

Ethics In Advertising

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In a contemporary society motivated by bottom line figures and expanding consumerism, advertising and marketing have adopted a significant hold over the American public. The “Brand” concept has permeated all corners of our culture, from politics and the manner in which elected officials are portrayed to appeal to a general audience, to the current trend of debt relief and credit offers that perhaps offer more than you bargained for based on commercial ads. From the time a child is born, through maturity, and into the years requiring a stringent attention to healthcare, decisions regarding playtime, sex and even medicine are under the persistent influence of advertising and marketing efforts. The blurred line between brand and reality requires a deeper focus and more resounding call to a discussion of ethics in advertising; in particular with regard to Politics, Sex, Children, Drugs and Credit.

### **Ethics in Political Advertising**

As ethics in advertising is discussed, the question of whether or not advertisers should be regulated or held accountable to a higher standard is usually brought up. The question then becomes who will regulate? The government then becomes the answer. Who is in the government? The government is comprised of elected politicians. When the politicians want to be voted into a certain elected position, they

must run an advertising campaign to achieve that goal. The question then becomes, how ethical is their advertising?

Political advertising is somewhat different from product advertising because in political campaigns advertising results must to be quick (Chang, 1998). Often times, there is an eleventh-hour negative ad that can not be challenged before the damage is done. When Warren Harding ran in the 1920 presidential election, it was rumored during the campaign that his great-great-grandfather was a West Indian black. In response, his campaign manager performed damage control by stating “No family in the state (of Ohio) has a clearer, a more honorable record than the Hardings, a blue-eyed stock from New England and Pennsylvania, the finest pioneer blood.” In a time when Harding’s political career should have been ruined by such rumors, proper timing in advertising allowed them able to overcome and Harding became the 29<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. (2008, February, 18).

In January of 2000 during the republican primaries, proving that history can repeat itself, a rumor was started that John McCain had fathered an illegitimate black daughter just before the South Carolina vote (Madden, 2008). The truth was that he and his wife had adopted a girl from Bangladesh. It was, however, too late. The bad P.R. was irreversible and as a result, McCain arguably lost South Carolina along with the Republican Presidential Nomination.

A local issue that had Missourians at each other’s throats was Amendment 2, The Stem Cell Initiative. Both factions paraded celebrities to make television advertisements for their respected cause. While the Amendment 2 supporters had such stars as Sheryl Crow and Michael J Fox, the advocates brought out Patricia Heaton, Jim Caviezel, and Kurt Warner. The supporters argued “lifesaving cures” such as diabetes, paralysis,

cancer, and Parkinson's to name a few. When one of their commercials discussed that fertility clinics would compensate women for their eggs, Patricia Heaton argued that "...low income women will be seduced by big checks". Advocates also claimed the amendment to be related to human cloning and argued the economic loss. In reality, the amendment was not to legalize stem cell research, but, among other things, to provide state funding and make it a constitutional right. None of these were disclosed in the commercials and unless a person performed their own research, the ads were the only thing they had to go on when executing their vote. Instead of providing concrete information, both parties played on voters emotions by discussing how they could potentially save a life and/or how it was a destruction of life as well as how much money it could potentially cost the taxpayers. Is this, then, ethical?

After hearing about such questionable behavior from whom is suppose to be our leaders, one would think that voters would either stop voting or vote in new politicians who do not participate in these types of campaigns. The fact that the 2006 election had the largest mid-term turnout since 1970, and the 2004 election had the largest Presidential turnout since 1968, shows the opposite. My conclusion would then be that until people stop rewarding unethical behavior, by withholding their votes or money, negative and ethical behavior will not only continue, but increase.

### **Ethics Involving the Use of Sexual Appeals in Advertising**

The use of sexual appeals in advertising has been happening for decades. Sex is everywhere. Its pervasive use and misuse are constantly before us throughout advertising.

Think of the Pepsi commercial that Britney Spears did a few years back. Here is a famous young female entertainer with a fan base consisting mostly of pre-teen girls advertising a “main-stream” product on national public television. Britney is dressed quite scantily dancing on stage very sexually promoting a soft drink. Does sex really sell? How do advertisers get away with using sex to promote their products, staying within ethical boundaries? What message does the use of sexual appeals in advertising send to the audience?

