

CIGARETTES, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THREE ADVERTISING CONTROVERSIES

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the histories of the continuing conflicts over cigarette advertising, the portrayal of women in advertising, and children's advertising. It then draws several conclusions, informed by the subjective emphasis in social problems theory, that should be useful in analyzing these and other advertising controversies.

INTRODUCTION

Advertising, like other media forms, has received its share of criticism over the years. Much of this criticism has been quite routine, being voiced by relatively few individuals and usually limited to specific advertisements or ad campaigns. Sometimes, however, criticism reaches a telling crescendo when crusading reformers and interest groups join forces to attack the advertising of an entire product category or type of advertising appeal. When criticism becomes exceptionally widespread and strident, a full-blown advertising controversy emerges.

Because these controversies often lead to new regulations, which at the very least affect the creative or media decisions of advertising practitioners, they should be studied as important phenomena in and of themselves. This paper approaches advertising controversies from an historical and sociological perspective. It begins with a review of the controversies over cigarette advertising, the portrayal of women in advertising, and children's advertising. Using these case histories as source material and drawing from the subjective emphasis in the field of social problems theory (Blumer 1971; Ross and Staines 1972; Reasons 1974), the paper then presents a few generalizations about the origins, dynamics, and consequences of advertising controversies.

CIGARETTE ADVERTISING

One hundred years ago, with the exception of eastern dandies, some immigrants, and the poor, few men and virtually no women smoked cigarettes (Sobel 1978). Instead, Americans puffed on pipes, chewed from the plug, used snuff, and smoked countless cigars. But with the help of marketing and advertising practices that became increasingly sophisticated in their strategies and executions, the cigarette habit spread and spread until ". . . by the end of World War II, smoking was not only accepted behavior, it was socially desirable, even necessary, in some subcultures" (Nuehring and Markle 1974, p. 515). Although anti-smoking crusaders and groups were present throughout this entire period, their impact was minimal, save around the turn of the century, when reformers were able to convince several states to ban cigarette sales (Sobel 1978).

Times did change, however. Starting with the research evidence that linked smoking to lung cancer and other ailments, and culminating in the 1964 release of the Surgeon General's report on "Smoking and Health," cigarette smoking had become recognized as a major health problem, as well as an undesirable habit. Public health interest groups, such as the American Cancer Society, the National Cancer Institute, the American Heart Association, and the National Heart Institute, began to call for measures to combat the problem (Fritschler 1975, p. 19). These interests were joined by outspoken individuals, especially Senator Maurine Neuberger, whose husband had died of lung cancer, and the attorney, John F. Banzhaf III, founder of Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) and the man who convinced the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to apply the fairness doctrine to cigarette commercials.

If cigarettes were a serious health hazard, it would have seemed logical to completely prohibit their production and marketing. Of course, this was clearly impractical. Millions of people smoked and most would have been categorically opposed to any restrictions on their addiction. Without a legal source of cigarettes, many smokers probably would have engaged in illegal activities, namely, bootlegging. Furthermore, the tobacco industry itself was very large, represented by influential trade associations and lobbyists, and backed by congressmen with tobacco constituents. For these reasons, then, cigarette advertising became ". . . the issue around which the anticigarette movement would coalesce, the battlefield for both industry and critics" (Soble 1978, p. 191). Thus, the public health interests began to attack cigarette advertising.

These newly created advertising critics then located a federal agency willing to adopt their cause. This agency, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), began a rulemaking procedure, pertaining to the labeling and advertising of cigarettes, in early 1964. In response, the industry did two things. First, it established a voluntary Cigarette Advertising Code, a relatively weak attempt at self-regulation. Second, the industry and its allies moved the entire debate into Congress where they surely would receive more favorable treatment. After hearings, discussion and compromise, the Cigarette Labeling and Advertising Act of 1965 was passed and soon health warnings would appear. However, this victory for the health interests was more apparent than real for the Act also stifled the FTC rule and, more important, stopped any further rulemaking until 1969.

Still, the issue did not die and by the late 1960s interest group pressures on various regulatory bodies began to pay off with much tougher cigarette advertising regulations. For example, the New York Times tightened its cigarette advertising guidelines and the Television Code Review Board of the National Association of Broadcasters

(NAB) endorsed a plan to gradually phase out broadcast cigarette commercials. Also, the California Senate voted to ban cigarette advertising from state newspapers, magazines, and radio and TV stations. Finally, with the threat of new rulemaking procedures by both the FTC and FCC, Congress passed the Public Health Smoking Act of 1970, which banned all cigarette commercials from the broadcast media. In less than a decade this controversy had clearly affected the creative and media decision-making of cigarette advertisers.

During the remainder of the 1970s and into the 1980s, the conflict over cigarette advertising became much more subdued. The anti-smoking forces, having won a great symbolic victory, turned their attention to other matters such as the rights of non-smokers. Nevertheless, cigarette advertising continues to be a controversial issue. In 1984 Congress passed a law requiring more alarming health warning labels on cigarette packages and Ralph Nader's Health Research Group challenged the FTC to force cancer warnings into snuff and chewing tobacco advertising (Gordon 1984).

THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING

In the 1950s, the ideal career for a middle-class woman was to be successful as a housewife. A woman was supposed to run the household, spend her husband's salary, and administer the family's leisure time. As Friedan (1963) put it:

Millions of women lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife, kissing their husbands goodbye in front of the picture window, depositing their station-wagonsful of children at school, and smiling as they ran the new electric waxer over the spotless kitchen floor (p. 14).

Apparently, most women were satisfied with this ideal and strived to attain it. Advertising, in turn, reflected and, perhaps, reinforced the ideal with its copy and artwork. Most ads portrayed women as housewives and intimated that the woman who did not use a particular brand would be somehow lacking.

For a variety of reasons, many women in the 1960s began to question this ideal, not to mention the status of all women in society. A social problem had been re-discovered and a neo-feminist movement was soon afoot. It had its crusading reformers, such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, and it had its interest groups, especially the National Organization for Women (NOW). The movement received a great deal of publicity from the mass media, including the trade newspaper, Advertising Age.

Before long some feminists attacked the way women were portrayed in advertising. For example, while addressing a House of Representatives subcommittee, Lucy Komisar, a NOW vice-president, stated that "advertisers trade in sex as if it

were listed on the stock exchange" (Grant 1970, p. 28). Other feminists complained about the products being sold to women, particularly the newly introduced feminine hygiene sprays, and about the way they were being sold:

Advertising can no longer address the ladies as lovable drudges, or as witless cuddlybeings who exist to please men. Advertisers who persist in this approach may find exactly the opposite reaction to what they anticipate. No one likes to be patronized, including women. They like it less today. (Leezenbaum 1970, p. 24)

Finally, there was much criticism of the underrepresentation of working women in ads.

Perhaps these feminists had good reasons to be offended. Based on the findings of their seminal content analysis of print advertisements, Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) concluded that ". . . the total picture presented did reflect some cliches about women's roles that are considered by feminists to be highly unflattering" (p. 95). In short, there appeared to be a gap between the old ideal that most ads upheld, and the emerging, very different, feminist one (Witkowski 1975).

Once again, broader interests had spilled-over into advertising. Did this conflict have any impact upon advertising decision-making? Unlike the anti-cigarette forces, the feminist movement was unable to pressure government agencies into promulgating new advertising regulations. There is some evidence, however, that new norms were being created within ad agencies, advertisers, and the media. Replicating the Courtney and Lockeretz study just two years later, Wagner and Banos (1973) found that:

. . . the percentage of advertisements portraying women in a working role has more than doubled. Since magazine advertising campaigns are planned some time in advance, this follow-up study indicates that there has been a substantial improvement in emphasizing women's expanding role as a working member of society in a relatively short period of time (p. 215).

In addition, the National Advertising Division of the Council of Better Business Bureaus disseminated guidelines to help advertisers avoid stereotyping women.

Obviously, the portrayal of women in advertising is still a controversial topic. Newspapers and magazines, including Advertising Age, routinely print articles and letters to the editor condemning advertisements and ad campaigns. Scholarly studies, such as Gofman's (1979) Gender Advertisements, continue to expose subtle forms of female subordination. However, advertising may have become less important as a rallying device for the feminist movement. It seems to have been upstaged by other issues such as pornography and the Equal Rights Amendment.

CHILDREN'S ADVERTISING

Until the late 1960s, relatively few people bothered to criticize advertising directed toward children, perhaps because there was not very much of it. In the early years of television, circa 1950, nearly half of all children's programs were sustaining, presented without advertiser sponsorship (Melody 1973). Subsequent programming had more advertising, but since many of the programs (e.g., Disneyland, The Flintstones) appeared during early prime time and appealed to a "family audience," the products sold were not always meant for children. It was not until the mid-1960s that advertisers, starting with toy manufacturers, aggressively pursued children as a special market that could be reached profitably at certain times. Melody (1973) states that:

By 1965, advertisers of other products for young children, such as candy and breakfast foods, had discovered that their targets could be reached as effectively on Saturday mornings as in prime time, and much more cheaply (pp. 50-51).

The Saturday morning "children's ghetto" had arrived, characterized by as many as sixteen minutes of child-directed advertising per hour.

It did not take long before interest groups defined this advertising as problematic and organized to oppose it. Among the first, and still the most important, was Action for Children's Television (ACT), formed in 1968 by concerned Massachusetts mothers. Eventually, many other groups, some of whose interests in children also included child-directed advertising, joined the battle. As had happened during other advertising controversies, the reformers received much free and usually favorable publicity from the mass media. They also commissioned research to support their cause. The zeal of these interest groups continued undiminished throughout the 1970s.

