education, and especially to how Catholicism and graduate education in business communication can be fruitfully integrated.

The Catholic tradition and contemporary business education typically come together only at the point of practical, applied ethics. There is much more that Catholicism has to offer business education, of course, but the real point of contact tends to be the ethics class. This has the unfortunate effect of confining, even marginalizing Catholicism within the student's experience. This system also prevents professors from trying to integrate their religion with the skills they teach since that sort of thing is seen as being taken care of elsewhere, in the ethics course. In a typical master's-level program, a student will take nine semester courses whose emphasis is profit maximization, but only one--the ethics course--which suggests there may be some legitimate reasons to see business as having more of a social role to play than creating wealth. Our programs therefore tend to create and support a divorce between Catholic social teachings and business education. This divorce is mirrored in the students as well--and it will be mirrored in their business lives,
in a split between their authentic selves and the contradictory roles they are called upon to play.

Some 17 years ago, Alisdair MacIntyre isolated a similar species of divorce or split in an article titled, "Corporate Modernity and Moral Judgment: Are They Mutually Exclusive?" MacIntyre's answer is yes: the modern business world demands that the self be split up into its various functions, and a divided self cannot make moral judgments:

Individuals in modern corporate organizations who are sensitive to the demands made upon them by the organization which employs them often discover that incompatible and contradictory demands are being made. Every organization implicitly, and to varying degrees explicitly, recognizes a set of virtues and vices, dispositions which those in authority seek to inculcate or eradicate. Unfortunately the very same quality is often presented in one guise as a virtue, in another as a vice. . . . In a world dominated by corporations, multiplicity and fragmentation of the moral self become dominant themes (123-128).

This condition is even more dramatic for the communicators, the people who work in public relations, advertising, internal communications, technical writing, or related fields. Their stated role is to be a mere channel for propagating a message. Their performance is judged on how well--that is, how efficiently and effectively--that message was communicated. The professional organizations to which the communicators belong have codes of ethics, but largely even those codes evaluate the message not for its truth value but for its aesthetic appeal and for its effectiveness in reaching the target audience--"selling dreams," for example. And the message is not one the communicator in any way originates; it may well not even be one with which the communicator agrees. Technique and skill are all that matter; the person involved--the speaker of the words--is irrelevant.

What is wrong, indeed, with selling dreams? My student's question implies a set of beliefs and assumptions that are common not just in the world of advertising but in the business world as a whole. These beliefs and assumptions are, in turn, only a reflection of those current in the modern world, and they have to do with a redefinition of the very concepts of truth and falsity. I'd like to start by drawing out some of these assumptions.

The world of advertising offers the best place to begin. We all know that the day has largely passed in which the typical ad--that is, the sort of expensive ads we all see on TV and in magazines--presents anything like what we might call information, whether true or false; the typical ad tends not to make any claim that could be either verified or falsified. What claim is made, for example, when a soft drink maker advertises its product by depicting a set of computer-generated grizzly bears drinking the product and dancing to a 1970s pop song? What claim is made when an automaker depicts its car driving through the countryside, passing fields of corn, and as the car passes the corn turns into popcorn? Expensive special effects are employed to entertain us for a moment and, if possible, leave us with a vaguely pleasant association with the product. The process used is most often called "branding": when the viewer thinks of soft drinks, the advertiser hopes, Coke
will immediately come to mind; when the viewer thinks of attractive and inexpensive cars, the Dodge Neon will come to mind. The product's brand name is impressed on our consciousness in "branding"; some of us will inevitably think, however, of *branding's* other sense--the process by which a rancher marks cattle. And some of us will inevitably wonder whether in this case perhaps we consumers are the cattle.

Thus, evaluating such ads by the use of the common tools of rhetoric is largely pointless, since nothing like what we commonly call persuasion has occurred: no proposition has been forwarded, no arguments marshaled, no conclusions drawn. How can the dancing bears ad be called either false or true? An illuminating analogy to this situation can be found in the history of literature; from time to time, thinkers have questioned the value of literature simply because it seems to lack the quality of statement, to avoid saying anything that is either true or false. To take one example, in England in the 16th century, a writer named Stephen Gosson, of the cast of mind we today call Puritan, wrote a pamphlet attacking poetry and drama for presenting lies as truths and thereby corrupting readers and playgoers; Gosson built upon similar arguments of Plato, who had gone so far as to ban poets and rhetoricians from his ideal commonwealth. The most famous response to Gosson came from Sir Philip Sidney, who countered that the poet is not a liar because the poet, "he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth": if I never actually affirm anything, I cannot be said to be lying. And I think something like this view lies behind my student's question about selling dreams: the modern ad "nothing affirmeth," and therefore it is not to be judged harshly for not telling truths. Just as it would be only a philistine who would condemn Shakespeare for being in error about historical fact in one of his plays, so only a fool would condemn the jeans ad for associating its product with glamour and a life of happiness. (The analogy between the advertiser and Shakespeare is of course a false one on many levels, though it can greatly flatter the advertiser.)