Advertisements that are sexy in nature tend to be remembered more often than advertisements that are not. Advertising research reveals that sexual appeals are attention getting, arousing, affect inducing, and memorable. Although studies have demonstrated that sexual appeal attracts attention to the ad, they do so typically without a corresponding advantage for brand information processing. Although using sexual appeals in brand advertisement has not proven to be as effective as needed, using them in social marketing may be beneficial. Sexual appeal ads stand out among a saturated media environment. (Blair, 2006)

There is no clear view of what is ethical and what is unethical when it comes to advertising. Advertisers must address the often tricky legal distinction between obscenity and indecency. Obscenity, which is illegal, must meet three conditions: appeals to prurient interests, be patently offensive, and lack any redeeming social value. In general, most ads with sexual appeals don't meet the criteria for obscenity, but they may still be considered indecent, since indecency is in the eyes of the beholder. Although indecent ads are not illegal, if enough viewers consider an ad to be indecent, citizen pressure

groups, along with media organization and local courts can enforce community standards by disallowing advertising that offends community standards. (Arens, 2008)

Using sex appeal in advertising is a good way to target certain market segments, but not all. With careful consideration and planning, it is possible for advertisers to find common ground and use sex appeal without offending people in the process. It is important for advertisers to evaluate the audience who will be viewing the ads before invoking sexual appeal into the ad. As the morals and ethics of society change over time, what is considered appropriate and acceptable by society must also change. Therefore, it is necessary to re-evaluate the assumptions on which strategic decisions are based when it comes to advertising. Advertisers need to look at potential social issues and consequences at stake when considering an advertisement based on sexual appeals. Ethical issues involving sexual appeal in commercials are more controversial than those involving print advertising due to the high number of viewers that see commercials. Sexual appeals in commercials have many types and consist of a variety of elements. They often involve visual elements such as attractive models, and many portray varying degrees of nudity and suggestiveness. (Carpenter, 2006) Although commercials often use visual elements for sexuality, appeals may also include verbal elements and music.

Advertisers can attempt to accommodate the seemingly conflicting concerns of the public by following four guidelines: (1) targeting commercials as carefully as possible to avoid unnecessary conflict and to minimize the viewing of sexual appeals by people who might be disconcerted by them, (2) heightening their own awareness of the impact of their sexual appeals on the public at large as well as on their target market, (3) testing the effects of their commercials, again not only on their target, but also on other members of

the public who might see their commercials, and (4) considering the effects of their commercials in promoting individuals, whether in their target or not, to take actions that have negative consequences. (Blair, 2006)

So, what is the negative effect of inappropriate use of sex in advertising? We are awash with images of flawlessly beautiful women in various states of undress, of men showing off their six-pack abs, and of perfect young couples imitating just about every form of copulation. These images define what is sexy and, more important, who is sexy. Women are portrayed as sexually desirable only if they are young, thin, carefully polished and groomed, made up, sprayed and scented and men can be conditioned to seek such partners and to feel disappointed if they fail. Of course, men are increasingly objectified themselves in ads these days, although not nearly as often or with the same consequences as women. In the world of advertising, only young and beautiful people have sex. We rarely see eroticized images of older people, imperfect people, or people with disabilities. The gods have sex. The rest of us watch and judge our own imperfect sex lives against the fantasy of constant desire and sexual fulfillment portrayed in the media. Inevitably, this can affect our self-images, making some of us feel less desirable, less sexy.

Today it is quite common for a reader of any age to pick up a general-interest consumer magazine and find an advertisement featuring provocatively posed and attired models for many consumer products. (Carpenter, 2006) During the past decade, the use of sexual appeals in print advertisement has become commonplace. Among the most memorable companies, which base their advertisement on sexual appeals, is Calvin Klein. Their ads usually feature a nude couple in a somewhat provocative position.

Ethical issues involving sexual appeal in commercials though are far more controversial than those involving print advertising due to the high number of viewers that see the commercials. Research indicates that media, advertising in particular, can create and sustain unrealistic images and stereotypes, especially of women. The frequent portrayal of women as sexual objects in all forms of the mass media can influence men's perceptions of women and women's perceptions of themselves. Many advertisements concentrate on the female "ideal", an identity to which all women should aspire. These messages--used to sell everything from cosmetics to cars to beverages--provide a prescription for how women should look and be looked at, how they should feel, and how they are expected to act. In short, these messages prescribe particular gender identities and how men should relate to women. Even when women are used as sex appeal in advertisements targeted at women, they can have a negative impact. Consider Victoria Secret. They want women to think that if they buy Victoria Secret products, they could be like the beautiful, sexy models on their commercials. Obviously these bras and panties are not going to look this good on just anyone. But at first glance, a woman might think, "Wow, she looks awesome; I should get that outfit so I can look that good too." Consider another example, AXE commercials. In the commercial the men who use AXE get beautiful women. In fact, AXE is so effective that if in any way you come in contact with this body spray, you will be instantly wanted. One AXE commercial shown in 2004 features an old man who gets a young hot woman because of the "AXE Effect".

