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Commentary

Applying Aristotelian rhetoric in teaching 'social responsibility' to advertising students



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Advertising is a highly visible business activity aimed at enticing potential customers to try new products and services. In the United States, advertising is monitored by the federal, state, and local governments, better business bureaus, the media, consumer groups, other advertisers, and the advertising industry itself – and criticized by all concerned. Overall, the common goals are to maximize the effectiveness of the commercials for the respective advertisers and minimize the negative impact on the American public.¹

“Social responsibility” in advertising, as defined broadly in a popular textbook, involves “doing what society views as best for the welfare of people in general or for a specific community of people,” distinguishing it from the more specific term, “ethical advertising.” The latter, described as “doing what the advertiser and the advertisers believe is morally right in a given situation,”² is paired in this book and others like it with a code of ethics or a list of practices condoned or condemned by the Federal Trade Commission or other regulatory agency.

In practice, the concepts of social responsibility and ethical advertising are closely related. For example, the American Marketing Association in the introduction to its Statement of Ethics calls members “stewards of society in creating, facilitating and executing the transactions that are part of the greater economy.”³ Similarly, the American Association of Advertising Agencies in its Standards of Practice holds that agencies should serve as a “constructive force in business,” avoiding unethical practices that “lead to financial waste, both in advertisements and in the institution of advertising.”⁴

Spokespersons for the advertising industry often cite its commitment to social responsibility in the work of the Advertising Council. Since 1941, it has sponsored the production of public service announcements for non-profit organizations and government agencies for causes such as disaster relief, literacy, safe driving, and health-related issues. Self-regulatory measures also encourage responsible advertising. The National Advertising Review Council works to resolve disputes between advertisers

and complainants over specific claims, thereby hoping to build public confidence in advertising,⁵ and the Children's Advertising Review Council monitors promotions directed toward children and responds to public concerns. In the first six months of 2010, CARU made recommendations in seventeen cases for modifying advertisements, packaging, and web sites for child-related products such as food, toys, vitamins, and forms of entertainment.⁶

Along with concerns about children's advertising, a few other specific social issues resurface for advertisers from time to time. Ever since the reforms of the late 1990s to how cigarettes are marketed and advertised, spokescharacters Joe Camel and the Marlboro Man have vanished. Yet advertisers still align themselves with tobacco interests, which could trouble the public. Organizations within the advertising industry filed a "friends of the court" brief supporting the appeal of tobacco companies of a lower-court ruling that upheld the constitutionality of most of the regulations included in the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act of 2009. Although the groups argued for the value of commercial free speech rights, consumers might see in this action only support in favor of a product determined to be harmful.⁷

Critics also have repeatedly questioned whether advertisers have been responsible in regard to the privacy of customers, especially with the continuing growth of the internet for marketing purposes and the inception of "cookies" and "data mining" to track consumers' online activities. FTC Chairman Jon Leibowitz declared privacy rights as an ongoing concern for his agency and made public in 2010 his intentions to work with Congress to write legislation that further safeguards consumers who cruise the internet from invasions of privacy by marketers as well as deceptive business practices. Possible legislation could limit marketing efforts but might also go as far as banning some types of online businesses.⁸

Public attitudes toward the advertising profession were a major concern for the American Advertising Federation when it helped establish the Institute for Advertising Ethics at the University of Missouri in June of 2010. Participants in a 2007 Gallup/ USA Today Poll ranked advertising practitioners ahead of lobbyists and car salesmen in perceived honesty and ethical behavior; however, all other professionals were seen as more ethical, including members of Congress, state officeholders and business executives. The public expects more, as shown in other research from the University of Missouri, which found "honest advertising" to be the single most important contributor to a company's reputation.⁹

When the Institute for Advertising Ethics opened, the industry's leading publications reflected the skepticism they sensed from the public. According to *Brandweek*, four members of the center's advisory board represented agencies that had been involved in recent financial scandals or public trust issues.¹⁰ *Advertising Age* encouraged advertisers to seriously debate the ethical issues that marred the profession's reputation, citing the willingness of some marketers to obscure facts from consumers when pitching financial products such as mortgages and loans.¹¹

Students of advertising thus need to be taught to look at the contributions that advertising makes to the health of the economy and the welfare of society. There appears to be *no shortage* of material available to facilitate classroom instruction. Advertising textbooks commonly contain the aforementioned codes of ethics and FTC guidelines. Resources available from the Advertising Educational Foundation,

¹² the Advertising Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, ¹³ and professional organizations include materials on ethics and social responsibility.

