

# Advertising and benetton assignment

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After years of controversy over ads such as AIDS, war, interracial relationships, and priests kissing nuns, it may be time for Benton to campaign about something other than controversial social issues, like clothes. On January 1, 2000, Bonnet's new advertising campaign wasn't about sweaters or pants, but about convicted murderers that are on death row. The "death row" ads feature portraits of American death row inmates in prison uniforms with the slogan "Sentenced to Death". The ads give the inmate's name, date of birth, crime, and expected method of execution.

Within the campaign, inmates also talk about topics ranging from their childhood to their dreams, everything except their victims. According to CNN, victims' rights advocates are outraged as well as are the individuals that cost loved ones to the profiled inmates. Once again, Benton is faced with another controversy that could perhaps worsen their already poor US market share. According to the New York Stock Exchange, where The Benton Group is publicly traded, it seems that the company has lost over ten dollars per share since their peak of 50 15/16 in January.

This decrease could be attributed to many things, but perhaps the most significant was the February announcement that Sears would immediately pull Benton designed clothes from all 400 of its stores that had been selling the Benton USA line. The Benton USA line was specifically designed for Sears when the TV companies joined last summer to introduce a new line of juniors, kids, and men's apparel. Troubled by the campaign, Sears renegotiated its contract with Benton to gain the right to preview future Benton ad campaigns.

A revised clause in the contract also gave Sears the ability to withdraw from the deal without penalty if the two parties were unable to agree on future campaigns, according to CNN. Regardless of these changes, the controversy was too significant for Sears to ignore due to the hundreds of consumer implants that poured into the store after the campaign released. According to the February 21, 2000 article in Advertising Age, a Sears spokesman said the chain allied itself with Benton because " We thought they were past that and had come to a point where they were interested in selling merchandise.

The whole episode is tragic, for the victims, for Sears and for Benton. " However, Sears is not the only one taking action against the company. According to CNN, it was announced on February 10, 2000 that the state of Missouri was suing Benton for ads featuring death row inmates that reside in Missouri prisons. Missouri claims that the company deceived the state when it used the death row inmates as part of its ad campaign. The state thought the inmates were being interviewed for a project sponsored by the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers.

In addition, according to the February 19, 2000 article in The Economist, a Benton spokesperson in New York admitted that payment was made to two inmates for the rights to their likeness. The state accuses Benton of fraudulent misrepresentation, trespass by deceit and trespass by exceeding the scope of consent. Although the problems with Sears and Missouri could have significantly decreased the overall value of Benton, the fact remains that consumers ultimately decide the fate of a company by whether or not they shop there.

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It seems that sources such as CNN, Wall Street Journal, and Advertising Age, among others, have touched upon US consumer reactions to the new ad campaign. Overall, it is not being accepted well in the United States and an already weak market will continue to weaken as long as Benton refuses to change its US advertising techniques. According to the Washington Post, Benton is tanning by its campaign. In fact, its US director of communications stated, “ Once again, it’s very hard for people to see what we’re doing and understand that it’s not advertising, that it’s a way to get people to think. Perhaps this is the problem with Bonnet’s campaigns in the United States, US consumers do not want to think about AIDS or the death penalty when they are shopping for pants, maybe they just want to shop for pants. Overall, the new campaign seems to be high-risk for Benton as its market value continues to decrease. A January 24, 2000, article in the New Statesman stated the dangers to Benton seem insignificant. Benton is used to unfavorable publicity, and for all its undoubted worthiness, the whole campaign is expressly designed to provoke outrage. Such strategies have become the Benton signature.

Although Benton wants to call attention to the reality of capital punishment, is provoking outrage a good strategy for a market that obviously does not take social issues lightly? Benton should learn from past US experience. In 1992 the Wall Street Journal stated that Benton had 700 stores in the United States in the early 1980s, which five years earlier was the biggest market outside Europe. However, today those numbers have decreased significantly to 200. This could be attributed to the failure to design a consistent marketing strategy from the outset.