Advertisers must examine, on a case-by-case basis, at what point sexual appeals become counterproductive. There is a social cost to portraying unrealistic aspirations in



the media. In a society rife with confidence-related disorders, should advertisers exploit consumer insecurities in an effort to sell more of their product?

### **Babies In Brandland: Is Marketing To Children Ethical?**

As the world becomes entwined in a symbiotic relationship between media and consumption, there exists a growing difficulty for many adult consumers: the challenge of sifting through and filtering out fact from fiction in commercial advertising to determine the best use of their resources for consumption. Equipped with mature reasoning skills most adults begin to scrutinize commercial content based on personal preference, knowledge, and necessity. An adult can use reason, understands the concepts of desire, and is much more attuned—for better or worse—to what it is that makes some product or service alluring.

For children, however, there is no matter of having experience on their side. What they do have is exposure to a media frenzy as marketers fight for market share behind a thin veil of media in the form of cartoons, web games and kid-friendly product sponsors. And that thin layer may just be the difference between what some advocates believe is responsible marketing, and others cite as corrupting the minds of our young.

While it may be granted that marketers have long held the benefits of marketing to children—especially grades schoolers and pre-teens—the more recent cause for concern are the really “young” viewers, and the article written by T. Stanley cites the Kaiser Family Foundation study that “75% of youngsters watching ads for toys, sneakers and snacks are under 6 years old; 43% of them are younger than 2.” (Stanley, 2007)

According to several sources, the mere heft of that statistic is complicated when considering the American Psychological Association study done in 2004 that states that when the viewer is 8 years old or younger, the whole notion of a “commercial” means nothing. (Stanley, 2007) The study goes on to describe how children process commercial information as legitimate and no different from that of any other subjective reality. In essence, children are unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality in the way marketing motives and persuasive techniques are used to capture their interest.

These findings have been reinforced by similar reports from many European countries that agree: kids under the cutoff age of 12 cannot distinguish between advertising and the many forms of entertainment advertising shares time with. These findings appear to support that marketing efforts have been successful at targeting children, young and impressionable as they unwittingly absorb the subliminal information between romper room sessions with Dora the Explorer and Bananas in Pajamas.

Marketers often draw the line at this suggestion. They promote that there is a convenient relationship between children’s programming and the access to the mothers, guardians and older family members of these impressionable youths. Certainly the children are not left alone while watching these shows. Most often, these guardians are mothers and just as the content of programming is geared toward children, the commercials are geared toward the household member with more purchasing power.

To deny the marketing presence to children is a slippery slope, with obvious displays by sponsors like McDonalds and Disney whose agency states: “5-year olds are their gateway, and 6-11 year olds are certainly a reasonable target.” (Stanley, 2007)

There is no lack of information on the subject of ethics in advertising and marketing to children. Studies have been done on a regular basis since the 1970s. However, as new media shifts the frame of how media is dispensed, new research revisits old trends and brings clarity to just how significant marketing to children plays into today's media-saturated societies. And given the prevalence of exposure to branding within the context of daily life, should "existing guidelines be strengthened?" (Stanley, 2007) And how far exactly is just far enough, before marketing to children becomes exploitation.

The average day for a child age 6 is inundated with promotional messages from cartoon characters, about the new line of toy, snack food bearing a friendly character's likeness and even lessons at school that incorporate sponsorships by McDonald's and Pizza Hut to encourage reading. Children are taught to be consumers at the same time they are being taught "reading, writing, 'rithmetic." And once the school day is over, children return to a home where a haven of media influence awaits as "By the time they hit the 4-6 age group, children are living richly media-centric lives...a third of children owned their own DVD player, a portable handheld videogame player, and a TV set in their rooms." (Stanley, 2007)

This offers marketers an unmistakable opportunity to tap into a primed and growing audience. They spend over 15 billion a year on kid-focused marketing and that finds its way into websites chock full of games to play, touched with a glaze of product endorsement. This especially included TV commercials, according to one report in excess of 40000 per child per year and most of those are for fast food, and snacks, according to the 2005 report in the Journal of Public Health (Stanley, 2007).

The key is responsible use of this access. Many advertisers admit that they consider the shareholder as much as the consumer. However, these same advertisers may also find this as encouragement to market to children responsibly. The fact that much of children's entertainment is sponsored commercially encourages this sort of approach. Companies such as Fisher-Price validate this concept by administering focus groups to both children and adults. In this instance the imperative is placed on a balanced approach to satisfying consumer preference and improving the bottom line, a sort of better business practice with an amoral yet socially responsible ethos.

