

Benetton Group:

Evolution of Communication Strategy

Benetton clothing and fragrances were considered very cool when I was a young teen in middle school and high school. I was never aware of their advertising methods and actually do not remember ever seeing any of them as I was growing up. I am truly uncertain on how I would have responded to some of these extreme photos. This case is an interesting study on how companies can use wildly different techniques to grab the attention of the marketplace. Most notably, the areas of emotionally charged marketing techniques coupled with cause related marketing stand out in the Benetton case.

Emotionally Charged Marketing

No one in their right mind could deny the emotional triggers that were incorporated into Benetton's marketing strategy. Toscani, the head of their advertising department from 1982 to 2001 wanted to make Benetton a "life style brand" and took the stance of making statements instead of focusing on what the company was actually trying to sell, clothes. This came in the form of many different provocative ads that definitely made an impact in the advertising world. These ads did exactly what Toscani wanted them to do, make a big wave and get the Benetton name out with full force. These extreme ads truly played to the emotions of societies all around the globe. The range of emotion was great as well, from infuriation and disgust, to appreciation and a deeper comprehension on the trials facing society today.

Emotions are very powerful tools in the hands of marketers. Most people strive for happy thoughts and happy emotions to be evident in their lives. However, "there is an empirical evidence indicating, that subjects better remember and more regularly recall ads awakening fear, than they do warm or with no emotional content ones"(Marketing and Ethics, United Colors of Benetton). Toscani obviously believed in trying to get very strong emotional responses. "Successful appeals to these basic emotions consolidate stories and the desired calls to action in the lasting memories of audiences" (American Research Group, Inc.). I believe that this was Toscani's intent with these ads. In his opinion, these emotional appeals, whether seen from a negative viewpoint or in a positive light helped keep the name of Benetton fresh on the minds of consumers. "An added bonus is that successful emotional appeals limit the number of exposures required for audiences to understand, learn, and respond to the calls to action - people may only need to see emotionally compelling scenes once and they will remember those scenes for a lifetime"(American Research Group, Inc.). The fact that these advertisements, out of the literally billions that have been made over the years are discussed and studied is proof of this alone. The emotional intrigue that they evoked is truly a lasting testimony to Toscani's strategy for name recognition of Benetton.

I find it interesting that it seems as a society, the United States is becoming immune to the fact that so many ads are now appealing to our emotions regarding sex and violence. Maybe because these ads are more prevalent, we do not see them as striking or shocking emotional (except maybe for the Paris Hilton's Carl Jr. ad for some - even the "Trunk Monkey" ads for Suburban Group could elicit strong emotions based on the violent content involved that is humorized and made into a light "funny" subject). It seems however, that as a society in general, we are much more uncomfortable with issues that bring about a stark reality that we may not really want to be hit in the face with. It seems imagery is more acceptable than reality in many cases. "Toscani was accused of emotional manipulation, crass sensationalism and of exploiting human suffering for commercial gain. He defended his stance" (O'Sullivan). Whether or not you stand by him, his ads did bring about awareness and ultimately, the primary purpose of advertising, brand recognition. Toscani effectively used a strategy noted by Belch and Belch (2002) by understanding that the "use of unexpected picture or visual image will grab consumers' attention and get them to engage in a more effortful or elaborative processing" (p.183). It is noted that this will also lead to "more recall and greater processing" (Belch and Belch, 2002, p. 183). I do believe however, that new consumers in the market may not be able to understand the emotional pull that Toscani was trying to make. In my opinion, some of his emotionally driven ads would not at all make me interested in clothing. I could see how they might challenge my personal beliefs, but I am more interested in actually seeing clothes than knowing what the company that sells them is socially interested in. Toscani would probably be offended by my socialized mentality toward clothing advertising. He stated that "ad agencies are obsolete. They create a false reality and want people to believe in it." (O'Sullivan). In my case, I would agree that with clothing I want that false reality, not emotionally charged messages regarding prevalent social issues. Toscani noted "'we show reality and we're criticized for it.' Far from offering glossy fantasies, he found a wound and sprinkling salt on it" (O'Sullivan). If nothing else, he did understand that by reaching people on an emotional level, he could have a lasting effect in their memory banks as well as in their daily news.

