

# The Ethical Consequences of Your Advertisement Matter

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A PROACTIVE CONSIDERATION of advertising ethics is essential to building consumer trust—the very essence of brand building—and will drive consumers to the company's products and services. Competition and the marketplace propel American business. Marketing, which is expected to play a key role, historically focuses on the four P's: product, price, promotion, and place. Advertising ethics is given little or no attention in this mix and usually not until the company must make a reactive response when its advertising offends consumers.

A concern for advertising ethics is critical to business welfare, as well as the welfare of our country and our citizens, considering its enormous impact on our economy. The \$200 billion industry largely funds our entertainment and programming and informs consumers about products and services. Also, the economic activity generated by advertising supports 21 million of the 138 million jobs in the United States (Global Insight, 2007).

But despite all of advertising's documented contributions, the public still has little regard for the profession. We have all seen those polls that consistently rank our view of the ethics of advertisers on par with used car salesmen and even lawyers (Jones, 2007). Focusing on ethics in advertising would most certainly raise our industry's credibility, enhancing and building American brands. Research supports this proposition. A study conducted by Bozell Worldwide (1996) showed that consumers ranked "ethics and values" as the number-one factor in assessing whether or not a company can be called a "corporate good citizen." In addition to being the right thing to do, practicing high ethical standards also pays off on the "bottom line."

How do we define advertising ethics, and how do we work its consideration into our already complex and time-sensitive advertising process?

My definition of advertising ethics includes three components: (1) truth, (2) fairness, and (3) taste and decency. Truth in advertising is highly regulated by the federal and state governments, and competing companies also bring civil cases to the district courts. Individual companies and the advertising industry do very commendable work developing truthful advertising. For instance, the self-regulation conducted under the National Advertising Review Council has won consistent praise. [The National Advertising Review Council is a strategic alliance among the American Advertising Federation (AAF), the Council of Better Business Bureaus (CBBB), the Association of National Advertisers (ANA), and the American Association of Advertising Agencies (4As).]

But advertising ethics goes beyond just legal requirements. Fairness includes both the nature of the audience and the nature of the product or service. How we advertise to children is a special category that food and toy marketers are justifiably recognizing. [For example, the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative includes food and beverage marketers who have voluntarily agreed to devote at least 50 percent of each of their advertising budgets directed to children to promote healthier dietary choices and/or to messages that encourage good nutrition or healthy lifestyles.]

Advertisers have also become better attuned to ethical considerations when addressing culturally diverse audiences. And with respect to the nature of the product, alcohol beverage marketers have self-imposed guidelines that assure that their messages are only contained in programming directed to adults.

That brings us to taste and decency. This ethical mandate was articulated by the American Advertising Federation in 1984 in *The Advertising Principles of American Business*: "Advertising shall be free of statements, illustrations or implications

that are offensive to good taste or public decency." I should emphasize that the government has no authority—nor should it—in this category of advertising ethics; it is totally up to the advertiser and its agency.

We can—and must—do much better in the area of taste and decency. While clear-cut standards are not possible, advertisers must demonstrate greater self-restraint and show respect for everyone who will view their advertisements (Snyder, 2003; see also a series of articles on advertising ethics on the American Advertising Federation's website, [www.aaf.org](http://www.aaf.org)).

So how can we work ethical considerations into the advertising process?

1. Advertisers and agencies need to *proactively* discuss the *ethical consequences* of advertising claims and depictions that might *offend* market segments. This *internal* discussion needs to take place early in the development of new advertising.
2. Certain devices should always be avoided, including utilizing stereotypes of race, gender, and age, and the way in which the human body is shown.

3. Focus groups or other research could aid in final decisions.
4. Public case studies that reflect on the ethical consequences of similar products and claims would be useful (Snyder, 2003).
5. Best of all, clients could provide agencies with their own ethical guidelines.

I understand that advertising must be attractive and relevant to the cultural influences of our society. It must be provocative in terms of persuading action. Further, I personally disfavor politically correct speech, and I know that advertising needs to take risks. But I believe consumers will respond with their pocketbooks to advertisements that reflect ethical considerations. Companies that follow high ethical principles in their advertisements will do well by doing good. **JAR**

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