

3.4: The Bad - Ethical Hot Buttons

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

1. *Identify* the dark side of advertising and advertising practice.
2. *Review* the practice of behavioral targeting and *appraise* its validity.
3. *Compare* arguments for and against materialism.

We've considered some of the good that advertising can do. Now let's check out some of the bad—and the ugly. It's certainly not hard to identify the hot buttons—a lot of people slam advertising for a lot of different reasons. Some objections may be a bit paranoid, as when the social critic Vance Packard wrote more than fifty years ago, “Large-scale efforts are being made, often with impressive success, to channel our unthinking habits, our purchasing decisions, and our thought processes by the use of insights gleaned from psychiatry and the social sciences.” Still, there are plenty of valid reasons to question the methods and goals of the advertising industry. Forewarned is forearmed. Here are some common objections we hear:

- *Ads make us feel bad about ourselves as they constantly throw images of perfect, beautiful people in our faces.*
- *Ads reinforce insulting ethnic and racial stereotypes.*
- *Ads invade our privacy.*
- *Ads create false needs that make us crave brand names and material possessions.*

Let's examine these charges one by one.

The Ugly

Ads make us feel bad about ourselves as they constantly throw images of perfect, beautiful people in our faces.

You are how (you think) you look. Our physical appearance is a large part of our self-concept. **Body image** refers to a person's subjective evaluation of his or her physical self. The key word here is *subjective*—your image of your body may not be what your body looks like to other people. You might have an exaggerated notion of the bulge of your muscles or the bulge of your thighs. Knowing that people's body images are often distorted, some marketers exploit our insecurities and suggest that purchasing their product will help alleviate the “problem.”

Indeed, advertising can affect a person's self-esteem when it takes advantage of our powerful instinct to gauge our physical and mental states relative to others. Numerous studies have noted that female college students compare their physical appearance to that of models in ads. Participants who viewed ads with beautiful women expressed lower satisfaction with their own appearance afterwards than did women who didn't see these ads. Another study showed that as little as thirty minutes of TV programming can alter young women's perceptions of their own body shape.

One of the prevailing arguments in the history of advertising is whether advertising merely reflects existing cultural values and views of gender or whether it constructs and creates those views. Some analysts believe that advertising is merely a “mirror” of culture. Others argue that advertising is a “distorted mirror” that both reflects and shapes our culture. The advertising industry likes to say that ads simply reflect existing values because this view absolves advertisers of blame for perpetuating unreal standards. Denise Fedewa, senior vice president and planning director for the LeoShe subsidiary of the Leo Burnett agency, presented an updated, unified view when she said, “Advertising is so fascinating, because it's both a mirror of the culture and it moves culture forward. I think the best advertising...taps into a direction that we are moving in, but we are not there yet, and it helps take us there...I think we've gotten a lot better at doing that...in tapping into where they [women] are moving next.”

Dig Deeper

A provocative advertising campaign by Dove features underwear-clad women with imperfect bodies to call attention to the unrealistic messages about our bodies that some marketing messages communicate. Unilever (which makes Dove soap) initiated the Campaign for Real Beauty after its research showed that many women didn't believe its products worked because the women shown using them were so unrealistic. Erin White, “Dove ‘Firms’ with Zaftig Models: Unilever Brand Launches European Ads Employing Non-Supermodel Bodies.” The marketers decided to focus the campaign's message on reassuring women about their insecurities by showing them as they are—wrinkles, freckles, pregnant bellies, and all. Taglines ask “Oversized or Outstanding?” and “Wrinkled or Wonderful?” Dove even has a Web site where visitors can view the ads and cast their votes.

Perhaps because of the success of the Dove campaign, other companies also are turning to ordinary people instead of professional models when they advertise. As an extension of its “I’m lovin’ it” campaign, McDonald’s held a casting call for consumers (as opposed to professional models) who will appear on its world cup and bag packaging. Nike and Wal-Mart also have run advertisements with average-looking employees.

Will this emphasis on “keeping it real” continue, or will it give way to consumers’ desires to aspire to perfection (and buy the products they think will help them get there)?

