

## Chapter 3

# Advertising Ethics in the Social Media Age

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### ABSTRACT

*Advertising ethics covers a wide range of issues, from the advertising of alcohol to misleading price claims. Advertising ethics research has traditionally concentrated on the influence of advertising on consumers or the society in general. New media tend to give rise to new ethical situations. This chapter aims to examine the issue of advertising ethics in the social media and offer suggestions for resolving some of the ethical concerns raised by social media advertising.*

### INTRODUCTION

Advertising has drawn criticism for a wide range of ills from misleading claims to the encouragement of undesirable attitudes. While some of the barrage of criticism leveled at advertising appears to be unfounded, even a brief perusal of the titles of the books and articles on the subject of advertising is enough to show the skepticism with which public opinion regards advertising: “What’s wrong with advertising?” reads the title of a chapter in *Ogilvy on Advertising* (Ogilvy, 1983/1999, p. 206). “Advertising – Is this the sort of job that an honest man can take pride in?” asks another title (Corlett, 1967, as cited in Corlett, 1985). The authors – both of them advertising professionals – both offer responses to criticisms of advertising, but the titles nonetheless reveal

recognition of what appears to be the prevailing public sentiment about advertising. The subject of advertising ethics is so fraught with controversy as to prompt a scholar to ask: “Advertising ethics – the ultimate oxymoron?” (Beltramini, 2003). In fact, Beltramini has pointed out that the reason why advertising ethics “has sustained itself as a towering lightning rod for controversy, at times singularly and fully credited with the demise of professional business practices, and the rise of underhanded and unprofessional commercialism” might be because it is the “most visible business tool” (2003, p. 215).

Advertising’s unintended social and cultural consequences have been the subject of much debate (see, for example, Pollay, 1986, and Holbrook, 1987, in response). While the discussion of these important arguments is beyond the scope

of this chapter, they are nonetheless included to provide a broader framework for the discussion of advertising ethics and social media.

Advertising in digital media in general, and the social media in particular, has added ethical concerns of its own to the discussion of advertising ethics, which was already suffering under a cloud of suspicion. In fact, as Lane, King, and Russell (2009) have noted, advertising content that would be “ill-advised” in general-circulation media paradoxically finds its way to a narrowly focused venue such as the Internet (p. 759).

An issue that has come to be of increasing concern to consumers with the development of sophisticated communication technology and growing use of Internet marketing is privacy (e.g., Fill, 2009, p. 112; Lane, King, & Russell, 2009, p. 757; Ashworth and Free, 2006; Rapp, Hill, Gaines, & Wilson, 2009). Some even claim that privacy rights will be to the twenty-first century what civil rights and women’s equality were to the twentieth, as cited by Laczniaik and Murphy (2006b, p. 315). In a section on Internet marketing, Clow and Baack (2010) include the issues of spam advertising, using cookies to track consumer Web browsing, and interstitial advertising that intrudes upon a person on the Internet without warning (p. 421).

This chapter will provide an overview of advertising ethics, address the ethical issues raised by social media advertising and try to suggest some guidelines for their resolution.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The major theories underlying advertising ethics are consequences-oriented and deontological arguments (Spence & Van Heekeren, 2005: 8-13). Utilitarianism is probably the most widely understood consequences-oriented theory, as noted by Murphy, Laczniaik, and Prothero (2012). Utilitarianism judges the ethical quality of a decision by its

consequences. In other words, that action is good if it results in the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Or, put another way, actions should be judged by their end results and not by the means used to achieve them (Schlegelmilch, 1998). As Spence and Van Heekeren (2005) have observed, by that logic, some advertising would be considered unethical only if it resulted overall in bad consequences for the greatest number of people, but the authors have also pointed out that it is difficult to imagine that a generally considered unethical advertising practice would ever result in the greatest satisfaction of utility for the greatest number of people (p. 11).

The deontological argument, or duty-based theory, indicates that actions are best judged by their inherent righteousness and without regard to consequences (Murphy et al., 2012, p. 27). In other words, deontological theories determine moral authority by the extent to which the intention of a decision is to treat all persons with respect and require that everyone should act in such a way that the act could be taken as a universal rule of behavior (Schlegelmilch, 1998, p. 31). The essence of this argument is embodied in the German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative (Kant, 1785/1981, as cited in Murphy et al., 2012; Spence & Van Heekeren, 2005; Schlegelmilch, 1998):

1. Act only according to the maxim by which you, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law;
2. Act so as to never treat a human being merely as a means to an end (as cited in Schlegelmilch, 1998: 31).

The third major type of ethical theory is the social contracts theory (Murphy, Laczniaik, and Prothero, 2012: 29). The social contracts theory assumes that there are hypernorms which cannot be violated by acceptable standards of business or industry practice. These hypernorms assume an obligation to respect the dignity of people, core

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