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Components of Ethics in Advertising

Professionals within the field of communication are frequently confronted by ethical dilemmas. Whether these issues are in video or print journalism, public relations, or advertising, a practitioner of communication is expected to be fully prepared towards making tough decisions pertaining to the integrity of the organization that he or she represents, while maintaining the moral standards entitled to his or her individual being. This essay will include analysis on three related articles concerning the enhancement and maintenance of ethics in advertising.

In “Advertising and Editorial Content: Laws, Ethics, and Market Forces” by Lee Peeler and Jim Guthrie, the complex relationship between editorial media and advertising is analyzed and interpreted. While advertising serves as a staple source of finances for print and internet journalism and televised media, Peeler and Guthrie identify that consumers generally view advertising as a dishonest and “lesser” form of communication. Advertising is under the protection of constitutional law but it is restricted in many ways. Three major constraints are established: laws, ethics, and market forces. Firstly, there are laws and regulations in place that require separation between advertisements and editorial content. These rules exist so that consumers are aware that advertisers have powerful financial interests. This allows for more skepticism towards messages that are presented by advertisers so that editorial journalism can be trusted. The second constraint is ethics, which, again, stresses the importance for journalists to avoid pressure from advertisers and to maintain a clear distinction between advertising and editorial content. Marketplace discipline is the third constraint, and relies more on the consumer than the publisher or broadcaster. If the publisher or broadcaster abides by the laws that distinguish advertisement from content, this regulates advertisements and content. For example, if there are too many ads, this may prompt the consumer to change the channel or switch mediums. These three constraints are in place to limit the influence of advertising on journalism, thus protecting the consumer from an unfair barrage of misinformation. This being said, it is also important and in their best interest for consumers to allow the media and advertisers to experiment with different ways of advertising. By following these three constraints, advertisers, journalists, and consumers can exist symbiotically.

In the article “Making the Case for Enhanced Advertising Ethics,” written by Wally Synder, a case is presented to advertising professionals supporting the improvement of ethics in advertising to effectively gain the trust of consumers. In her introduction, Synder claims that the industry of advertising could only benefit from the practice of “enhanced ethics.” Modern advertising is ubiquitous, and consumers currently have control over the commercial information they are subjected to. Advertising is crucial to consumer choice, along with the nation’s economy, yet it is often considered to be among the least honest and ethical means of communication by consumers. Synder states “It would be impossible to be ethical without being truthful,” and emphasizes the obligation for an advertiser to comply with government and industry laws (478). While marketing companies focus much of their time and resources towards following these regulations, Synder believes that advertisers must take a step beyond the law in order to treat their consumers ethically.

Several illustrations of practices that can be considered unethical are provided. The first example is advertising to children under the age of 12. In this type of advertising, the primary ethical challenge is to make sure that advertising can be distinguished from entertainment. According to the Children’s Advertising Review Unit, children’s advertisements should not present products in ways that blur editorial and advertising content to children because they are particularly vulnerable “by virtue of their inexperience, immaturity, susceptibility to being misled or unduly influenced, and lack of cognitive skills to evaluate the credibility of advertising” (478). This blurring of advertising and editorial content is also an issue with adults. Advertising comes in various self-regulatory forms, such as unverified claims in press releases, news articles, and unattributed commercial content on social media sites. While companies can claim that advertisements intended to be entertainment, they can often be misleading and nefarious. Word-of-mouth marketing through viral messaging and Internet sources also contributes to the blurring of advertisements with editorial content. The Internet ultimately allows for advertisers to hide themselves and to create aliases which can be very deceiving to consumers. After identifying these issues, the author asserts that consumers desire high ethics in advertising, and that they punish and reward companies based on the ethicality of their advertisements. She concludes that advertising professionals will practice enhanced ethics if they are provided proper guidelines and reinforcements.

The article “Advertiser Pressure and the Personal Ethical Norms of Newspaper Editors and Ad Directors” by Gergely Nyilasy and Leonard Reid presents research gathered from surveys of newspaper journalists and advertising directors. According to the authors, findings reveal that advertiser pressure is prevalent in newspaper journalism; advertisers often attempt to influence media by exchanging favors for advertising dollars. Separating advertisement from editorial content is a core component of ethics in journalism and advertising, and advertiser pressure can be a serious threat to the integrity of these fields of communication. The authors also identify the potential for consumer deception as an ethical danger: they warn that if an advertiser is able to insert advertisements into editorials, he or she will be able to manipulate the reader and ultimately compromise the integrity of journalism. In this sense, advertiser pressure results in the “blurring” of information previously mentioned in this essay. The authors cite “Advertiser Pressures on Newspapers,” a 1992 survey that focuses on three facets of advertiser pressure. The first is influence attempts, which occurs when advertisers attempt to include positive stories in journalism, while excluding or manipulating negative ones. The second is economic pressure, or the threat to withdraw advertisements and to, as a result, cripple the media financially. The third and final facet is acquiescence, which is the extent that editors cede to advertiser pressure. The results of the study showed that 70 to 90 percent of newspapers experienced advertiser pressure. However, acquiescence was much more infrequent among editors, proving that advertiser pressure attempts, while common, are rarely successful. Findings also show that there are few differences between large and small newspapers when it comes to advertiser pressure. The more economic pressure a newspaper receives, however, the more likely its employees are to have more permissive ethical norms.

Advertising and journalism have a very important relationship: one simply cannot exist without the other. Likewise, without ethical advertising there can be no ethical journalism. There is a need for clear and practical ethical guidelines in all fields of communication. Professionals in advertising must be just as aware of the laws that limit them as the laws that protect them. On the other hand, journalists must be aware or advertiser pressure and the fine line that separates advertisements and editorial content.

Synder, Wally. "Making the Case for Enhanced Advertising Ethics." J*ournal of Advertising Research* 51.3 (2011): 477-483. Communication & Mass Media Complete. Web. 26 Jan. 2015.

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