

# Ethics of sex in advertising



**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to discuss whether or not it is ethical to use sexual appeals in advertising. The study also examines (1) if sex actually sells and if so, when and where is it being used in advertising, (2) the use of men and women in ads of a sexual nature, and (3) the role that ethics plays in the use of sexual appeals in advertising. It is important because it not only focuses on the use of sexual appeals in advertising, but also how ethical it is to do so.

The study found that sexual appeals are used often in advertising. Sex does catch people's attention in advertisements, but usually without much brand recognition. Women have been the primary focus in sexual advertising in the past and present, but men are starting to be used more often as the sex object in advertisements. Ethics plays a definite role. There is no clear view of what is ethical and what is unethical when it comes to advertising, but with careful consideration and planning, it is possible for advertisers to find a common ground and use sexual appeals without offending people in the process.

**INTRODUCTION**

As stated by Richmond and Hartman (1982), " Every media consumer is alert to ' sex in advertising.' Its pervasive use and misuse are constantly before us, and typically elicit strong criticism" (p. 53). As one can see, the use of sex in advertising has been happening for several decades and the reason for it? – It works. Advertisements that are sexy in nature tend to be remembered more often than advertisements that are not. The question to ask, though, is how ethical is it to use sexual appeals in advertisements? This

research paper will discuss whether or not sex sells, when and where sexual appeals are used in advertising, who is the primary focus in the ads, and the ethical dilemma of using sexual appeals in advertising.

This study is important to its readers because it not only focuses on the use of sexual appeals in advertising but it also looks at how ethical it is to do so. Advertising draws people in and coaxes them into buying things based on how the ads make them feel. It is not always fair to assume that everyone knows what the advertisers are doing.

### **DOES SEX SELL?**

“ Does sex sell?” Actually, sex does not sell, but sexiness does (Cebzynski, 2000, p. 14). Using sex appeals in advertising is a good way to target certain market segments but not all. What is identified as sexual appeals in advertising? Where and when should sex be used in advertising? Does the use of sexual appeals lead to an advantage for brand remembrance? These questions will be the next topics of discussion for this paper.

The use of sexual appeals in advertising has been happening for decades. Sex is everywhere. There are several different distinctions as to what is being categorized as sex appeal. A study conducted by Ramirez and Reichert (2000) revealed four characteristics of sexy ads: (1) physical features of models, (2) behavior/movement, (3) intimacy between models, and (4) contextual features such as camera effects (p. 267).

Ramirez and Reichert (2000) sought to find what people consider sexy in advertising. The most common referent was physical features (66%), followed by a model’s movements and verbal and nonverbal communication

(39%), contextual features (26%), and proxemics (15%) (p. 269). They made an important note that what people referred to as sexy differed gender to gender. The study showed that females responded more to context than males did at 35% to 20%. It also showed that 28% of the females responded to proxemics or references to physical distance or relative interaction between models compared to 6% of the males (p. 269).

### **WHEN AND WHERE SHOULD SEX BE USED IN ADVERTISING?**

This section will discuss the usefulness of sexual appeals in advertising, but not from the ethical stand point. Sexual appeals only work in some advertisements. Many studies have been conducted regarding this subject.

Jones, Stanaland, and Gelb (1998) conducted an experiment to see how men and women responded to beefcake and cheesecake ads. A beefcake ad is an ad that has a sexy male model as the center of the ad. A cheesecake ad is an ad that has a sexy female model as the center of the ad. The study found that women had higher recognition scores for the ad showing a nonsexy male model than for the beefcake ad, and men had higher recall scores for the ad showing a nonsexy female than for the cheesecake ad. The study also found that women had lower recognition scores than men for the beefcake ad, and women viewing the cheesecake ad had higher recognition scores than women viewing the beefcake ad. Also, men had lower recall than women for the cheesecake ad. They concluded their study with the statement, “ The nonsexy ads seemed to do the most good with the least harm” (p. 36).

It is important to evaluate the audience who will be viewing the ads before invoking a sexual appeal into the ad. A recent study conducted by Whipple and McManamon (2002) found that there is not an industry-wide conspiracy that advertisers use men as voiceovers in ads. Rather, individual advertisers and agencies make decisions about specific products and ad executions. For instance, a spokesperson and an announcer's sex can affect advertising evaluations for a gender-specific product but not for non- gender imaged products (p. 87).

“ Advertising research reveals that sexual appeals are attention getting, arousing, affect inducing, and memorable” (Reichert, Heckler, and Jackson, 2001, p. 14). But, although studies have demonstrated that sexual appeals attract attention to the ad, they do so typically without a corresponding advantage for brand information processing. Although using sexual appeals in brand advertisements has not proven to be as effective as needed, using them in social marketing may be beneficial. “ From a social marketing perspective, sexual appeals may be beneficial for the simple reason that they are attention-getting and potentially motivating desirable message characteristics in a saturated media environment” (Reichert, Heckler, and Jackson, 2001, p. 18).

