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IS IT ETHICAL TO EMPLOY CHILDREN IN ADVERTISEMENTS? A FEW CASE STUDIES OF INDIAN ADVERTISEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

In an era of diverse marketing and advertising platforms, entertainment and modern culture, where cut throat competition dominates and seldom unethical methods of cost cutting is a concern for the industry, children from all over the world are involved in a great number for marketing and advertising activities. The last decade has observed the role-play of children in advertisement constantly moving upward. The need to add ethics in modern marketing and advertising is essential as we have a duty to live a good moral life. This duty is as much applicable to the business lives as to our private lives. And marketing professionals also know that ethics brings good business. This paper throws light on various aspects in which an advertisement with a child can affect his/her future. An adult likes to watch an advertisement with a kid smiling through the TV set, but fails to realize what could be of the child who is subjected to this fame even before he/she understands the meaning of fame. After all, the companies certainly do not have the children's moral or social well-being in mind; they are solely concerned about profits.

KEYWORDS

Business Ethics, Advertising, Children.

1. INTRODUCTION

One are the days when cartoons were used in the commercial advertisements but now is the time when children (1-14)years of age have hit the advertising industry on a big scale. Today we live in a commercial world with fast growing technologies, the advertising and marketing ethics have been changing too. Ethics have always been an important aspect of every business activity , although the term has meant different things at different times in different lands to different people. Nonetheless, as ethical concerns are an inseparable element of business, advertising cannot ignore them. Advertisers are doing business with thousands of people may be millions of people across the globe so they must practice what is right. Thus advertisers and admen are increasingly under pressure for creating the socio-cultural religious sensitivities and sensibilities of consumers. And unfortunately things are becoming worse day by day. The society in which we live has always imposed context on the commercial ads that involves children. The Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU) of the Better Business Bureau (BBB), which also monitors kid's programming, requires that adults be shown supervising children when products or activities could be risky.

2. OBJECTIVE OF STUDY

The objective of this paper is to evaluate the various ways in which an advertisement employing a child can affect him/her psychologically. What is the use of employing children in corporate advertisements that have nothing to do with children? What could be the effect of advertisements on the lives of children who appear in them or watch them? An advertiser should follow specified guidelines that should be kept in mind while making advertisements with children.

3. CHILDREN IN ADVERTISEMENTS

This is one question that has been surfacing time and again that whether having children in ads is ethical or not. Let us first take some instances where children appear in ads. A recent ad of Tata Docomo commercial shows children and toddlers dancing to a Bollywood number, Dhinka Chika, without any inhibitions and then the commercial ends with a voice over, saying, "Open up. It's a wonderful feeling, Laugh, Talk, Share. By seeing this ad children these days are asking their parents for mobile phones. Children are the most vulnerable part of society. Today we see these little toddlers endorsing electronic gadgets, mobile connections, biscuits, soaps and detergents, flipkart online shopping, insurance products and other products which are mainly used and consumed by adults. For instance, an ad for surf excel shows a kid playing in mud pretending to be a pet dog just to cheer up his teacher who has lost her pet. The idea behind the ad is that it is ok to dirty your clothes to make someone happy, thus, their tag line is "daag acche hain".

What does a child has to do about the various discounts offered by online agencies in fashion clothing and apparels. And above all, is it even sensible to portray a bunch of kids in overly dressed style as in the various flipkart advertisements of " The Flipkart Fashion Sale", "Fashion has a New Address". The flipkart advertisement of "India Wants to Know" and "Shopping k Naya Address" shows a few kids imitating adults in a news bulletin, why not use adults instead? Are these ads meant to teach children to go into acting and quit education?

4. PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF CHILDREN IN ADS

The question that arises is that why do we need kids in such ads when the product being sold is to be used by adults and kids do not even have the knowledge about them and whether using kids and little tots in these ads is ethical?

The answers are not too hard to find. The advertisers try to grab the attention of the audience by using cute children in their ads. Sumit Kishore, group Account Director of Euro RSCG, said that a reason why children have begun dominating advertisements is because of their innocence. "when you are flipping channels, the chances that you will stop on one is more when you see a cute little child saying something or a baby gurgling than the sight of an older person enacting the same. "One tends to listen to a child babble something because it seems innocent and true. Featuring a child in an ad thus plays up the emotional factor in the audience and wins over them."

Another reason is that kids have in advertising gurus words, "pestering power"- the ability to escalate the sales of a particular product. According to Ramesh Shri Vats, executive vice president of Rediffusion advertising agency, young children have a greater say in the household these days. In other words, they have a

greater influence on their parents in deciding which item should be bought. Children as young as eight or nine have started becoming increasingly aware of various products and are very well informed. They have the pestering power by which they can influence the household decisions when it comes to buying something.

