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EDITORIAL POSTLUDE

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Can You Really Say That?

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At a marketing and public policy conference some years back, the researchers' review of gun advertising concluded that women were "disproportionately" and "unfairly" targeted by these messages. The former term would probably be acceptable if taken in the pure data results sense, since women were found to be clear target segments for more than half of the messages studied. But taken with the latter term, the negative connotations were inescapable. And since the conference was dedicated to public policy issues, the dangling implication was that some sort of regulatory response was necessary. During the discussion, one audience member asked whether the authors were asserting that "only possessors of a pale penis can be presumed to resist the persuasive power of pistol promotions."<sup>1</sup>

Sarcastic discussion questions notwithstanding, this goes beyond the not-uncommon practice in which many business critics readily label adults as "vulnerable" in need of protection for no other reason than being a member of a minority group (as discussed in Wolburg 2005). Their data did not provide a basis for saying that women were an unfair or improper target audience, only that they had the attention of the advertisers. As business people become the modern cultural villains, all types of conspiracy theories are repeatedly asserted regardless of the data support (e.g., see Broyles 2006; Mizerski 1995; Rotfeld 2001, 2008).

It is easy to presume all sorts of evil motives for business practices. What is more difficult is to show restraint. Even when the subject is a publicly disliked product, extremism in data interpretation is not a virtue.

To start the first day of my consumer behavior theory class, I show an old Winston cigarettes television commercial featuring Barney Rubble and Fred Flintstone as star presenters. After a few minutes of class reactions, when I reveal that this was a real commercial from the 1960s, many students are aghast at what they see as the blatant attempt to get children to

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1. To my friends and colleagues, I hereby vow that this is the last time I will say or write this phrase.

smoke. I ask why they are so certain this was aimed at children, and they respond in terms of children watching after school or Saturday mornings when parents are not around. It's obvious this was aimed at children, or so they say, since this is a cartoon. At some point, a student with a bit of knowledge of television history would point out that "The Flintstones" was a prime time program four decades ago. I then add information that Winston was a program sponsor, so at the time it was broadcast, this commercial was considered the same as other program-tied star-featured messages for cigarettes made by the characters of "I Love Lucy," "The Dick Van Dyke Show" or other programs of television's first decades.

Only knowing that they themselves watched "The Flintstones" as children, the students assume that the commercials must have been for children. Some presume that anything with a cartoon character targets children, forgetting the adult-oriented cartoon programs they might watch such as "South Park." Another cartoon commercial from the 1950s animated the trade character of the Chesterfield King for cigarettes of that name. In what is hoped no one sees as being oriented toward children, the sixty-second spot ends with the questionable humor of the clumsy king accidentally beheading a loyal subject (albeit off camera).

Yet there exists a long history of tobacco industry critics who steadfastly presumed any cartoon-style trade characters cause children to eventually become smokers, despite a dearth of data supporting a simple cause and effect between children, their memories of cartoon trade characters and generic product purchases (Mizerski 1995). As the research on efforts to discourage tobacco consumption repeatedly find, the interactions between advertising and the consumers of any age are complicated (e.g., Smith and Stutts 2006; Wolburg 2006), as it is with any mass media messages. Undoubtedly, there are many sources of information on tobacco industry corporate malfeasance, but that does not make it valid to simply presume it exists where it might not.

Manuscripts submitted to *JCA* often exhibit this bias in data interpretations. Finding anecdotes of an event, authors draw conclusions of massive widespread impact. If consumer reactions are varied, the worst scenario is considered most valid. With an analysis finding a demographic group more likely to be caught by an undesirable business practice, they conclude that being a member of the group causes vulnerability to that practice. As I have said many times before in a phrase adapted from a comment by comedian Bill Maher, people who dislike motorcycles, guns, or bungee jumping attack the marketing of these products as manipulation of people who want to ride motorcycles, go hunting, or jump off bridges.

Illogical extremism does not acquire validity because it is arguing in the consumers' interests. To the contrary, it can harm research that supports that interest when overstatements reduce the credibility of other, more tempered, valid conclusions. Social science research is difficult enough without the baggage of researchers appearing blinded by a personal agenda.

The potential for consumer abuse in funeral planning are many, but despite years of attention, the data on business practices still remain limited and needing cautious interpretation (Kopp and Kemp 2007). No one denies that predatory lending has injured many consumers (Hill and Kozup 2007). But over time, the term has grown to label all sorts of practices, from the generally legal at one end and extending through the spectrum of undesirable, unethical, and illegal efforts of fraud. As the term loses specificity, the research itself could become diffuse in a way that only confuses meaningful directions for corrective regulatory actions (Delgado, Erickson, and Piercy 2008). Similarly, consumer activists who label any communications that might persuade consumers as "advertising" also presume that the possibility of influence translates into an actual manipulation of consumers' purchase decisions. In the end, the term itself loses meaning or research loses credibility, as the particular concerns for needed regulatory responses might become misdirected or misunderstood (Rotfeld 2008).

A myriad of issues of method or sample selection limit the generalizations of any study, impacting how the study can be interpreted and what can validly be concluded from findings (e.g., see Carlson 2008; Royne 2008). *JCA* reviewers repeatedly direct authors to rein in conclusions to what the data support. Even in defense of the consumers' interests, companies selling publicly disliked products can be doing something positive.

Dubious conclusions do not acquire validity just because they might be labeled opinions. Off-hand comments in a refereed journal carry the danger of being cited as if they were research findings, and the opinions could find a life beyond that of the data or related theories. In the earliest research studies on message appeals to audience fears, the authors' off-hand comment speculating about unexpected results became a data expectation repeated without end in all textbooks covering the topic, despite the original speculation never finding theoretical support (Rotfeld 2000). In a different research area, my 1981 article's background literature reviewed some then-recent regulatory practices, stating at the end that the trend "will probably" continue in the near term. To this day, that article is still cited in manuscripts that manage to ignore the research as they present my long ago comment as an authoritative prediction for the future as if it was published in 2008.

Admittedly, some researchers are advocates, so they feel that they must state as strong a case as they think the data might support. Yet the power of persuasion lies not in sounding alarmist or extreme, but in stating what is known. In the end, the strongest case derives from distinguishing between what the results indicate you really can say and what remains uncertain.

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