

In of new brands or
new products



In terms of its basic identity, advertising in India has not made any noticeable change in recent years. In a sense the major body of advertising still retains its 'product promotion' character and urban direction. Its symbolism and appeals still have a great deal in common with those used in many western countries. Its identity remains that of a 'sales aid', attributable to selling costs, assessed on the time-honored scale of demand generation to cost incurred. This identity must perforce be so, since the competitive conditions in the market place and the rational desire to utilise capacity to full, must result in the advertising machine turning out communication in much the same way as it has always done. And the fight in the market place must lead to a direct fight in the media vehicles.

The mainstream of advertising is, and will perhaps continue to be, concerned with giving a brand or a company a little more shoulder in the market place. If we accept this to be the role of advertising an attempt to eulogise its services for any direct social purpose might seem a trifle exaggerated. Yet, some social benefits do stem even from this predominantly commercial role of advertising. In the larger context of far-reaching social change, these benefits do not perhaps contribute to greatly but this is only to state that to date the use to which advertising has been put has restricted itself more or less to commercial area. Consider the entry of new brands or new products in the market place.

New brands/products many a time bring with them attendant benefits which are geared to giving the customer a better buy and in helping him attain a better standard of living. New products normally being the result of better technology, do quite frequently offer direct or indirect rewards that affect the

standard and quality of life. By ensuring sufficient demand, advertising enables these products to survive in a competitive situation and to come to the forefront. Take another example, which relates to the promotion of various health foods, tonics, and nutrition products. These groups of products, many a time new in concept or in terms of ingredients used, contribute directly to raising the standard of health amongst the general populace.

Advertising, by helping the growth of these products, does serve a basic useful function. This is not to stretch the point unduly and I must state that the foregoing discussion is not meant to ascribe an overtly social role to advertising but only to establish the fact that commercial activity, of which advertising is an integral part, does influence social change. There is yet another level on which product advertising has served an interesting social purpose the transmission of values from the urban to the rural areas. The growth of advertising media was brought more and more rural markets within the ambit of advertising, promoting not only a greater desire for literacy but serving also to transmit urban social values to the rural areas. The profounder .

aspects of this encroachment is outside the purview of this article but for good or for bad an inevitable social interaction has been set in motion by advertising. Yet one point needs mention which robs much of the glory attributed to advertising the generation of aspirations that cannot be sustained. Advertising, through its persuasive powers, creates the desire for a standard of living or life-style, which many people cannot afford. It encourages consumers to see themselves in unrealistic roles. It stimulates

the desire for immediate gratification of individual needs. And coupled with the various “ Buy now, pay later” schemes promoted, it enhances existing inflationary trends. The consequence is also felt in the social structure, as the ramifications of living in debt, start coming home. Apart from this, there are other areas where advertising has been known to serve a high social purpose.

This is through what are known as public service campaigns. The war mobilisation effort, funds for flood and emergency reliefs, blood donation campaigns, TB and malaria eradication programmes, to name a few. In these and many other cases advertising has borne the main responsibility for their success. In a sense it is when dealing not just with facts but with concepts that the real communicating power of advertising has displayed itself.

There has been the difficult task of persuasion to be achieved, the task of re-educating and reversing socially non-beneficial trends, of skillfully utilising every tool available in the field of mass communication. And this communication has had to overcome a plethora of ethnic, regional and lingual barriers. The most recent cases in point are the family planning campaign and the nutrition programmes. Yet, this does not wish away the fundamental score, that the main body of advertising has served little social purpose. It is time, I feel, that advertising practitioners sat up and evolved plans and programmes by which the situation could be improved, since the process of redressal is in our hands and the means of doing so within our midst.