The use of overt sexual appeals in print advertising has increased considerably in contemporary advertising practice. According to an article by Henthorne and LaTour (1994), today it is common for a reader of any age to pick up a general-interest consumer magazine and find an advertisement featuring provocatively posed and attired models for many consumer products (p. 82). During the past decade, the use of sexual appeals in print

advertisement has become commonplace. Among the most memorable companies, which base their advertisement on sexual appeals, is Calvin Klein. Their ads usually feature a nude couple in a somewhat provocative position. Also, many of the print advertisements for Calvin Klein jeans are just as suggestive and memorable (p. 82). Ads of this type are designed to elicit what the originators hope is a vicarious experience of sensuality (Henthorne and LaTour, 1994, p. 82).

In the 2000's, the use of sexual appeal in advertising continues to be a very controversial topic. A 1994 study done by Henthorne and LaTour revealed that an ad which contains a strong overt sexual appeal results in a significantly less favorable attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intention than an ad that contains little or no sexual appeal (p. 90). For example, a very controversial AXE subway ad in Mexico has an arrow pointing up the shiny miniskirt of a woman driving a convertible sports car. Another ad shows a man with his arm around a woman with the arrow pointing down the front of her low-cut shirt. Next to the arrows is the statement: " To get what you want" (Ordonez, 2003, p. 48). In this case, strong overt sexual appeal is being used in order to place brand remembrance on AXE. As a result, the brand also has been labeled as a company which is involved in strong overt sexual advertising (Ordonez, 2003, p. 48). Although the use of highly sexual print ads is viewed more negatively, the attitude of women is significantly more negative than that of their male counterpart. As the morals and ethics of society change over time, what is considered appropriate and acceptable by society must also change. Therefore it is necessary to re-evaluate the assumptions on which

strategic decisions are based when it comes to print advertising. Advertisers need to look at potential social issues and consequences at stake when considering an advertisement based on sexual appeal.

Ethical issues involving sexual appeal in commercials are more controversial than those involving print advertising due to the high number of viewers that see commercials. Sexual appeals in commercials have many types and consist of a variety of elements. They often involve visual elements such as attractive models, and they may portray varying degrees of nudity and suggestiveness. Although commercials often use visual elements for sexuality, appeals may also include verbal elements and music. A study conducted by Severn, Belch, and Belch (1990) found that the use of sexual advertising appeals detracts from the receivers' processing of message content. The use of sexual appeals in the study seemed to detract from the processing and retention of message arguments. However, it did appear that the recipients would focus their attention more on the execution elements of ads using this type of appeal (p. 21). With the use of sexual appeals in commercials being both controversial and productive in remembering a product, there is a fine line that advertisers should follow to keep the controversy to a minimum. According to Gould (1994), advertisers can attempt to accommodate the seemingly conflicting concerns of the public by following four guidelines: (1) targeting commercials as carefully as possible to avoid unnecessary conflict and to minimize the viewing of sexual appeals by people who might be disconcerted by them, (2) heightening their own awareness of the impact of their sexual appeals on the public at large as well as on their target market, (3) testing the effects of their commercials, not

only on their target, but also on other members of the public who might see their commercials, and (4) considering the effects of their commercials in prompting individuals, whether in their target or not, to take actions that have negative consequences (p. 78). Regardless of the guidelines, it is difficult for both managerial and governmental policy makers to know how to approach this sensitive ethical dilemma because of the variety of ethical and moral standards of today's public. In any market, advertising and promotions are partly an educated guessing game. You are bound to have unexpected hits and disappointing flops. At home or abroad, the old saying almost always proves true: "It pays to advertise" (Zhan, 1999, p. 83).

### **ARE WOMEN THE PRIMARY FOCUS?**

For years, many have believed that women are the primary focus of sex appeals used in advertising. This is not necessarily correct. Women seem to be the target most recognized in sexual appeals, but men have been targeted more recently.

Women have often been the targets of sexual advertising because it seems to work in many cases. Sex is a powerful and easy method of getting male attention and making a product desirable. In advertising, it is easy to get a man's attention by using women's bodies and associating getting the women if he buys the product (Taflinger, 1996, p. 8). The most well known target of women as sexual appeals has been in beer commercials and advertisements. Usually the ads go something like this: a beautiful woman is sitting at a bar and a man comes up and she does not notice him at all. Then he orders a certain kind of beer and all of the sudden, he is desirable to this woman.



