

# Benetton group evolution of communication strategy marketing essay



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Although advertising is an essential factor to all business's success, the nature and purpose differ from one industry to another. Some industries advertise to raise the demand for the product category as a whole. Business-to-business marketers use advertising to perform important functions such as building awareness of the company and its products, generating leads for the sales force, reassuring customers about the purchase they made, or helping create a favorable image of the company (Belch and Belch). In any industry advertising is considered an important promotional tool.

The Benetton Group is a clothing company with strong family roots whose main advertising objective is to raise brand awareness through awareness of social and political issues. Before the 1980s Benetton's advertising focused largely on its products logo, a stylized knot of yarn with the word Benetton printed under it. The owner, Luciano Benetton realized that to be successful, his advertisements had to stand apart from the rest of the competition. He hired Oliviero Toscani, a prominent fashion and advertisement photographer and they decided to promote Benetton as a life style brand. They first used photographs of teenagers from culturally diverse nations wearing Benetton clothing, which created the trademark, " United Colors of Benetton." After that, they launched a similar campaign titled " All the colors in the World" which focused on more photographs of children together from different countries and ethnic groups. They launched more campaigns using photographs of people and things that wouldn't typically go together, such as a wolf and lamb, trying to spread their message of unification. By the late 1980's, Benetton decided to take on their own advertising campaigns in-house. Toscani's new focus was to use photographs that stimulated thinking

among consumers. His advertisements never showed the products or the product logo. He started with advertisements that were racially driven such as a black hand and a white hand linked with a handcuff, and a black woman breast-feeding a white baby. Benetton's position on these advertisements was that the photographs symbolized universal brotherhood. In the early 1990's, Toscani changed his focus more toward advertisements that draw public attention to important social and political problems. A few of these included photographs of many different colored condoms, a baby with an umbilical cord, and a priest and a nun kissing which offended the religious sentiment of many. Some of Toscani's political themed advertisements included images related to the AIDS crisis, environmental disaster, political violence, war, and exile. Toscani stated about Benetton's advertising methods, " All they attempt to do is promote a discussion about issues which people would normally glide over if they approached them from other channels, issues we feel should be more widely discussed" (Ganesan 2003). These advertisements caused much controversy, but despite all that, Toscani went one step further by using " reality advertising" which used actual photographs showing real social issues. Some of these photographs showed a dying AIDS victim with his family at his bedside, and African guerilla holding a Kalashnikov and a human leg bone, a boat overcrowded with Albanians, and a group of African refugees. Benetton went on to create even more shocking advertisements showing close-ups of various human body parts tattooed with the English abbreviation " HIV Positive." Some advertisements promoted homosexuality, while another was a photograph of three human hearts, each portrayed to be the heart of a person of different color, " white, black, and yellow" showing that all were the same inside no

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matter what the outside color was. In the early 2000's, Benetton launched a campaign called " We, on Death Row" which featured twenty-six prisoners in the United States who had been sentenced to death. This campaign resulted in widespread protests from individuals and governments (Ganesan 2003). At that time, Benetton defended themselves as being a company that can raise brand awareness by caring about capital punishment and being able to get people engaged in the topic. Due to the increasing controversy of Benetton's advertising, Toscani resigned in 2000, and they launched a new campaign under new Creative Director James Mollison. Since then, Benetton's advertisements focused more on conventional images, but Benetton remained that the company would still continue with its " socially responsible" status by focusing on non-controversial themes like racial discrimination, poverty, child labor, and AIDS awareness.

There were many pros and cons of Benetton's shock advertising campaign. They were a good example of showing how you can use product advertising for dual purposes. Many people praised the fact that Benetton tackled social and political issues and put them in consumers' faces when they would normally have gone unnoticed. Also, Benetton felt socially responsible for bringing awareness to these issues, and they probably felt a great deal of personal satisfaction from taking that giant leap from a clothing company to a socially active company. Their advertisements also showcased their creativity and ability to think outside the box. There were many downfalls from using this type of advertising though. In most cases, people were offended by the photographs used, or had mixed responses. Many countries tried banning some of Benetton's advertisements. Many political leaders

were also offended including the Pope, which also influenced how their followers viewed the Benetton brand. A problem with using such controversial advertising is that the consumers who feel negatively about the images portrayed in the advertisements will feel negatively toward the company as well. Another problem is that advertising should be used as a tool to promote your product and reach your target markets, and when you aren't doing that, you aren't going to generate sales. Benetton probably did not reach its targeted markets using their shock advertisement campaigns, and as a result they probably didn't reach their full potential of profits.

