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<th>Media and the consumer: a Sri Lankan viewpoint with particular reference to TV advertising</th>
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Media And The Consumer: A Sri Lankan Viewpoint
With Particular Reference To TV Advertising

By

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RESEARCH & INFORMATION CENTRE
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SEMINAR ON MEDIA EDUCATION IN SOUTH ASIA
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PAPER ON: MEDIA AND THE CONSUMER
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- A SRI LANKAN VIEWPOINT
  WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE
  TO TV ADVERTISING

- SHEHARA DE SILVA
MEDIA AND THE CONSUMER

Is advertising an authentic and uncomplicated social mirror that reflects the pulse, variety, frailty and dignity, the aspirations and actual reality of everyday life of the community that it communicates to?

Does Advertising portray actual conditions and behaviour or is it an imposed entrepreneurial value set, an utopia faithful to the value propositions and preoccupation of Advertisers, Agencies and the Creative conjurers?

There is surely in all persuasion, suspension of some belief, some nuance of stress, that is manipulative, and exploitative? The more exceptionally creative or clever it is, the more successful it is.

Advertising must sell a product/service or idea, it must create a need or build up an added value, and an inclination to purchase. It is thus inherently manipulative.

In countries such as Sri Lanka - where no particular bodies represent the consumer, and where despite, 10 years of an open economy - the disparity of wealth, and often power based on wealth, both the private and public sector has shown a fair degree of restraint in self regulating their media messages.
One reason no doubt has been the state monopoly of the main National Media-TV and Radio, leaving Press as the only "non-regulated" medium of Mass Communication (in terms of advertising).

The State run Television station with islandwide transmission and an approx. Maximum 35% to 40% reach of households at prime time peak programming, has had a stringent code of Advertising ethics set up in 1982 - One Year after the station came into being, and this was further elaborated on in 1985.

In a Traditional culture when exposure to Western culture via the growth of communications can leave certain sectors of the community Feeling that its values are being eroded, or its sensibility peaked, it is extremely important that the programming stations, and all media carry some responsibilities towards the culture it is set in. Again as programmes live on market response, and, as the market reach in Sri Lanka is too small to oversegment and polarise any part of the whole, the open market system has its own self regulating common sense.

The issues related to non-violence, conservatism of sexual relations, value portrayal of respect to elders, and religious - multiculturalism and hypersensitivity are true of India, Sri Lanka and many other parts of this region.
In a young population as in Sri Lanka, where over 35% of the population is under 15 years, where the literacy rate is 90% plus, and where, the quality of life indexes are some of the highest in the region, particular interest is given to:

1. Communication of pharmaceutical products
2. Truth and over promise
3. Childrens advertising / Portrayal of violence
4. The use of advertorial style
5. Use of fear
6. Portrayal of Women or Gender issues (as is the trend to call it)

These are issues which are global. To not cover some of the traditional brickbats of TV Advertising in relation to these issues would be remiss, though my stance is clearly skeptical on these populist themes.

PHARMACEUTICAL ADVERTISING

Let me start first with childrens advertising, I noted sometime last year in Greece the ban of childrens toy advertising on television, I do not know if this will bode any impact in the E/C but 2 Ads that I have carried with me - one, a Sri Lankan childrens Panadol advert, stresses the use of the product consumed by the child almost like a sweet. To my mind, this is unacceptable : drugs of any form however mild, should not be
treated like sweets, particularly when it is positioned for children.

The advert transgresses another ethic in that it majors on a competitor's inferred negative - "Aspirin Free". Ethical products/pharmaceuticals should not be (and usually never are), positioned on a competitor's negative; as it can lead to misinformation/or building up fear against a product that, as in this example, is the drug of choice in certain conditions of fevers.