So, which way is it? Is advertising a mirror or an idealized picture? It’s likely that advertising both reflects and affects gender roles in our daily lives. Since the 1970s, researchers have investigated the extent to which American advertising portrays women in stereotypical roles. Most report that ads do tend to portray women as subservient to men, as preoccupied with physical attractiveness, and as sex objects who are preoccupied with their appearance, and they tend to minimize depictions of women in positions of authority. To rub salt into the wound, this media exposure can indeed influence real women’s self-concepts and aspirations.

James Twitchell, in his book *Twenty Ads that Shook the World*, takes a more positive view. Using the example of the ads for Charlie perfume in the 1970s and 1980s, he shows how this advertising provided the imagery of the new woman in the workplace: striving, not strident, proud of her accomplishments and not afraid to say so, but not the dour “make room for me or else” feminist that the press portrayed at the time. Twitchell’s view is that Madison Avenue is not immoral in imposing stereotypes but *amoral* in reflecting prevailing roles; that is, advertising follows whichever way the wind is blowing. The point is that if stereotyped roles didn’t sell products, advertisers would gladly use different imagery.

One celebrated ad campaign—Nike’s “If You Let Me Play”—challenged stereotypes about women while at the same time achieving Nike’s advertising objective of enticing more women to buy its shoes. This effort successfully blended statistics with a powerful story that showed how exclusion and outdated norms concerning girls’ participation in school sports hurt their self-esteem and even their health. The campaign included lines like these:

“If you let me play sports, I will like myself more. I will have more self-confidence, if you let me play sports. If you let me play, I will suffer less depression....If you let me play, I will be more likely to leave a man who beats me. If you let me play, I will be less likely to get pregnant before I want to. I will learn what it means to be strong. If you let me play sports.”

And what about guys—is what’s good for the goose good for the gander? Let’s not forget that advertising also can influence how boys and men feel about themselves. In addition to “cheesecake” ads that show plenty of female skin, there are plenty of “beefcake” ads. That helps to explain why men spend \$7.7 billion on grooming products globally each year. In Europe, 24 percent of men younger than age thirty use skincare products—and 80 percent of young Korean men do.

Ripped abs aside, even a casual analysis of TV commercials for products from laundry detergent to computers turns up no shortage of spots that depict men as incompetent, bumbling idiots. Organizations like Stand Your Ground and the U.K.-based Advertising Standards Authority object to **misandry** (the male counterpart of **misogyny**, which means a hatred of women). They protest ad campaigns that show men acting as buffoons who do nothing but ogle cars and women and who can’t perform the simplest household tasks.

Uncle Ben or CEO Ben?

Ads reinforce negative ethnic and racial stereotypes.

Advertisements have a long history of relying on stereotypical characters to promote products. For many years Aunt Jemima sold pancake mix and Rastus was a grinning black chef who pitched Cream of Wheat hot cereal. The Gold Dust Twins were black urchins who peddled a soap powder for Lever Brothers and Pillsbury hawked powdered drink mixes using characters such as Injun Orange and Chinese Cherry—who had buck teeth.

These negative depictions began to decline in the 1960s as the civil rights movement gave more power to minority groups and their rising economic status began to command marketers’ respect. Frito-Lay responded to protests by the Hispanic community and stopped using the Frito Bandito character in 1971, and Quaker Foods gave Aunt Jemima a makeover in 1989. As part of its fiftieth-anniversary celebration for Crest toothpaste, Procter & Gamble reintroduced its “Crest Kid,” who first appeared in 1956 as a “white bread,” apple-cheeked girl painted by artist Norman Rockwell. It’s telling that the new Crest Kid is Cuban American. Similarly, a recent campaign gives a radical makeover to the black Uncle Ben character who appeared on rice packages for more than sixty years dressed as a servant. (White Southerners once used “uncle” and “aunt” as honorary names for older African Americans

because they refused to address them as “Mr.” and “Mrs.”) The character is remade as Ben (just Ben), an accomplished businessman with an opulent office who shares his “grains of wisdom” about rice and life on the brand’s Web site.

These positive steps are motivated by both good intentions and pragmatism. Ethnic minorities spend more than \$600 billion a year on products and services. Immigrants make up 10 percent of the U.S. population, and California is less than half Caucasian. Advertisers and their agencies couldn’t ignore this new reality even if they wanted to.

