

Advertising Ethics

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Abstract: Ethics means a set of moral principles which govern a person's behavior or how the activity is conducted. And advertising means a mode of communication between a seller and a buyer. Thus ethics in advertising means a set of well defined principles which govern the ways of communication taking place between the seller and the buyer. Ethics is the most important feature of the advertising industry. Though there are many benefits of advertising but then there are some points which don't match the ethical norms of advertising.

Keywords: Advertising, communication, ethics)

I. Introduction

Ethics in Advertising is directly related to the purpose of advertising and the nature of advertising. Sometimes exaggerating the ad becomes necessary to prove the benefit of the product. For e.g. a sanitary napkin ad which shows that when the napkin was dropped in a river by some girls, the napkin soaked whole water of the river. Thus, the purpose of advertising was only to inform women about the product quality. Obviously, every woman knows that this cannot practically happen but the ad was accepted. This doesn't show that the ad was unethical. Advertising and promotion have a significant influence on people, society in large, while shaping their attitudes, behaviors and priorities. Some scholars believe that advertising supports ethical issues. It is also considered unethical to shame a substitute or rivals product or services. Other ethical issues include, mistreatment of women, advertising to children, misleading advertising and other issues, which lead to ethical decline of society. Mistreatment of women is evident immensely in advertisements. Often women are matched up with household products such as cleaning supplies and are shown as doing domestic work, which represents stereotyping of women. Women are also often used as sex symbols, to convey particular messages about products. Also men are often apparent in DIY (do it yourself) ads, which deliver the idea of them being a "handy man. An ad, which demonstrates ethical features, is truthful, it doesn't make false claims, and it provides sufficient information for the buyer to make informed choices.

Exhibiting a level of respect and dignity for its buyers is important while demonstrating decency. An example of an advert produced by Coca Cola, through using false advertising, it showed unethical issues behind its production. Coca Cola used of Karl Lagerfeld (Chanel designer) who had claimed to lose 80 pounds on a diet that was mainly attributed to diet coke, "I drink diet coke from the minute I get up to the minute I go to bed and I drink nothing else". This advert was specially targeted towards women as it aimed to be conveyed as a fashion trend, through the use of a famous fashion designer. Coke used thin models and world-renowned fashion designers both of who are cautious of body image, which shows the wrong message for women, especially young women. The advert shows that going overboard with dieting is conventional and that diet coke is the way of going about achieving a thin and attractive body.

It is ethically wrong to be using Karl Lagerfeld's extreme dieting ways in order to promote diet coke. It is not only advocating an extreme statement, but it is also sending the wrong message about the drink by directly associating it to a "healthy ideal body". Often the line between ethical and unethical advertising is blurred, what may seem unethical to some consumers or businesses, may not to for others. Therefore, in cases like this, businesses should proceed with caution, because unethical advertising and promotion can fail, causing consumers to shy away from the company consequently defeating the purpose of any campaign.

Ethical pitfalls in advertising and promotional content include:

- Issues over truth and honesty. In the 1940s and 1950s, tobacco used to be advertised as *promoting* health. Today an advertiser who fails to tell the truth not only offends against morality but also against the law. However the law permits "puffery" (a legal term). The difference between mere puffery and fraud is a slippery slope: "The problem... is the slippery slope by which variations on puffery can descend fairly quickly to lies.
- Issues with violence, sex and profanity. Sexual innuendo is a mainstay of advertising content (see sex in advertising), and yet is also regarded as a form of sexual harassment. Violence is an issue especially for children's advertising and advertising likely to be seen by children.

- Taste and controversy. The advertising of certain products may strongly offend some people while being in the interests of others. Examples include: feminine hygiene products, hemorrhoid and constipation medication. The advertising of condoms has become acceptable in the interests of AIDS-prevention, but are nevertheless seen by some as promoting promiscuity. Some companies have actually marketed themselves on the basis of controversial advertising - see Benetton. Sony has also frequently attracted criticism for unethical content (portrayals of Jesus which infuriated religious groups; racial innuendo in marketing black and white versions of its PSP product; graffiti adverts in major US cities).
- Negative advertising techniques, such as attack ads. In negative advertising, the advertiser highlights the disadvantages of competitor products rather than the advantages of their own. The methods are most familiar from the political sphere: see negative campaigning.
- Delivery channels
- Direct marketing is the most controversial of advertising channels, particularly when approaches are unsolicited. TV commercials and direct mail are common examples. Electronic spam and telemarketing push the borders of ethics and legality more strongly.
- Shills and astroturfers are examples of ways for delivering a marketing message under the guise of independent product reviews and endorsements, or creating supposedly independent watchdog or review organisations. For example, fake reviews can be published on Amazon. Shills are primarily for message-delivery, but they can also be used to drive up prices in auctions, such as Ebay auctions.
- Native advertising is the blurring of lines between advertising and content.