"Gentle on your stomach" is perhaps better than "Free from stomach irritation - contains no aspirin", again inferential and knocking. This has been the Panadol platform for many years now. Of course, my comments could sound biased as my husband works for the Company that markets soluble Aspirin! However, pharmaceutical advertising in Sri Lanka, particularly the analgesic wars should be monitored closely. Both Panadol and Disprin have sometimes trespassed the grey areas of the TV Code of Ethics. Visual presentation of doctors, dentists, chemist and nurses have been used. Either in posm or press though less on TV. The impression of professional advice or recommendation is inferred. Many years back, the use of a leading S.L. Cricketer in testimonial endorsement and subsequently the use of the ex-Ms. World (who appears on the children's Panadol ad too) and a series of other celebrities have also walked over the credo - "No advertisement for a medicine or treatment may include a
testimonial by a person well known in public life, sport, entertainment etc. [advertising standards and practice issued by Ruparahini (Sri Lanka - State run TV station) Commercial Operations Division 25/1/82 revised 1/11/85].

TRUTH AND OVER PROMISE

Dental health care products that take a health platform must and should be maintained under a similar code and not the more open ended personal care products code. With the potential threat of the entry of Proctor & Gamble, with Crest in Sri Lanka, and a strong flanking attack by a leading local company with a clove oil based toothpaste called 'Clo-guard'; Unilever, S.L., introduced 'Signal-Plus' on a gum health platform recently. It is, in my mind, a clear example of over promise in advertising particularly as it uses as its campaign platform "saves your teeth for life"! Unilever have substantiated their claims in the campaign to the TV Station that "a 99% success rate in prevention of the recurrence of gum health disease" is possible with Signal Plus. I have not read this study and am not in the position to comment. However, whatever the research "saves your teeth for life" is too broad a statement, as much as life time trials should then be conducted and submitted.

CHILDRENS ADVERTISING

To get back to the 2nd commercial I have brought, the imaginative
use of a local folk character "Andare" (Court Jestor) - a childrens favourite because he tells them stories; is used in a pied piper like sequence to appeal to kids. Here, the clever exploitation of a childrens folk personality as would Mickey Mouse of the West or some such character, has much appeal for kiddies related products.

Talking of use of childrens folk characters and fairy tale characters, there is much blah blah on the excessive use of violence and fear in childrens TV today. As a mother opposed to showing my 3 yr. old child TV that depicts guns and violence, I find myself struggling in an unreal world, over-protecting him, for sans TV exposure, school and other childrens parties etc., have exposed him to a staple aspect of our lives. In countries such as ours, where communal strife has left brutalities man-to-man out into the open street, and a militarisation of everyday civil law maintenance; where, though we might like to say that violence is a legacy of Western type TV programming, I know that our local folk tales for children have many tales of gore and terror, wicked stepmothers, tearing out of childrens eyeballs in retribution, etc. (See illustrated Folk tales of Sri Lanka).

Panyakanthi Wijenaike and Sybil Wethasinghe two of Sri Lanka’s most respected childrens writers have published many books using traditional folk stories. The wicked witch of Hansel & Gretel that put children in cages and ate them, the giant that chases children in Jack and the Beanstalk, or the moral that could be
in the shade to the traditional tales of our culture. However, like Freud who’s analysis on childrens nursery rhymes, made them all out to have phallic or sexual over or undertones, I believe that the extremists who wish to analyse any of these media through their particular position, would be able to find enough examples to make a credible enough case. However it is true, that even as an adult, watching old movies like "A patch of blue" with so called "good old-fashioned values and pace" that makes one shed tears and feel good about life and people, I felt these 'old values' are now rarely projected.