Multicultural advertising is a major force in today’s industry. Like the green-marketing phenomenon, the changing environment motivates both well-established agencies as well as those that specialize in talking to racial and ethnic segments to redouble their efforts. The Advertising Research Foundation, for example, sponsors a Multicultural Research Council to promote a better understanding of relevant issues. We still have a way to go to overcome stereotypes—not all African Americans are into hip-hop and not all Asian Americans are studious—but many agencies are working hard to address these issues, especially as they aggressively try to add diversity to their organizations.

We Know Where You Live

Ads invade our privacy.

Behavioral targeting is a fancy way to describe the growing number of techniques that allow advertisers to track where you surf on the Web so that they can deliver relevant ads to you. As we’ve discussed elsewhere in this book, that’s very convenient, and it’s clear that ads tailored to your interests are going to be both less intrusive and more valuable to you—but at what cost?

For example, cable and phone companies say their growth increasingly depends on being able to deliver targeted advertising to their Internet and TV customers. But privacy advocates are not happy about this, and due to their vocal protests some companies are backpedaling on plans to integrate advanced ad-targeting technology. NebuAd, one particularly controversial form of tracking software, tracks users wherever they go on the Web. Company executives claim the data can’t be traced back to individuals; instead, the software categorizes consumers as they surf the Web. Marketers then buy ads to appear online before certain subgroups of consumers when the technology recognizes their encrypted identity. Categories can be made quite specific; for example, you could come to the attention of an appliance manufacturer if you searched for “microwave ovens” within the past month.

At the end of the day, just how important is this privacy issue? Scott McNealy, CEO of Sun Microsystems, famously observed at a 1999 press conference, “You already have zero privacy—get over it.” Quoted in Edward C. Baig, Marcia Stepanek, and Neil Gros, “The Internet wants your personal info. What’s in it for you?” Apparently many consumers don’t agree; one survey reported that consumers are more worried about personal privacy than health care, education, crime, and taxes. People are particularly concerned that businesses or individuals will target their children. Nearly 70 percent of consumers worry about keeping their information private, but according to a Jupiter Media Metrix survey, only 40 percent read privacy policies posted on business Web sites. And many consumers seem more than happy to trade some of their personal information in exchange for information they consider more useful to them. A 2006 survey on this issue reported that 57 percent of the consumers it polled say they are willing to provide demographic information in exchange for a personalized online experience.

Dig Deeper

Let’s bring the argument a bit closer to home: how private is your Facebook page? The popular social networking site ignited a huge controversy after it rolled out a marketing tool it calls Beacon in 2007. Facebook users discovered that their off-Facebook Web activities—such as purchases at online retailers, reviews at other sites, and auction bids, among other things—were being broadcast to their friends. The idea behind Beacon is to offer “trusted referrals”; if my Facebook friends see that I’ve been buying stuff at Alloy, they’ll be more likely to check out the site as well. Unfortunately, the folks at Facebook neglected to ask users if they would consent to share this information. In response to heated criticism, founder Mark Zuckerberg was forced to post a shamefaced apology, and Facebook now allows users to opt out of Beacon completely. But some privacy advocates still see this event as only the tip of the iceberg. Do you?

Living in a Material World

Ads create false needs that make us crave brand names and material possessions.

The validity of this criticism depends on how you define a “need.” If we believe that all consumers need is the basic functional benefits of products—the transportation a car provides, the nutrition we get from food, and the clean hair from a shampoo—then advertising may be guilty as charged. If, on the other hand, you think you need a car that projects a cool image, food that tastes

fantastic, and a shampoo that makes your hair shine and smell ever so nice, then advertising is just a vehicle that communicates those more intangible benefits.

Critics say that advertising makes us buy products that we don't need—or even want—but that we think we must have. In his seminal book *The Affluent Society*, economist John Kenneth Galbraith portrayed advertising as “manipulating the public by creating artificial needs and wants.” John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), as cited in William M. O'Barr, “What Is Advertising?” *Advertising & Society Review* 6, no. 3 (2005): 11. He charged that radio and TV manipulate the masses. His view was that ads created new desires, encouraging consumers to spend their scarce resources buying highly advertised products rather than on basic items that fulfilled actual needs.

