



# Misplaced marketing

Gardening, pizza, tacos, truck parts and fake jewelry: misuse and misdirection of sex in advertising

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**Abstract** Looks at how sex has an effect on advertising, albeit that it is misused and misdirected at times. Stresses that these types of advertisements are aimed at both male and female markets, depending on the product type – though some are aimed at both sexes. Concludes that often the end does not justify the means as it is the product that is important – as this will outlive any titillating adverts – if it is any good!

An advertisement for a pizza place near a college campus ran an advertisement in the school paper that said “Put a hot piece between your lips. We’re hot and easy, fast and cheesy.” In another city, a Mexican restaurant showed a lycra-clad woman posed with her hands on her hips over the headline, “Tickle my taco.” Running for years in various sporting magazines is a bold-type proclamation, “Better than five-gallon jugs”, over a picture of a bikini-wearing woman with most of her large breasts visible as she bends over to fill the boat gas tank with the product “gas dock”, an extra large gas tank built on a wheeled cart. As the promotional campaign for the movie *Eyes Wide Shut* filled the news in almost all mass media vehicles, newspaper advertisements for a gardening supply store in New Zealand ran the headline “Eyes Wide Open for Spring”, with a picture in the center of the page of a rear view of a person’s thigh to mid-back, with a small area covered by thin bikini briefs.

## Irrelevant use of sex

In each case, the advertiser probably thought it was good advertising, not realizing that the irrelevant use of sex distracts and hinders any communication or persuasion to the target. It should be intuitively obvious that a product is sexually relevant for marketing communications only if people would make a purchase for a sexual reason. While breath mints, clothes or exercise equipment may be purchased by some people to enhance their self-image of sex appeal, it is doubtful that anyone buys pizza or tacos for anticipation of an orgasmic experience, even the heavy-into-puberty college students.

A truck supply company owner thought he had a client-grabbing pictures on his business calendars with the monthly display of exposed female anatomy, but when many of his customers forgot his company name or “lost” his phone number, he finally realized that the secretaries and office managers

Parts of the material for the article are drawn from the author’s book, *Adventures in Misplaced Marketing* ((2001) Quorum Books, Westport, CT).



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who gave the truckers the necessary purchase order forms would never allow such lewd displays on their office walls. The garden shop advertisement draws so much attention to the sexy body part that it would be read only by people in search of the latest bun-tightening video or maybe an exercise gym.

The misplaced marketing problem is more than just simple misdirection and distraction. The people who wrote or produced these ads lost track of what they were trying to say to the target audience. Several years back, a California pager company ran newspaper advertisements asserting that its product is the preferred method of pimps and hookers to “keep in touch,” maybe thinking that these “working people” are a consumer-perceived standard of working men and women who need to be on call when needed. In the print advertising for a shower gel brand, the body copy is in the middle of two pictures: the product sits on a shower stand to the left; on the right is a naked man from the thighs upward, standing discreetly sideways with enough view to focus on his tight bun, with a headline “The one on the right can also stimulate your mind.” This could be considered an effective message in the woman’s magazine only if the audience might be willing to perceive a shower gel as a sexual and mental turn-on. Is sex a mental stimulation? Are they selling sexual fantasy? I’m sorry, but the necessary logical jumps here just confuse me.

After years of talking to advertisers and watching them produce these less than optimal efforts, one comes upon the ineluctable but reluctant realization that some of the advertising creators are so myopic as to believe that publicity from offending people is always beneficial. They do not see it as being a distraction from saying positive things about the restaurant or store. Instead of communications, attention of any kind, to anything, at any cost, is their goal.

## Complaints generate publicity

The man who wrote the “Tickle my taco” advertising thought it was the greatest campaign he ever wrote because the numerous complaints generated publicity. Bad Frog Beer’s label depicts a frog extending a finger in an apparent obscene gesture, resulting in the product being banned by the liquor control boards in Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey. Maybe the company president feels the shelf visibility from the label and negative publicity is worth some state alcohol control board restrictions on sales. A brief magazine news note reported that makers of an unnamed brand of potato chip in South America seemed surprised at the complaint from the Israeli embassy when their commercials showed Adolf Hitler becoming a nicer person by eating their chips, with a swastika morphing into the company logo in the final scene. A car wash company in Los Angeles has long used the name of questionable taste, Hand Job, but their newspaper advertising one spring inane suggested that people “give a hand job for Mother’s Day.”

However, advertising is a very limited and limiting form of communication, costly to undertake and difficult to carry out successfully. The marketing question of how to best communicate is a conservative one, but it is also an effort to maximize the likelihood of a favorable consumer response. Because, in the end, there is a communications job to be done.

In the newspaper advertisement from Los Angeles, the woman wearing only jewelry with her hands covering her breasts and exclaiming, “What do you mean they’re not real?” might convey an association and image that helps sell imitation and fake jewelry. The message to either a male or female

audience is definitely not about sex. And yet it must be noted that the message's various innuendos and associations also would carry the negative connotations about breast implants while gratuitously offending many people, both of which would get in the way of communicating anything to anyone about fake jewelry.

Too often, the advertising writers seem focused on titillating each other with the overuse of lewd imagery, exposed breasts and other distractions. In the end, the sex does not sell.