

# Introduction

## Why Does Everyone Have an Opinion about Advertising?

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Will Rogers once said, “Advertising is the art of convincing people to spend money they don’t have for something they don’t need.” On the other hand, at the beginning of his address to the Advertising Federation of America at the Hotel Pennsylvania in New York City on June 15, 1931, Franklin D. Roosevelt had this to say about advertising:

If I were starting life over again, I am inclined to think that I would go into the advertising business in preference to almost any other. The general raising of the standards of modern civilization among all groups of people during the past half century would have been impossible without the spreading of the knowledge of higher standards by means of advertising.

So, which is it? A noble method for improving modern civilization? Or a questionable process to wrestle money out of the hands of people who can’t afford to let it go? The reality is, it’s a bit of both. And, that’s what this book is about. Both sides of controversial issues about advertising.

The pros and cons of advertising have been debated ever since advertising emerged as the means to support our growing mass media consumption habits. A few years ago, I went sailing along the Amalfi Coast of Italy. We stopped along the way to visit Pompeii, a place that had intrigued me since I was a kid and first saw pictures of people encased in lava ash casts from the great volcano. Experiencing the ancient city of Pompeii for myself was breathtaking. But what surprised me even more than the former citizens forever frozen in screams of terror was seeing some frescoes on some buildings’ remains. They were faint

(the volcano erupted in 79 AD, so it's not a surprise that these paintings had faded over time!) but clear enough to see that these pictures were a kind of early outdoor advertising displaying what customers could expect if they entered the store.

Clearly, business people of modern civilization understood very early that it is important to convey some kind of message to people that you hope would eventually buy what you're selling. In the hundreds of years since, advertising has only become more important.

It's no coincidence that advertising as an industry grew alongside businesses in the United States during the industrial revolution. Before technology allowed products to be mass produced far away from their point of sale, consumers had to rely on their home-town merchant to decide what products to provide. They would most likely visit the country store where the manager would sell whatever goods he had available. You most likely bought a pound of flour. You didn't get to choose between Gold Medal and King Arthur. But, once mass production took off, all sorts of products flooded the market and advertising was needed to make sense of the choices – and also to help create the needs for the different choices.

While the slogans might be different today, the basic premise is the same. Advertising is still helping us to understand the differences between products – even if they are only perceived differences. (Really, there's no discernible difference between Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola, but don't try telling the die-hards that!)

To consider the roles and responsibilities that advertising can have in a society, it's helpful to think about the specific role that advertising has played in the growth of some companies. One of my favorites to look at is General Electric. My dad was a lifelong GE executive. I had the privilege (and challenge!) of moving all over the country during my childhood as my father oversaw the growth of GE's appliance parks. One of the happy side effects of being a GE family was being early adopters of some of the electric gadgets that the company would develop. The first iteration of electric curlers was interesting – and painful! The early electric potato peeler was another curiosity. (As far as I could tell, it looked like a regular peeler. You still had to make the peeling motion. It just came with a little motor.)

Inventor Thomas Edison was the mastermind behind General Electric. Begun in the late 1800s, GE has consistently been a leader in innovation, both in its products and in its advertising. Its current advertising slogan "Imagination at Work" seems to embody the mission of GE. Much of its advertising through the years has been trying to explain new products to the potential consumer. From the light bulb, to electric irons, to refrigerators, when GE started advertising these products – consumers didn't know they needed them. But who today would say that the light bulb is a luxury?

So, at the very least, advertising can provide important information about products. The controversy tends to be when the advertising moves beyond information. As historian Michael Schudson (1984) has said, advertising lets us

know how things ought to be. Of course, it's the advertisers' opinion on how this is conveyed – and that's often when the conversations get heated.

## A Mirror of Society, or an Agent of Change?

Over 20 years ago, Richard Pollay (1986) wrote a scholarly article laying out the argument about the role of advertising. It's a seminal paper and has been quoted by many advertising scholars through the years. Whenever I teach an advertising class, I ask my students those two questions on the first day of class. Is advertising a mirror of society? Or is it an agent of change? The basic premise is something like this: If advertising were a mirror of society, then the advertising industry is not really to blame for all the problems associated with bad advertising. *We're* to blame. If we don't like the ads, we should stop watching the shows that they're on, or stop buying the products, or tell the advertising agencies that we hate their ads. But if we respond (as we might to sexy ads), then that shows advertising is only going in that direction because it's what we want. It's a reflection of our culture. We look in the mirror and we see (and have no one to blame but) ourselves.

On the other hand, could advertising be an agent of change? This means that advertising can change our views about a particular product and eventually contribute significantly to what we purchase. *If that's true, then it's advertising's fault we're the way we are.*

I'll admit that I am a huge fan of reality television. I love any cooking contest show (*Master Chef* is a favorite), and I love *Property Brothers*, *House Hunters International*, *Shark Tank*, *American Idol*, *The Sing-Off*, *The Voice*, and those are just the top-of-mind shows. I do not watch *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. But about 2.5 million of us do. (For a cable show, that's a highly respectable number.) No one claims this show elevates our society. But *Honey Boo Boo* is clearly a vehicle that can attract advertising because the audience is solid. Without exception, the show exploits people. So why should we be surprised if the advertising on that show is also low-brow? Shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* are classic examples that provide evidence that advertising is a mirror of society.