Deceptive Advertising and Ethics

Another breach of marketing ethics has to do with the use of deceptive advertising. This form of advertising is not specific to one target market, and can sometimes go unnoticed by the public. There are a number of different ways in which deceptive marketing can be presented to consumers; one of these methods is accomplished through the use of humor. In a study conducted by Hassib Shabbir and Des Thwaites, 238 advertisements were assessed and 73.5% of them were found to have used deceptive marketing practices. Of those advertisements that were conducted deceptively, 74.5% of them used humor as a masking device in order to mislead potential customers. Part of what drives this study is the idea that humor provides an escape or relief from some kind of human constraint, and that some advertisers intend to take advantage of this by deceptively advertising a product that can potentially alleviate that constraint through humor. Through the study it was also found that all types of humor are used to deceive consumers, and that there are certain types of humor that are used when making certain deceptive claims. It is important to understand that humor is not the only method that is used to deter consumer's minds from what a product actually offers. Before making important purchases, one should always conduct their own research in order to gain a better understanding of what it is they are investing in.

The use of ethics as a marketing tactic

Business ethics has been an increasing concern among larger companies, at least since the 1990s. Major corporations increasingly fear the damage to their image associated with press revelations of unethical practices. Marketers have been among the fastest to perceive the market's preference for ethical companies, often moving faster to take advantage of this shift in consumer taste. This results in the expropriation of ethics itself as a selling point or a component of a corporate image.

- The Body Shop is an example of a company which marketed itself and its entire product range solely on an ethical message.
- Greenwash is an example of a strategy used to make a company appear ethical when its unethical practices continue.
- Liberation marketing is another strategy whereby a product can masquerade behind an image that appeals to a range of values, including ethical values related to lifestyle and anti-consumerism.

"Liberation marketing takes the old mass culture critique — consumerism as conformity — fully into account, acknowledges it, addresses it, and solves it. Liberation marketing imagines consumers breaking free from the old enforcers of order, tearing loose from the shackles with which capitalism has bound us, escaping the routine of bureaucracy and hierarchy, getting in touch with our true selves, and finally, finding authenticity, that holiest of consumer grails."

-Thomas Frank

Neuromarketing ethics

Neuromarketing and its precursor, neuroeconomics, uses clinical information about brain functions and mechanisms to help explain what is happening inside of the "black box" so prevalent in many explanations of consumer behavior.^[35] In order to do so, specialists use neuroimaging techniques and record brain responses to different stimuli. The Neuromarketing Science & Business Association has launched on November 2012

a Neuromarketing Code of Ethics. This is a first step towards adopting international standards applied to using neuroscientific methods to study the effectiveness of advertising campaigns, packaging and product design, as well as communication campaigns from non-profit organizations and government institutions. However, some ethicists condemn the code as protecting only a very narrow class, and in the extreme position that neuromarketing itself should only be used for the advancement of what is reasonably believed to be public good, employing Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of double effect (DDE). Although one could make the argument that engineering profit serves the public good, it would not be saved under the DDE because the intention behind it is not to generate a greater good than to which the collective harm of manipulation is greater. However, neuromarketing programs to encourage healthy lifestyle choices may be saved under the DDE, provided it is based on good scientific information in the first place, such as regular exercise.

Marketing strategy

The main theoretical issue here is the debate between free markets and regulated markets. In a truly free market, any participant can make or change the rules. However, when new rules are invented which shift power too suddenly or too far, other participants may respond with accusations of unethical behaviour, rather than modifying their own behaviour to suit (which they might not be able to anyway). Most markets are not fully free: the real debate is as to the appropriate extent of regulation.

Advertisers should start taking responsibility of self regulating their ads by:

- design self regulatory codes in their companies including ethical norms, truth, decency, and legal points
- keep tracking the activities and remove ads which don't fulfill the codes.
- Inform the consumers about the self regulatory codes of the company
- Pay attention on the complaints coming from consumers about the product ads.
- Maintain transparency throughout the company and system.

When all the above points are implemented, they will result in:

- making the company answerable for all its activities
- will reduce the chances of getting pointed out by the critics or any regulatory body.
- will help gain confidence of the customers, make them trust the company and their products.