

Overcoming marketing and manufacturing challenges the problem



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The occasional arrogance and bullying while queuing is nothing in comparison to the violence that can take place long before the goods arrive in the shop or supermarket. Violence takes place when there is no morality to our commerce. Nowadays, marketing executives will use all available methods to convince us of the need to buy their company products. They are not selling soap or petrol, but a vision, a way of life. Using the most sophisticated knowledge and techniques, they create unfulfilled desires and then they push us to buy the products that we do not need.

But we should not take all the information we receive at face value. The desire for profit and the appeal for a “ healthy economy” has led many companies and governments to put aside the necessary moral responsibilities in the age of the global market. One often hears the comment made after watching fast cars, semi-nude bodies, or amorous encounters during television adverts or on huge billboards: “ I never did figure out what they were advertising. ” There is no connection or indeed there often is a contradiction between the way of life presented and the product sold.

For instance, sport and beer, sport and hard liquor do not go together in real life, but the advertisers know that rationality is not important, what is important is the emotional impact. Advertisers claim that it is up to the consumer to make moral decisions. The advertisers simply present their products ... but not without spending a great deal of time and money to study how best to attract and control consumers of every age, sex, race and religion. It is interesting to note that what we really need does not need advertising. For instance, nobody spends huge sums advertising flour.

People will buy it even without it being advertised. But soft drinks may stop selling after a few months without adverts. The need for it is created by the advert. Otherwise everybody would consider it a rip-off to pay Kshs 20 for a glass of water with a bit of sugar, artificial colouring and flavouring whose real value must not be over a shilling. More serious, however, are company and government policies that avoid moral responsibilities and thus establish a whole violent culture. The United States Government has often been criticised for ignoring the violations of human rights in countries with whom they want to do business.

In other countries, such criticism is not allowed. From time to time in Kenya, for instance, we read reports of children who are employed to pick fruits or coffee and are paid a pittance. Usually, however, the issue is quickly swept under the carpet by those who have economic interest in the plantations. Similarly, around the world, there are many situations where workers are paid very little, and have to work in extremely dangerous or unsanitary conditions to produce goods that companies sell at huge profits ... hile doing nothing to improve the workers' conditions. People are beginning to recognise the injustice and violence done by such companies whose workers toil under deplorable conditions, the use of which amounts to “ slave labour” for the planting and harvesting of the food we eat. Another case is the marketing of products such as powdered milk in countries which have no sanitary water supply to make them safe for use, thus causing diseases and death to a great number of babies.

However, no one has an economic interest in advertising breast-feeding, which is the best and cheapest way nature has provided for babies to grow

strong and healthy. But many have an interest in advertising powdered milk. It is a form of violence to psychologically force in the mind of a rural woman that to be modern she has to feed her babies with powdered milk. As awareness of this kind of violence grows, some people try to respond in a creative way. A few years ago, the European football leagues agreed not to use balls or equipment made under “ slave conditions” in Asian countries.

Most of us do not have that much influence, nor the means to find out how the products we buy are prepared, but we can make an impact. The people who set morals aside are very much concerned about their profits, and governments are concerned about votes. The boycott has been used effectively as a non-violent expression of people's discontent with what is going on. Some people argue that boycotting a product only hurts the workers we are trying to help, but actually they have already been hurt and are smarting.

Often we misunderstand a boycott. It is not only avoiding buying or supporting a particular product, but very honestly letting the company know the reason why we are choosing not to use their product. It takes commitment on our part to make even a small statement. Personally, since the killing of Ken Saro Wiwa and his Ogoni companions in Nigeria, I have followed closely the involvement of the Shell Company in the situation of oppression of the Ogoni and I avoid buying any of their products.

Or, if I have to choose an Internet provider, I carefully look at what is known about the company owner or owners, and I avoid those owned by people of questionable influence in Kenya society. Shopping becomes a way to exercise my moral judgement. It is not wrong to criticise something we love:
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it is precisely because we love our countries, our government and our churches (yes, sometimes churches invest their money in companies involved in dubious deals) that we want to express concern.

Because we have enjoyed a product, we want a company to maintain its quality without doing violence to those who produce that product. Sometimes we have to make some noise to get the attention of those in authority over a situation in order for them to make some necessary changes. Many times this is even helpful, since the people at the top are not always informed about what the people in the middle are doing. Letting our concerns be known is a healthy civic responsibility. Sometimes people will listen, sometimes they will not.

If they do not, then we do indeed have a moral responsibility - as the advertisers so often claim - and we must, in conscience, decide not to use their products, or to support immoral political parties or their candidates. We must also keep in mind that these issues are not always so clear. Sometimes we just have to use our own best moral judgement and to remain open to the possibility of making a mistake.

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