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An Appraisal of Persisting Issues in Advertising Practice

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Abstract

The paper appraises persisting issues in the practice of advertising in Nigeria inspite of its socio-economic importance to the nation and the benefits it offers to markets, organizations and consumers alike. The work closely examines the issues involved with a view to fashioning a way forward towards best practices. Anchoring the work are persuasion, human action approach theory, Marshal's model, teleological theory and gate keeping theories. The paper concludes that advertising supports the media and the overall economic system. However, there is no disputing the fact that the practice of advertising has been often misconceived and criticized. The regulatory bodies have not really helped matters as they are not in very tight control of practitioners therefore many things take place. Based on the foregoing, the work recommends that APCON and its subsidiary bodies should vigorously regulate, control and handle malpractices in the advertising domain. Ethical standards should be raised by practitioners. They must be credible to succeed as professionals. Adverts should pass through the toughest scrutiny so that they can be free of ethnicity, tradition, gender etc among others.

Introduction

Advertising is a complimentary management function. To a large extent, it is known to influence people especially in this modern – day world. Organizations too, both public and private have come to understand that the ability to communicate effectively and efficiently with their target publics is crucial to their success. The media also depend on it for survival. Rabiou (2010) quotes Azzaro (2004, p.1) as saying that in United States the advertising business largely supports the media. Azzaro (2004) explains further that media is the business of delivering content to an audience. Interesting content is what attracts audiences to the media. These audiences then pull advertisers who want their advertisements to be part of that content. Advertisers spend money to buy access through media channels to communicate with

consumers in the audience who might buy their products, services and ideas. Those advertisements help pay for the media that consumers enjoy.

Conceptual Clarification: Advertising

Definitions abound. Media people maintain it is a persuasive process. To businessmen, it is a marketing process; economists and sociologists tilt it to economic, societal or ethnical significance (Rabiu, 2010). Consumers are not left out because they are the reason for advertising. Some of them see it as a nuisance.

A more functional definition by the American Marketing Association and Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) says, an advertisement "is a communication in the media, paid for by an identified sponsor and directed at a target audience, with the aim of imparting correct information about a product, service, idea or opinion".

To Ginn (1995, p. 224), "advertisement comes from the Latin word "vetere" meaning "to turn". He explains that, when an advertisement turns a person's head, it has already done half the job. Once it has a consumer's attention, it may turn his or her ideas about what to buy, think or do.

Nwosu and Nkamnebe (2006, p.78) point out that advertising...involve information, communication, persuasion, consumers – publics meaning one and the same thing. The authors further explain that advertising is "paid for" but presently; "paid for" has eroded because the media as avenues of information dissemination now charge for virtually everything including the so-called publicity materials.

According to Nwosu and Nkamnebe (2006), a thin distinction between advertising and other forms of publicity materials lie in the fact that advertising is more marketing oriented in terms of products, services and ideas. In terms of scope too, advertising is not very involving as is the case with fields like public relations. The former is essentially a marketing tool and profit – driven. The marketing job yields positive results in the end.

To this end, marketers are always up and doing in search of new ways and avenues to get in touch with consumers. Consumers too are not resting in their quest for more information. These drives have in no small measure led to developments technologically, economically, financially, communications wise and so on. All of these efforts are geared towards targeting market segments and to build long-term reputations and vice versa. In spite of the all importance attached to this field: there is still an unprecedented level of social, economic, legal and ethical criticisms or rather issues which practitioners collide with. The paper seeks to critically examine the issues and come up with a way forward towards best practices. These definitions and several others are an embodiment of messages which entertain, inform and also persuade prospective buyers to take informed decisions. Advertising is however not restricted to commercial products but also to selling of ideas and services, one other thing is that, an individual, a group of people or an organization is always behind such advertisement.

Theoretical Framework

The premise of this paper is anchored on the tenets of persuasion and Human Action Approach theory.

Persuasion Theory

Persuasion theory is traced to the mid-1930s when Dale Carnegie first published his best-selling book "How to win friends and influence people". The notion of how to persuade others has been both a popular and profitable subject. Concurrently, with the rise of the mass media and the pervasiveness of propaganda used in both World Wars, the study and understanding of mass-mediated persuasive messages became critical to understanding political and social change, (Dainton, 2004).