Most stoneware in the IIS closed their Benton doors because of personal conflict with the company's campaigns. The past seems to be repeating itself with the Sears conflict. The marketing issue for Benton becomes the decision of whether to continue its current ad campaigns in the United States despite the risk of losing more market value or to redesign the campaigns to better suit the US consumer's frame of mind. As a group, we feel that Benton needs to rethink its IIS market strategy to increase its presence, better its reputation, and increase its market value.

In order to do this, we have come up with some consumer behavior factors that Benton needs to be aware of and recommendations that they should seriously consider to turn around the US market. Marketing and Ethics (United Colors of Benton) Marketing issues, as they relate to business ethics, extend across a wide range of business activities that characterize a company's relationship with its customers (product manufacture and integrity; disclosure, labeling and snacking; marketing and advertising; selling practices; pricing; and distribution).

In recent years the scope of marketing issues has expanded, including new problems like an environmental responsibility, a firm's relationship to its competitors etc. Companies now are expected to bear a greater responsibility for the integrity, use and consequences of their products and services. Companies' concerns with satisfying society needs have a very rational explanation: if a company will not care about welfare of society, it may ultimately cease to exist, because it operates by community consent to oblige its requirements.

For that reason, firms put a lot of effort in dealing with the issue of corporate social responsibility, recognizing the importance (and potential benefits) Of doing so. There are plenty of external standards for marketing practices: codes of ethical behavior (e. G. Ones established by the American Marketing Association), industry specific guidelines developed by different trade associations and legal standards set forth by national and local governments. These laws and codes provide assistance to companies in establishing their marketing policies.

Some of the examples of such policies are as follows ([http://www. Sir. Org/](http://www.Sir.Org/)):

- \*Sears, Roebuck- the company's Code of Conduct , "... You (employee) are expected to deal fairly, honestly and responsibly states with all customers, fellow associates and anyone else you come in contact with while representing Sears. With regard to customers, this duty requires you to conduct sales in a truthful and accurate manner, always maintaining the highest of ethical standards.
- C] USA: the company's Core Values Statement reads: " We will consistently behave in ways that are ethical, earning the respect of members and customers by being steadfast in our commitment to act in both their best interests and the interests of the Association, regardless of any business, social, economic or personal pressures to the contrary. " In what follows, we will focus on the topic of ethical ramifications of certain advertising practices, which are rarely covered by the companies' policies; namely on utilizing emotion-arousing ads.

The American Marketing Association (AMA), for example, in its code states that one of the basic marketer's responsibilities is not to harm customers (Siring, 1999). It also recommends avoiding false and misleading advertising

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but there is no annotation regulating advertising by appealing to customer's motions. There are at least two explanations for that: emotion-arousing ads are commonly used and seem to work; the regulation of the utilizing this type of ads is very difficult to convey (e. G. There are no objective standards for it).

Emotion-arousing ads are widely used and are commonly perceived to be very effective. There is an empirical evidence indicating, that subjects better remember and more regularly recall ads awakening fear, than they do warm or with no emotional content ones (Thornton and Fieriest, 1985). Advertisers try to evoke emotional responses for the following reasons Hyman and Tenses, 1 990): 0 Emotions can be an important benefit derived from product or brand. CLC Emotions can help to communicate the benefits of product or brand.

C] Emotions can directly influence attitudes. Each of these functions help companies sell products/essence's, and that is precisely the reason for using ads in the first place, right? It is not surprising then, that we are bombarded by commercials, that try to grab our attention by provoking emotional response, such as fear, sadness or just simply annoyance. Yet, some critics feel, that these ads may be unethical, because hey can expose a person to harmful and offensive images (Snipes, La Tour and Bliss, 1999).

Not only that, others say, emotion-arousing ads prey on vulnerable customers by exposing them to emotional responses, they cannot freely choose or control (Hyman and Tenses, 1990). One type of emotion- arousing ads seems to be especially morally controversial: a psychoactive ad. “ A

psychoactive ad is any emotion-arousing ad that causes a meaningful, well-defined group of viewers to feel extremely anxious, to feel hostile toward others, or to feel a loss of self-esteem” (Hyman and Tenses, 1990).