Galbraith voiced a common fear—that marketers link their products to desirable social attributes so that people feel measured by what they buy and guilty or anxious if they don't measure up. As an example, when the eminent psychologist John Watson joined the J. Walter Thompson (now JWT) advertising agency, he worked on a campaign for Johnson's baby powder. In a 1925 lecture, he explained how he increased sales of the baby powder by making the mother who did not use it “feel bad, that she was less of a mother, not really a good mother.”

But is advertising really all-powerful? The reality is that 40 percent to 80 percent of all new products fail. Advertising can't magically make a product succeed (at least for very long) if it doesn't have some merit. Johnson's baby powder would not still be on store shelves after more than 110 years if it didn't provide some benefit. As one former advertising agency president noted, “The fact of the matter is we are successful in selling good products and unsuccessful in selling poor ones. In the end, consumer satisfaction, or lack of it, is more powerful than all our tools and ingenuity put together. You know the story: we had the perfect dog food except for one thing—the dog wouldn't eat it.” The heart of the matter is: does advertising give people what they want, or does it tell them what they *should* want?

In fact, we can even make the argument (one that advertisers such as high-end stores like Neiman-Marcus, Prada, or Tiffany surely will welcome) that we should want things we can't afford. According to author James Twitchell, not everyone can buy a \$200 cashmere sweater from Saks for their baby—but we can always dream of owning one. He claims that such a collective dream life is important to the continuing vigor of a culture. In the bigger scheme of things, advertising is a simple reflection of an age-old drive: “Human beings did not suddenly become materialistic. We have always been desirous of things.”

Luxury products are not a bad or wasteful thing (goes this argument) because history shows that one generation's decadent indulgence becomes the next generation's bare necessity. Former luxury products that are now in daily use include buttons, window glass, rugs, door handles, pillows, mirrors, combs, and umbrellas, not to mention cars, electric lights, and indoor plumbing. The phenomenon of striving to afford “luxury” is the driving force for a rising standard of living. When we buy a luxury good, we increase the demand for it, which leads companies to produce more of it, ultimately leading to lower prices that make it affordable to the masses. At the same time that each new luxury creates new demand, it also creates the potential for a new industry with new jobs that enable people to afford the new luxuries. People become individually and collectively richer as they strive to buy new products and create new businesses to make these products. Advertising accelerates this cycle by both stimulating demand and helping suppliers communicate with customers.

Numerous organizations such as Adbusters and The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood work to counteract what they view as the debilitating effects of commercial messages in our culture. Adbusters sponsors numerous initiatives, including Buy Nothing Day and TV Turnoff Week, intended to discourage rampant commercialism. These efforts, along with biting ads and commercials that lampoon advertising messages, are part of a strategy called **culture jamming** that aims to disrupt efforts by the corporate world to dominate our cultural landscape.” Adbusters Media Foundation.

Is Adbusters right? Does advertising encourage us to be shallow, or to value material rewards over spiritual ones? The jury is still out on that question, but there is little doubt that ads reinforce the things our society values. Images of happy (and popular) people who drive gas guzzlers and eat junk food surround us.

Key Takaway

Because it's so powerful, advertising can hurt as well as help us. A consumer would have to live in a deep hole not to be affected by the images of “shiny happy people” (to quote from the REM song of the same name) that constantly bombard us. To decide whether advertising causes us to feel insecure about our bodies, engage in self-destructive behaviors, or covet others' possessions is to raise a chicken-and-egg question that elicits strong feelings on both sides. Nonetheless, whether they create the problems or merely perpetuate them, advertising practitioners certainly need to remind themselves (preferably every day) of the power they wield. Hopefully, if you go into the biz, you'll remember that too.

EXERCISES

1. List and briefly discuss four common objections to advertising and its practice in our society.
2. Briefly trace the history of how advertising has reflected and affected gender roles and racial and ethnic stereotypes in our culture since 1970.
3. Evaluate the practice of behavioral targeting. Take a position on whether or not this practice invades privacy in a positive or negative way. Support your position.
4. We can see materialism as a “drain on society” or a “promoter of prosperity.” Pick one of these views and support your choice with an effective argument.

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