Modern ad theory concerning branding goes even further than what I've sketched here, of course. There is currently considerable excitement over the notion of analyzing and establishing the *essence* of a brand, and conveying that essence to the consumer--though the notion of "essence" is used rather oddly. One of the more sought-after advertising thinkers today is Helena Rubenstein, who works out of London; she is highly respected for what she calls her ability to "deconstruct" brands, to get down to the brand's "DNA"--a process many other ad people are eagerly employing themselves. Thus, the essence of IBM's computers is not some objective quality regarding hardware or software or performance or capabilities: the essence of the IBM computer is that it is a "solution." Hence we see everywhere the slogan "solutions for a small planet." Another example is a current European campaign for Polaroid cameras. The advertising agency in charge of creating the campaign began with an attempt to isolate Polaroid's "essence," and concluded that it would be all wrong to call a Polaroid a camera: it is a "social lubricant," a means of coming together with others:

In one of the campaign's ads, a beautiful girl gets the attention of a rock star by flinging a picture of herself onto the stage; in another, a Japanese worker sends a scandalous photograph to a female boss who has humiliated him. The tag line: "Live for the moment" (Heilemann, 175).
Ad campaigns like this affirm nothing, or very little, but they do strongly imply--and they imply it vividly and memorably--that the product is not simply a product but a means of enhancing one's life, changing one's personality, improving on one's fate. They sell dreams.

Now, all of us can see what is wrong with this sort of thing, and all of us can see that in its way such advertisement is in fact simple misrepresentation, not qualitatively removed from the old quack patent medicine ads, or from the Philip Morris cigarette ad campaign of the 1930s that promised their cigarettes were the best thing for a sore throat. The new ads promise us abstractions--solutions, happiness, adventure, a richer life--just as the old ones promised us universal health or cures for everything from cancer to old age. But our discourse about such ads today renders any discussion of the ad's possible misrepresentation largely irrelevant, because, we say, consumers have grown so sophisticated about ads: it would be a very rare person who would genuinely believe his or her life was going to be profoundly transformed by the purchase of a Polaroid camera--whereas, the old patent medicine ads assumed a naive consumer who would actually believe the claims. But we don't believe such ads today--or at least we tell ourselves that we don't believe them. Thus we have a curious phenomenon: a species of communication that affirms nothing, and a consumer who believes nothing. This situation ought to be morally neutral. But in fact, branding and "essence-communicating" are species of statements, and if consumers were really immune to such statements, the industry would not be spending billions every year to produce them. A recent report by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications has pointed out the moral issue here:

> Often there are only negligible differences among similar products of different brands, and advertising may attempt to move people to act on the basis of irrational motives ("brand loyalty," status, fashion, "sex appeal," etc.) instead of presenting differences in product quality and price as bases for rational choice.

In other words, we should be concerned not only at the absence or presence of truth or falsity but at the fact that this absence leads to the erosion of rationality, which obviously compromises the human dignity of the consumer.

But advertising, while it presents many intriguing social and moral difficulties, is not an isolated area; business communication in general has been in our time tending in the direction of the apparent avoidance of statement, the use of language for purposes other than making verifiable claims. We are all familiar with the modern concept of "spin control": when a corporation faces a crisis, the public relations professional is called upon to put as favorable a spin on the crisis as is possible. When the press releases are crafted so as to create an image of the organization as benign, concerned but in no way guilty, we can often see in such communications something like the advertiser's "branding" going on: the important thing is to create an *image* rather than to address the issue, and one can admire the aesthetics of such public relations, their artfulness and adeptness, while never raising the issue of their truth or falsity. Indeed, we today assume that the organization will "spin" rather than address the issue, and as a culture we seem increasingly ready to
accept spin rather than statement, artfully created *image* rather than reality. We become complicit with the organization in assuming that truth is not the issue, but "issuing a statement" is. Language is being used only because the situation calls for the use of language. And, as with the ads, the important point is that such "spin" is not really lying and not really telling the truth; the truth is rendered irrelevant.