Looking at advertising in European countries, from where the company Benetton hails, it makes it a little easier to understand how these stark, in your face advertisements might be a little more well accepted than by me, a small-town Texas Panhandle girl. European advertising has traditionally been racier from my opinion. Even when watching shows giving samples of the worlds funniest commercials, you invariably see the dark circles to censor out certain body parts. France is definitely considered the most lenient of all European countries (Malvern, 2004). You can definitely see the cultural differences through each countries media standards. "Standards of "decency" already range widely across the EU. On Italian television, for instance, scantily clad women read the 'news' and cavort around variety shows in ways that might make viewers in more politically correct places like Britain cringe. German television offers a selection of cheesy late-night erotica that seems to promise more than it delivers"

(Toering, 2005). Benetton likely did not have such a strong response in these countries that are a little more open than the United States and Britain but did experience backlash from countries like Germany on many of its ad campaigns. "Judging from the European advertising involvement with sex and nudity, and its anticipated impact on American agencies and marketing experts, there will be many more sexual pitches at the American consumer in the near future" (Bieber). This is very evident in my opinion. Actually Benetton's ads may fade away in memory as we continually get more and more outrageous with ads that continue to push the limits we have set in American society advertising. In my opinion, at least the Benetton ads were somewhat thought provoking and not merely pushing the line in soft pornography as some of our advertisements are today. We as Americans need to get ready though, the ideas and movements in advertising in Europe are very likely to be our ways in years to come. Just look how far language has come over the last 20 years, damn is no longer a cuss word, but a part of vocabulary throughout our media.

Cause Marketing

Toscani effectively used these emotional pulls to utilize a unique type of marketing called cause marketing. Cause marketing is a central theme in the Benetton ads with Toscani as they still are to this day. Toscani believed that he could successfully address issues such as racism and hunger as tool for marketing the Benetton brand. Toscani appears to have had strong convictions for overcoming the racial difficulties that are experienced around the world. "Toscani's objective was not to sell but to make consumers think" (O'Sullivan). For example, Toscani used one ad with a white baby breastfeeding from a black breast. "Although intended by Toscani as an anti-racist statement, the ad evoked painful memories of the black wet-nurse and her outcast position in society" (O'Sullivan). Not everyone saw the value of blending these two cultures effortlessly; there are many historical wounds that cannot be simply overcome with a good photo opportunity. Unfortunately, as in many cases, a person's vision does not always cross communication lines effectively. Different people have different life experiences and belief systems that are a constant factor in any kind of cause marketing that a for-profit or non-profit entity must face in marketing. This was also true of the intermingling of the Arabs and the Jews. Again Toscani faced a strong-willed audience in which many did not appreciate at all the implications he made through his ads. It is a wonderful thought, but to imagine these two cultures merging is impossible in the minds of some.

Sometimes, less shocking advertising is more beneficial in the cause-marketing arena. For example, in 2003, Benetton developed a campaign that focused on the issue of food and hunger in the world and developed ads that were informative and provocative but not to the extreme that some of Toscani's work. Benetton invested approximately 16 million dollars in the campaign (Chicago Sun Times). I believe that a company can actually do more good given directly to a cause, but Benetton obviously feels differently and believes that the awareness

they bring is more beneficial. I looked extensively on their website to find direct financial donations and was unable to find that paper trail (that does not mean it does not exist – I just could not find it – I contacted Benetton and they gave me a number in Italy to call – but I didn't splurge: -)). To me, action speaks louder than words. In my opinion, they could have more effectively used publicity and public relations to work for their benefit while also directly benefiting a cause that they wanted to support. For example, ConAgra is active in raising awareness of hunger, especially the problem of children going without food. "In less than one year, ConAgra Feeding Children Better has rallied 80, 000 employees from the company's 70 plants and operating facilities to raise more than 200 tons of food" (Cone). To me, this is a much more efficient use of cause marketing that lends for hard results in making this world a better place. However, Benetton was successful despite my opinion of their lack of true results. They did effectively obtain "worldwide notoriety the campaigns brought the brand" (O'Sullivan). Thus, in my opinion, the advertising was effective in brand recognition.

Conclusion

Through emotionally charged marketing and cause marketing, Benetton grew and continues to be a notable force in the market to this day. We as a society have to be aware of the images and symbols that are being presented to us in order to successfully keep our belief systems and moral thought processes in check. It is becoming easier and easier to blame advertising and the media for our social ills but I believe that in truth, we are still responsible for our own lives. We must take an active part in the shaping and the growth of our selves and our children. The media as we know it and advertising will not soon fade away. We must prepare ourselves to interact with these emotional appeals and cause stances and be strong in our own opinions that we are responsible for developing. I do believe that the media and advertising are powerful and can many times challenge our personal stances. However, we must take charge and choose our own paths as intelligent human beings rather than being sedentary sponges that simply soak up what the media spits out at us. (this brings up a completely different topic, regarding children – but I am basing this opinion on adults) The way I look at it is that creative advertisers, such as Toscani from Benetton, give us opportunity to evaluate and truly look at what drives us and what we find to be important. In my opinion, great advertising people are those that make you remember the product. Whether you are for or against the emotional appeals and cause marketing of Toscani at Benetton, the fact of the matter is that he and his campaign are remembered and are still talked about, long after they are even used in the media any more.

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