

ADVERTISEMENT CLAIMS GROW TALLER! A STUDY OF ETHICS IN ADVERTISING BY FMCG COMPANIES IN INDIA

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Abstract-Doing business without advertising is like winking at a girl in the dark! Only you know what you are doing! No one else does!

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What is the difference between unethical and ethical advertising? Unethical advertising uses falsehoods to deceive the public; ethical advertising uses truth to deceive the public.

An advertisement is simply a public notice meant to convey information and invite patronage or some other response. However, where freedom of speech and communication exists, it is largely up to advertisers themselves to ensure ethically responsible practices in their profession. Advertising has two basic purposes: to inform and to persuade, and- while these purposes are distinguishable-both are simultaneously present.

This paper focuses on the unethical side of advertising. Data was collected from a thorough research analysis of FMCG ads and on interviewing consumers regarding their reactions to specific ads. Conclusions point out to the glaring fact that all those involved in commissioning and disseminating advertising should eliminate its socially harmful aspects and observe high ethical standards in regard to truthfulness, human dignity and social responsibility. Besides avoiding abuses, advertisers should also undertake to repair the harm sometimes done by advertising, as far as possible: for example, by publishing corrective notices, compensating injured parties, increasing the quantity of public service advertising, and the like. This question of 'reparations' is a matter of legitimate involvement not only by industry self-regulatory bodies and public interest groups, but also by public authorities.

I. INTRODUCTION

The spotlight has once again turned to product claims made by advertisers and their influence on consumers. Rahul a 10-year-old in New Delhi, India allegedly killed himself just because his favorite health supplement, a popular brand of 'grow tall' protein rich milk, did not add inches to his height as promised in the advertisement. Even

on consuming it for a month, Rahul still remained the shortest, shorter than even the girls, in his class!

Though this is an extreme instance of how seriously people take what they see and hear, the fact is that most people passively accept whatever ads claim. But with advertisers increasing selling products on misleading health claims, believing everything you see can damage a lot more than just your pocket.

Advertising is a form of communication that attempts to persuade potential customers to purchase or consume more of a particular brand of product or services. Every major medium is used to deliver these messages including television, radio, cinema, magazines, newspapers, video games and the internet. When it comes to advertising, it's a given rule that making untrue claims, bait-and-switch offers, and the like are unethical.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Breakfast cereals are available in various permutations and combinations, promising essential carbohydrates and vitamins to see one through the day. They promise to make you bigger, sharper and stronger. If one gives it some thought, one will realize that one gets a more potent nutrition boost from freshly-prepared whole wheat chapattis and a multivitamin. Yet, if you ask someone what constitutes a healthy breakfast, they are likely to say milk and muesli.

Advertisements promote cholesterol-free instant noodles, chips, nut mixes and cooking oils. What the advertisers do not mention is that cholesterol only comes from foods from animal sources, such as meats, fish, milk, eggs, cheese, and butter. Chips and instant noodles are fried - yes, even the whole wheat 'flour' noodles are 'bathed in oil' before being packaged - in vegetable oils, which may not have cholesterol but are packed with calories that add to weight. Worse, the oil may contain other fats that block up arteries just as efficiently as cholesterol does.

All advertisements suggest the right choice is to go for products that are sugar free, wholegrain and/or low in calories, fat, cholesterol, starch and carbohydrates. What they do not mention is what the product is finally offers, which is often nothing more than empty calories. Fruit-flavored yogurt, for example, may have calcium but it is

also loaded with sugar and preservatives. It's healthier to eat an apple and a bowl of natural yogurt.

Making food choices based on television advertising results in a very imbalanced diet, reported a study in the June issue of the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. After comparing the nutritional content of food choices influenced by television to nutritional guidelines, the study found that a 2,000-calorie diet consisting of advertised foods would contain 25 times the recommended servings of sugars and 20 times the recommended servings of fat, but less than half the needed servings of vegetables, dairy, and fruits.

In fact, hidden sugars and fat are so high in advertised foods that, on an average, eating just one of the food items provides more than three times the recommended servings for sugars and two and a half times the serving for fat for the whole day. The study said advertised foods are high in disease-causing saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium; and low in health-protecting nutrients such as iron, phosphorus, vitamin A, carbohydrates, calcium, vitamin E, magnesium, copper, potassium, fiber and vitamin D.

Though some consumer groups in India are demanding television advertisements targeting children be banned, a less radical approach would be to whet advertisements for information withheld.

