
Misplaced marketing

The cynical use of marketing to the unwitting consumer

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Abstract

Purpose – To show how marketing is accused of having all sorts of powers to control consumers and segmentation itself is often accused of abusing consumers, and yet there are many times when marketing people who should know better unethically abuse consumer targets' naïve willingness to believe all sorts of nonsense.

Design/methodology/approach – Points out the potential unethical nature of marketing practices that could take advantage of consumers' inability to know or understand the truth of the matter.

Findings – A growing number of books and articles describe the limits of human understanding, or how there are many things people believe that are not true. For some people, ignorance is simply a point of view. Yet it is patently unethical when marketing people take materials they know are false and sell to people not able to know better.

Practical implications – Marketing is not inherently unethical, but the worst of practices make all others look bad. At best, many marketing decision makers are too often amoral, and do not even consider the morality of what they do. This describes a distinction of clearly immoral approaches to marketing practice.

Originality/value – Stating the difference between simply meeting consumer needs and abusing consumers.

Keywords Ethics, Marketing strategy

Paper type Viewpoint

An electronics store might claim that when you've got questions, they've got answers, but the reality is that their sales staff often make it up as they go along. They are the "experts", or so the customers believe, and whether fact or fiction, the salesperson's techno-babble has the ring of truth. Maybe they have the answers, and maybe they do not, but they are treading a difficult line between innocuous fallacy and deception as they sell the store's products. If they know what they claim might not be true, they are stepping over that line from error to fraud. The broader problem is that too many marketing "experts" abuse and misuse consumer desires to believe.

A commonly cited statistic from an old *Harper's* index is that there are ten times more working astrologers employed in the USA than there are astronomers. It is easy to decry the dumbing down of modern consumer-driven culture or to blame advertising for causing a downward slide in social values, and the topic has sold many books (e.g. Adams, 1997; Allen, 1989; Washburn and Thornton, 1996). But then, an entertaining idiot or mentally challenged superstar athlete

always commands a higher income than a scientific genius. This is not a function of marketing, but rather, how our most consumers value sports over education or entertainment over science.

Yet despite the growth in both science and education over the last century, the strong staying power of common consumer misbeliefs and self-delusion is confusing to many. The late David Ogilvy would say to other advertising people that "The consumer is not an idiot, she is your wife". But often, for many products, the consumer really is an idiot, believing all sorts of nonsense.

It is possible that most astrologers honestly believe the power of what they sell to their customers – people who also want to believe their lives are controlled by the stars. It is one thing for believers of voodoo, astrology, smart water or the healing power of mysterious N-rays to meet the needs of consumers of the service. Far be it for thee or me to say that people should not be able to sell to others of like-minded faith. Unfortunately, there are too many examples of marketing executives knowingly seeing the uneducated, ignorant and dumb consumers as targets to exploit.

Almost five decades ago, a man with a failing research firm made claims that he had generated huge increased in sales of drinks and popcorn by use of subliminal messages in a movie (Rogers 1993). It was a research myth, a conscious effort to generate interest in his company, and it has created a monster that is still with us. In modern times others have pointed to hidden pictures in advertisements that are claimed to cause sales, despite not a scintilla of evidence from consumer psychology that consumers can be manipulated by messages

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they are unable to perceive. These ideas have obviously captured the popular mind. It is difficult to think such sellers of subliminal manipulation theories actually believe a great conspiracy exists to manipulate consumers, but it provides a source of income as long as they find an audience willing to believe their tales.

Of a greater danger to the public well being are the products serving to cure the epidemic of obesity in the USA or to help the numerous people who are not grossly overweight and wish they were thinner. Aside from the small number of people who are overweight as a result of genetic or metabolic disorders, the intuitively obvious way to lose weight is to eat less and exercise more. Yet to no one's surprise, overweight Americans hope to lose weight while still eating all they want and spending their free time on the couch. To satisfy this widespread consumer "need", a plethora of products that promise consumers quick-and-easy, exercise-free weight loss are now prominently advertised in many major media vehicles and have their own huge display section in many stores. The minimum-wage clerks in the stores probably know little of the products beyond what they read from the labels, yet it strains credulity to assert that the products' makers all believe these products provide their magical cures. Similarly, the plethora of new products that claim to cause growth to sexual anatomy cannot be true, and the sellers must know this.

Of course, even some scientists fall prey to delusions and mistaken beliefs (e.g. Gratzner, 2000), but some research scientists take what they think are the career advancing steps to outright fraud when they should know better (Park, 2000). In marketing, they are not just "meeting consumer needs" when they make gullible consumers a willing market segment to abuse. Knowingly using consumer foolishness is unethical, and marketing people who see this happening should try to call attention to it and stop it when they can.

Introducing my talk of advertising self-regulation to the Philadelphia Advertising Club, Professor Charles R. Taylor included his own lament on the poor image of marketing and advertising people in consumer surveys. We both teach marketing students, and it is vexing for us to acknowledge that marketing professionals are among the most-readily criticized of business people. And yet, it is impossible to defend the unethical practices and consumer abuses. As respectable vehicles carry advertising for questionable products or patently false claims that target consumer ignorance, marketing people will possess the low image created by these unethical practitioners.

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Further reading

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