Within organizations, too, such practices are becoming more and more common. Managers are expected to communicate with employees as managers--that is, there are certain issues and attitudes that we expect them to raise, certain approaches we expect them to take, certain taboos we expect them to avoid artfully. The manager is playing a role, as MacIntyre says, and is thus acting as a fragmented moral self. Truth in the manager's communications is increasingly rendered as irrelevant as it is in the ads and in public relations; instead, style is valued, both by the manager's superiors and by the subordinates. The sheer proliferation of euphemism in managerial communication is a further example of the trend, as terms like "downsizing" and "rightsizing" and a host of others are trotted out to camouflage disturbing realities. Even the subordinates have come to expect such euphemism and the general habit of circumlocution as the mark of a truly professional manager. Aesthetics, again, displaces ethics.

What I've been trying to sketch here is a picture of the business world as one in which the very concepts of truth and falsity are being undermined, if they haven't already been abandoned. The point is not that the business communications professions are packed with liars, but that business communications operate in an environment in which truth is assumed to be irrelevant, and probably unattainable anyway. And in this respect, of course, the business world only reflects the larger culture.

The abandonment of the belief in truth in our century is too large a topic to treat here at the length it deserves, but the important thing to note is that this abandonment has been carried out at the highest intellectual levels of the culture, not by the advertiser or business person, who have in fact merely inherited it. We have reached the point now where one of the most influential philosophies is that of Jacques Derrida, which holds that the idea of truth is a complete absurdity, for language never refers to anything other than itself; there is no relationship between language and the world to which we pretend it refers. Language thus becomes a series of free-floating "texts" to be deconstructed, rather than a series of statements about reality that can be verified or falsified. This major thesis of Derrida was anticipated by Nietzsche in 1873 in an essay titled "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense." The matter is put as clearly as possible there:

What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.
Nietzsche's influence on our century needs no demonstration, as his approach has been taken up by many others, Derrida among them, to deconstruct what had to previous generations seemed to be truths; Derrida has simply gone the furthest so far in arguing that truth itself is an outmoded and self-contradictory concept. (There is, of course, a fundamental contradiction here: if truth is radically unobtainable, how can Derrida or Nietzsche be taken as providing us with the truth about it? The attempts to resolve this contradiction will never quite satisfy one's common sense, though they are apparently satisfactory to the legions of followers Derrida has attracted.)

What strikes me as most significant in all this, however, is not the ideas of Derrida or his predecessors, but the sheer rush to embrace them by Western intellectuals. His teachings are now commonplace in just about every literature department, and they have taken root also in departments of history, sociology, philosophy, and even theology. There are glimmerings, if that is the word, of his ideas to be found even in business departments. Our critics, our professors and our students have embraced such theories with a strange eagerness—perhaps because the theories tell us what we most want to believe, that there is no absolute truth. The absence of truth, we seem to feel, will set us free. In this new world liberated from the tyranny of truth and reality, there are no limits or bounds set to what we can be or do. And this situation is thought to be real freedom at last, freedom from the oppression of centuries of authority—and Nietzsche taught us in the *Genealogy of Morals* that authority is nothing more than someone's grab for power. Take away the idea of truth itself and we at last achieve our liberation. Now, our students, and businesspeople in general, are not usually interested in philosophy and are quite unlikely to read theorists like Derrida—and yet ideas like his have trickled down into popular culture, where what was once the avant-garde is now the norm. In Western popular culture, rebellion and nonconformity have long become the expected norm and the necessary condition for one's authenticity as a person.

Now, if we set business communications within this cultural context, we cannot be surprised to find that the belief in truth is at least endangered there. And we cannot be surprised to hear a bright and serious student asking, "What's wrong with selling dreams?" Dreams are evidently what we have, not facts and realities. "Truth" itself is increasingly a suspect word, with a vaguely Victorian air about it. Pope John Paul II described the current intellectual situation well in his encyclical, *The Splendor of Truth*: he points out that there is today a systematic attempt to argue that the church does not have and cannot have authority in matters of morality. He says that even within the Christian community today, we are experiencing

the spread of numerous doubts and objections of a human and psychological, social and cultural, religious and even properly theological nature, with regard to the Church's moral teachings. . . . At the root of these presuppositions is the more or less obvious influence of currents of thought which end by detaching human freedom from its essential and constitutive relationship to truth.
The Pope's encyclical is of course a rigorous argument that real human freedom only comes from truth, and it demonstrates how very widespread the doubt in the very existence of truth has become.

