

## **Shock Advertising; Its Justification and the Effects on Society**

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## **Shock Advertising; Its Justification and the Effects on Society**

Advertising encapsulates both the realities and fantasies of the world in which we live (Cortesse, 1999). Dating back to the Roman era, advertising has been used as a communications medium, revolutionising the way in which people view the world around them and changing the lifestyle of those who surrender to its calls.

However, the power of this medium is grossly underestimated. To many, advertising is seen as an enjoyable form of persuasive artwork, capable of igniting ones' emotions irrespective of age, gender or socio-economic status. To others, advertising presents a platform for advertisers to exploit their creative talents, formulating deceiving, provocative and highly controversial advertisements, staged before our very own eyes or ears. Sadly, this is a truer depiction of the advertising world. Although many choose to concentrate on the positive influence it continues to provide and the reward it holds for this who use it respectfully. Many however choose to neglect the damaging effects advertising has had on the moral and ethical high grounds on which some elements of society rest. Fundamental misconceptions and distorted truths can often be blamed on advertising campaigns that choose to shock their audience for the sake of generating publicity.

The debate argued within this paper seeks to decipher whether shock advertising is predominately justifiable, based as it is upon the frequent misuse and exploitation of sensitive and delicate issues. The paper also questions whether the intentions were morally and ethically justified (Wnek, 2003), in spite of causing widespread public offence. More often than not, advertising agencies are oblivious to the damaging effects that shock advertising continues to have on society. It leaves those responsible to grapple with the burdening question of whether images and literature used in advertising campaigns pose a risk of introducing messages that contain impurities into the most vulnerable elements of society and our society as a whole.

This paper draws in views gathered during interviews with the Advertising Standards Authority and OfCom, based in the United Kingdom, together with perspectives from advertising agencies to present a consideration of both the reasons for and the impact of using shock tactics within advertising. Do advertisers perceive that a highly controversial and offensive advertisement is a success if publicity and profit were generated, despite considerable public complaints? Are agencies lowering their standards of advertising through the use of such controversial material? Where do they, and the regulatory bodies, see advertising progressing in the future and what effect might this have on society as a whole?

Concern for the future of advertising is therefore in need of much attention, since the consequences of neglect may be damaging to our future prosperity. The study highlights the much-needed role for a greater responsibility to be exercised throughout the industry, together with an effective regulatory framework, void of any potential loopholes.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Advertising is the world's most powerful industry (Saunders, 1999) and can change governments and make or break fortunes. It acts as a driver of public opinion and a powerful social force (Twitchell, 1999). It is a part of our lives (Cortese, 1999) and part of our culture. Essentially it is a paid, mass-mediated attempt to persuade (O'Guinn, Allen & Semenik, 2002). However, as consumers, we are becoming smarter than ever before. We are born into a society which breeds off information and messaging; and through experience, we learn which messages to pay attention to and which to ignore.

A common and expected characteristic found in a competitive market is the constant and rigorous battle to stand out and be noticed amongst ones rivals. In the world of advertising there is no exception. With so many companies battling for attention, using a range of original and creative ideas to capture our attention, the heat soon intensifies for companies to gain immediate attention from their audience.

In recent years, agencies have taken steps which they claim to be fully justified and strategically planned, whilst others would beg to differ. The use of provocative graphics and literature have given birth to many popular methods now used by advertising agencies. These include outrageous, seductive, incensing, shocking, electrifying, compelling, challenging and sensuous techniques. Invariably these methods cause offence, as advertisers choose material which is seen as being highly controversial. Their choice of graphics and wording is strategically selected so that its' immediate effect will cause uproar amongst both its targeted viewers and those who are offended for other reasons.

One is then tempted to question the relationship between the advertising agency responsible for the creation of a highly controversial yet incredibly successful advertising campaign and the consumer who is expected to be swayed by the advertisement. What sort of relationship exists between the advertiser and the consumer if more of the audience are offended by the advertisements than those who appreciate them?

One is also liable to post the question as to what the original intentions were when designing the campaign and whether they interpret negative feedback as valuable publicity? However, any controversy often works to a company's advantage, since the more commotion that builds up from the launch of a controversial campaign, the greater the publicity that results. Whether we come to accept it or whether we decide to reject the message, advertising is a message forum which advises society as to how to live its life. Ultimately, we are all forced to subconsciously read the messages advertisements present, with seemingly little or no say. Although we have free will in which to make our own calculated decisions, human instinct often makes us surrender to peer pressure, so we commonly follow the crowd, in the fear that we may otherwise be left behind (Goldman, 1992). Cortese (1999) highlights the notion that advertising controls society to such an extent that it can be blamed for both the ups and downs it experiences, and at the same time acts as a phenomenal vehicle responsible for societies' ways.

