ADVERTISING AND ITS SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract: Advertising in its simplest form means “public announcement”. Advertising as described by the American Marketing Association, Chicago is basically “any paid form of non-personal presentation of ideas, goods and services by an identified sponsor.” This definition in itself states that advertising is mostly a form of persuasive communication with the audience. Further, it is also clear from the definition that advertising is basically one-sided information where information flows from the part of the advertiser (sender) to the public (receiver). Thus, in this context it wouldn’t be wrong to say that that advertising forces itself upon the audiences leaving little scope of response from the receiver’s end. Advertising is thus not a panacea that can restore a poor product or rejuvenate a declining market rather it is a tool that helps in selling new ideas, products and services through the art and strategy of persuasive communication.

Keywords: Advertising, mass communication, advertiser, advertisement, Public Service Advertising, Social Awareness Advertising

Introduction

Advertising is multidimensional and is definitely a form of publicity. Any form of mass communication has a social responsibility attached with it and thus advertisement is no exception. However, one question in this context that needs to be cleared is whether advertisements fulfill the ‘so called responsibility’ or not. Advertisements are meant for the masses and people relate themselves with this medium. Thus, for understanding its
responsibilities towards the public, its positive and the negative aspects needs to understood. It is not only a powerful medium of mass communication but also is a vital component of the economic system, a means of financing mass media, an art form, a social institution, an instrument of business management, a profession and last but not the least a field of employment. In simple terms, advertising is an announcement regarding the launch of a product, service or idea through the usage of basically the most popular mass media. Medium is chosen based on its popularity and the one which has maximum reach. It may vary from audio-visual medium, audio medium to print medium, etc. As advertising is a form of mass communication and thus just like other popular forms it too have some social responsibilities associated with it. Here at this stage, one big question arises whether advertising people do have a responsibility only towards their clients or does this sphere of social responsibility is much bigger than that?

**Negative and Positive Aspects of Advertising**

Like any other medium of mass communication, advertisements also have certain positive as well negative aspects. Several studies have been conducted on the effect of advertising on the price sensitivity of consumers. At first sight, the results of the conducted studies appear to be quite conflicting. Like for instance, some of the studies imply that an increase in advertising leads to an increase in the anticipated price sensitivity of the public. On the other hand, some studies have indicated that an increase in advertising leads to a decrease in the price sensitivity of the consumers.

In this competitive market, with the advent of so many advertising agencies as well as with the arrival of billions of products, services and ideas, satisfying the needs of the clients have become the ultimate objective for the advertisers. In several cases, we find portrayal of misleading and false information in advertisements. People are often left with ample choices about the same kind of products which guarantee almost the same facilities but are not really the same. The advertisers rarely think about the benefit of the people, they are more inclined towards making profit. Further, advertising, apart from its plentiful direct effects, also affects the price sensitivity of the consumers as well as the prices of goods in the market directly. The advertisers including the ones involved in market research are mostly interested in assessing the sensitivities of the consumers to price. This assessment is treated as an input to take strategic and tactical decisions regarding market segmentation, marketing activities, price, as well as cutthroat marketing
strategies. The claims made by advertising need to ensure honesty and truthfulness. On a lighter note, advertising people are citizens of the community and thus being a part of the community they do have certain duties to develop towards the society rather than demolishing the values of the civil society (here it needs to be specified that values do not mean the ones that degrade human dignity). Social responsibility advertisements that help in creating awareness against the evil systems such as dowry system, bonded labour, child labour, caste system, discrimination, etc. Thus, the advertisers in the effort to promote only commercial profit and prosperity cannot simply turn their backs on improving the social, ethical and cultural development of the community. They cannot deny the fact that it is only because of this context of the social and cultural development, people mostly understand and accept the advertiser’s messages. Messages in any advertisement when delivered in real circumstances grab maximum attention of the audiences. It is truthfully stated by experts that an exotic environment might grab attention and can probably retain their interest for a while but eventually fails to persuade and convince as effectively.

The big question that remains yet unanswered is that whether advertising which is one of the most powerful tools of mass media is fulfilling its social responsibility towards the society or not. According to surveys, majority of the consumers felt that advertising holds quite a relevant and significant position in present day society. However, they also feel that the advertisements should be properly censored and checked for the claims being made in order to avoid any type of socially irresponsible advertisings. Nowadays, a number of advertisements are being made that simply exaggerate the qualities of the product often leading to biasness. In those cases, it has been found later that the products were not as good as claimed by the advertisers. In India, a large amount of advertisements are being especially to attract the female audiences. Certain advertisements like that of ready-made garments, fabrics, cosmetics, leather goods, jewelries, etc., mostly feature celebrities and portray highly westernized and showy type of lifestyle. People often cannot relate themselves with these advertisements. It definitely affects the mindset of the people often leaving them with the feeling of inferiority complex in front of those who can lavishly afford the kind of lifestyles portrayed in certain advertisements.

Mostly, the commercials of Radio and Television feature women essentially as the consumers who are preoccupied with clothes, jewelries, and other similar adornments. Women are mostly
portrayed as housewives, loving wife and mother. Only minimum percentages of advertisements show the working class women and their problems.