Sumit Seth, creative consultant with Sahara said children are part of the most easily influenced category. Thus advertisers featuring children first convince the child sitting in front of the TV who in turn convinces his/her parents to buy that particular product. Earlier it was the woman who used to decide which product to choose and buy. But now it's the kids who decide which brand to go for and parents gladly oblige them also.

Children's reactions to advertisement can be very different from grown-ups. If adults see a product advertised and don't find it when they go shopping they forget about it. As children develop the ability to recognise and understand ads and their purpose they start making demands. If these demands are not fulfilled they might start screaming or throwing themselves to the floor. It is difficult to explain to young children the reasons why they cannot have everything which - according to advertising - is 'for them'.

Children don't have the capacity to know the difference between advertising and marketing gimmicks, and real promises. It is a very well known fact that children imitate what adults are doing. Advertisers need to take care of this important fact while deciding upon the matter to be shown in their advertisement. It is only fair to leave them out of the world of marketing and advertising, as they will not be able to understand the full reasons for their being there. Much like kids quickly fall subject to advertising tricks in supermarkets, their preferences, and even world view, may be coloured by working in advertising.

Child modelling and child advertising have become a big business for both the advertising companies and parents of these children. From newborn to teens they are busy in advertising and getting spotlight. Children these days are fond of working on commercials because of many reasons but still we found out for most of them the common reason is recognition and getting money

5. GUIDELINES WHEN PLANNING AND PREPARING ETHICAL ADVERTISING

- 1 Advertisers should take great care in assessing the level of knowledge, sophistication and maturity of the intended audience. In particular great care should be taken when communicating with younger children who may have a lack of ability to comprehend the purpose of advertising and differentiate between it and non-advertising messages;
- 2 Advertisers should ensure that the language and manner of any advertisement is easily understood by those children for whom it is intended;
- 3 Advertisers should not exploit the lively imagination of children and their use of make-believe, by creating communications that take unfair advantage of their commercial innocence;
- 4 Advertisers should not portray unsociable or stereotyped behaviour; every opportunity should be taken to promote such attributes as friendship, kindness, honesty, justice, generosity and the like. Care should be taken to avoid any suggestion of bullying, vindictiveness, cruelty or behaviour involving undesirable body language or other anti-social gestures;
- 5 Advertisers should take great care to avoid any inference of or endorsement for discrimination based on race, religion or sex.
- 6 Advertising should not unfairly imitate programme or editorial content so as to confuse children as to what is advertising and what is not; where there is danger of this there should be clear statement marking it as an advertisement;
- 7 Advertisements should not portray violence or aggression, nor contain menacing or horrific elements likely to disturb children;
- 8 Advertisements should be rigorous in depicting proper behaviour and must avoid suggesting any activity that would be unsafe for children;
- 9 Advertisements should not suggest any feeling of inferiority or unsociability for not buying the product or service;
- 10 Children should not appear in any hazardous situation or be depicted behaving dangerously or irresponsibly (except in public service advertising where a problem is being addressed); children should not appear in street scene without supervision unless they appear old enough to take care of themselves; care should be taken not to place them in the context of potentially dangerous situations as with fire, matches, petrol, electrical appliances, inappropriate medicines or household substances; they must not be seen to operate vehicles, farm machinery, unsuitable electrical appliances and the like; purchase;
- 11 Where price is mentioned or suggested, a clear and complete price for the product or service must be given, any additional items offered must be clearly defined; there must be no appeal to excessive purchasing;
- 12 If additional items are needed, such as batteries, this should be clearly communicated;
- 13 A product that is part of a series should be placed in the context of that series;
- 14 Advertising should not exaggerate what is attainable by a child with the product or service
- 15 No appeal to a charity should be unfairly used to pressurise children or create a feeling of guilt in them;

6. CONCLUSION

It would seem to be fairer and more sensible to start educating children about the commercial intentions of companies at an age when they can rationalise and are no longer predominantly motivated by emotions. Expecting children to learn about advertisements before that age would seem to be rather futile as well as creating difficulties for the child and the family. Research has confirmed the influence of the media upon the close conformity between children's tastes and perceived needs and the content of the programmes they watch. Teachers say that they know what has been on TV the night before, by the games the children play the next day.

Employing an adult of more recognition, for instance an actor or a sports-person, is tend to be more expensive in commercials than putting a cute kid.

So it can be safely argued, employing children in advertisements is unethical, because small children do not have mental faculty to be able to decide what is good for them and what is not. What is unethical here, is the fact that the advertisers try to influence the minds of innocent little kids and thereby harm the society, if not directly then indirectly.

Advertising with the young generation must not encourage children to be involved in dangerous activities or undermine the authority of their parents. Therefore, ads must be regulated in terms of both the language and images they use and all the topics that might potentially cause negative effects on children must be excluded from the ads that might be watched by children.

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