

3.3: The Good - Advertising Enhances Our World

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this section, students should be able to do the following:

1. *Describe* the prosocial aspect of advertising and advertising institutions.
2. *Explain* the concept of green marketing and its impact on contemporary advertising.

Advertising is part and parcel of the daily world in which we all live—it's the lifeblood of *popular culture*. It's also an incredibly powerful mirror that reflects our values, aspirations, and fears (whether of social rejection, financial hardship, or just plain body odor). True, we may not always like what we see in this mirror. And it may not deliver a totally accurate reflection—like the looking glass in a funhouse, it may be distorted to magnify our noblest dreams as well as our basest desires. It's a formidable weapon that people, businesses, and countries can harness for good or exploit for evil.

Advertising Is Culture Is Advertising

Advertising's cultural impact is hard to overlook, although many people do not seem to realize how much these pervasive messages influence their preferences for movie and musical heroes, the latest fashions in clothing, food, and decorating choices, and even the physical features that they find attractive or ugly in men and women.

For example, consider the product icons that companies use to create an identity for their products. Many imaginary creatures and personalities, from the Keebler Elves to the Burger "King," have at one time or another been central figures in popular culture. Although these figures never really existed, many of us feel as if we "know" them.

Advertising pervades all of our lives, and its presence only continues to grow as advertisers expand the formats they use to reach us and as we try to slake our growing appetites for information and entertainment. The average adult is exposed to about 3,500 pieces of advertising information every single day—up from about 560 per day thirty years ago.

Here's a statistic to chew on: American Internet users ages twelve and older spend an average of *6.1 hours per day* interacting with video-based entertainment. About four of these hours are devoted to television viewing (live and recorded), while the rest goes to video games, Web and PC video, DVDs, and video on mobile devices. This sizeable chunk of time is projected to grow to eight hours per day by 2013. Where will the growth come from? One answer is online video; Nielsen tells us that in 2007 Americans watched 7.5 billion streams and 16.4 billion minutes in total of online video, and children ages two to eleven spend almost one-third of their online time watching videos.

So, is advertising a vapid cloud of superfluous fluff, or is it an efficient and entertaining process that enriches our lives? Obviously that depends on whom you ask. Let's focus (first) on the reasons we should regard advertising as a glass half full. Then we'll deal with the negative stuff.

Prosocial Advertising

Can advertising save lives? Let's investigate a recent project that answers a resounding "yes!" A public health professor named Val Curtis spent years in the developing world fighting what seems like a simple problem but turns out to be a frustrating battle: get people to wash their hands regularly with soap (sound like your mother?). It turns out that dirty hands spread diseases like diarrhea that kill a child somewhere in the world *about every fifteen seconds*, and about half those deaths could be prevented with the regular use of soap.

Dr. Curtis, an anthropologist then living in Burkina Faso, was almost ready to throw in the towel (pardon the pun). Then she decided to ask some consumer goods companies how *they* would convince people to wash their hands using the same techniques they rely upon to sell vitamins or deodorant that people tend to consume out of habit. As she observed, "There are fundamental public health problems, like hand washing with soap, that remain killers only because we can't figure out how to change people's habits. We wanted to learn from private industry how to create new behaviors that happen automatically." These companies know very well how to create and reinforce such habits. For example, a century ago it was rare for anyone to brush her teeth twice a day, but efforts by Colgate and others changed all that.

Public health campaigns have had limited success in changing unhealthy habits. For example, evidence suggests that antidrug campaigns actually *increase* drug use, presumably because they remind people about the drugs to which they've become attached. It's sort of like telling someone, "Whatever you do, don't think of an elephant." Did that work?

Procter & Gamble, Colgate-Palmolive, and Unilever accepted Dr. Curtis's challenge and joined an initiative called the Global Public-Private Partnership for Handwashing with Soap. The group's goal was to double the handwashing rate in Ghana, a West African nation where almost every home contains a soap bar but only 4 percent of adults regularly lather up after they use the toilet.

When participants started to look into the issue, they had the insight that the problem resembled one Procter & Gamble first encountered when it introduced Febreze, a product it developed to remove odors from smelly clothes and furniture. Its ads initially focused on smelly situations, like pets, sweaty teenagers, and stinky minivan interiors. The launch flopped, and P&G was ready to kill the product. Then its researchers found that consumers liked Febreze when they used it, but that many customers simply forgot that it was in the house. P&G's ads needed to give them the right *cues* to use the product. The company identified one: the act of cleaning a room. So, it created commercials showing women spraying Febreze on a perfectly made bed and on freshly laundered clothing instead of in smelly areas. The ads worked well—and the more people sprayed Febreze, the more automatic the behavior became. Now consumers buy \$650 million of the stuff each year.