The critics stress two arguments when attacking children's advertising. First, they believe that advertisers take unfair advantage of children, especially young children, with their crafty and polished television commercials. This argument is based upon the assumption, which has been supported by several studies, that children are a "special audience," less discriminating and possibly more persuasible than adults (Robertson and Rossiter 1974). Second, the critics contend that this advertising has adverse effects upon children. Under the influence of television commercials, children will nag their parents for advertised toys and sugared foods, a confrontation that could damage the parent-child relationship. Moreover, constant exposure to candy, pre-sweetened cereal, and soft-drink ads might teach the child poor eating habits and, as a consequence, lead to mild forms of malnutrition such as tooth decay.

With these and many other arguments to support their cause, the interest groups have petitioned

and pressured Congress, as well as several government agencies, for the reform, if not the elimination, of child-directed advertising. Of all the bodies approached, the FTC appears to have been the one most willing to create new regulations. In 1971, for example, the FTC ordered toy companies to halt dubious camera techniques such as slow motion, freeze-frame and tracking, and stroboscopic lights. In 1974, it proposed that businesses voluntarily discontinue advertising premium offers to children (Shimp, Dyer and Divita 1976). In 1978, the FTC staff took the more daring step of proposing a rule that would, among other things, ban all advertising from television shows with a substantial audience under the age of eight. This action was later halted for political reasons. Indeed, the 1971 order has also been rescinded (Colford 1984). Still, ACT persists and is currently petitioning the FCC to regulate "program-length commercials," such as the Pac-Man cartoon adventure series (Jennings 1984).

Although government agencies may not be able or willing to regulate children's advertising, industry has reacted to its critics. Early in the 1970s, for instance, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) devised guidelines to control deceptive techniques in toy commercials, and ruled against the practice of "host-selling" where, say, cartoon characters push products in commercials during or adjacent to their own programs (Melody 1973, pp. 90-93). The NAB also reduced the number of non-program minutes during children's weekend shows, from sixteen to twelve minutes per hour. In 1972 vitamin manufacturers announced that they would no longer use children's programs as a vehicle to sell their products. More recently, the National Advertising Review Board (NARB) developed guidelines for child-directed advertising. Finally, there has been some talk of finding ways to more clearly demarcate commercials from children's programs. The creation of these and other rules and guidelines illustrates once again how an advertising controversy can engender at least some changes in advertising decision-making.

LESSONS LEARNED

(1) Most advertising controversies emerge after the recognition of a larger social problem. Attacks on cigarette advertising were not prevalent until after cigarette smoking had been labeled a serious health hazard in the 1950s. The portrayal of women in advertising was not challenged until after the neo-feminist movement blossomed in the 1960s. In both of these instances, the larger social problem gained national attention and legitimacy only a few short years before the related advertising controversy erupted. In other cases the social problem existed for quite some time without leading to an advertising controversy. It took new, more intrusive advertising methods to precipitate a conflict. For example, the socialization of children can be seen as a perennial, albeit ever changing, social issue. When advertisers attempt to persuade children, they are also influencing the socialization process. For decades parents

may have quietly resented print and radio advertising aimed at their children. This outside interference became intolerable in the mid-1960s when advertisers began to reach children directly with the ubiquitous medium of television.

(2) Advertising controversies, like the recognition of larger social problems, are largely subjective matters. Blumer (1971) states that ". . . social problems are fundamentally products of a process of collective definition instead of existing independently as a set of objective social arrangements with an intrinsic makeup" (p. 298). In other words, a social problem does not exist until it is recognized as such by society. Inequalities in women's status have surely been present for centuries but, aside from the suffragettes, were not widely seen as a social problem until the re-emergence of the feminist movement. Likewise, advertising controversies are also products of a process of social definition. Neither the advertising of a particular product class, nor the use of specific strategies and tactics, are problematic for society in an objective sense. They become controversial only after enough individuals and interest groups define or recognize them as problematic. After all, cigarette ads, stereotyped portrayals of women, and children's advertising had existed for many decades with relatively little important criticism.

(3) Advertising controversies are essentially symbolic crusades. Reformers concerned about a larger social problem become irritated with product advertising or a type of advertising appeal that seems to fly in the face of their concern. To these individuals advertising symbolizes an alternative, competing definition of the social problem. Cigarette advertising featuring healthy young models contradicts the dire consequences associated with smoking. The portrayal of women often illustrates the very social conditions that feminists find objectionable. In short, advertising content annoys, irritates, and is eventually criticized because it suggests a world view that reformers refuse to accept.

(4) Advertising controversies inexorably lead to some regulatory response. A response can be made by advertising practitioners, advertising trade associations, media entities, government agencies, or legislative bodies. The response per se can range from the creation of new norms and weakly enforced guidelines, to censorship and exclusion by media entities, to the implementation of court decisions and municipal, state, and federal legislation. Yet, even modest regulations can affect advertising decision-making.

CONCLUSION

Advertising controversies are interesting and important phenomena that will undoubtedly continue to shape the decision-making of advertising practitioners. In its historical review and sociological analysis, this paper has tried to demonstrate some characteristics shared by all such controversies. Still, much more needs to be learned about the definition of social problems, why these problems are linked to advertising, and how political actions spread and intensify.

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