This may just be the approach best catered to a generation of children so much "Savvier and less naïve than the generations of children who preceded them, and don't need the protection that some are calling for." (Stanley, 2007)

Examples of such an approach account for several current ripples in marketing for major brands such as Kellogg: the company prohibited advertising to children under 12 unless those foods met specific nutrition guidelines, (Stanley, 2007) in response to a lawsuit over advertising standards reform.

While the research data can be interpreted with mixed results, the fact remains that children today compose a significant margin of consumers and the channels for reaching them are on the increase, with new media, gaming and sponsorship-based opportunities. This makes a challenge to regulation, as more responsibility must be driven back to media and marketing agencies, toward responsible advertising, enhanced by the support of parental feedback.

## **Ethics And Parmaceutical Sales**

The ultimate goal of creating any product is to sell it. It does not take a lot of deep thought to come up with this idea. Advertising helps to sell the products that marketers come up with, and this is a very essential part of our economy. Promoting a product in a certain way can cause consumers to act, and it is because of this that making sure that no false information is conveyed to a potential buyer. When the product being promoted is a pharmaceutical drug, it is incredibly important that the correct information is conveyed.

Pharmaceuticals have been advertised for several years. It is highly unlikely that any single person in the United States has not seen at least one drug advertisement. One can turn on the television and probably find one on the channels. Since many of the drugs advertised can bring a very drastic change to peoples' lives, one would think that federal laws would be very strict on the regulation of the possible side effects and health risks of any advertised drug. In fact, the Food and Drug Administration is currently reviewing advertising rules for pharmaceuticals, and many believe that they will place even more strict rules into place (Edwards, 2006). However, advertising companies are currently lobbying for a less firm hand in hopes of no longer being required to include health risks and side effects in the actual ad (Edwards, 2006). Drug companies have failed to speak up about their views on this subject, and some feel that this says that their silence means consent (Edwards, 2006). As more people feel in favor of stronger regulation on drug advertising, drug companies work within their power to influence more lax rules, and this is cause for a horrific public relations nightmare.

This situation is a nightmare because the drug companies are overlooking the fact that a greater number of people feel very uncomfortable with the fact that drugs are even allowed to be advertised. By not wanting the health risks and side effects advertised, it really makes one think about exactly what the Pharmaceutical Industry doesn't want you to know. Doctors already do not like it when a patient asks for a specific drug that he/she saw advertised. Imagine how much more difficult it would be to prescribe proper medication for a person when she has her heart set on a certain drug as seen on television; especially since all they are getting from the advertising are the "positive" effects of the drug. It would just take that much more time to simply convince a patient why a certain drug may be a bad idea.

For this subject, if I were part of the public relations of any of the drug companies I would make a clear statement that informed the public that we have absolutely nothing to do with the lobbying, and would more than likely even speak out against such a law. As a manufacturer of pharmaceutical drugs, the company is responsible for ensuring that they are making the safest product possible, and keeping their consumers informed. To not do so is to tell the customers that ultimately "we just don't care about you."

Not only would I show the customer I cared about them, it is my belief that drug companies should not hold back any information for the public good. A drug often has many extremely dangerous side-effects for those who are taking it. To ensure that my company was acting ethically, I would make sure that research on those risks and side-effects are incredibly easy to access, and that a possible patient knew every single risk from the beginning.

## **Ethics in Advertising Credit and Debt**

In today's world where predatory lending and foreclosure are the buzz words, we need to focus our attention on the ethical advertisement of credit and debt. There are a slew of companies that are willing to offer extensions of credit to nearly anyone and everyone. The tags, "no credit, bad credit, no problem" abound from used car lots to cell phone service providers to credit card companies themselves.

Society at large has become more consumer-driven than ever and it seems "charge it" has become an American mantra. According to Bob Dart of Cox News Service, the average American household income rose .07% in 2007, from 2006 from \$47,825 to \$48,201 (Dart, 2007). However, total consumer revolving debt reached \$904 billion in June 2007 from \$879 billion at the close of 2006, for an increase of nearly 3% with the average household having 5% of the total annual income in credit card debt (Woolsey, 2006). While American wages are increasing, they are not keeping up with purchases financed thru credit.

But, what does this have to do with ethics in advertising? So what if a goodly portion of the United States populations spends more than they should or can afford? At some point in time, people have to be responsible for their own actions. To that I say – I agree. However, as marketers and advertisers, the target audience and consumer are always picked for one reason or another.