Today, the import of understanding the power of persuasive messages is greater than ever. This involves a process by which messages are used to influence people. While persuasion typically uses information, emphasis in a persuasive message is on influencing the receiver (rather than merely providing information and letting the receiver make up his mind). Persuasion attempts to change minds or get people to act. Persuaders seek change.

Persuasion rests on issues of belief, motive, attitude and subsequent behavior. Galvin and Terro (2001) cited in Rabi (2009, p. 21) say that, persuasion is central to people's lives. The authors add that many persuasive messages are encountered through the media. Describing persuasion as a complicated process, they define it as communication with a goal of other people. Galvin and Terro (2001) further add that a persuasive message is a communication strategy designed to change people's beliefs or behaviors or to move them to action hence the theory's relevance to the work.

Human Action Approach Theory

The theorist responsible for this approach is P. Winch. In his 1958 work, "The idea of a social science and its relation to philosophy", he explains that human behavior can be predicted because people make choices with a purpose about their actions. Behavior Winch affirmed is chosen by individuals to reach certain goals (in this case, buying behavior).

Human action approach has meta-theoretical; axiological; epistemological and ontological assumptions. The axiological says values definitely play a part in this-which ones are more important to an individual are the ones that goals will be modeled after and could be used to track behavior.

Epistemologically, the theorist says since there can be many different goals assessed for a person's behavior, there are many truths that could be possible for the humanistic theory.

Ontologically too, it is believed that free will does rule behavior which can be predicted when goals are observed. Although, critics contend that the theory is used as a measure to provide better understanding of behavior that has already occurred and it says nothing about future behavior. It is still useful to apply in situations when trying to explain behavior that has already occurred. For example, a post on www.utdallas.edu/dept/hd state that, a group of people listening or watching persuasive speech/advert about smoking and lung cancer. Fear appeals had nothing to do with changing people's minds. They were presented with new information that, stopping smoking increases life expectancy even for former smokers. That led the audience members to quit. There was a change in behavior because the audience saw living longer as a goal.

In relation to this work, advert messages determine what action prospects take at the end of the day as posited in the assumptions of this theory that, there can be many different goals assessed for a person's behavior.

The Persisting Issues with Advertising

Advertising is indeed a form of communication intended to persuade an audience to purchase or take some action upon products, ideas or services. While advertising can be seen as imperative for economic growth, it is not without social costs. Critics contend that so many ills come with it. That, advertising is increasing pervading public spaces such as schools, which they argue, is a platform for child exploitation. Unsolicited commercial emails and other forms of spam have also become prevalent such that they are a major nuisance to users of these services as well as being a financial burden on internet service providers.

In addition, critics feel that advertising frequently uses psychological pressure for example, appealing to feelings of inadequacy on the intended consumer, which is thought to be harmful. (Wikipedia.org). Belch and Belch (2001, p.761) also aver that the role of advertising is controversial and has sometimes resulted in attempts to

Similarly, Iwokwagh (2006, p.52) quotes Doghudy (1989, p.162) as saying that, "honest advertising practitioners will readily admit that several malpractices are currently going on and are destroying the image of the profession". At several national for a too, Iwokwagh (2006) says that advertising has been variously criticized for being false and misleading.

These, among other vices, are complaints arising from what advertising presents to customers. The overall intention, though, is to move prospects to countenance favorably the merchandize put forward in the market and to patronize them. This section of the work looks at some issues that have made advertising to be criticized for violating and miring society in controversy over time.

Socio-Cultural Aspects: Sexism, Discrimination and Stereotyping

The general thinking is that advertising is the leading light in our cultures. That is to say, sometimes the messages may counter cultural norms, religion and even philosophy of a people. It is when advertising violates these aspects of society that there is a growing discontent. Postings on www.commercialalert.org state that many scholars go beyond considering advertising as a kind of religion and that advertising even replaces religion as a key institution. Children for instance are bombarded with adverts on noodles, snacks, drinks, toys and so on. As such, they pressurize or rather persuade their parents so that they can have those goodies advertised especially on TV due to visuals they see. The portrayal of tobacco and alcoholic products also appeal to young persons as they are glamorized and shown with/without consequences. Resistance to adverts is said to be weakest here.