**Case Studies**

Advertising and its effectiveness is directly associated with its marketing that is the way in which a product has been launched or presented to the consumers. Products are identified with certain taglines. Those advertisements become extremely popular that can aptly touch the pulse of the consumers. Popularity of any product defines the effectiveness of advertisements. Following are some case studies that would indicate the effectiveness of powerful advertisements and the impact of the popular taglines on audiences in Indian market.

i. **Vicks Action 500**

It was introduced in India in 1979. Today, the capsules enjoy a huge market share in anti-cold tablets category. To begin with, people from south and west of India preferred balms but North Indians liked quick solution to their cold problems. These days, however the consumption of Vicks Action 500 is much more in West and South, and accounts for around two third of its sales. Vicks Action 500 is India’s first advertised OTC medicine, whereas other anti-cold tablets were all doctor prescribed. It was launched as one dose medication (the norm being two doses then). Its brand name signified ‘one’s getting back into action’. The numeral 500 was chosen to make it register in the minds of the rural folks.

The first account managers were O&M. The pilot ad with the words ‘Haan Bhai Haan’ was largely conceived. The first ad cast Dheeraj Kumar. Tiku Talsania was next in line.  


ii. **Dettol Soap**

Reckitt & Colman of India’s Dettol antiseptic is a brand leader in disinfectants. It is the oldest player with a stint of 60 years behind it. It has become synonymous with disinfectant properties in consumer mind. It extended the brand name to Dettol Soap. The soap was earlier launched on the love-and-care promise like all other premium soaps. The launch year was 1982. Dettol, however, had a formidable reputation as a health and hygiene product.

The brand was sold on the pitch of possessing cleansing properties. Dettol had a strong antiseptic image and the consumers were not ready of accept a ‘soft’ soap. In the trial period, it registered 1 p.c. share but repeat purchases were few. RCI learnt on the strength of the research that in any
brand extension of their, they should transmit the characteristics of the mother brand. The consumer had to relate the new product to the main brand closely.

In 1985, Dettol was re-launched and repositioned. The advertising theme was a ‘100 per cent bath’ at those times when a ‘special’ bath and a ‘special (Dettol) soap is needed. This campaign was closer to the Dettol equity. It goes further by stating that it is special soap for special bath. In other words, you may use your beauty soap, but reserve Dettol for special times. It is a niche of hygiene that it filled up.

   iii. TV Commercial

There are shots of all those special occasions like shopping in a vegetable market and playing with pets. The commercial is more focused. It sold on the pitch of delivering the ‘antiseptic’ promise. It is two-dimensional. It began by selling the special bath so that consumers were convinced of the need for such a bath. They naturally then would look for a soap like Dettol. The soap sells from grocery shops where it competes with other premium soaps. Moreover, it also sells from chemist shops where it has the highest share among all soaps sold. (Foundations of Advertising Theory and Practice – S.A. Chunawalla & K.C. Sethia, Chapter 32, Page – 966)

Social Awareness Advertising

As it is quite clear that advertising is one of the most influential tools of mass communication, there is no doubt regarding the fact that any information delivered through this mode create an impact. In this context role of public service or social service advertising needs to be mentioned. It is also referred as development advertising. Public service or social awareness advertising mainly focuses on social issues like national integration, pollution, family planning, care and concern for aged and disabled, awareness campaigns against smoking, drugs, alcohol, etc. The primary purpose of this type of advertising is to educate the masses through hard hitting didactic messages. This particular genre of advertising does not sell products rather effective messages and ideas.

“Social Awareness Advertising promotes ideas. But for these ideas, creativity will be of a different kind. A product is out there in a shop. A bar of soap is an investment of small consequences. Trying to sell an idea – like a free cancer check-up, the need to keep the Ganga clean, the importance of Family Planning, is altogether a different proposition. It needs more care, more study, more perception, and more inspiration and above all, more sensitivity – not in
the good table manners, sense but as honestly as it is possible for any human being to speak like a person and not an ad man.” (S.R. Iyer, AD veteran)

Tara Sinha (veteran in the field of Advertising, Public Relations, External Affairs, Issues Management and Corporate Communications) wants advertising to become an instrument to accelerate the process of change in the urban and rural society. Social awareness advertising, according to her, should be much more than ‘tokenism’ with a potential to do PR job. It should have a better fate than being hung in galleries or occasionally released in media. Public Service Advertising or Social Awareness Advertising must bear a stamp of professional excellence that moves people to action – especially the voluntary and non-voluntary organizations that together with the makers of advertising and planners of media form a part of the team. She emphasizes that it is important to ensure that there is an agreed statement on the specific and if possible measurable action which the advertising must generate among groups of people. It is also necessary that public service advertising be viewed on a campaign basis: adequate time must be given for advertising to work.

Frank Simoes (ad veteran) is of the opinion that no amount of well drafted and well meaning public service ads will be effective unless they are supported by political, social, legal, religious pressure on the concerned people. (From Foundations of Advertising Theory and Practice – S.A. Chunawalla & K.C. Sethia, Chapter 32, Page – 940)

**Conclusion**

These case studies show that advertisements do have a large impact on the audiences. It clarifies that advertisements really are one of the most powerful and strongest medium of mass communication and when authentic and unbiased messages are delivered through this medium, the products get an instant positive response in the market. It all depends on the advertisers, who introduce the products or services with complete authenticity and without forgetting their responsibility towards the community. Advertisements do have a social responsibility and it wouldn’t be wrong to state that people can be successfully made aware of the all the concerned and relevant social issues through this significant tool of mass communication.