For Cadillac, the consumer target is much different than the alternative GM brand, Chevrolet. Westinghouse LCD televisions have a much different target market than Samsung, and so on. Therefore, logically, the marketing of credit and debt is also

therefore targeted to those individuals who will ultimately make said creditor more money. After all, businesses are in business to make money. However, when has a line been crossed in marketing debt to those already in debt?

Credit card solicitation and the resulting granting of credit is much akin to the investment business. The greater the risk, the greater the potential return. Those who are a greater risk with credit are also those who pay the greatest amount of interest; and in turn lining the pockets of the creditors. However, more and more, those same risk v. rewards scenarios end up in write offs for credit card companies and more bankruptcies for American families. In 2007, 800,000 bankruptcy claims were filed (Rajan, 2008).

Wrapping this all back into advertising debt and credit ethically, we need to understand the psychological implications of soliciting the American dream that is beyond the means of most Americans. Because of the glamour era that we live in where idols are no longer leaders of nations but rather leaders in rating, we are a society that is based on image. Those who cannot control their spending habits now, will without counseling and a mentor after bankruptcy, most likely fall back into the same spending trends that landed them in severe debt in the first place.

While we are not charged with being our brother's keeper as in a more socialist society perhaps, we do all have responsibilities to not cause others to continue to self-suffocate in debt. I submit that there is no such thing as business and personal ethics, there is only ethics. Therefore, if we would hold that to be true – we can conversely state that if one is ethical, it will translate to every area of life including conduct in business.

I will not say that making money thru lending is unethical or wrong, however, credit has been exceptionally easy to come by lately with “984 Million bank issued cards



in 2006” (Woolsey, 2006). However, when does simply turning a profit turn into all out greed? The credit companies know that those who currently have revolving, unpaid debt are those who are comfortable with that type of lifestyle and will continue in that way of daily life. Thus, that market is targeted and the propagation of debt is a continuing vortex.

I propose that until companies stop targeting the greater American public with advertisements of debt and credit, the United States will continue to be a country built on debt. Assuming that most Americans live in an average priced home at “\$224,000 according to the National Association of Realtors” (Molony, 2007), with an average mortgage of 80% of the balance, the monthly payment without taxes and insurance would be around \$1,200 per month. If said family also has two vehicles, one of which is still being paid for at \$250 per month and an average credit card minimum monthly payment of four percent of the average household credit card debt or about \$100, you have a typical family with minimum credit payments of \$1,550 per month when the monthly net income after taxes would be around \$3,100. Subtract taxes, health insurance, food, gas, clothing, utilities etc... is it any wonder that the middle class is being squeezed?

Advertisers have unfortunately played and unwitting role in propagating the debt of Americans. While commerce runs on spending, greed leads to overextending, and I mean greed on the part of the American public as well as corporate greed. We are here too, not our brother’s keeper; however in the strategy of increasing net income, growing business and turning bigger profits, we have created marketing that alludes to the fact that debt is ok. You, the hard working American deserve the vacation, the new car, the new kitchen and the larger house, just because!

Ethical advertising comes in the form of product presentation. Messaging that allows consumers to connect with a brand and become emotionally attached to the product. However, marketing and advertising debt as a way of gaining the good life and truly the way to afford what you really cannot afford is ethically sub-par to the standards we should hold ourselves to.

Leadership in this area however is key and unfortunately the United States government is perhaps the worst offender of all – thus is there truly any reason why the American people would not follow suit? With the national debt equaling more than \$9 trillion at last check, the American public debt of just about 10% that amount seems nearly miniscule in comparison. Too leadership from the largest marketers of debt should be bettered. With the acquisition of MBNA by Bank of America (BoA), BoA has become the largest consumer lending in the United States. Beyond advertising credit counseling, BoA needs to seriously examine what ramifications advertising credit and debt-solutions to middle income families is having right now. Many families feel the pressure of commuting prices, insurance increases and just the cost of living outreaching their salary – what can these large companies do, or not do for that matter, to slow down the lending process?

Perhaps making credit harder to attain is a way in which advertising can be offset in this realm. Perhaps tightening the reign of lending needs to occur and lessen the \$19k in credit extended to the average household? (Woolsey, 2006) Perhaps more importantly, as we are also a fear driven society, credit counseling agencies advertise the heartache that occurs when families are over-committed, have a home or car seized and use one

credit card to pay another. Maybe the only way to turn the tide of the credit epidemic is to exploit the horrifying experience of having to walk thru a bankruptcy.

Ethically speaking, we are not responsible for each other. However, morally speaking, we all share the same cities, economy and world. Maybe a little more responsibility on individuals parts in combination with a society that looks out for their own would change the way in which advertising targets and seeks to market debt and credit.

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