Much of what students learn rests on the priorities set by instructors. They might teach that advertising's responsibility in society is to make clients more profitable and thereby more capable of making bigger contributions to society, a reasonable point but hardly obvious to most consumers. Or instructors may propose a more proactive role favored by the public, according to research. A study found that 70 percent of respondents are willing to pay more for products marketed by companies they can clearly identify as socially responsible. ¹⁴ They, as consumers, may be asking for *their* best interests to be addressed by advertisers, not just companies seeking profits. Apparently, the industry and the public hold fundamentally different views on what "social responsibility" in advertising means. Educators, through research and teaching, might be able to close the gap in perception.

What goes on in advertising classes also reflects the attitudes that students bring with them from their individual backgrounds. The topic of social responsibility in advertising became contentious in the classroom when I was a novice college-level instructor. In this case study, I applied to the situation some of the principles of Aristotelian logic that I had been studying in a graduate seminar on rhetorical theory at a university nearby.

Situation

The classroom challenge I faced arose in an introductory advertising class at a private liberal arts college in southeastern United States. Sponsored by a major Protestant denomination, this college boasted a student body of about 2,500 undergraduates that was approximately 95 percent white with predominantly students from the sponsoring church. In this particular class, most students were junior or senior majors in communication arts or business. One of the most vocal students double-majored in both fields and served as an officer in a campus organization that promoted free enterprise. His father, who owns a practice as a certified public accountant, had set for the student an entrepreneurial example.

When I broached the subject of advertisers having a moral obligation to society, the students adamantly defended advertising solely as an arm of business with no role beyond the selling of products and rejected the idea that advertisers bear any burden of social responsibility. They saw advertisers as holding a "right" to positively portray their products and services in the free-enterprise system. For consumers who might be misled, their recommendation was *caveat emptor* ("let the buyer beware"). The students also saw no need for advertisers to be concerned with the impact of advertisements on society.

The students seemed to see the field of advertising from one point of view. The business entrepreneur sets out to make money, which means he should be allowed to do so without governmental or societal intervention. They assumed the consumer ought to know that advertising was meant to sell products with a one-sided argument. Evidenced by this viewpoint and the strong support of the Republican candidate in the recent Presidential election, the campus preferred GOP politics. The

students favored laissez-faire policies with the government staying out of the way of business. They might also have advocated the “prosperity gospel” of the late 20th century, popularized by televangelists. For them, Christians’ success from using their intelligence and resources to make money and find evidence of their faithfulness to God.¹⁵

Discussion

Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, drew a generalized picture when offering insights into the minds of college-age students. In describing the “youthful type of character,” Aristotle characterized members of this group as inclined toward “strong passions,” “quick-tempered and apt to give way to their anger,” and “accepting [of] the rules of society in which they have been trained – not yet believing in any other standard of honor.” Additionally, “they have exalted notions, because they have not yet been humbled by life or learned its necessary limitations” and “think they know everything.”¹⁶

Consequently, students might well have been expected to support the commercial aspects of advertising with which they had already become familiar, possibly becoming angry and/or defensive when questions arose over the moral obligations to be truthful and transparent in promoting new products and services. When confronted with new notions about social responsibility, they might continue to advocate the advancement of commercial interests as still the primary concern of advertising.

However, one factor that Aristotle could not have envisioned for a college classroom was the impact of digital technology on recent generations of students. The college environment changed significantly as “digital natives” – those born in the early 1990s – entered classrooms with their thinking patterns and learning experiences shaped by using computers, the internet and social networking media. The digital generation gap has challenged educators to go beyond traditional teaching techniques to forge innovative ways of engaging young minds in the learning process.¹⁷

