

Debate

Marketing Campaigns Use Sex Appeal to Sell Products

ISSUE: Is using sex appeal in a marketing campaign appropriate for product promotion?

“Sex sells” is a philosophy that marketers have come to embrace to market products. Calvin Klein, Abercrombie & Fitch, and Carl’s Junior have all benefited from using sex appeal in their marketing campaigns. Sexualized advertising has become a fact of life for many consumers. However, in recent years the types of sex appeal used in marketing has also changed. According to one advertising expert, sexual imagery that was once considered pornographic has become commonplace in well-known magazines, billboards, websites, and other marketing venues. This has led many to question whether sex appeal is appropriate for promotional purposes.

Proponents of the sex factor in marketing, including several well-known brands, claim that sex appeal sells their products, which in turn benefits society with satisfied customers and increased jobs. In many cases, sex appeal is central to the brand’s image. The deodorant Axe has created its entire brand around “giving guys an edge in the mating game.” Axe commercials feature women who are turned on by men wearing Axe. The year after featuring such ads, sales of the product were up 14 percent. Clearly, many consumers are motivated by advertisements that use provocative or sexual imagery. Some companies are even mixing sex appeal with humor in marketing campaigns. Procter & Gamble was able to revitalize interest in its Old Spice brand through its “Smell like a Man, Man” campaign. The campaign features bare-chested former NFL receiver Isaiah Mustafa, who informs women *that although their men may not look as well-built as him, they can smell just as good.*

However, society can—and often does—put pressure on companies to remove advertisements that cross the line. When Pepsi Co. released a controversial mobile app to promote its AMP Energy Drink, public outrage forced the company to pull the campaign. The app was designed to help men “score” by categorizing women into 24 different groups and giving the men clues about her personality and providing conversation starters. If a man was successful in “scoring,” he could create a “brag list” with details and upload it to Facebook and Twitter. Activists immediately began protesting the app after its release, and Pepsi discontinued the campaign. Proponents of sex appeal in advertising argue that society is capable of monitoring the marketing industry to ensure it complies with social norms. Because society does not always protest sex appeal in advertising, they maintain that as long as society views a certain amount of sex appeal as acceptable, then the use of sex appeal in advertising is an appropriate form of marketing.

On the other hand, sex appeal in marketing has been widely criticized for contributing to sexism and other social concerns. One study revealed that the majority of female respondents and half of male respondents believe that sexually explicit advertisements may contribute to sexual harassment. Others have accused sexually explicit marketing of contributing to distorted body images among consumers. Obsessions over the body seem to have increased in recent decades, representing a social concern that has plagued the younger generation in particular.

Finally, many believe that sexually explicit marketing is simply immoral, degrading people to sex objects just to sell products. Several women criticized Reebok's portrayals of "EasyTone" shoes because its commercials, which claimed that wearing the shoes would lead to a toned bottom and legs, spent a great deal of time focusing upon these areas—so much so that some critics claimed the actresses' butt and legs were featured more often than the shoes were. Axe might also be accused of sexism as its commercials appear to reduce women to an animalistic status.

In contrast, some marketing campaigns have found success by emphasizing an alternative view. Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty" features everyday women in its commercials rather than typical supermodels. The company expresses its desire to give women the confidence they need to see themselves as beautiful, an idea that has struck a chord with the female demographic. On the other hand, Dove's owner Unilever also owns the Axe brand, which targets younger men and is saturated with sexual imagery. Hence, many corporate marketing campaigns appear to deal not so much with social concerns but with what will sell to a particular market.

There are two sides to every issue:

1. Using sex appeal in marketing is an appropriate way to sell products depending upon the type of market targeted.
 2. Using sex appeal in marketing campaigns contributes to social ills and is therefore inappropriate.
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