I feel that particularly in the issues that relate to communication to children, a study of the pioneers [Disney, Hanna Barbara, Warner and MGM, or, in the advertising scene Kellogs and Mills in Cereals, General Food in non-carbonated drinks, Mattel in toys, Mars and M&M in the candy business] would help. They have set the "patterns and principles" that are still used globally. Cy Schneider, in his book "Childrens Television - How it works and the influence on children" gives a delightful account of how Mattel tied up with Disney in the sponsoring of the 1st Mickey Mouse Club in 1955. It was the first time the Disney theatrical cartoon library was to be shown on TV. Mickey has been an International movie favourite since the 20's, and he was to star in the new series. The show was to combine music, songs, cartoons, childrens news features, adventure serials and appearances by guest celebrities with a
supporting cast of young performers called Mouseketeers. (Here was the precursor to the fun/entertainment and education mix of Sesame Street). Unprecedented advertising support was needed - half a million dollars or the total net worth of the company that was to sponsor it. In 1955, there had been no recognised brand names for toys. It was a period when the parents of children had grown up in the bleak days of the depression. These parents wanted much more for their children than they had had to in their deprived childhoods. A block-buster television show seemed to be apt to build the first brand name for a kids toy, and the "Burp G is the first toy product that became an immediate TV hit. Therefrom, as Schneider recounts, there has been "no turning back". Thereafter, the mix of communication strategies and products were somehow designed on the basis of how it could be communicated on TV,. Products were accepted by a dubious trade not on their individual charm and sales appeal but on TV support and promotional package.

USE OF ADVERTORIAL STYLE

The use of advertorial style, which is a print media issue has little exponention in Sri Lanka, partly I believe, due to the poor credibility of the medium (the press), due to State regimentation and a poorly developed magazine and tabloid market. The argument against use of advertorial style is that again, it attempts to mislead consumers with a veneer of authority, as was the earlier ethic I quoted in pharmaceutical products used by
people who look like doctors etc. to endorse these products. The press has no published code of standards for advertisers typically of its effete status in the country.

THE USE OF FEAR

The use of fear as a device to create attention and to jolt people to some imminent danger, that they should take counteractive measures against, is a favourite ploy of much Insurance advertising in Sri Lanka. Insurance marketing is another large segment of media voice - again particularly on TV. Apart from my personal viewpoint that the traditionally Pollyanna-ish outlook of our people, and that if misadventure did strike the fatalistic viewpoint generally takes over with a Buddhistic or karmic explanation. I feel the people are not receptive to ads that harbour on the aspects of potential danger. They"switch off" it rather than face it. However, since much advertising is done like this, maybe it works for them and I am wrong. The advertising that communicates through fear that also promotes use of children, though it's targets however, are parents that must insure against ill health or death, for the sake of the young dependants they might leave behind, has again to follow the sensibilities of Childrens Advertising.

The commercial I have brought can also have negative psychological impacts on children building insecurity and destabilisation (Ceylinco Diagasiri). A young child
...and the trouble began
with harsh toilet tissue

Doctors, Hospitals, Health Authorities approve Scott Tissues for Sale

1928 - Scott Tissues 'Scare Campaign'

'Is your bathroom paper safe?'

'A single contact with inferior toilet tissue may start the way for serious infection - and a long, painful illness.'

Attention getting but surely over doing it?
Just what is it to be
A Good Wife in this
MODERN AGE?

DEEP down in your heart—in the
heart of every woman—is that
magnetic wish to be a good wife—
not just in your husband's eyes, but
in the eyes of your world, too. He is moving ever for-
ward. You can not afford to lag behind.
The world of Business men have
launched the dragon of Drudgery. But
what of your world? Are you still ham-
pered by heavy household tasks that
make your time and sap your strength?
Does the weekly washday task its heavy
mill of hours that you spend so
joyously, so probably in other ways?

TIME IN ON LAUNDBERLAND

Are you passing up enjoyable, stimulat-
ing youth-bringing pleasures and pas-
times because of this heavy burden?
It is no wonder then that washday means
more of Youth and Beauty than the
other six days can mean?

Washday in your home is deemed—
a day of rest and recreation is assured
—if you will decide now to get the facts
so are for yourself just what the modern
laundry has to offer. In place of drudgery
you are given a full day of freedom,
happy hours for those pleasant pursuits
—those gracious arts—that make one
a truly good wife—a worthy companion
of the twentieth century husband.

You will find there is a laundry service
that easily meets your needs, one that
fits snugly into your Family Budgets.
Moreover, in that progressive age,
the laundry can be relied upon to wash
clothes clean and make them last long.
The health of your family is safe guarded
with every scientific aid. Modern laun-
dry service really saves both in the long run.