III. RESULTS

FMCG companies like Hindustan Unilever, Nestle and Parle Agro have been made to withdraw the TV commercials they aired during the quarter from April to June, by the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI). While HUL was pulled up for its Dove Treatment shampoos with false efficacy suggestions, Nestle Maggi Ketchup's claims of being healthy was found to be misleading, and Parle's LMN lemon brand was said to be racist in nature.

HUL's TV commercial on Dove Treatment shampoo was claiming to be more effective than ordinary anti-dandruff shampoos. According to ASCI, the claim that ordinary anti-dandruff shampoos make your hair dry and rough is not supported by any valid research or tests and had no authenticity. The claim was disparaging to all other anti-dandruff shampoos and the advertisement was withdrawn.

Nestle Maggi ketchup showed an obese and aged gentleman consuming unhealthy burgers with claims of "Make India Healthy." ASCI felt the ad created an impression that by consuming unhealthy food, India could be made healthy and that the ad is contradictory to health eating habits. Nestle discontinued the advertisement.

Parle Agro depicted a parched African site with people looking for water. ASCI claimed the situation in Africa and India is extremely grave with no water. The ad showed the African nation in poor light and the fact that "if you don't have water, drink LMN was ridiculous." This reminds one of French queen Marie Antoinette's famous words during the French Revolution, "Eat cake, if no bread!"

Advertising simply mirrors the attitudes and values of the surrounding culture. No doubt advertising does act as a mirror. But, it is a mirror that helps shape the reality it

reflects, and sometimes it presents a distorted image of reality.

It was found that most advertisers withheld information. There were many different media and techniques employed in advertising; commercial advertising for products and services; public service advertising on behalf of various institutions, programs, and causes; and - a phenomenon of growing importance today - political advertising in the interests of parties and candidates.

Most consumers interviewed fell prey to the fraud selling of goods and services. The findings of the study revealed that there were benefits and harms of advertising.

A. *The Benefits of Advertising*

Advertising was found to be very simple- a local, even 'neighborhood,' phenomenon - or it was very complex, involving sophisticated research and multimedia campaigns that span the globe. There is nothing intrinsically good or intrinsically evil about advertising. It is a tool, an instrument: it can be used well, and it can be used badly. If it can have beneficial results, it also can have a negative, harmful impact on individuals and society. Enormous human and material resources are devoted to advertising.

1) *Economic Benefits of Advertising*

Advertising was found to be a necessary part of the functioning of modern market economies, which today either exist or are emerging in many parts of the world and which currently seem to be "the most efficient instrument for utilizing resources and effectively responding to needs" of a socio-economic kind. Here, advertising was found to be a useful tool for sustaining honest and ethically responsible competition that contributes to economic growth in the service of human development. Advertising did this by informing people about the availability of rationally desirable new products and services and improvements in existing ones, helping them to make informed, prudent consumer decisions, contributing to efficiency and the lowering of prices, and stimulating economic progress through the expansion of business and trade. This can contribute to the creation of new jobs, higher incomes and a more decent and humane way of life for all. It also helps pay for publications, programming and productions that bring information, entertainment and inspiration to people around the world.

2) *Cultural Benefits of Advertising*

Advertising contributed to the betterment of society by uplifting and inspiring people and motivating them to act in ways that benefit themselves and others. Advertising brightened lives simply by being witty, tasteful and entertaining. Some advertisements were instances of popular art, with a vivacity and élan all their own.

3) *Moral and Religious Benefits of Advertising*

In many cases, too, benevolent social institutions, including those of a religious nature, used advertising to communicate their messages - messages of faith, of patriotism, of tolerance, compassion and neighborly service, of charity toward the needy, messages concerning health and education, constructive and helpful messages that educate and motivate people in a variety of beneficial ways.

B. *The Harm Done by Advertising*

There is nothing intrinsically good or intrinsically evil about advertising. It is a tool, an instrument: it can be used well, and it can be used badly. If it can have, and sometimes does have, beneficial results such as those just described, it also can, and often does, have a negative, harmful impact on individuals and society.

a) *Economic Harms of Advertising*

Advertising was used not simply to inform but to persuade and motivate - to convince people to act in certain ways: buy certain products or services, patronize certain institutions, and the like. This is where particular abuses occurred. The practice of "brand"-related advertising raised serious problems. Often there were negligible differences among similar products of different brands, and advertising attempted to move people to act on the basis of irrational motives ("brand loyalty," status, fashion, "sex appeal," etc.) instead of presenting differences in product quality and price as bases for rational choice.