Advertising in the 21<sup>st</sup> century understands that humans by nature react to challenging images and literature, which advertisers are more commonly using in their work, potentially due to increased competition and message volume. Shock tactics have now become an adopted style accepted and used in mainstream advertising. However, public opinion guided by recorded complaints questions the validity of such a technique, arguing that many advertising

campaigns often offend more of its audience than those that appreciate it. If this is the case, then on what terms may an advertising agency deem the advert justifiable?

Barnados (Advertisement 1)

### Advertisement 1 – Barnados

advertising campaign in 2003 highlighted ability to both shock and raise awareness, yet was criticised by Wnek (2003) for concentrating on the imagery rather than the message. The uncomfortable images hide the true message; that of child poverty, yet drew record complaints to the UK Advertising Standards Agency.



The nature of shock advertising presents a very sensitive subject, since a proportion of ones audience will always be offended by whatever material is used. How does one then justify using such a technique in the knowledge that much of the audience will be offended by what they see and may even take a negative view towards the organisation as a result. The question potentially rests with the use of creativity designed to engage the viewer (Kover, Goldberg & James, 1995). By ensuring that any advertisement engages the audience in whatever form, it is more likely to provoke an emotional response (Jones, 1990; Schroer, 1990; Belch & Belch, 2001). This would explain why many have turned to unconventional methods of advertising in order to make themselves heard.

However, others argue that a one-off advertisement which is well executed has significant influence (Gibson, 1996), conveying a message and having a lasting and positive impact – arguably requiring greater creativity (El-Murad, 2002).

If that is the case, then why do advertising agencies take the ‘shock tactic’ approach? This paper aimed to consider the reasons for taking this approach; why do advertising agencies take the decision to specifically use shock tactics in their advertising campaigns? In addition, how do the regulatory bodies of the Office of Communications (OfCom) and the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) in the UK consider this approach and control the use of potentially controversial imagery?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper used both primary and secondary data within its approach, designed to examine both advertisers and primarily regulators perspectives on shock tactics in advertising. In order to understand more about the regulators perspective, interviews were arranged with both OfCom and the Advertising Standards Authority. The use of a semi-structured interview was decided upon to allow an evaluation of the attitudes, thoughts and emotions surrounding this potentially controversial topic. In addition, as the paper had sought to evaluate the decisions taken by the Advertising Standards Authority in banning or permitting advertising the use of a face-to-face interview was perceived as the most appropriate methodology.

The use of a semi-structures interview was decided upon due to the need to conduct an interview which allowed an explorative discussion to openly tackle topical issues surrounding

the world of advertising whilst maintaining a flow through a set of selected topic areas which would aim to avoid bias yet permit carefully-worded probing questions (Easterby-Smith, 2002). It was decided that sensitive questions would be left until last (Healey & Rawlinson, 1994) once initial fears have been overcome.

Supplementing the primary research in this working phase of the paper was the use of secondary data. This took two forms; a documentary by Channel 5 titled 'The Ads They Had to Ban' and regulatory decisions by advertising authorities. The Channel 5 documentary looked at the advertising world from the industry's perspective rather than from a consumer viewpoint. However, as it included interviews with art directors who explained their thinking behind the advertisements, it identified an initial response and highlighted potential issues to be tackled with advertising agencies as a progression of this research.

## **FINDINGS**

Thousands of advertisements reach television screens, newspapers and magazines plus billboards nationwide on a daily basis. The majority of these advertisements are entertaining and playful, enjoyed by a large proportion of the public. However, a select few fail to please their audience, causing viewers to be offended and others to file a complaint in regards to specific advertisements they have seen. These complaints are then reviewed by regulators; in the UK this is two independent bodies which are the Advertising Standards Authority and the Office of Communications. Each with different remits, the Advertising Standards Authority polices all non-broadcast advertisements and the OfCom regulates broadcasting. The regulations the Advertising Standards Authority operates under are from The British Code of

Advertising, Sales Promotion and Direct Marketing developed by the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) and form the basis for any decisions taken. Complaints to these bodies have been rising in recent years in terms of the number of advertisements being complained about and also the number investigated, from a dip in 2001. The peak in 2003 was caused by an Yves San Laurent Opium advertisement, which drew a non-broadcast record 948 complaints (Advertisement 2).