Toscani stated " To capture their (consumer's) attention, advertising must become an artistic product in itself, like a play or a film" (Ganesan 2003). I completely agree with this statement because advertising is such a complex process and in today's world, advertisements must be creative to catch the attention of the consumers. I also agree with Toscani's argument that potentially offensive images are acceptable in the world of art and journalism while they are not as accepted in advertising. But, I do believe that there is a reason for this. I don't see advertising and product promotion as a good platform for raising social awareness because it is too hard accomplish without leaning too far one way. I think Benetton's advertisements were not effective because they only showed the social issues and had nothing to do with the product. I believe that advertisements for social issues should be just that, and separate from any kind of brand or product. This would be the best choice for a company to promote their brand or product, because it focuses mainly on the product and the market it chooses to reach. I also believe that a company cannot please everyone with its advertising and

there will always be someone who does not agree with a campaign, but you can't tackle such controversial issues and expect it to not have a negative impact on your brand.

Although Benetton has chosen shock advertising as its main form for its campaigns, there are many other companies who have tried it as well. A Nike ad once used a topless, headless torso for its clothing line's sports bra. Coca-Cola promoted an unusual campaign in 1998 featuring a "dead" teenager in a morgue clutching a Coke Card. Coca-Cola pulled the campaign after the public complained about it. Calvin Klein is another company who uses a lot of shock advertisements to gain publicity, which is another word for free advertising. Calvin Klein's advertisements use teenagers in suggestive poses with suggestive voice-overs for print and TV-ads (Fernando). I think these types of advertisements work if you are targeting a younger market because kids and young adults seem to respond to sexually driven campaigns. Advertisements like this work in many industries such as the cars, clothing, music, and show-biz. I don't think using sexually driven advertising is good when targeting an older generation though because they are more likely to be offended. Advertising has changed so much over the years that older generations have a hard time adapting to the new social norms. I think shock advertising is best suited for companies or organizations whose main objective is raising awareness and funds to support research and development for that cause. I can remember the television advertisements as a kid that promoted staying off drugs. They used an egg to symbolize your brain, and then fried the egg in a fry-pan to symbolize your brain on drugs. This type of advertising sticks in people's minds and has

more of an impact than regular advertising would. I have also seen many advertisements that support the research of Cancer and AIDS that use shock advertising. A lot of times they show the patients of these diseases and take a very personal approach to gain the interest of the consumer, and then play on their emotions. I also think that the foundations which raise money for starving children in poor countries use shock advertising. They use photographs of real children who are dirty and look sad, and pictures of crying babies who are obviously malnourished and starving. I think these advertisements are more accepted because we have seen them for a very long time now, and most humans naturally feel bad for these children. That is what makes those types of advertisement for that type of organization so successful. They have figured out a way to play on the wants, needs, and emotions of the consumers.

Benetton gained a lot of publicity over the years for their controversial advertising. Whether or not the public liked their promotional strategies, this publicity did great things for Benetton. I think that after Toscani left Benetton, it was a good time for the company to reassess their promotional goals and make changes to their campaigns and company image. They will always be known for their radical campaigns and the fact that their company stood for the betterment of humanity, and raising awareness of social and political issues. I agree with their decision to drop the use of shock advertising, and return to the use of more conventional advertising. After Toscani left, Benetton was able to realize that they needed to have advertisements of models wearing their clothes. They needed to show consumers that they are an actual clothing line, not a political or

governmental company. I would be willing to bet that prior to 2001, there were many consumers who had seen Benetton's advertisements and had not even realized that they were a clothing company. Although their advertisements were creative, they had nothing to do clothes. Also, there was substantial damage done to Benetton's reputation and they needed to undo the damage by changing their approach. I think consumers are very forgiving, and if they see a change in a company for the better, they are more willing to embrace that company. Benetton still stands for many social issues, but they are ceasing to offend the consumers by not placing these issues in their advertisements. It is hard for me to imagine how Benetton was ever successful in sales without showing their products in advertisements. People want to see the product and they want to be assured of its quality. I think using photographs of attractive models wearing their brightly colored clothes will positively promote the Benetton brand, and they will see a huge increase in sales. I think that Benetton can also promote brand awareness by supporting its causes on different platforms. They could team up with other organizations and help promote their causes and attach the Benetton name to the advertisements to show that they still believe in promoting social and political issues. I think that separating social and political issues from the actual company and its products will greatly increase Benetton's consumer approval. As I said before, the current market-economy is very complex, and a company must have the ability to realize its faults and adapt its advertising to a more effective strategy. Benetton is making the right choice by trying to find better advertising techniques to reach its consumers.