Regarding sex appeals, opponents feel that advertisers aggressively display scantily clad women in the bid to sell all kinds of things: from lingerie to soap; perfumes, hair products, creams, undies, electronic appliances, cars and what have you. The thinking is that both children and teenagers are also targeted with these.

However, other people still posit that advertisers only resort to various tactics to get people to buy their wares or patronize their services, e.g the use of humor, self-

esteem, peer pressure etc. The one assumed to be the most popular and most effective is the use of sex. (Price 2002 cited in Danesi 2005, p.64).

An excerpt from one article by Eric Smith of Garlicke and Bousfield, a Durban-South Africa law firm titled, "Suggestive advertising" also cited in Danesi(2005) states that, "health, fashion, beauty and fragrance ads would be dull, wimpish and lack-lustre without the strong positive images of near-perfect models flaunting flat-ribbed abdominals, seductive curves and breathless beauty". The writer leaves us with this poser: "How else would Calvin Klein promote his underwear for men but to use clean-shaven tanned models that have all the bulges in the right places?". This out rightly shows that there is something about sex and sexuality that arrests most people's attention and gets them to buy the associated products.

Another article titled, "Biological basis of sex appeal" by Richard Taflinger in Brandfaces magazine posits that, "sex is the second strongest of the psychological appeals, right behind self preservation". He also points to the important role of gender in order for advertising to be effective. Taflinger further adds that, portraying a woman in a state of arousal is an invitation, as studies also show that advertising is easier and more effective on men. Also, they are receptive to the immediacy of the image.

Most research conclude that the reward centers in the human brain are activated by food, sex, money, drugs and anything that makes the individual feel good (excluding religious extremists). Also, reward centers in the brains of young hetero-sexual males are found to be activated by female voices. Some researchers describe this finding as "a kind of visceral response to beauty". Perhaps, this explains why beautiful women are used to sell products.

Another reason why sex is used in advertising according to Katz (2003) quoted by Danesi (2008) is because advertisers want to shock you by forcing you to look at what they are selling. This is against the back ground that daily, you are bombarded with adverts everywhere you turn.

Generally, people are said to resist advertising, they want to be left alone. But the contrast remains that there is a strong self-interest and this could be an explanation for the sex tactic, which shockingly gets your attention. On the whole, advertisers believe that the more outlandish, the sexier, the more skin shown; the more the brand image will refuse to leave one's memory. The strategy is that when next you go shopping for any product, you will naturally prefer the advertised brand of products.

More so, the thinking by certain people that the explicit use of sex to sell products is a more recent practice is an age-long tradition which dates back to about 140 years ago according to Tom Reichert, Professor of advertising, University of Alabama. In his book, "the erotic history of advertising", such adverts portray women in order to sell. That, as far back as the 1880s, the famous Duke cigarette enclosed in their packs small cards showing suggestively dressed "women of the stage", which encouraged purchasers to continue to buy in order to complete the whole set.

Advertising is often criticized for using stereotypes, gender-specific roles of men and women reinforcing existing clichés and for inadvertently or even intentionally promoting racism and ageism. At the very least, it often reinforces stereotypes by drawing on recognizable "types" in order to tell stories in a single

image or 30 seconds time frame. Activities are also depicted as typical of male or female. In addition, people are said to be equated with commodities and gender specific qualities are exaggerated e.g cosmetics, fashion, food, (www.media_awareness.ca).

Advertising as Untruthful and deceptive

Critics of advertising contend that it deceives consumers into making wrong choices. Bobbit (2008, p.246) says an advert is deceptive if it makes no false statements yet, leaves out important information or is otherwise misleading. If for instance, an advert says product 'A' costs less than product 'B' yet omits the fact that product 'A' is sold in 32ml bottle while product 'B' is in 48ml bottle then, it means both products come with the same content while in the actual sense they are not.

In a letter to the editor of 'Brandfaces', for the 'brand court' page titled, 'My brand new Honda CG125 is a pain in the ass', the complainant was angry as the claims that the bike he bought is the most rugged of all motorbike brands was not true after all. First, he realized that the bike brand was of two categories. One is assembled by Honda Nigeria while the other was produced by Xintian, a Chinese company imported freely into the markets. It was ordered by a courier Service Company for which the man works. Though, tested and ascertained by the importer, the bike had problems almost immediately thereby debunking the earlier claims.