<b>Table 1: Number of advertising complaints received</b>			
Year	No. of complaints	No. of advertisements complained about	No. investigated
2004	12711	10062	1687
2003	15204	11413	1614
2002	13959	10213	1597
2001	12595	9938	1336
2000	12262	8457	1662
1999	11774	8503	1812
<i>(Source: The Advertising Standards Authority)</i>			

In 2004 there were 1835 advertisements changed (an 8% rise 2003-4) with the top ten broadcast complaints being:

- Auctionworld (1360 complaints) – licence revoked
- Mr Kipling Cakes; religious theme (806) – upheld
- Virgin mobile; sexual theme (459) – not upheld
- LandRover; glamorising violence (361) – upheld
- Trojan Condoms; sexual (317) – not upheld as broadcast after 9pm



- Walls Sausages; animal abuse (174) – not upheld
- Müller Rice; animal abuse (142) – not upheld
- British Heart Foundation; cigarettes (92) – not upheld as broadcast after 9pm
- COI Basic Adult Skills; use of gremlin (89) – upheld
- Teacher Training Agency; decapitation (83) – not upheld

### Advertisement 2 – Opium, Yves San Laurent



BRMB Research conducted a research programme for the Advertising Standards Authority in 2002 to evaluate perceptions and offence caused by advertising, with 19% claiming to having taken offence to an advertisement in the past 12 months and 44% agreeing that advertisements ‘just go too far’ (ASA, 2002). The majority of those offended were non-white, mostly female and had a strong religious belief. There were no differences between age although the higher social classes were more likely to be offended.

In terms of the use of shock tactics used within non-broadcast advertising, 40% agreed it was acceptable for government to use this approach and only 34% for commercial advertisers (ASA, 2002). In addition, 79% agreed that an advertisement which caused serious offence it should be banned (ASA, 2002).

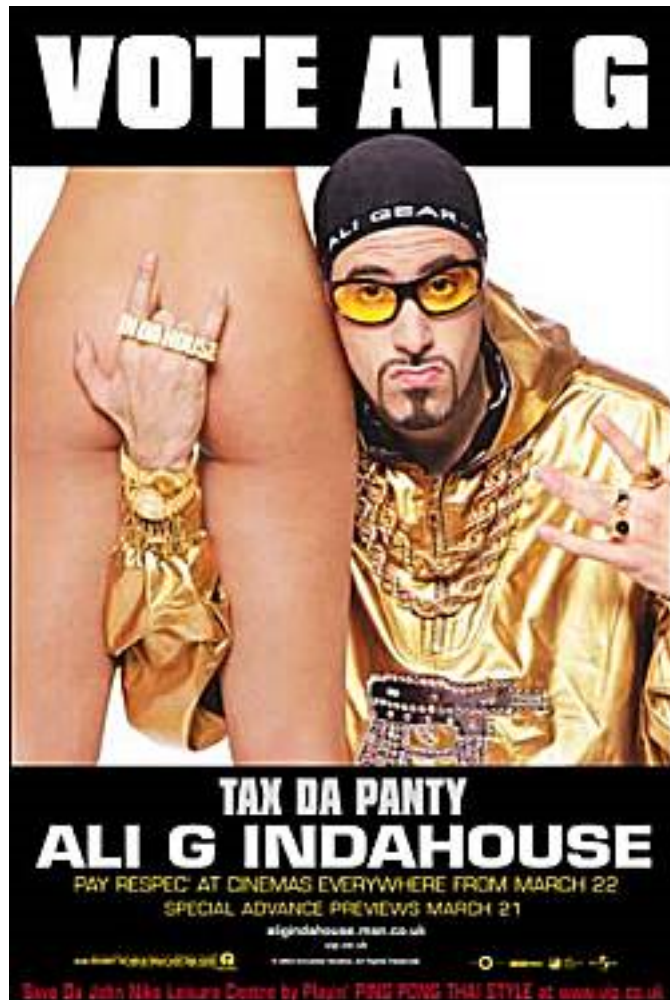
Two interviews were conducted with regulatory bodies; the Advertising Standards Authority and the Office of Communications. The Broadcasting Advertising Clearance Centre, who operate to approve any advertisements by organisations that have experienced significant controversy, declined to be interviewed due to the nature of the subject area.

