Contemporary Issues in Advertising - An Impetus or Impediment to A Progressive Indian Society

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Abstract

Ethical conduct in advertising is a good, long term, business decision. Advertisement these days whether nationally and internationally, are bound to be more creative, more subtle, more persuasive and more competitive. Advertising is an art of persuasion and can attack any of the senses- sight, hearing, touch, even smell or taste. Its purpose is specifically to move product and services, and influence one’s thinking. Be it visible or audible is often considered as manipulative and controversial. It is to enlighten the customers about the products or services. Since there are too many products in the market and competition is tough for marketers to attract customers, they give a false picture of their products which is far away from reality. The paper tries to scrutinize the ethical and social responsibility questions faced by the advertisers and examine Government and self regulation issues that affect advertising.

The paper attempts to guide manufacturers, advertising professionals and media, how best they can play the game safely and profitably, particularly in context to Indian society.

Keywords: Ethical, persuasion, manipulative, controversial, scrutinize, social responsibility, professionals.

Introduction

Ethics in advertising affects both our lives and our business, in subtle yet significant and prominent ways. Indeed advertising ethics is connected with the concerns of all-academics, ad agency persons, advertisers, consumers, media personnel, marketers, regulators and society as whole in one way or another. Advertising significantly affects many industries. There are many media industries (cable
television, newspapers, magazines etc.) and non media industries which solely exists
due to the influx of money advertising brings in. It would be affected drastically, if
they couldn’t sell advertising space. It is not that what advertiser’s say or proclaim is
overly false, but that it can distort the truth by implying things that are not so or
without proper substantiation. The major objective of advertising is to enlighten the
customers about the products or services. Since the market is flooded with products
and competition is strong for marketers to attract customers, they give a false picture
of their products which is far away from reality.

It is very well known fact that advertising in India is governed by law but there are
many issues of advertising that are left to the judgment of advertisers. Most of the
people these days specify that society is becoming overrun with advertising and to an
extent advertising validates this criticism.

We are surrounded by clutter of advertisements everywhere. Nearly everything we
see, hear, touch, drink or eat has a logo on it. Advertising is all about an art, freedom
of speech, propaganda, healthy capitalism, an essential evil, and all that what makes
world go round.

Ethical Issues
Companies attempt all sorts of tactics involving illegal, misleading or dirty tricks to
get attention of consumers and raise money. There are number of exemplary
advertisements which do not confine to the prevailing ethical standards. Advertisers
adopt an unfair approach of suppressing the negative features of the product or offer
and exaggerating the positive features of product by using superlative language and
large fonts, images and colours exhibited in a way that negative conditions are either
suppressed or placed in an inconspicuous manner. For example, in the print
advertisements, marketers and advertisers display the attractive pictures and claims
related to their products like insurance offers and in case of builders, the attractive
pictures of the buildings, amenities like swimming pool, gardens, club house are
displayed in large form and will be printed in fine print that the pictures given are not
the actual product where as important disclosures like ‘condition apply’ are given in
small font, almost unreadable form at one corner of the ad, leading to ambiguity
among reader. This practice is not only unethical but also misleading and damaging to
the interest of the public.

Advertising proves to be a plaguing problem for the country at times. Consumerism is
acting as a major strength to advertisers and corporates. They can sell what they want
and consumers have to buy what they sell. These people directly or indirectly force
consumers and push them to buy their products and more in quantity. Their
purchasing does not reflect any need to buy the product, but people buy it because of
advertisers’ and marketers’ pressure as they need to make money out of it.

They play with emotions and social values of people and creates a stigma
around that if someone doesn’t consume, if he can’t consume more, then also they
have to buy the product and waste it. Their manipulations affect the buying behaviour
of consumers, without the consumers getting know about this and therefore, they still
feel happy about this fact. Advertising creates the market by hitting the hidden needs or by arousing a marketer driven need in consumers.

Advertising attempts to create the demand and increase the rate of consumption. Many advertisements prove the above statement. When consumers see a model, overusing a product, they get influenced to consume that product more. For instance, a cute guy or an actor in the toothpaste advertisement squeezes out so much of toothpaste on the toothbrush. It is all about making you consume more. It is enough if you squeeze out just a bit, but they make the cute model squeeze out more and create a great impression on your mind of how the teeth brushing experience is great when you squeeze out so much. So, the paste gets over quicker than it should, and you run to the shops to buy it again earlier than you should, thus more number of times in a year, and you spend more money on toothpaste than you should. Not because you need it, but because you are made to do it and they make money out of it.

