

Advertising and Social Responsibility

POINTS TO DEVELOP

1. Advertising is important in a market economy, with its inbuilt competition. Today, its reach has expanded widely. And it has also become a lucrative field for the unscrupulous operator.
2. Advertising informs; benefits economy.
3. Rooted in a social milieu, advertising has to maintain the balance between hard selling and ethics.
4. Human imperfection has necessitated regulatory codes for advertising, but conscience alone can guide advertisers in twilight zones of what is right or decent and what is not.
5. Honesty should be not only the best 'policy' but also an imperative so that credulity and ignorance are not exploited.
6. Ethical codes should be kept in mind while advertisements are devised; these pertain to unfair comparisons, sexual images, disproportionately emotive, social health.
7. Advertising consumer goods could be detrimental in creating a demand for fashionable goods at the expense of necessities. (Compare developed and developing countries.)
8. Conclusion: Advertising is necessary today but it must be socially responsible.

There is much to celebrate about advertising. Wherever there is a market economy there is competition, and the more competition there is, the more important becomes the role of advertising. It is the most visible sign of the lively competition which results in satisfied customers for whom it promises more choice, better value, more new and improved products that are widely available and easily accessible.

The reach and influence of advertising is truly mindboggling as its tentacles reach into every home and heart, today. Competition to sell goods and services through a relatively new medium, the Internet and the web, is developing at a tremendous speed and is sure to extend the boundaries of advertising manifold. It has also become an attractive hunting ground for the unprincipled operator as there are far too many obstacles to the enforcement of codes and self-regulation becomes doubtful.

Advertising is essentially about informing customers about product availability and prices. Every product can be distinguished from its rivals with the help of advertising, thus helping the customer to exercise choice. Advertising is

thus important in establishing brands that customers can recognize and rely upon. The economy too stands to benefit as advertising builds up volume by creating demands, especially for new products, which in turn can lead to lower prices.

While this proves that advertising (and its corollary, competition) is highly beneficial to the economy and is accepted as a fact of modern life, it is also clear that advertising works within the social milieu. It must reach out to individuals in the community in order to inform, convince or cajole. These individuals are a part of the greater social fabric. So, it becomes the responsibility of advertising to make sure that in its efforts to attract maximum customers it does not tear or slash this tenuous fabric. Advertising is all about reaching out to society just as much as society can stand being reached out to. Society survives on an unwritten code that delineates roles, functions, actions and behavior of its members. It is the duty of advertising to respect this code and use the influence it has over the customer's mind to strengthen this code and not put it in a cocktail shaker just to make a particular product sell. Essentially, advertising is justified provided it strikes a balance between hard-sell and regulatory ethics.

Unfortunately, imperfections which still cling to human nature often tilt the balance in favour of stronger motives of self-interest, rather than higher or loftier one. E.F. Schumacher has described the market as "the institutionalization of individualism and non-responsibility". This instinctive rivalry and strife to capture the market, even though it may result in benefits to the customers, can prove detrimental to society as a whole. This happens especially when the myriad morals, traditions, values and principles upon which the societal edifice is based are sacrificed without compunction.

The idea of advertising having to be "legal, honest, decent and truthful" has been around for a long time and regularly bodies such as the Advertising Standards Authority have taken it upon themselves to draw up regulatory codes to guide all advertising. The problem is that there are many grey areas between what is banned by law and what exceeds the standards of honesty, decency and truthfulness as set out in the codes. In many cases the approach becomes subjective and the conscience of the individual advertiser is the only check to overstepping certain unwritten limits.

The advertising legend David Ogilvy of Ogilvy and Mather always believed that "good products can be sold by honest advertising – because if you tell a lie you will be found out." Strictly speaking, this is not ethics but business prudence. But honesty in its pitch should be one of the main principles of all advertising. Advertisers should not exploit the credulity, lack of knowledge or inexperience of customers. This is especially pertinent in the case of advertisements relating to financial services where there is under-stand. Exaggerated claims such as "best".

“smoothest”, “whitest” are, of course, subjective and are part of standard advertising practices. What is much more serious is the concealment of relevant information, for instance withholding statutory safety warnings for specific products such as tobacco, paan masala and certain drugs, as also showing risky acts of daredevilry and bravado encouraging false notions of masculinity and heroism.

There is a phrase in advertising called “knocking cope”, which in effect means unfairly attacking or discrediting other products. Of course, comparative advertising is widely practiced and accepted but comparisons should be clean and fair because an attack on rival products induces negative thinking in the customer. Many products are advertised by attempting to denigrate, discredit or take unfair advantage of a competitor, as is found in the case of soaps, detergents, drinks – soft and hard¹ this affects public values as it encourages fault-finding attitudes.

Indecency in advertising tries to fulfill the ultimate objective- to use shock tactics to draw attention to the product. The most obvious example is the often irrelevant exploitation of sexual images, especially those of women. Attitudes to indecency are subjective and very enormously. Nevertheless, such advertising is increasingly being viewed as unnecessary and avoidable even in the advertising world. Besides, even for the consumer who does not wish to be labeled a prude or a feminist, such advertisements reflect bad taste and promote moral laxity and licentiousness simply by the association of ideas.

Shocking claims and images are also used to instill fear, especially by insurance companies, but raising such apprehensions should not be disproportionate to the risk as it could result in spreading panic. Instead, appeals to encourage prudent behavior or discourage dangerous or ill- advised actions would be more acceptable ways to attract customers.

The advertising of alcohol is a very controversial and widely-discussed aspect of responsible advertising. No matter how subjective the approach of different individuals, society as a whole agrees that it is ethically vital for the advertiser to keep alcohol abuse and damage to health (in all age groups) in mind while advertising the product. This also holds good for the tobacco industry where manufactures and advertisers insist on the right of freedom of commercial speech, but have come to acknowledge that the right also carries with it certain responsibilities and constraints must be exercised for the sake of health as well as ethics.

In the modern world, advertising has an awesome impact in its ability to influence lifestyles, attitudes and priorities of millions. It has the power to create demand and make people believe they must have something which they would have never dreamed of before. This is significant in developing countries where

newer artificial needs are being created, often at the expense of necessary public services. Making non-essential products fashionable amounts to wasteful expenditure in poor countries, while the seemingly inexorable march of consumption fuelled by advertising in developed countries raises a more fundamental environmentalist question of the damage it is doing to the planet (and to a lesser extent perhaps the moral question of excessive devotion to the acquisition of worldly goods!)

Advertising has, no doubt, become an essential part of modern life. But it must be made to act responsibly and abide by certain values and ethical codes. It must stick to standards and stay within bounds. Though it would be ridiculous to expect advertisers to act as the moral guardians of society, any advertising that shrugs off responsibility and rides roughshod over the customer is, ultimately, self-destructive.. socially responsible advertising has the power to influence, educate, and motivate the community towards positive and desirable behavior and this should be the guiding principle behind all advertisements. The magical caveat emptor or 'buyer beware' becomes a warning against exploitation and manipulation of society by unscrupulous near-sighted advertising.