The interview with OfCom was held with Ms Vena Raffle and raised a multitude of issues surrounding the notion of whether a controversial advertisement has the right to be posted on a billboard, whilst a multiple number of complaints are filed against it. OfCom currently screens in excess of 30000 advertisements each year prior to broadcast and this pre-vetting has been proved as an effective measure. However, as highlighted during the interview, since advertisements undergo last minute adjustments, manuscripts consequently change – presenting a completely different advertisement to that originally approved by OfCom. Due to their independence, OfCom can only exercise their power once an advertisement has been broadcast although Vena Raffle did not consider that advertisers aimed to shock audiences in order to maximise publicity. Her opinion was that shock advertising was similar to many other techniques used by advertising agencies. Statistically, there were very few shock advertisements produced, however, when they are they usually attracted the bulk of complaints. Her perspective was that shock advertisements were predominantly used by

charities and not in the mainstream, with OfCom taking a ‘light touch’ in terms of self-regulation by advertisers.

The interview conducted with Donna Mitchell from the Advertising Standards Authority drew many similarities with that conducted with OfCom. Her view was that every company that chooses to use shock tactics takes a measured risk. For some this is carefully weighed up and for others, mistakes are made and lessons are learnt. It was not the ASA’s responsibility to exercise morals and ethics to advertisers; however it is the ASA’s job to ensure that advertisers were exercising the CAP codes as an effective safeguard. Her view was that

### Advertisement 3 – Ali G



“there will always be advertising that will offend different segments of society”. One of the examples raised by Donna Mitchell was the poster advertisement for Ali G (Advertisement 3 below) – some would see the comical value and others more unfamiliar with the character would be offended. Only one billboard poster contractor had accepted the advertisement for distribution however, possibly indicating the controversial aspect displayed. The only way to ensure that all codes were kept would be to operate a pre-vetting procedures which would be logistically impossible.

The Channel 5 documentary 'Ads They Had to Ban' considered these elements of shock tactics, inviting the advertising agencies involved to explain the reasoning behind their use. Derek Robson, from Bartle Bogle Hegarty who created the banned Microsoft X-box birth-to-grave advertisement explained their decision as; "You explode into life, you explode out of life; we didn't think the advertisement was about death, we thought it was a celebration of life" (Channel 5, 2003). Robert Bean (2004) stated that "judging advertisements on their potential to offend is like comparing the music of Beethoven and Marilyn Manson. What one person sees as provocative another nails as creative". This is undisputedly the moral and ethical dilemma that advertising presents.

However, receiving a ban may be just the tactic the advertiser is aiming for. Whilst Steven Marks from French Connection UK (FCUK) stated that "the peroxide ladies that complain are not our customers" (Channel 5, 2003) Benji Wilson highlighted that FCUK knew their advertisements would be banned, particularly that of FCUK kinkybugger – a highly erotic advertisement showing foreplay which was immediately banned by OfCom. FCUK benefited by placing an advertisement in the Evening Standard the following day, building on the publicity generated. This approach of shock tactics was denounced by Kim Gordon (2003) as an offensive marketing ploy, even though there may be little evidence of its effectiveness.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

Having explored the realms of shock advertising, an attempt has been made to comprehend the influential nature of this medium in order to succumb to a rational conclusion as to whether its use is predominantly justifiable. Advertising, like many other powerful and

prominent industries, displays weaknesses which are protected by some and exploited by others. Evidently there are many issues raised in advertising campaigns that viewers will take offence to. These are dealt with by regulatory bodies, although the main emphasis is on industry self-regulation. The fine balance sought between using a sensitive subject supported by imagery that many find offensive, and executing a hard-hitting yet eye-opening campaign that viewers will appreciate, drawing its key message from, is one of the most complex and tactical in the world of advertising. As such, the dilemma is down to judgement. Since advertising is a form of expression, and as open-minded individuals we are all free to interpret these in whatever manner we choose. The legitimacy of shock advertising is essentially based upon whether a company's original intentions were morally and ethically constructive or whether their motive was purely profit-oriented.

As the paper utilises secondary data from a media investigation together with interviews from regulatory bodies, perspectives from both advertising agencies and companies which have chosen to use 'controversial' and 'shock' advertising form the next strand of the research process. How and why this approach is taken is of vital consequence and therefore requires further study. In addition, the differing views of the audience who willingly and unwillingly view such advertisements needs to be probed further. Do shock tactics leave a lasting impression, or is it acceptable to offend some of the population, however small, during the advertising process in order to achieve a commercial or social goal.

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