

## **Ethics in advertising by Adelle Wapnick**

Advertising and the question of ethics would classically need consideration from three points of view, that of the advertiser, the consumer and the medium. Between all three parties there's an implicit understanding of the need for advertising. From the advertiser whose selling his wares as pleasingly and effectively as possible, to the consumer whose not sure what to purchase so seek answers in advertising, to the medium owning the space in which the messages are placed and whose very existence is dependent upon the billions spent advertising. All have a vested interest in the discipline, for some the stakes are higher.

This describes the discipline as a basic transactional system. However, as advertising has become more sophisticated, and consumers have evolved, so the debate around ethics has become more heated.

There are many in-depth philosophical and literary works on the subject, in which the vast ethical issues facing advertising are raised. Some include the question of manipulation and the undermining of an individuals' autonomy to the question of stereotyping or product origin. These are academic, complex and often subject to partisanship.

I will take a more simplistic view. The two real issues are the advertiser and the message. Who is advertising and what is being said. The problem being that the consumer, while entertained by (some) advertisements, has very little power over its content, its omnipresence or its effects on society.

In SA, the Association for Communication and Advertising (ACA) requires members to uphold its code of conduct, as well as that of the Advertising Standards Authority, which includes the principles of transformation, ethical competitive activity and the propagation of advertising that is legal, decent and not harmful or misleading. And by and large South African advertisers and their agencies are compliant. There are those brands that intentionally, or unintentionally, push the boundaries. The first that comes to mind, of course, is Nando's. For years the brand spent many hours at the ASA fighting their corner, the right to freedom of speech, expression of human truth etc. And while they accommodate the rulings, there's no doubt that their early victories lay in the brand standing for courageous conversations, and the smile in our minds.

This is not to say that there are not real issues at hand. Namely, advertising to those groups that are vulnerable eg. the elderly, or children. The latter has seen recent focus in the food sector due to the high levels in the rise of obesity among children. Or advertising products that are harmful to an individuals' health or well-being. Certain food groups fall into both. Categories such as tobacco and alcohol continue to receive attention. The Tobacco Products Control Amendment Act, which was passed in 1999 banned all advertising and promotion of tobacco products, including sponsorship and free distribution of tobacco products. The alcohol sector has yet to face similar regulation. It's only a matter of time.

It's not just regulation that is addressing these issues. Consumers themselves are making a mark by expressing concern at the high levels of consumerism, its resultant waste, their desire for a more eco-friendly environment and the need, generally, for a more conscious world. As a result advertisers who are wise are watching and listening, and accommodating the change taking place around them.

Authors like Naomi Klein and Paul Dickinson have gone to great lengths to describe the organic evolution of communities operating amongst brands. They explore anti-branding and ideas associated with sustainability and social justice, but note that the corporation has a newfound role in a changing world. These concepts need consideration if marketers are to sustain their success. The alternative is too extreme.

So what do advertisers and marketers do? How do they ensure the success of their brands while still giving consideration for ethics and the world in which they operate?

They should strive to behave sensitively.

On the one hand, there is the need for sales and awareness and then there's the requirement for greater sensitivity and understanding of what it is that the market place wants and what the world needs. Brands need to be cognisant of their power.

They should seek authenticity.

Conscious consumers want what's real. They want it to be ethical and honest, simple and unspun. They need to dispel the suspicion that advertisers are purchasing reality and twisting it to suit needs rather than meeting the real needs of those on the receiving end.

They should be responsible.

Brands must take into consideration the long-term effects of their branding and their messaging. The sentiment being that it is not only thought provoking, but thoughtful too.

And most of all, they should be relevant.

There is no point in putting brands in places that are irrelevant. Nor is there any merit in communicating in a manner that is irrelevant. Consumers need real engagement, by real brands. If it's not relevant, it's not real. And if it's not real, it's wrong.

Word count 822