Whether speaking to students or other audiences, Aristotle recommended *rhetorical* communication methods that focused on the ability of the communicator to move an audience to action with a compelling argument, strengthened by involving logical, ethical, and psychological factors. Complementing the rhetorical method is the Socratic *dialectic* approach. This starts with a dialogue between two or more individuals matching wits in attempts to change each other’s minds.¹⁸ The *Socratic method* has long been used in educational settings as instructors pose questions for students to stimulate their critical thinking. As one is answered, another question is followed up to push students beyond the limits they knew toward deeper understanding.¹⁹

Had I used Socratic questioning when I encountered the students’ resistance, I might have followed up with questions that forced them to reconsider their original thoughts. However, as a beginning instructor, I opted for the lecture format, which in hindsight, was less conducive to changing attitudes or teaching values and more applicable for simply conveying information.²⁰

A former advertising professional, I was relatively new to teaching and still not fully acclimated to the classroom. I more closely resembled Aristotle’s “men in their prime” with “neither that excess of confidence, which amounts to rashness, nor too

much timidity, but the right amount of each.” “In regard to anger and desire, they will be temperate as well as brave,” and “all their excesses or defects are replaced by moderation. . . .”²¹

From the students’ negative response, my reaction to the students came across as disapproving as I emphasized the concept of social responsibility for advertisers as superior to theirs. A video, “*Killing Us Softly: Advertising’s Image of Women*,” shown at this point in the discussion seemed to further polarize the disparate viewpoints; many students saw the video’s claims as exaggerated beyond consideration. While closer to Aristotle’s model of “prime” moderation than the students, I failed to reach the ideal of remaining wise and dispassionate in the midst of dispute.

Findings

Afterward, I developed a strategy utilizing Aristotle’s three main types of proof – *pathos*, *ethos*, and *logos* – which would prove to be helpful should similar circumstances present themselves again. While the purpose of a classroom presentation is not necessary to win an argument or persuade a crowd, as Aristotle might have intended his rhetoric, his principles would tailor a lesson to the particular group of students. As one observer points out, the standard lecture format must “be adapted to a much less homogeneous body of learners and their learning needs, lecturers will have to address individual learning needs and styles much more closely than in the past.”²² This format might lend itself more easily to helping students understand how and why ethical decisions were made rather than guiding them on how to make their own judgments.

- ***Pathos* (emotion):**

In dealing with the flaring of tempers in the classroom, I might well have heeded Aristotle’s wisdom that “growing calm is the opposite of growing angry.” He further wrote: “Also, we feel calm towards those who humble themselves before us and do not gainsay us.”²³ Therefore, I realized that it becomes more important in the classroom for me to minimize any threat to the students’ point of view. I might have acknowledged their articulation of advertising’s more commercial interests as indeed an important aspect while encouraging them to further discuss the subject, perhaps on a more personal level. This might produce concerns from a Christian perspective about the work ethics or protectionist views on assuring that advertising is truthful. While ever mindful of the volatility in a classroom, I should establish a low-key approach while keeping my own display of disagreement and/or temper in check. Then, I might propose that balancing the needs of advertisers with those of society as a whole has been difficult for everyone involved before introducing factual materials from the textbook and lecture notes. The video that presented criticism of advertising would be more appropriate at the end of the lecture when students were not as emotionally involved.

- ***Ethos* (speaker’s authority):**

My presence in the classroom as an authority figure produced only limited influence. I could earn more credibility than in the previously mentioned classroom situation by regarding the students’ viewpoints with greater respect and maintaining an open environment. Authoritative sources as the Bible, well-known individuals

in the advertising community, and additional research materials should be used to reinforce the textbook's points on balancing the positive and negative effects of advertising in today's world. While I emphasized my own background in professional advertising, I had yet to develop confidence in the classroom that was likely to be reinforced by experience over time.

- **Logos (reason):**

The textbook used in this class offered a thorough examination of the agencies, councils, courts, and individuals involved in regulating advertising. It might be pointed out to the students that the very presence of these entities suggests that society prefers some controls over advertising. As well, a presentation of the specific types of regulations and court rulings imposed would be useful in helping students discern between advertising in general and deceptive advertising. It might also be effective to offer current examples from the advertising industry, such as the ongoing controversy over cigarette advertising, especially the alleged pro-smoking effect of Joe Camel on children. Recent articles from *Advertising Age* magazine would demonstrate the range of issues being debated within the professional advertising world.