Back to handwashing in Ghana: studies showed that while about half of the people washed their hands before they ate or after they used the bathroom, only about 4 percent of Ghanaians included soap in this process. They also found that mothers often didn't see symptoms like diarrhea as abnormal but instead viewed them as a normal aspect of childhood. But they also unearthed an interesting tidbit: Ghanaians *did* use soap when they felt that their hands were dirty, for example, after they cooked with grease. This habit was prompted by feelings of *disgust*, and they applied soap to eliminate this bad feeling.

So the team came up with a big idea: create a habit to instill a feeling of disgust when people use the toilet, so that the emotional reaction would cue the use of soap. While many of us don't hesitate to grimace at the thought of a less-than-sparkling bathroom, in many places in the developing world any toilet is a symbol of cleanliness, because flush toilets have replaced pit latrines. So the task was to create commercials to teach the audience to feel disgust after they went to the bathroom. The solution: the team shot ads of mothers and children walking out of bathrooms with a glowing purple pigment on their hands that contaminated everything they touched. These spots didn't sell soap use, but rather disgust. Soap was almost an afterthought—one fifty-five-second television commercial only showed soapy hand washing for four seconds. Still, the link between disgust and its removal via soap was clear: the team's follow-up research showed a 13 percent increase in the use of soap after the toilet, while the number of Ghanaians who reported washing their hands with soap before they eat rose by an impressive 41 percent. This is no soap opera: advertising can save lives when it's used creatively and when it thoughtfully applies what social scientists understand about human behavior.

PSAs

The Advertising Council, a private, nonprofit organization, is one of the most important and influential organizations in the advertising industry. The Ad Council coordinates advertisers, advertising agencies, and media in its efforts to create effective public service messages and other forms of advertising and deliver those messages to the public.

Advertising agencies enhance society's well-being when they create (usually *pro bono*, or for free) **public service announcements (PSAs)** like the "Friends don't let friends drive drunk" campaign. PSAs intend to change the society's culture as they focus awareness on specific issues that address the public as a whole. For example, after the anti-drunk driving campaign, its creators reported that 70 percent of people said that the ad helped them to stop someone from driving drunk.

Advocacy Advertising

Like PSAs, **advocacy advertising** intends to influence public opinion about an issue relevant to some or all members of a society. However, advocacy ads espouse a particular point of view that not everyone may share, so they tend to be more strident in tone. For example, while virtually everyone advocates designating a driver to abstain from drinking (even the alcohol industry), not all of us agree with messages that exhort us to practice safe sex or avoid eating meat.

The organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) is a good example of a group that employs graphic messages to drive home its agenda, whether it's advocating an end to using lab animals for product testing or urging a boycott of the fur industry. PETA has used former *Baywatch* actress Pamela Anderson and ex-Beatle Paul McCartney in spots to protest the handling and killing of poultry, and most recently the group even involved the Pope in its efforts. The group's KentuckyFriedCruelty.com Web site featured the Pope's photo next to a quote it attributed to him: "Animals, too, are God's creatures....Degrading [them] to a commodity seems to me in fact to contradict the relationship of mutuality that comes across in the Bible." (Note: PETA didn't ask for or receive the Catholic Church's permission to use the photo or the quote.)

Nonprofit Advertising

Many **not-for-profit organizations**, including museums, zoos, and even churches, rely on advertising to recruit members, attract donations, and promote their activities. Churches aggressively brand themselves to fill empty pews. For example, the “megachurch” Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago uses sophisticated marketing techniques (including selling copies of sermons on CDs) to attract over twenty-five thousand worshippers.

Local governments use advertising to attract new businesses and industries to their counties and cities. Even states are getting into the act: We’ve known for a long time that I ♥ NY, but recently Kentucky and Oregon hired advertising agencies to develop statewide branding campaigns. The official state motto of Oregon is now “Oregon. We love dreamers.” A publicity campaign to select a state slogan for New Jersey generated a lot of questionable entries, including “It’s Jersey: Got a problem with that?” “New Jersey: We’ll look the other way,” and “New Jersey: Be sure to pick up a complimentary chemical drum on your way out.” The state went with something a bit less colorful: “New Jersey, Come See For Yourself.”