At the other end of your telephone
there is a laundrywoman who will gladly
converse this story. Talk with her—
then try. Let her send you the deli-
ightful journey booklet of "A Life in
Laundreland." It's the next thing to
wearing the laundry yourself.

The 1920's Ads of the American Laundry Machine Company has
parallels to the Singer (S.L.) Durables ads of the 90's.

To quote Marchand again—"Many of the advertising tableaux
presented women's new leisure pursuits as acts of individual
self-expression. One American Laundry Machinery Company ad,
having contrasted "Mrs Weary Wife at Home" and "Mrs Wise Wife
at Liberty," suggested an open-ended, self-justifying notion
of "female freedom" in a world of recreation and amusement
where "there is so much to learn, so much to do, so much to
see and hear." But more common were the tableaux that
brought women back full-circle to their traditional roles:
the new range of activities made them "better wives and
can get up crying at night in fear that his father has had a heart-attack. On the other hand, to be fair, like the example of my child who I wished to protect from violence, the reality is kids today are more and more exposed to life's truths through all media and are less impressionable than we think. Trying to regiment and overprotect commercial advertising, is not a real solution.

GENDER ISSUE / PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN

I have brought just two other examples with me. (1) A Singer Gas Cooker ad that had a campaign platform "Behind every successful mother is a Singer Gas Cooker". As I was partly responsible for the thinking behind this ad, I was approached by a women's lobby stating that the ad portrayed women as a stereotype and inferentially role played successful motherhood with the ability to cook well and be a housewife etc. I argued it out, that as a professional woman who had never got into the kitchen, that this kind of sexist viewpoint was not intended, least of all by me. Fortunately, the lobby was known, and weak, and it died a natural death and the commercial still runs. But it does really put peer pressure on women, who feel they must perform, or role play, and who like to keep pretty kitchens. In fact, research showed that upper middle class S/L women often possess oven type cookers for status and that they feel a kitchen is incomplete without one, rather than to really ever use it!

Roland Marchand in his book 'Advertising the American dream',
says the Zerrspiegel is a fun house mirror that reflects with distortion objects, but nevertheless portrays everything within its field of vision. Is Advertising like this or is it too selective in its portrayal of its field of vision. Is that what is fundamentally wrong? Yet, if, wish fulfilment and pondering on the rosier side of life as Walter Mitty or Millers salesmen did, overshadows their real world, and this gives escape from, and release from, the drudgery of life’s routine should we complain?

The "Upscale Selling" of the Advertisers’ jargon to make people stretch economically beyond their reach has many social problems in developing countries. In Sri Lanka, for instance, use of luxury goods and frozen meat, ice creams etc. were nearly banned as "creating dissatisfaction" to a population that was 50% below the poverty line. Only pork products that might offend the sensibilities of the Moslems is now banned. The rigidity of the earlier stance had no place in the open economy, foreign investment seeking position of the Government. However, in the converse, I remember sometime back as a Product Manager of a leading Multinational brand of Durables researching the possibility that Market stretching had occurred for a product category, due to easy payment schemes in which consumers who had no economic need or hope of recouping the economic outlay on refrigerators had invested in this, due to pressure of prestige created by heavy advertising. This was particularly true of Traders who set up a shop with the purchase of Refrigerator imagining they only were "true traders", with a competitive edge, if they possessed one.
—and he wonders why
she said "NO!"

Could he have read her thoughts—he would not have lost her. A
picture of neatness—herself, she detected slovenliness. And not
once, but many times, she had noticed his unbuttoned socks
creeping down around his shoe tops. To have to apologize to
her friends for a husband's careless habits was too much to ask. So she
had to say "NO"—and in spite of his pleading couldn't tell him why.

No SOX Appeal Without

PARIS GARTERS
NO METAL CAN TOUCH YOU

Dress Well and Succeed
... 12 ...