The company would have run an ad alerting customers of the fake brand but they never did. Many products lay claims which are often unfounded and the consumer either continues or discontinues the use of such products and opt for a better option. Nescafe advert for instance claims it 'awakens your senses' and in the real sense it does not.

In Nigeria, MTN for instance has at different points claimed. "It's all about you", "Life is beautiful" and "everywhere you go" in their campaigns but people feel these are mere 'business claims' which cannot be matched with the quality of services provided. Subscribers are of the view that life cannot be uglier than the frustrations they go through with telephone service providers whose services are 'all about their pockets'.

Our submission is that no system can be hundred percent perfect but in every situation at all there are bound to be lapses but providers and other business services need to be on their feet in search of ways to improving their services because the customer is the reason for their existence and it behoves on them to render quality services so that the benefactor can hold on to it.

Advertising as Offensive

Another criticism is that ads are sometimes offensive, tasteless, irritating, boring and obnoxious and so on. Most people feel offended by some ads at least, sometimes. According to Belch and Belch (2001, p.746), a number of studies in the western world found that consumers feel most ads insult their intelligence while most are in poor taste.

In Nigeria, MTN's "Mama, Na Boy" advertisement became a subject of controversy sometime in 2005. The battle cry came from the camps of gender rights groups. The camps took it up against MTN because they felt the company was deliberately encouraging gender discrimination in the commercial and presumably for

its failure to appreciate and recognize the injury it could inflict on the women folk. They saw the commercial as yet another war informally declared against them.

Analytically, the truth remains that the company made an innocent error by emphasizing that the child was a male when the society we live in already places so much importance on male children while women are at the receiving end of the male-child syndrome. The real message conveyed in the commercial is that of MTN's wide coverage up to the rural areas and the spectacular celebration that the news elicited by the call in the village. The controversy however presented the company as one that is either insensitive to the feelings of women who have been at the receiving end of traditions and customs that discriminate against them, or unconsciously encouraging such practices.

The company however rested the commercial in a subtle manner and launched the next phase of its "Life is beautiful" series. The fact remains that most times companies employ certain strategies in their commercials for the purpose of selling ideas, products and or services but when the audience interprets such messages differently problems arise.

In Brazil too, Catholics were also reported to have protested against the "Pirelli" commercial. They saw it as an insulting imitation of the risen Christ. The company was said to have wasted no time in discontinuing airing of the commercial although, it did not make any effort at defending the choice of the statue used in the ad just like MTN did (Iboroh 2005, p.10).

Advertising Discontent from the Legal Perspective

a. **Passing Off** – This entails misleading the public to think that a certain product is that of another. Ozoh (1998, p. 192) sees this as fraudulent. He notes that such intention is meant to enjoy all the benefits that come with the existing products' good name. This practice includes trading products as that of the plaintiff's, using a closely related name or that of the plaintiff. These, Ozoh (1998) explains, are likely to mislead the public into believing that the defendant's business and that of the plaintiff are one and the same. This can be seen with Vitafoam products and other misleading companies that also produce foams. One particular company produces mattresses and uses a near resemblance of the vitafoam's 'V' trademark. People do know that Vitafoam products are known for quality and the other company uses that to probably deceive customers into believing that the two products are the same. Numerous other cases abound in our markets such that the consumer is at the receiving end while; original owners of products are robbed of their right. One wonders whether they choose to be ignorant or they are not just aware of such occurrences. Maybe, the awareness is there but fear of long and corrupt judicial processes and resources to go through lets them be.

b. **Copyright**- This is the outright use of expressions, songs, music, words or compositions of other people without prior approval. In the realm of advertising, what is involved is copying of visuals, artworks or similar visual representations created earlier by other persons or agencies. Ozoh (1998, p.194) observes that such cases are usually unfounded here. This shows the extent to which people are sensitive about the originality of an agency's adverts. There may not be

direct cases of infringement of such; it is not uncommon to come across snide remarks about copycat agencies.

c. **Invasion of Privacy-** Invasion happens when people's pictures or voices are used without their permission or consent. There is however, no registered case in this regard here. To this end, Ozoh (1998) also explains that people are getting more and more enlightened and sophisticated regarding their rights so, it is no longer possible to use people's pictures or voices for commercial purposes without express or implied permission.

