



Who Decides “Responsible” Advertising?

By Adonis Hoffman -- Broadcasting & Cable, 4/3/2006

The rules of advertising are changing. I'm not talking about new creative concepts, or even the Big Idea. Nor am I referring to product integration, search marketing or interactive platforms.

The challenge for advertisers is not how to reach consumers where they are, but how socially responsible the message is once it reaches those consumers. The new rules have more to do with responsibility than with ROI. It's not the medium, it's the message.

The new era of “responsible advertising” seeks to protect consumers from advertising that someone, somewhere, deems socially irresponsible. Even if we stipulate there are categories of advertising that can—and should be—disallowed, responsible advertising goes well beyond traditional notions of content regulation. Should values become an indispensable part of the advertising mix?

Bolstered by a conservative mood in Washington, the would-be arbiters of responsible advertising claim a public mantle, if not a public interest. Most would like to see advertising go entirely away, but would surely settle for heavier regulation. They seem to be getting nearer to that goal every year because it is impolitic for big corporations to wage war with do-good public-interest groups. So companies prudently have taken initiative on another front.

More advertisers are choosing to aggressively self-regulate. Since most large companies already have mandates of social responsibility, applying those principles to marketing and advertising isn't hard.

Prescription drug makers established a new marketing code and set up an office to review direct-to-consumer commercials. A leading food company decided not to advertise some products on children's programs that reach audiences under age 12. Other industries have instituted rules and established independent review panels. The ad industry has strengthened its unique self-regulatory regime through the Children's Advertising Review Unit.

The emphasis on responsibility is well-placed. What troubles me is who gets to define it. Advertisers have a vested commercial interest in portraying their products in the best light possible.

They are, after all, ultimately accountable to both their customers and shareholders. It would be a mistake to abdicate this role to outside interest groups that want to do away with advertising altogether, or would promote a system that only permits marketing products they alone deem to be good, healthful, nutritious, wholesome or necessary.

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