Given that these ads can actually hurt viewers, some believe that it is unethical to carelessly produce and use such ads (Hyman and Tenses, 1990). If not for sake of caring about society, people responsible for advertising practices should be aware of the possible audience reactions to the use of such ads. When customers feel that specific advertising practices are unethical, they may exhibit an unwanted behavior; ranging from indifference to the products, to boycotts or demands for government regulations (Snipes, La Tour and Bliss, 1999). Such actions can be very costly for a company and may tarnish its image permanently.

To illustrate potential problems with using emotional-arousing ads we will examine more closely marketing practices Of Benton Group. The company’s controversial ads have won awards and united Colors of Benton has become the third most recognized brand in the world-following Coca-Cola and McDonald’s ([http://www. BBS. Org/](http://www.BBS.Org/)). On the other hand, the company has faced a lot of problems tied to its marketing practices (strong negative responses from customers from all over the world, including boycotts; legal suits from retailers who claim that company’s advertising is sabotaging their sales).

We are going to discuss three major reasons why we think the company’s ads can be perceived as an unethical, or at least morally hazardous. First, most of the advertising is irrelevant to the products/services sold by the



company. Secondly, the ads evoke strong emotions that sometimes can not be control or that are unwelcome by viewers. Lastly, they can be perceived as psychoactive (“ Death Row” campaign). We start with the short company information, then we look at the history of company advertising practices and finally we finish by presenting the recent changes in company practices.

To get more information about Benton Group We turned to its website ([http://win. Benton. Com/](http://win.Benton.Com/)) where We found following information about company: “ Larger, more international and closer to the market, a new Benton Group emerged from the integration of design and production capabilities in the textile and clothing sector (present with the world-famous brands United Colors of Benton and Sisley), with the strong image and reputation of the sport brands Playbill, Prince, Rollerblading, Nordic and Killer Loop.

Benton is a unique global group, where design and manufacturing know-how in the textile-clothing sector are combined with he strong identity and image of the some of the world’s leading sports brands The clothing sector includes both casual and sportswear which has an annual production above 90 million garments. With a total turnover, before retailing, of 4, 000 billion lire (more than 1. Billion dollars), the Benton Group is today a global company. Setting a new way of experiencing sport and leisure at the center of its philosophy, it offers a range of clothing that satisfies all requirements and, thanks to the US brands Rollerblading and Prince, it has achieved an improved balance in terms of world presence, also in the competitive North American markets.

The Benton family's holding company, Edition Holding, includes companies operating worldwide in various sectors: textile-apparel, sports equipment and accessories, highway and commercial catering; infrastructures and services for transportation and communication; real estate and agriculture and others (for details look at the organization's chart). Edition Holding's total aggregated turnover reaches 13, 000 billion lire (more than 5. 7 billion dollars). The average number Of personnel in the Group exceeds 30, 000 units.

The Benton Group “ constitutes the traditional and innovative “ heart” of the system”. The Benton Group operates in 120 countries, with the 6, 000 stores, but it gets only 5% of sales in the world's biggest market, the US (Swanson, 1998). “ Our products are maybe too frivolous for American tastes,” says Lucian Benton (Swanson, 1998). Critics say, that clothing is not a problem: the company's practices of using advertisement based on provocation and playing on customer's emotions, are responsible for the situation. Benton has a specific approach to issue of corporate social responsibility.

It is expressed by company's ad philosophy, which is rooted in social awareness and changes. Olivier Toscanini, creative director of the Benton Group, says that the advertising industry does not recognize its power to influence culture for the better. He states, adjusts advertising a product is a waste of communication. He also claims, “ Advertising is the richest and most powerful form of communication in the world. We need to have images that will make people think and discuss” (www. Benton. Com). Founder,

Lucian Benton, adds: “ Advertising has a habit of portraying only the rich, beautiful and blonde.

We need images of normal people, to help us see the world differently” (the same source). The company positions on the role of marketing has received mixed reaction; from very positive, perceiving its practices as genuine expression of involvement in social problems, to ferocious attacks of others, who claim that company is putting a facade of social responsibility, just to cover an intention of getting publicity by any means possible (even if it means offending a lot of people). Bonnet’s web site summarizes history of its advertising quite adequately: United Colors Divided Opinions.