Conclusion

The classroom conflict that I faced as an instructor and my subsequent search for understanding the relevant issues seemed almost as complex as the subject matter itself. Just as advertisers must balance their roles in financial and social responsibility, educators should strive to accommodate the needs of students and the demands of the academic content to create respectful and productive learning environments. In this case study, I found in classical rhetoric a fresh perspective on classroom challenges.

Hopes also run high that the new Institute on Advertising Ethics at the University of Missouri can also bring a fresh perspective to the debates over advertising's social responsibility being conducted in classrooms, industry publications, offices, and society at large. The initial research being planned will focus on understanding consumers' perspective on advertising ethics, which will in turn help educators train savvy employees for the industry and wiser citizens of a society based on free enterprise.²⁴

Notes

¹ William F. Arens, Michael F. Weigold, and Christian Arens, *Contemporary Advertising*, 11th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 70-71, 74-93.

² *Ibid.*, 70.

³ Statement of Ethics, American Marketing Association, <http://www.marketingpower.com/AboutAMA/Pages/Statement20%of%20Ethics.aspx> (accessed July 1, 2010).

⁴ Standards of Practice, American Association of Advertising Agencies, <http://ams.aaaa.org/web/upload/inside/standards/pdf> (accessed July 1, 2010).

⁵ National Advertising Review Council, www.narcpartners.org/about/index.aspx (accessed July 3, 2010).

⁶ Children's Advertising Review Unit, www.caru.org/ (accessed July 3, 2010).

- ⁷ Karlene Lukovitz, "Ad Groups File Brief in Tobacco Act Appeal," *Marketing Daily*, June 7, 2010. The Association of National Advertisers, the American Association of Advertising Agencies and the American Advertising Federation took part in filing the brief.
- ⁸ Bob Garfield, "FTC Privacy Review Could Mean Trouble for Online Marketing Internet," *Advertising Age*, April 19, 2010.
- ⁹ Jack Neff, "Ad Industry Battles Back Against Bad Rep, Forms Ethics Institute," *Advertising Age*, June 7, 2010, <http://www.rjionline.org/in-the-news/stories/advertising-institute/stories/ad-age/index/php> (accessed July 1, 2010).
- ¹⁰ Jim Edwards, "Why the Ad Biz's New Code of Ethics Will Surely Fail," *Brandweek*, June 11, 2010, <http://industry.bnet.com/adver-code-of-ethics-will-surely-fail/> (accessed July 1, 2010).
- ¹¹ Rance Crane, "If Ad Industry Doesn't Have Debate on Ethics, It's Doomed to Repeat Its Mistakes," *Advertising Age*, June 21, 2010, <http://www.rjionline.org/in-the-news/stories/advertising-institute/stories/ad-age2/index/php> (accessed July 1, 2010).
- ¹² <http://www.aef.com>. The Advertising Educational Foundation supports classroom teaching with online sources such as videos, book excerpts, suggestions for curricula, industry news, reports of research, and training opportunities.
- ¹³ Advertising Division, AEJMC, <http://addivision.wordpress.com> (accessed July 3, 2010). Resources include the *Journal of Advertising Education*.
- ¹⁴ Elena Malykhina, "Social Responsibility Boosts Brand Perception," *Adweek*, March 31, 2010.
- ¹⁵ See Bobby Ross Jr., "Prosperity Gospel on Skid Row," *Christianity Today*, February 2009, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/february/2.12.html> (accessed May 15, 2010).
- ¹⁶ Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, eds., *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1990), 175-76.
- ¹⁷ See "Digital Natives," Berman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, <http://www.cyber.law.harvard.edu/research/digitalnatives> (accessed May 15, 2010). Also see Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon*, October 2001, <http://www.marcprensky.com/.../Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf> (accessed May 15, 2010).
- ¹⁸ "Aristotle's Rhetoric," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 2010, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-rhetoric/> (accessed May 15, 2010).
- ¹⁹ Peter Jarvis, *The Theory and Practice of Teaching* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 92.
- ²⁰ Jarvis, 81.
- ²¹ Bizzell and Herzberg, 177.
- ²² Jarvis, 87.
- ²³ Bizzell and Herzberg, 163-64.
- ²⁴ "Ad Industry Battles Back."

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