How does one go about teaching business ethics in such a cultural context? Some ethical approaches, such as those of egoism and utilitarianism, are not much harmed by the absence of belief in truth; for the egoist and the utilitarian, if dreams are what work, then dreams it shall be; if soothing fantasy contributes to the public happiness and to the health of the economy, then let there be even more of it. But even in today's Western culture there are hopeful signs from time to time, when students not wholly under the sway of the current intellectual fashion indicate that they are searching for an ethics that can confidently declare certain acts right or wrong, an ethics that holds out the promise of an obtainable and undeniable truth. And it is hopeful also that the absence of truth, of solid demonstrable realities, is beginning to be felt in the culture at large--though much of the intellectual world is evidently not yet tired of it all. One index of this shift is a series of popular books coming out recently which try to establish that morality can be based on realities after all, books which try to rehabilitate the belief in certainty. Among these are the "virtue ethics" writers, of course--for virtue itself is a word that had long lain discredited in our century; we substituted for it the term values, a term which is much more comforting for a culture trying to dedicate itself to a radical relativism.

Two books which have had considerable popularity in the US recently are Stephen Carter's Integrity (1995) and James Q. Wilson's The Moral Sense (1993). Both address themselves to a wide general audience, and both seek to find something universal and definite, something true and real, amid the chaos of contemporary western culture. Both are good books, with much to recommend them, and yet both fail ultimately, and for the same reason, as I'll try to explain.

Carter's Integrity is an examination of what he calls a pre-political virtue--that is, a foundational virtue necessary in a just society. Becoming an integral person requires three steps: 1) discerning what is right and what is wrong; 2) acting on what we have discerned, even at great personal cost; and 3) acknowledging openly what we are doing and why. One objection Carter anticipates is this: if integrity, acting openly on one's beliefs, is a virtue, wasn't someone like Hitler a good example of the integral person? Hitler certainly acted openly and consistently on his beliefs. Carter's response is to re-emphasize step 1: the period of discernment of right from wrong. A Hitler or an unrepentant evildoer is not integral, because such people's acts are immoral. This discernment step, thus, gives some moral weight to the concept of integrity; without it, integrity is simply a matter of being consistent and open, neither of which has much to do with morality.

Carter's redefinition with its stress on discernment is his way of arguing that integrity should be considered a virtue. The problem ultimately is, however, this first step, the discernment period. Carter urgently wants a revivified American culture, one that is pluralistic and open to all--a laudable enough aim--but he approaches this end by allowing morality too to be pluralistic, up to the individual's discernment. He is
uncomfortable saying that in a pluralistic society there can be a single definite standard of right and wrong (though as a Christian, he clearly would like to be able to do so); and he begins his book by divorcing the subject of integrity from religion, though he allows himself to "use traditional religious understandings to illuminate" (9) the subject. He is anxious to honor the American tradition of pluralism, of many different beliefs and approaches, but this eventually weakens his entire argument and weakens his definition of integrity. And ultimately, he leaves the impression that the only way we can be sure that a Hitler is evil is by a sort of majority vote: most of us would not do as Hitler did following our periods of discernment, and we have to rely on this majority approach in defining moral response. Pope John Paul II has recently warned us against this very approach, noting that in our time there are some ethicists who, under the influence of the physical and social sciences, are willing to define the moral with "the results of a statistical study of concrete human behavior patterns and the opinions about morality encountered in the majority of people" (Splendor of Truth, 73). However good majority rule is for a government, though, it is a weak and dangerous approach to morality. And the Pope also warns us that a democracy that depends on moral relativism "easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism" (152).

James Q. Wilson's The Moral Sense likewise tries to revitalize the idea of objective morality.

I wrote this book to help people recover the confidence with which they once spoke about virtue and morality. . . . [I wrote it] to reestablish the possibility and the reasonableness of speaking frankly and convincingly about moral choices. In doing so I endeavor to show that mankind has a moral nature to which we commonly and inevitably appeal when trying to defend our moral arguments (Wilson, pp. vii-viii).

Wilson notes that our intellectual and popular culture has made of moral thinking an irrational impulse that should be abandoned, and he goes about refuting this widespread belief by using the findings from social and biological research, findings which show that morality is not culture-based or merely relative, but is in fact universal: we have a moral sense, comparable in some ways to our other five senses. We have as a species, Wilson tries to demonstrate, four innate sentiments: sympathy, fairness, self-control, and duty. These can be either strengthened or weakened based on our experiences, especially our family experience, and the tendencies of the culture into which we are born, but all four are universal and capable of nourishment.