Since the beginning Bonnet’s advertising has faced controversy: gathering awards and recognition on one side, and at the same time getting strong negative reactions from others. It started out quite innocently though. In 1984, the company ad showed six adorable children of different races wearing colorful ethnic clothing with the headline “ All the Worlds Colors”. This campaign appeared in 14 countries and along with the prize from the Dutch magazine ‘ Avenue” came the refusal to print the ads in publications reserved for whites in South Africa.

For the next few years company’s message was peace and brotherhood. The advertising was refreshingly different and it worked. The following campaign addressed the issue of racism. To describe a few of the posters: black woman breastfeeding a baby, black and white child on potties. Again public voices were split. Even though the campaign was aiming at presenting the equality between blacks and whites, the African American community in U. S.

Opposed strongly to the first ad, claiming that it perpetuates the stereotype of the black nanny, relegated to subordinate role.

Internationally, this photo became the most awarded image in Bonnet's advertising history. In 1991, peace and brotherhood have been replaced by the desire to shock and provoke customers, as some of the opponents claim. Ads became more aggressive and attention grabbing. First came a giant poster showing a cloud made up of multistoried condoms, after that the priest-kissing-a-nun poster, which drew protests from around the world, followed by a newborn child covered with blood. In 1993, Benton launched Aids and Safe Sex Campaign, with its very graphic and controversial posters.

The list goes on. The ads initially succeed in rising brand's profile, but eventually began to cause problems with customers and retailers. In 1995, German retailers sued Benton, claiming the ads sabotage their sales effort. In the U. S. , the company had even more problems. By 1995 stores had all but disappeared. Sensationalism bred more sensationalism, but not sales. Advertising Age reported surveys in which 83% of customers said Benton ads did not persuade them to shop for the company products (Famine, 2000). In the late nineties, to boost up sales in the U.

S. , Benton tried to team up with the Sears, Roebuck. It could have worked if it was not for the upcoming advertising promotion. In the January 2000, Benton launched " We, on Death Row" campaign. In it Benton reveals the real faces of the prisoners on the death row along with an explanation: this project aims at showing to the public the reality of capital punishment, so that no one around the world will consider the death penalty neither as a

distant problem nor as news that occasionally appear on TV” (www. Benton. Com).

The pictures of faces of 27 incarcerated men and one woman, along with the interviews, first appeared as a 98-page ad insert in the February issue of Talk’ magazine. Toscanini explains, “ We wanted to talk about how it feels to be on death row. What do they dream about? What are they afraid of? ” (ibid) Many were outraged, claiming that Benton wants to increase its sales on the backs, on the users, on the fates of condemned men and women, and their slaughtered victims” (Garfield 2000). It is difficult to guess if the Mr.. Benton or Mr.. Toscanini have anticipated the outcome of the campaign.

In Europe, the issue has not initiated such strong reactions, but in the U. S. The company got a crushing blow. Within weeks of the first ads, Benton was hit by a lawsuit from the state of Missouri, along with boycotts organized by National Organization of Murder Children etc. All the controversy proved to be lethal to Bonnet’s contract with Sears, Roebuck & Co. In June 2000 the Advertising Standards Authority brushed aside 144 complains that Bonnet’s ‘ Death Row” campaign was offensive and disturbing insisting its validity lay on grounds of the adviser’s right to free speech. Nevertheless, the company’s image and sales suffered.

In the light of recent events many have asked if using attention-grabbing ads, completely irrelevant to its product, is ethically right. How showing a convict can help company sell T-shirts? Are they allowed to use a shield of “ improving society” in their marketing practices? Toscanini statement that he is just taking pictures not selling clothes (WV”. Benton. Com) raises even

more questions. Vagueness of the company's campaign goals does not help either; although many of the social issues Benton publicized in its advertising had been supported by the company's efforts beyond marketing (e. . In 1993 " Clothing Redistribution Project"), some still feel it was done as a facade for the real cause: rising the brand's profile. The ethically of the company's advertising practices have been questioned for another reason as well: the high exposure (billboards, TV) increases the inability to control how many see them and how many can be offended by them. The company does not take any steps to ensure that viewers can hose whether they want to be exposed to the images presented (it could be done by using special warnings).