Some of the exemplary cases are discussed below:

1. Advertising also attempts to turn non-users into users. Someone may be good with basic nominal food, but it is hep to have pizza a and burgers. One likes it or not, but tempting lines like “I’m loving it” and “Hungry kya?” switches the taste buds from few bucks stomach fillers to a heavy bucks junk, the cost of production of which, in actual would be a few bucks. But people pay them, for their costly ad campaigns which further pushes them into darkness.

2. If we look into the irony of clothing industry, the T-shirts that everyone wears as ‘Imported product’ is made in India and some other surrounded nation. The top quality products, after been produced in domestic regions of India are exported to companies in US and Europe, which then sold them at a cost much higher than their actual cost and with a heavy profit margin. These T-shirts are then imported back to be sold at high price. They market the product here, advertise the product here, and convince people to buy with brand value.

3. Most of the advertising campaigns are owned by people in west. They use our brains and our talent to make advertisements to sell products we make and sell products we make, and sell it to us at humungous prices and the profit goes at all ends with a small bite for us. Most of these top shot Ad companies are owned by conglomerates based in the US. They pay their employees here small amounts compared to what they earn and take all the credit and money home. And here in India, we still have people who beg and live with less than 40 bucks a day.

4. Another most common tactics used by the porn industry websites is to create pages that rank well for unrelated but free stuff. You click one and go to another dazzling array of ads before finding another link.

We demand and enforce ‘ethics’ in a field like advertising. It is like telling a cold-murdered how to murder properly, and to ask him to respect his victim. We need to understand that enforcing ethics is such a field in classrooms only validates it even more. By inducing ethics, we are telling ourselves and our students that what we do in the name of advertising is correct. We are teaching our students that advertising is a noble field. Keeping aside the advancement, the field is harming societies at such a large scale. People are dying of hunger, and all we care about is how we maintain culture through ads.
Few Unethical Practices
1) False Product Advertising: If an ad makes promises that the product does not deliver, the issues are manifold. False advertising will have a negative impact on the customer's overall impression of other products offered by the same company.
2) Ethical Responsibility: This section governs the company's responsibility to society and because of their particular susceptibility to advertising. The creation and placement of advertisements that create awareness of a product among teenagers and young adults, about a product that is detrimental to their health/behaviour (eg, alcohol and tobacco).
3) Stealing ad space: Few unethical marketers sell phrases or products through advertisements on someone’s website without paying for it, makes it illegal.
4) Defacing property: Altering or changing few elements on my site, by web designers and advertisers, in terms of adjusting it without the consent, or even knowledge of the webpage owner. They are hacking sites, in the sense that they are altering the look of the sites without consent.

Ethics and standards to be followed in advertisements
“Here are some more ethics and standards to be followed in advertisements:
1) Permission will not be granted where objects are completely or largely religious or political in nature. Advertisements cannot be directed towards any religious or political end, or to gain mileage of any form.
2) Any goods or services that are advertised should not have any defect or deficiencies of any form declared in the Consumer Protection Act 1986.
3) Products should not be portrayed in a way that misleads the public to infer that the item has some special, miraculous or a super natural quality, which is anyways difficult to prove.
4) Picture and the audible matter of the advertisement video should not be excessively 'loud'.
5) Advertisement should not endanger the safety of children or produce any sort of perversion or interest that prompts them to adopt or imitate unhealthy practices.
6) Any type of offensive, indecent, suggestive, vulgar, repulsive themes and/or treatment must be avoided under all circumstances.

Good creative advertisement will always attract people’s attention, but they should have meaningful visual content. One shouldn’t have an attitude to play with people’s sentiments and emotions.”
[Source: http://www.ascionline.org]

Conclusion
Ethical conduct in advertising is a good, long term, business decision. Its not about morality, it’s about our freedom to earn what we deserve, our freedom to spend the right amount, consume the right amount. It is about those others, fooling us to buy our own product, which we market and sell in our own country and buy them at ridiculous
prices for their profits. The challenge before advertisers and agencies is to ensure that ads reflect our values. We must endeavor to see that "advertising" does not remain a dirty word.

References