But despite his universalist aspirations, Wilson ultimately comes up against the twentieth-century bugbear: truth is relative. This passage illustrates the problem:

I agree that there is a universal human nature, but disagree that one can deduce from it more than a handful of rules or solutions to any but the most elemental (albeit vitally important) human problems. The reason is that one universal truth . . . [humankind's sociability] coexists with other universal truths--man's ambition, avarice, and vanity--and both tendencies
are engulfed by a natural preference for one's own kind. The struggle among these sentiments is shaped by circumstances and necessity as well as by ritual, religion, and poetry. The passions of man are in conflict; his moral sense is one of his calmer passions, but it cannot always prevail over its wilder rivals and its reach is uncertain and contingent. And even when it prevails, it provides at best a set of tests for human action, not a set of hierarchical rules for ordering that action (Wilson, 218-19).

Wilson's universal moral truths are swamped amid other biological and social imperatives, and his morality ends up as rather a wistful description of how we can behave when we are at our best. The "moral sense" does not bring with it anything like moral truth. Wilson, like Carter, wants to bring us to a sense of universal morality, but without some belief in a fixed and obtainable truth, both authors leave us with little but some conflicting impulses.

My intent here is not simply to criticize Wilson and Carter--for in fact, both authors present a great deal of very valuable discussion--but to present them as examples of a growing trend, a widespread attempt to rescue some approach to morality that will allow for at least some measure of moral certainty. This trend is significant, as is the fact that neither Wilson nor Carter are philosophers or ethicists by training (Wilson comes from Government Studies and Management, and Carter comes from Law): there is clearly a growing need today for some approach that will allow us to say this is true, that false; this right, that wrong. There is a growing dissatisfaction with the moral thinking that only lets us speak about texts and power differentials, and Wilson's and Carter's books are among the more noteworthy responses to that dissatisfaction. But neither is completely successful.

What is needed is a moral theory that has room for a conception of truth as genuine, not determined by situation and by hidden agendas; we need a moral theory that has room for truth that is real and obtainable. Such a theory probably will not come from the secular world, where truth has been so radically undermined for so long now. The last place left where transcendent truth is accorded full centrality is revealed religion, and our Catholic tradition can provide us with a way out of the modern wilderness of destabilized, evanescent, deconstructed language--a way out of this world of ours in which "selling dreams" cannot really be criticized. In my view, the most compelling theory of language and communication, the one that best offers a pathway out of our dilemmas, is that of St. Augustine.

Augustine's theory of language and truth is highly complex and is spread over a number of his works; here I only want to try to bring out a few of the most important features in order to show how they can help us in our contemporary dilemma. Augustine's philosophy is of course profoundly God-centered, and everything he has to say about human language is in relation to God--indeed, as I'll discuss shortly, our language is itself one important manifestation of our relation to our Creator.
First of all, words are signs. Our contemporaries like Derrida insist that words are signs only of other signs, and that our language is infinitely self-reflexive, creating a kind of barrier between ourselves and the non-linguistic world. This is not Augustine's view: for him, signs convey truth to the listener or reader, and the relationship between the sign and the signifier is relatively uncomplicated—a view that will appeal to most people's experience of language. What is more important, however, is the relation between the sign and the mind of the listener or reader. In his early work on The Teacher (De Magistro), Augustine develops a theory of communication that is called Illumination: He tells us that the listener is not a passive recipient, but a participant in the communication process:

We consult, in the case of all the things which we understand, not the external speaker but that internal Truth which presides over our minds; the words of a speaker are, perhaps, but an admonishment to this consultation.

Truth, in other words, comes from God; we can know nothing without His grace and illumination, and we do know by means of the truth He has planted within us. This is the case, Augustine insists, with all human knowledge, whether the individual is a believer or not. Now, Augustine tells us in his On The Trinity, the word we speak or write is a sign of this inward truth:

Accordingly, the word that sounds outwardly is the sign of the word that gives light inwardly; which latter has the greater claim to be called a word. . . . For our word is so made in some way into an articulate sound of the body, by assuming that articulate sound by which it may be manifested to men's senses, as the Word of God was made flesh, by assuming that flesh in which itself also might be manifested to men's senses.

Language thus bridges and unites the inner world, the world of our mind and soul, with the outer one of our senses; and Augustine draws the analogy between this uniting of worlds with the uniting of Divine and human that was effected with the Incarnation.