They then get caught up in the moment and ultimately the man gets this woman (because of the beer).

Another example of the man getting the hot woman because of a particular product that supposedly makes the man more desirable to the women is the AXE commercial. AXE is a body spray for men. In the commercial, the men who use AXE get beautiful women. In fact, AXE is so effective that if in any way you come in contact with this body spray, you will be instantly wanted. The commercial features an old man getting a young, hot woman because of the “ AXE Effect” (2004).

Women are used over and over again in advertising as sex appeals. But, some do not realize that these advertisements are often targeted at women as well. Victoria’s Secret is a good example of this. They want women to think that if they buy Victoria’s Secret products, they could be like the beautiful, sexy models on their commercials. Obviously these bra and panties are not going to look this good on just anyone. But, at first glance, a woman might think, “ Wow, she looks awesome; I should get that outfit so I can look that good too.”

Women are not the only focus in sexual appeal advertising. Men play a large role as well. According to Taflinger (1996), “ It is rare for advertising to use sex as an appeal for women. Women are often less interested in the sex act itself for its own sake. They are interested in sex for what it can mean in the future. They may enjoy it as much as men, but for them it has far greater significance. Advertising cannot take advantage of a woman’s instinctive sexual desire because advertising’s job is not to build for the future-it is to

sell a product now” (p. 6). Here, Taflinger tries to explain that women are not interested in sexual appeals on television. They are interested in sex for their future. Although this seems to be correct in some instances, it is questionable when thinking about all of the ads that target men as the sex selling object.

Some recent ads that target men as sex objects and sexual appeals are Abercrombie & Fitch and Calvin Klein. Abercrombie & Fitch is notorious for using men as sexual objects in their advertising. Many times, it is a large group of men standing around half naked if not completely nude. Although this company is a clothing company, they mainly advertise using naked pictures of their models. This does not make much sense except to assume they are trying to sell sex.

Sex does sell for Abercrombie. But is it to women? Many questions have been asked about the nature of Abercrombie’s advertisements. Some speculation has brought up the question: who are they trying to target with these advertisements?

Men are used over and over again in advertising, although it is generally targeted at the younger market. It is targeted at not only women but men also. This generation of women is becoming more open to sexual advertisements and is more apt to be enticed by them. According to a study conducted by Morrison and Sherman (1972), when looking at nudity and sexual arousal together, the majority of the women who rated ads high in nudity also reported being sexually aroused by the ads. This is contrary to

traditional views that women are not as sexually aroused by nudity as men are (p. 19).

### **THE ROLE OF ETHICS**

Abercrombie, Express, Sony, Calvin Klein: all big companies with big brands who promote to the public in a big way; therefore, they rely heavily on agency expertise to help them do so. Likewise, in the ethical paradigm that is marketing through sex to the public, who should be accountable for the way in which the campaign is conducted?

Clearly, agencies shoulder the majority of the responsibility for the campaigns they deliver. Ensuring compliance with regulatory guidelines often falls to the agency and although the client does hold the ultimate responsibility, they will often follow the agency's lead. As a result, a true partnership needs to be developed in order to ensure a sustainable relationship based on trust and transparency. This is necessary to get the success that is sought after (Gould, 1994, p. 76).

How can agencies and their clients establish this desired state of partnership? By seeing what the goal is—sexual appealing, successful campaigns that send sales through the roof and still makes sure negative publicity stays away from the brand.

A helpful path that leads agencies along the route to creating effective and responsible advertising entails five key elements: the brief, time pressures, competition, measures of success, and commercial pressures. The brief is important because a good brief lays the foundation for a good campaign. Second, sufficient time creates the conditions necessary to create a great

idea. Third, do what is right for the brand and the target audience regardless of the competition. Fourth, evaluate your measures of success qualitatively as well as quantitatively. Last, respect the relevant codes of practice and do not let commercial pressure affect your campaign. Thoroughly implementing these key elements will help agencies and companies launch a successful campaign. The measure of a great agency is its ability to help the promoter navigate that path and counter balance the pressures it brings (Gould, 1994). Working in partnership with the promoter, the agency can embrace the responsibilities it holds and have fun, while keeping the public safe, warm, and fully protected.