But how about agents of change? The above discussion of General Electric's advertising is a good example here. People didn't know that they needed light bulbs. The *advertising* told them that they did. Consumers responded and welcomed electricity into their homes. If ever there was an agent of change, this was it. With electricity, people could stay indoors longer, which changed the amount of time they sat on their front porches, which changed the amount of time they communicated with their neighbors, and so on. Sure, advertising wasn't the only reason this happened – but it certainly played a part.

What about Apple's now iconic Macintosh 1984 Super Bowl commercial? That one commercial ushered in a whole new way of thinking about computers. It was most definitely an agent of change. (Okay, some would also argue it was

a mirror of society in that we were ready for the change. See how complicated this is?)

While these are only a couple of examples, they demonstrate how many people through the years have argued that all sorts of ads have impacted people and persuaded them to change their buying behaviors – and ultimately their lives. Some people claim they have friends who drink vodka now simply because of those funky, art-inspired ads. Of course, they never think advertising has impacted them personally. Only others. (This is called third-person effect and there are whole books written on this very interesting media theory.) Many people have argued that advertising is to blame for why so many young kids smoke. You'll read more about that in Chapter 5. So there is a lot of evidence that advertising is, indeed, an agent of change.

Now, at this point, you're probably thinking the answer's clear: it's both – advertising must be both a mirror of society *and* an agent of change. That's right, of course. But it's way more interesting – and instructive – to stick to one side or the other. That's what I make my students do. When I ask the “agent of change”/“mirror of society” question on the first day of class, they typically start out answering the expected “both.” I ask them to explain. The answers are not very interesting. After a few minutes of trying to give an “on the one hand/on the other hand” answer, they give up, shrug their shoulders and say, “Well, it just is. I don't know why.”

Then I tell them they have to choose a side. Each student must vote one way or the other. I have the “mirror of society” people move to one side of the classroom and the “agent of change” people move to the other side. Then I'll ask them to tell me why they are on the left (or right) side of the room. Finally, the answers start getting interesting. My students really start to think. They start to get passionate about the issues. They're starting to form an opinion. They're learning.

That's what this book is about. It's about examining the controversies, thinking about the consequences of perspectives, and then choosing a side. Intuitively we already know that both sides have merits, but we end up learning more about *both* sides if we're willing to argue *one* side. Even if we argue a side we don't actually believe, we can come to appreciate the other side of the argument and learn more about our own convictions.

There are a number of fine books on the market that deal with the impact of advertising on society. What is different about this book is that it is organized by “controversies and consequences.” I've asked a number of advertising experts to write essays about a controversial topic – but to write the essay primarily from one perspective. I found that as I read the essays I would be persuaded by the first argument – and then persuaded by the second argument. With the essays side by side, it becomes easier to see that these topics are complex and not to be dismissed easily.

The idea for this book came out of a class I taught when I was an advertising faculty member at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I had my students conduct research and debates about many of these very topics. I put them into teams without considering what their personal views were about a

particular topic. In fact, if I knew they felt one way, I would try to put them on the opposite team. After researching the topic and trying to develop a strong argument, they would begin to see that the other side also had a point. Over the course of the semester, they came to understand that there is more than one way to look at just about everything that has to do with advertising – and many other socially oriented subjects.

That class – in 2005 – was the last class I taught at UNC – and the students wholeheartedly embraced the notion of thinking more deeply about controversial issues. Of all the classes I taught during my tenure there, that was by far my favorite class. In their quest to find answers, these students helped me become a student again. Every one of those 40 students helped me to think more critically about advertising. I will be forever grateful to each of them.

## What’s Different about the Second Edition?

The first edition of *Advertising and society: Controversies and consequences* was published in 2009. Some things have changed since then – and some have not. Therefore, for this second edition, I’ve divided the books into two parts: “Enduring Issues” and “Emerging Issues.” The enduring issues have been around for years – and most likely will continue to be important to examine. Sex in advertising, tobacco advertising, and the use of stereotypes in advertising are examples of enduring issues.

But there are some new issues that are tackled in this second edition. Advertisements in journalistic environments (Chapter 12) is a good example. In recent years, we’ve seen more and more advertisements in places that would have been off-limits just a few years ago. That’s the financial reality in which our media now reside. But is it right?

Advertising in the world of social media (Chapter 10) is another example of an emerging issue. As ads permeate Facebook and other social media outlets, are there new privacy issues that should make us rethink our approach to advertising?

Some of the original essays have been updated for this edition. But some of the essays (even in the “Enduring Issues” section) are completely new. I’ve also updated and expanded the questions at the end of each chapter as well as provided some ideas for other debates you could have that are related to these topics.

But what hasn’t changed is looking at controversial issues from more than one perspective. How convincing are the essays in this edition? *You decide.*

## Ideas to Get You Thinking . . .

- 1 Think about all the great ads you’ve seen recently and not so recently. What do they have in common? Why do you think you can remember them?

- 2 Make a list of everything you would change about advertising if you could. How different would the world look if you had the power to adopt every change you wrote down? Would it be a better world? Why or why not?
- 3 If you could create *one* law about advertising, what would it be? Why?
- 4 Can you think of an example of an ad that might have changed your behavior (or attitude) about a product? If not yourself, what about a friend? What did the ad do that was so effective?
- 5 Do you and your friends have a favorite cola? If so, try a blind taste test. (For example, you might compare Diet Coke and Diet Pepsi.) How many could tell the difference? What did you learn from this?

### If You'd Like to Know More . . .

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