

MARKETING PERSPECTIVE

The boob tube: U.S. networks avoid bare-breasted commercials

When I visited Australia, I noticed minor differences more than big ones: Cars with U.S. brand names that are manufactured there looked as if they did not have a driver inside (since Australians drive on the left and the drivers sit on the right); American actors such as Tom Selleck, who seldom appear in U.S. commercials, popped up repeatedly to deliver unexpected sales pitches.

And in a country possessing many almost-petty restrictions on consumer freedom, a television commercial showed a close and clear view of a woman's bare, bouncing breast.

The Australian commercial for a sports bra was a clear, strong demonstration of the product's benefit, showing the motion and tissue damage that can result when a woman does not properly support her upper anatomy during exercise.

The commercial was in no way lewd, lascivious or sexual, but nonetheless never would have run on a major U.S. television network. In this country, the sports bra manufacturer probably would have to find another way to show the product's benefits or forgo using television.

When I told this to Australian students or journalists, they were amazed. After all, theirs is the more-regulated society. Australians are required to vote and barred from driving cars while barefoot. Their laws lack guarantees of free speech or press, such as those found in the U.S. Constitution.

But it is not the U.S. government that limits potentially offensive advertising; it is broadcast and cable network managers who fear complaints.

And media managers seem to have an overblown fear of complaints. When showing Mel Brooks' movie "Blazing Saddles," the advertising-supported cable network Comedy Central bleeps out the Madeline Kahn character's name because it is a Yiddish word for a sexual activity.

The network managers' fear of naked breasts may not be in viewers' best interest. For example, a health information program about breast cancer, which was to include a detailed demonstration on how to conduct a breast self-examination, was cancelled by the cable network scheduled to present it because it was thought that viewers would object, even though the demonstration was not intended to be sexually provocative.

Of course, the program might appear on premium cable outlets not supported by advertising, such as HBO, but the canceled health program offered information important to all women, including those who can't afford a premium channel.

The choices forced on advertisers trying to promote products on television can sometimes seem strange.

Before 1982, the National Association of Broadcasters' Radio and Television Codes were the basis for voluntary advertising acceptance decisions at the major networks and larger stations that accounted for about 80% of broadcast audiences. Even when the NAB dropped the code altogether, these stations and networks continued to follow its guidelines for several years.

The code included a ban on live models in underwear commercials. Underwear advertisers used alternative ways to demonstrate the product: models wearing bras outside clothes; mannequins strapped into bras; or the

Herbert Rotfeld on Misplaced Marketing



"invisible woman" spots, showing underwear floating down the street (even when so-called "jiggle-TV" programming was in its prime). Meanwhile, newspaper advertising showed women

models in underwear.

Today, this attitude still is seen among media managers. I wish that U.S. television, like Australian television, could be free to appropriately depict the human body in advertising and health-related programs without fear of backlash.

Misplaced fears of audience backlash can hurt not just marketers trying to demonstrate the benefits of their product, but also consumers who would benefit by receiving health-related information. ■

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