Dig Deeper

How far should nonprofit organizations go to promote their agendas? The Nationwide Children’s Hospital in Columbus, Ohio (a \$50 million donation from the Nationwide Insurance Company prompted this name) recently came under fire for its embrace of corporate sponsors. In 2008 the hospital announced plans to rename its emergency department the Abercrombie & Fitch Emergency Department and Trauma Center in exchange for a \$10 million donation from A&F. Citing A&F’s racy ads that feature (apparently) underage models, an advocacy group called The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood vigorously protested the name and submitted a letter signed by more than a hundred doctors and child welfare advocates. A spokesman explained, “A company with such cynical disregard for children’s well-being shouldn’t be able to claim the mantle of healing.” Quoted in Natalie Zmuda, “Children’s Hospital in Hot Water over Corporate Sponsorships: Critics Dismayed by Association with Racy Retailer Abercrombie & Fitch.” What do you think: is this use of corporate sponsorship over the top, or would forbidding it be throwing out the baby with the bathwater?

SS+K Spotlight

SS+K regularly engages in philanthropic work through an informal organization it calls David’s Work. This is named after David McCall, the creative founder who was on the board of SS+K before his untimely death while on a mission with his wife. After leaving the ad biz, David donated his time and effort to doing good, so SS+K does something in his honor every few months; typically this involves fundraisers for local schools.

Green Marketing

In the early twenty-first century, we are witnessing a profound shift in priorities as people clamor for products and services that are good for their bodies, good for their community, and good for the earth. Some analysts call this new value **conscientious consumerism**. They estimate the U.S. market for body-friendly and earth-friendly products at more than \$200 billion.

In particular, some marketers single out a type of consumer they call **LOHAS**—an acronym for “lifestyles of health and sustainability.” This label refers to people who worry about the environment and spend money to advance what they see as their personal development and potential. These so-called “Lohasians” (others refer to this segment as *cultural creatives*) represent a great market for products such as organic foods, energy-efficient appliances, and hybrid cars, as well as alternative medicine, yoga tapes, and ecotourism. One organization that tracks this group estimates they make up about 16 percent of the adults in the United States, or 35 million people; it values the market for socially conscious products at more than \$200 billion.

Just how widespread is conscientious consumerism? Corporate responsibility is now one of the primary attributes shoppers look for when they decide among competing brands. Consumer research strongly suggests that this awareness often starts with personal health concerns and then radiates outward to embrace the community and the environment. Predictably, advertisers have been quick to jump on the green bandwagon. **Green marketing**, which emphasizes how products and services are environmentally responsible, is red hot. Established agencies are setting up divisions to specialize in green campaigns and a host of new agencies (with names like The Green Agency and Green Team) are opening to meet the demand.

The advertising industry has the potential to radically change people’s attitudes and (more importantly) their behaviors as we face the real consequences of environmental contamination. Unfortunately, there’s also the very real potential that it will “poison the well” as it jumps onto the bandwagon a bit *too* energetically. It’s almost impossible to find an ad for virtually any kind of product, service, or company that doesn’t tout its environmental credentials, whether the focus of the ad is a detergent, a garment, a commercial airplane, or even an oil company. As a result, complaints about **greenwashing**, or misleading consumers about a

product's environmental benefits, are skyrocketing. One egregious example is an ad for a gas-guzzling Japanese sport utility vehicle that bills the car as having been “conceived and developed in the homeland of the Kyoto accords,” the international emissions-reduction agreement.

To prevent a greenwash backlash, it's imperative for advertisers to act responsibly. There's nothing wrong with trumpeting the environmental value of your product—if the claims are accurate and specific. Or you can suggest alternative methods to use your product that will minimize its negative impact—for example, Procter & Gamble runs an ad campaign in the United Kingdom that urges consumers of its laundry detergents to wash their clothing at lower temperatures. The FTC (Federal Trade Commission) provides guidelines to evaluate green advertising claims; for example, it suggests that “if a label says ‘recycled,’ check how much of the product or package is recycled. The fact is that unless the product or package contains 100 percent recycled materials, the label must tell you how much is recycled.” “Sorting Out ‘Green’ Advertising Claims,” Federal Trade Commission, April 1999.

The advertising industry can help us heal our toxic environment: *please don't poison the well*.

Key Takaway

Advertising creates awareness and persuades people to change their opinions or behaviors. The same principles that advertisers use to sell cameras and cars apply to conservation or even contraception. Prosocial messages can significantly influence consumers' daily lives in positive ways. Of late we see a huge emphasis on green messages; these can help to galvanize the world to take action in order to save the environment—if they don't turn us off first by bombarding us with insincere claims.

EXERCISES

Advertising has been described as being the good and the bad (and sometimes ugly).

1. Explain the “good” perspective by naming some benefits that advertising conveys to society.
2. Explain the role played by the Advertising Council and how it uses public service announcements (PSAs) to influence public opinion. Give an example.
3. Characterize the green movement in advertising. Evaluate its success in changing advertising's view of environmental issues and causes.

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