Other attacks on advertising are associated with following:

Language- Critics feel that advertisement is too breezy, informal and casual. They believe that advertising twists language by fragmenting sentences, omitting punctuations, exaggerating and padding sentences through the use of multiple adjectives etc. Rabi (2009, p.36) says critics believe that ideal language should be exact, precise, objective, correct and clear. Citing Bovee and Arens (1983), Rabi (2009) explains that grammar rules and especially punctuation rules are commonly broken by copywriters and this truly infuriates critics. For example, S.C Johnson & company's slogan for their RAID insecticide is '...Kills insects dead!'. English critics according to Rabi (2009) frown at the heavy use of punctuations (dashes, hyphens, periods, exclamations and question marks) by copywriters and multiple adjectives like 'rich', 'full-blooded', 'heavy-texture' and so on.

Bovee and Arens (1983) however explain that perhaps, the critics fail to understand that contemporary advertising copywriters use the same license allowed in poetry for centuries hence the play of words.

The use of Puffs- This is the use of hype or exaggeration which critics feel cannot be proven true or false e.g 'the best', 'premier', or 'the only way'. Common usage is said to portray puffery as praise for an item to be sold using subjective opinions, amplifications and vagueness, generally stating no specific facts. BAGCO bags advert claim the bags are as strong as the elephant but they last only for a while.

In this regard, Nwosu and Nkamnebe (2006, p. 178) explain that the law of contract does not stop ad agencies from using legitimate persuasive tools of intentional exaggeration, which is a powerful tool of creativity in advertising.

Materialism- Bovee and Arens (1983); Dominick (2002) state that critics claim advertising affects their value system. This is because advertising portrays acquisition of more things as the means to a happier life instead of acquisition for more spiritual and intellectual enlightenment.

In response to such view, Dominick (2002) affirms humans have a variety of needs: biological (food, shelter), psychological (self-esteem, actualization). Other proponents of advertising explain it caters for a wide range of needs, not just the basic one. They see nothing wrong with regular purchases if it boosts a person's self-esteem. These and other reasons according to critics portray advertising in bad light but, companies really need to boost sales and no other vibrant way than creating awareness can do the magic through persuasion.

Conclusion

Advertising is an integral part of our social and economic systems. It has evolved into a vital communication system in our complex and ever-changing world. Its ability to deliver carefully packaged messages to target audiences has given the

practice a major role in the marketing of programmes, ideas, services and products. Large and small enterprises increasingly rely on advertising for their success. As rewarding as it is, so do challenges come with it and real ethical behavior is sometimes expensive, and that is where the dilemma lies. Sometimes, there is no ethical way to protect and be protected and this means that certain ills are propagated not because those involved are evil. Most times, such things are done because problems exist and cleaning up image is said to be easier and cheaper than cleaning up mess. It also seems APCON and other advertising regulatory bodies are not in firm control of their responsibilities, effort has to be stiffened to closely monitor the practice as today's consumer has also become more sophisticated and fully aware of his rights.

Recommendations

-Advertising agencies and other regulatory bodies should rise up to the challenge of checking ads in terms of language, terminologies, appeals and manner of presentation especially those ads targeted at children, young persons and groups. Even though, what is a matter of concern in another society will mean nothing to another and to certain groups; extreme care should be taken.

-Measures such as corrective ads/messages over a period of time should serve as remedy for nasty situations while apologies could be tendered to aggrieved persons as a sign of commitment. It does no credit to the product or the agency to carry on as if those whose feelings have been hurt by a commercial do not matter.

-Advertisers to present favorable information and to be truthful at all times no matter what it costs to do so to enable prospects make informed choices.

- No matter how difficult it is, social, professional and ethical considerations be taken into account so that professional integrity and of communication channels will be maintained and protected.

-Advertisers should have a reasonable basis for making claims about product performance and also provide evidence to support the claims. A commercial must effortlessly connect with the audience it is appealing to. It must establish a relationship between consumers and the product promoted.

-Ads should be subjected to the toughest scrutiny to ensure they pass the tests on issues of religion, ethnicity, customs, traditions, gender, vocations etc while, self-regulation should also be complemented.

-Consumers should also form groups and other organized bodies for the protection of their interests.

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