While ethics and the role which it plays in advertising continue to generate a great deal of attention, the role of the educator has become an important factor for advertising. Social changes in the U. S. have further complicated the situation and raised the need for attention to ethical advertising. The use of sex and sexual appeal in advertising is at an all time high (Ramirez and Reichert, 2000, p. 267). With this being said, professional educators play a big role in keeping this trend ethical and sexy at the same time. Educators need to firmly imply the positives of ethical advertising and behavior compared to possible downfalls of unethical advertising. Simply put, the philosophy has been that all advertisers must fish in the same pond and when the waters are muddied by unethical advertising, everyone catches less fish. This is a very true philosophical statement that educators can preach to their students. The result has been to exhort ethical behavior because it is good business. A further reason for educators to preach ethical standards has been the clear understanding that such activity can often be

used to head off governmental regulation which the industry always feels would be impossibly restrictive (Fraedrich and Ferrell, 1992). As one may know, the foundations and fundamentals of students are what they will rely on when in the workplace; therefore, good fundamentals and practices are a key component for ensuring ethical behaviors during stressful situations.

In short, the role in the development of advertising ethics lies in a proper emphasis of advertising as an institution to assist the students in proper and ethical behavior in the advertising industry. Advertising will continue to have a weak public image until the field of practice is built on a more professional base. With educators encouraging thoughtful attention to problematic aspects of advertising, students will be better mindful of ethical questions and situations. As a result, the students will attain their goal of a “Professional Advertising Education.”

To understand more fully the positive and negative effects and ethical dilemmas arising from the use of sexual appeals in advertising, one must consider the fundamental concepts contained in normative ethical theories of moral philosophy (Gould, 1994, p. 78). Normative ethical theories can either be classified as teleological or deontological.

Teleological philosophies are defined as philosophies concerned with the moral worth of an individual behavior (Fraedrich & Ferrell, 1992).

Teleological philosophies maintain that the individual should examine and determine the probable consequences of alternative actions and behaviors in a specific situation (Henthorne & LaTour, 1994, p. 82).

Deontological philosophies focus on specific actions or behaviors of the individual without regard to the consequences of the actions. Thus, deontology opposes the principal tenet of teleology (Fraedrich & Ferrell, 1992). Deontology supports the theory that the rightness or wrongness of actions should be judged by the actions themselves instead of the outcomes. It is not realistic to believe that individuals make ethical decisions strictly on the basis of either teleology or deontology. Individuals do not use clearly defined concepts of ethical philosophies in making specific ethical evaluations but a mixing of these philosophies are used.

With this being known, the expectations of a print ad displaying strong sexual appeal should yield a significantly less favorable attitude toward the ad, the brand, and purchase intention than an ad containing only mild sexual appeal. This expectation is supported by a study conducted by Henthorne and LaTour (1994). It was clear in the study that undesirable reactions and consequences might result from the use of strong overt sexual appeals (p. 88). Although risky, sexual appeal is often a creative way to capture the consumer's attention. The point at which sexual appeal may be viewed as unethical and counter productive is what advertisers are concerned with. Sex objectification is very much in the " eyes of the beholder" and, therefore, leaves the object of effective advertising very challenging. As a result, there is no simple solution when it comes to the use of sexual appeal in advertising. The best advice is for advertisers to recognize the ethical complexity of sexual appeal in advertising and incorporate that understanding in their strategic thought. Henthorne and LaTour, (1994) state " As the ethical considerations of society change over time, what is

considered appropriate and acceptable in advertising must also change” (p. 88). So, it is imperative to continually re-evaluate what society would consider acceptable and consider the full level of consequences of their actions before considering what they perceive as ethically acceptable.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The study discussed whether it is ethical to use sexual appeals in advertising. The study also examines (1) if sex actually sells, when and where it is being used in advertising, (2) the use of men and women in ads of a sexual nature, and (3) the role that ethics plays in the use of sexual appeals in advertising. This study is important because it not only focuses on the use of sexual appeals in advertising, but it also looks at how ethical it is to do so. Advertisers try to appeal to people’s emotions and coerce them into buying things they really do not need.

The following conclusions were drawn from this research:

- Q. Sex sells sometimes. After evaluating the characteristics used in ads as sexy, the main characteristic identified was physical features. Sex appeal does not always lead to brand remembrance, but rather using sexual appeals in social marketing, like condom ads, will prove to be a better fit and will work better to send a message. Sex is used everywhere in advertising including print ads, commercials, and on the Internet. Sexual advertisements are mainly targeted at younger groups that have a different, more open view of sex.
- R. Answering the question: Are women the primary focus in sexual appeals? – Yes, they are. With the growing open mindedness to sex

that the younger females in America are experiencing, men have been targeted more and more. Abercrombie and Fitch uses male models as sex objects in almost every ad. They are even known for targeting the homosexual market. The use of men in advertising is growing and will be highly used in the future.

The role that ethics plays in using sexual appeals in advertising is that there is a fine line between what people think is acceptable and what they think is unacceptable. The main thing to consider is what is the product or service that is being sold and who is the targeted consumer. For example, it would be unethical to put sexual appealing commercials on Nickelodeon.

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