Language is thus for Augustine sacramental, in the usual sense of that term: it is an outward sign of inward grace. Nothing could dignify and ennable language more than Augustine does here in On the Trinity. Much of the book on the Trinity is devoted to examining our bodies and souls for traces of the Trinity itself, as Augustine wrestles with defining just how it is that we can be said to have been made in God's image. And our language is one of the traces we can find of the Creator's image. The relationships Augustine finds are numerous and too complex to go into here very fully, but one of the chief points is the close relationship between sign and meaning, between our words and the truths they seek to express:

When we speak what is true . . . there is born from the knowledge itself which the memory retains, a word that is altogether of the same kind with that knowledge from which it is born. For the thought that is formed by the thing which we know, is the word which we speak in the heart; which
word is neither Greek nor Latin nor of any other tongue (On the Trinity, XV: 10, p. 398).

Augustine suggests not only a close relationship between language and truth, but practically an identity between them within this "language of the heart," a language that precedes the language of the senses. This inner language is analogous to the great creating Word of God.

We learn via language, and the desire to know is, in Augustine's formulation, a kind of love. Thus we are naturally anxious to learn unfamiliar words and signs, for by these signs, by this human language,

human fellowship mutually communicates its own perceptions, lest the assemblies of men should be actually worse than utter solitude, if they were not able to mingle their thoughts by conversing together (On The Trinity, X: 1, p. 135).

External language, then, is given us so that we may share our inner worlds, our thoughts and feelings, with our fellows.

Given the noble, sacramental character of language, and the social binding to which it contributes so greatly, it is not surprising to find Augustine condemning the practice of lying in any form. Lying in Augustine's definition involves what he calls a "double heart," the will to deceive regardless of the artfulness of the words actually used:

. . . that man lies, who has one thing in his mind and utters another thing in words, or by signs of whatever kind.

In his two works on the subject (On Lying [395] and To Consentius: Against Lying [420]), Augustine confronts a number of problematic ethical situations in which people often argue that a lie is permissible because it averts a greater evil. But he always condemns lying, insisting that the prohibition against lying is, after all, one of the ten commandments--and not a subordinate or conditional commandment either. He is wise enough to recognize, however, that our human feelings will often prove too strong for us, and that we may sometimes lie to protect another or ourselves; but the lie remains a sin--sometimes a lesser, sometimes a greater sin, but a sin nonetheless. And lying, even when we have good intentions, only serves to erode the truth in human society:

For, once break or but slightly diminish the authority of truth, and all things will remain doubtful: which unless they be believed true, cannot be held as certain (On Lying, 466).

When the authority of truth is diminished, all things will become doubtful: there is no better description of our situation in the late twentieth century.
Augustine's approach to truth and language outlined here seems to me to provide the best possible hope for a resolution to the problem we face in communication today. What we most need today, I believe, is what we might call a Catholic theory of communication, one which begins with Augustine and develops his insights for use in our modern world. This theory needs to be, like Augustine's, one which sees our language as a species of sacrament, not a self-sufficient, self-reflexive symptom of our inevitably solipsistic psychological condition. Our language, seen in the light Augustine provides, can call us to our higher selves and contribute to our God-given dignity. The advertising and business communication that uses language as essentially meaningless markers to make us believe that more possessions will lead to greater happiness is impossible to justify when we reorient ourselves with the help of Augustine. The Pontifical Council's statement that I quoted earlier makes this point very clearly:

Advertising that reduces human progress to acquiring material goods and cultivating a lavish lifestyle expresses a false, destructive vision of the human person harmful to individuals and society alike.

When people fail to practice "a rigorous respect for the moral, cultural and spiritual requirements, based on the dignity of the person and on the proper identity of each community, beginning with the family and religious societies," then even material abundance and the conveniences that technology makes available "will prove unsatisfying and in the end contemptible" (Pontifical Council, "Ethics in Advertising", p. III).

"Selling dreams," the production and promotion of goods that are meant to be a sort of therapeutic substitute for a meaningful life, is of course a prime example of the kind of materialism the Pontifical Council here condemns. I've tried to suggest in this paper that the absence of any belief in an obtainable truth is at the foundation of the ethical difficulties besetting business communication today, and perhaps is at the foundation of a great many more difficulties as well. Our Catholic tradition provides us with a radically opposite view, however: a noble view of truth, truth available through grace and communicated through language that is itself sacramental. Without an approach like Augustine's, I fear there is no way out of selling and buying dreams.