

The marketing myths and consumers' fear of marketing

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to assert how common yet unfounded claims to persuasion power are not in the best interest of marketing professionals. News reports of any pervasive marketing activity include a direct assertion, or at least an implicit presumption, that business managers do it because they know it “works.” And since consumers know that marketing wishes to influence their decisions, they fear that they are being manipulated.

Design/methodology/approach – With marketing professionals claiming great power to move the masses despite their uncertainty of just how effective their tools might be in causing sales, consumers tend to believe the claims of sales influence and, in turn, blame marketing for many consumer or social problems.

Findings – Marketing is not as all-powerful as some consumers believe or fear, but marketing professionals tend to claim their work has all sorts of expansive powers.

Originality/value – Many public debates put marketing people in the strange position of noting the limits of their persuasion power and the uncertainty of past claims successes. Unfortunately, as marketing professionals try to gain new business budgets and make claims of their worth, their failure to admit the limits to knowledge of how or why people might be persuaded to buy products results in many consumers blaming marketing for all types of social problems. Public education and understanding might be best helped by some practitioner honesty.

Keywords Advertising, Marketing, Product positioning

Paper type Viewpoint

Which scenario has a basis in marketing reality?

- *Scene 1:* Last December, a 34-year-old Wal-Mart employee was trampled to death by a predawn crowd rushing into a store as they eagerly sought to be the first in line for special sales on the day considered the kick-off of the US Christmas holiday buying season. In addition to claims that the store failed to provide adequate security protection, a lawsuit filed by the estate and relatives of the deceased claimed that the store's advertising was a proximate cause of the tragedy. National media quoted police officials that said merchandising practices that gather large crowds need to change.
- *Scene 2:* In an effort to combat tobacco consumption by young people, government agencies periodically propose bans on all hats, toys or gym bags carrying the logo of a popular cigarette brand. Critics of the regulations point out that the problem is sales of cigarettes to young people, not brand licensing, noting the limited enforcement of laws banning sales to underage youths. In response, the proposals are defended by assertions that since full enforcement of sales laws would be difficult or impossible,

they are going after the reasons young people desire to buy the products.

- *Scene 3:* At the start of 2009, the US pharmaceutical industry agree to a voluntary moratorium on branded trinkets given to doctors such as pens, coffee mugs or soap dispensers. Where doctors offices are decorated with a plethora of these brand name items, the specialty advertising trinkets are accused of increasing medical costs by causing physicians to prescribe allegedly over-priced brand names instead of less expensive regulatory-certified generic equivalents.
- *Scene 4:* In the first episode of a short-lived 1980s television program, a fictional television network created “blipverts,” high speed condensed commercials that implanted sales messages directly into the viewers' minds with the periodic minor side effect of causing a few viewers' heads to explode.

Obviously, the fourth is a work of fiction and the first three describe actual news events, but all four are lacking any foundation in marketing theory and practice. Yet, despite the patent absurdities of Blipverts, they draw from the same widely-believed power of marketing activities to manipulate consumers that is behind the law suit blaming marketing for a tragic death or crediting specialty advertising as the cause for unnecessary prescription spending and youth cravings for addiction to a carcinogenic substance.

Many people strongly believe that advertising messages possess massive power over their lives. At major research universities, faculty with personal expertise far removed from the study of consumer psychology build classes around

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popular books that assert marketing's ability to control consumers. Even some people who understand that marketing must deal with audience predispositions believe that all-knowing marketing managers know just what buttons to push to get consumers to buy products.

The content of advertising messages exists in the mind of audiences, not the marketing people who create the messages (e.g. see Carlson, 2008; Preston, 2009). And there does not exist a scintilla of theory or research that shows marketing can overpower consumer predispositions. Marketing professionals who run advertising to gather crowds or who distribute unrelated logo-visible products to generate brand awareness are often uncertain how or if these can contribute to increases in sales. But instead of seeing marketing as a useful and uncertain business tool, many consumers fear its power. And it feeds that fear when marketing people fail to admit they have no idea how or why some things that they do could or would have a sales impact, or if it can have any impact at all.

Take, for example, product placement.

Though product placement has become a ubiquitous practice on US television, UK viewers only see it in imported American programs, albeit with some programs having the visible brand items digitally blurred out for UK transmission. In 2007, the European Parliament's culture committee gave product placement an endorsement. While they started putting pressure on individual countries to accept the practice, they originally included a consumer protection requirement that broadcasters must inform viewers every 20 minutes what products have been placed in the program. Given this mix of encouragement and fear, it is puzzling that the culture committee embraced it.

In January 2007, the trade magazine *Advertising Age* praised the movie tie-ins for cars in upcoming summer movies, though the value of these expenditures did not seem tied to audience responses (Hall, 2007). Dodge paid several million dollars and committed over \$10 million more from their marketing budget to design and brand the flying car used by the title characters in the movie, *Fantastic Four: The Rise of the Silver Surfer*. However, the logo was barely visible and the car itself seemed more *Star Wars* than street car, making it doubtful that the huge expense generated a positive impact on car sales. GM similarly partnered to have its line of vehicles portray the animated robot characters in the *Transformers* movie. The vehicles in this case were central to the plot, though it is questionable whether the fantasy of alien robots hidden in their vehicles adds sales value.

In a joke my grandmother liked to repeat, a woman walks into temple during a funeral service. Hearing the words about the illness of a loved one, she starts to call out, "Give him some chicken soup." The rabbi stops and quietly says, "I'm sorry madam, but it's too late. It wouldn't help." She replies, "It wouldn't hurt." When shown examples of marketing efforts of questionable consumer impact, some students in my classes speculate that they might generate sales. When asked how or why they think it could happen, someone often says

that it would not hurt. Maybe not, but that was not the question. Trying something that would not hurt (other than lost investment dollars) is not the same as knowing that it will probably generate a sales impact, and yet the former is the unspoken rationale behind many marketing efforts. And consumers, in turn, simply assume that because marketing people are trying to manipulate them that they are being manipulated.

There exist anecdotes that describe product placement generated publicity that drove increased product sales. Articles in academic journals reporting surveys or experiments indicate situations in which product placements in programs or game shows can enhance the brand image with some consumers (e.g. see van Reijmersdal *et al.*, 2007). Some of these popular marketing tools described in the opening scenes herein, other than blipverts, of course, might work in contributing to consumer response, but that does not mean it will be a proximate cause of consumer decisions, or could cause a frenzied customer stampede. Brand awareness alone, or even a positive brand image, does not necessarily translate into sales. And yet, many marketing efforts are undertaken with uncertainty of what they can accomplish while the practices themselves defy pragmatic assessment of their impact.

Of course, it is possible that some marketing professional think they are getting away with something, using hidden mystical powers they think they possess to get consumers to act against their own self-interests. But aside from the unethical or lunatic fringe that might operate at the edges of any business, it must be admitted that just because these people think they are getting away with something does not mean that they are. The problem for marketing people operating in reality is that to reduce consumer fears of manipulation they must also admit to the known limits of what marketing really can or cannot accomplish.

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