Advertising also was, a tool of the "phenomenon of consumerism," "It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed toward 'having' rather than 'being', and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself." Sometimes advertisers speak of it as part of their task to "create" needs for products and services - that is, to cause people to feel and act upon cravings for items and services they do not need. "If ... a direct appeal is made to his instincts - while ignoring in various ways the reality of the person as intelligent and free- then consumer attitudes and life-styles can be created which are objectively improper and often damaging to his physical and spiritual health."

b) *Cultural Harms of Advertising*

Advertising also had a corrupting influence upon culture and cultural values. In the competition to attract ever larger audiences and deliver them to advertisers, communicators can find themselves tempted - in fact pressured, to set aside high artistic and moral standards and lapse into superficiality, tawdriness and moral squalor.

d) *Moral and Religious Harms of Advertising*

Advertising was found to be tasteful and in conformity with high moral standards, and occasionally even morally uplifting, but it was also vulgar and morally degrading. Frequently it deliberately appeals to such motives as envy, status seeking and lust. Some advertisers consciously sought to shock and titillate by exploiting content of a morbid, perverse, pornographic nature.

Commercial advertisers sometimes included religious themes or used religious images or personages to sell products. This can be done in tasteful, acceptable ways, but the practice was obnoxious and offensive when it involved exploiting religion or treating it flippantly. Advertising sometimes was used to promote products and inculcate attitudes and forms of behavior contrary to moral norms. For instance, with the advertising of contraceptives and products harmful to health, and government-sponsored

advertising campaigns for artificial birth control, so-called "safe sex" etc.

IV. SOME ETHICAL AND MORAL PRINCIPLES

Advertisers — that is, those who commission, prepare or disseminate advertising — are morally responsible for what they seek to move people to do; and this is a responsibility also shared by publishers, broadcasting executives, and others in the communications world, as well as by those who give commercial or political endorsements, to the extent that they are involved in the advertising process. If an instance of advertising seeks to move people to choose and act rationally in morally good ways that are of true benefit to themselves and others, persons involved in it do what is morally good; if it seeks to move people to do evil deeds that are self-destructive and destructive of authentic community, they do evil.

This applies also to the means and the techniques of advertising: it is morally wrong to use manipulative, exploitative, corrupt and corrupting methods of persuasion and motivation. In this regard, we note special problems associated with so-called indirect advertising that attempts to move people to act in certain ways-without their being fully aware that they are being swayed. The techniques involved here include showing certain products or forms of behavior in superficially glamorous settings associated with superficially glamorous people; in extreme cases, it may even involve the use of subliminal messages.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Special problems were noted associated with so-called indirect advertising that attempted to move people to act in certain ways-without their being fully aware that they are being swayed. The techniques involved here included showing certain products or forms of behavior in superficially glamorous settings associated with superficially glamorous people; in extreme cases, it even involved the use of subliminal messages.

The study revealed that many women and men professionally engaged in advertising do have sensitive consciences, high ethical standards and a strong sense of responsibility. But even for them external pressures—from the clients who commission their work as well as from the competitive internal dynamics of their profession-created powerful inducements to unethical behavior.

The involvement of public should be emphasized. Representatives of the public should participate in the formulation, application and periodic updating of ethical codes. Public authorities also have a role to play. Government should not seek to control and dictate policy to the advertising industry, any more than to other sectors of the communications media. By promulgating laws and overseeing their application, public authorities should ensure that 'public morality and social progress are not gravely endangered' through misuse of the media. Government regulations should address such questions as the quantity of advertising, especially in broadcast media, as well as the content of advertising directed at groups

particularly vulnerable to exploitation, such as children and old people.

In light of these reflections, it is an appeal to call upon advertising professionals and all those involved in the process of commissioning and disseminating advertising to eliminate its socially harmful aspects and observe high ethical standards in regard to truthfulness, human dignity and social responsibility.

In the final analysis, however, it is largely up to advertisers themselves to ensure ethically responsible practices in their profession. Besides avoiding abuses, advertisers should also undertake to repair the harm sometimes done by advertising, insofar as that is possible: for example, by publishing corrective notices, compensating injured parties, increasing the quantity of public service advertising, and the like. This question of 'reparations' is a matter of legitimate involvement not only by industry self-regulatory bodies and public interest groups, but also by public authorities.

Till then, you just have to take all advertisement claims with a liberal pinch of salt!

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