Media managers mustn't allow ads that mislead consumers

Herbert Rotfeld on Misplaced Marketing

James Miller III, President Ronald Reagan's first appointee as chair of the Federal Trade Commission, defended his cuts in FTC activity on "The McNeil/Lehrer Report" in 1982 by stating, "The FTC is not the only body with a program of protecting consumers from false and deceptive advertising. The Better Business Bureau has an excellent program. The media, and especially the broadcast networks, have ongoing problems to screen commercials (for honesty)."

Miller could have said that advertising regulations are bad, as he had said about other regulations, but he did not. This leader of 1980s deregulation implicitly stated that advertising regulations are desirable, but that organizations other than the FTC can provide them.

Referring to the power and activity of the media to control advertising veracity, it might have been true then, but it is not true today.

No U.S. television station, cable or broadcast network, magazine, radio station or newspaper is required to accept any commercial advertising. All media outlets have the right to reject advertising and some impose strong standards on the types of advertising they will accept.

And every rejection has the power to influence or alter an advertising campaign. Sometimes the media manager's objections are minor, so changes can be made to the ad without harming the message strategy. Of course, the marketer can take the ads to another media outlet, but only if there are others who will accept it and who also will fit with the media strategy.

With occasional educational seminars, the FTC tries to encourage media managers to do more to screen ads for potential deceptions. Every deceptive claim caught by attentive media managers is one less thing to take up the time and attention of the commission.

However, the primary concern for most media decisions about advertising is how the taste or style of the ad fits with the editorial content or image of the vehicle, not whether the claims are true or if the product works. Some media companies might be examples of a potentially strong advertising regulation force, but it would be a gross error to presume that their practices are typical.

Usually, although media managers probably would not knowingly carry ads that mislead the audience, their primary concern is keeping readers or viewers. In other words, media managers aren't so much concerned about whether an ad is misleading as whether the audience will find it objectionable.

The original owners of the major networks—wealthy patricians with a sense of social responsibility—started their businesses with consumer protection concerns. They carried strong and influential news divisions as a money-losing public service.

These days, owners and corporate affiliations are in constant flux, and people fear that advertising standards will become driven by monetary goals. At many daily newspapers, which are driven by the delivery of news and honest information, the primary reason for rejecting advertising is often that it is potentially misleading. Yet grossly false ads sometimes do appear in reputable publications.

Textbooks and popular wisdom paint the media as major bulwarks of consumer protection, but advertising acceptance is really just another marketing activity for the publication or programs. *Good Housekeeping*'s seal of approval was assurance not of product testing but of standing behind readers wanting refunds for products that did not meet expectations. The seal was a tool to market the magazine to both readers and advertisers.

In these days of the Internet and the quick exchange of information, the time and costs of checking out advertiser claims are no longer reasons for ignoring possibly deceptive claims.

At the same time, the media managers' job is evaluated by the revenue and profitability, so even the best policy often is driven by greed and fear—by wanting the revenue but not wanting to drive away the audience. In marketing the publications or broadcast stations, most managers are concerned with entertainment value, not a reputation for honesty.

Media standards for acceptable advertising possess a strong potential as a force for consumer protection, but not when its use is limited or misplaced as another marketing tool. ■

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