However, as a firm believer in market forces, I predicted the inevitable – The consumer trapped on over-promise cannot be fulfilled and soon de-marketing occurs from the consumer or the marketeer himself for the sake of a total grip on his market. The use of prestige as a common ploy is a market reality in the marketing of durables, in a developing country. It is no different to the exploitation of snob values in the mid 20’s – in the famous Paris gartery ad. The advertising research of that time showed that people "Knew Money Not People". The vestiges or symbols of wealth, the nuances of style were exploited as in the implication that a woman would reject a marriage proposal of an otherwise desirable mate, simply because his socks sagged!! It is said of this, that the "Interdependence fostered by Urban Market relationships undermined individual autonomy" and created a fragmented or "discontinued self" consisting only of a series of manipulative aspirations of the system and the status quo were sustained." Intergrated Propaganda" – or ideas and images that reinforce and intensify existing patterns and conceptions – or system reinforcement occurs. But this then is like the historicity of all written history – ultimately a "slice of life" as is interpreted by the mindset of the recorder.

I will move on from here to what is far more regional a preoccupation – the issues of:

1. Social education on health and related issues
2. Social responsibility in Product Advertising
3. Cultural Puritanism and Extremist groups.

SOCIAL ADVERTISING - EDUCATION ON HEALTH AND RELATED ISSUES

Moving on from children's advertising to the use of social issues by product marketeers which is another key area.

In Sri Lanka, we have several extremely successful social education programmes starting with the Family Planning campaigns in the early 70's, masterminded by veteran advertiser, Dr. Ananda Tissa de Alwis. He once recounted an amusing tale of how they shortlisted names for a contraceptive. The word "Seema" (limit) came out on top. However, as it sounded too close to the then Prime Minister 'Sirima', they chose "Preethi" (Joy) which became a great success! The drop in birth rate was contributory to Sri Lanka's topping the UN HDI (Human Development Index) list, in medium income level countries.

To date, Sri Lanka's programmes on leprosy and polio eradication are some of the most successful campaigns in the world. Grant Bozell who have handled the last two campaigns will also handle the new Aids education programme, no doubt with equal success. The TV commercial I have brought shows the use of a well-loved singer who actually suffers from polio. She makes an extremely emotive appeal to mothers not to allow what happened to her to happen to their children through neglect. It is something through the very credibility of the singer genuinely having polio
that strikes a chord in every parent's heart.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN PRODUCT ADVERTISING

Even product marketeers have social responsibilities and even for the sake of Corporate P.R. or Product P.R. social issues are used to show a balance in viewpoint.

In Sri Lanka, the per capita milk consumption is apparently very low relative to the region. The market for fresh liquid is minimal (unlike in India) and the bulk of the market is in powdered full cream milks. Anchor milk, the market leader, ran an ad endorsing the need for mother's milk as a part of product P.R. and common sense sometime back. Environment issues, sponsorship of the arts and anti-alcohol and anti-drugs ads are also sponsored off Corporate Budgets by various big sponsors. This certainly is another positive aspect of the advertisers role in the media.

CULTURAL PURITANISM AND EXTREMIST GROUPS

The final commercial I have, shows again another Singer commercial that really was a tremendous success and helped establish Singer as a leader in the electronics market in S.L. Here again, an extremist chauvinistic cultural group called the "Hela-urumaya" (Sinhala - heritage) lobbies had raised some weak criticism that this advert brought Western culture "Coke culture" to Sri Lankan youth! Funnily, the singer is a very
popularity was further sustained and extended through a series of ads he did for Singer. Personally, I thought, the criticism was too absurd to even deserve comment.

Finally, I would like to leave off on the contention that ultimately a social process that is as fundamental as any evolution process, society and people, will, and must be, exposed to consumerism in all its exploitative forms. It is enveloping - Chicken and Egg like, creating the consumers, and its consumers, creating the mode or style of reach. Technology in all its diversity, permeats social parameters; and value sets no longer can be insular. It is as harmful, as is to say, we cannot treat a dying aborigine for he does not believe in Western medicines, if we know we can cure him if we tried. It is as parochial as saying, we will not let people grow out of a jungle - because it is their traditional homeland. If their babies die, their people cannot feed and clothe themselves, they can perhaps gradually become extinct, or we can gradually assimilate them, if they wish to, into our civilised chaos where life expectancy is high. We cannot play God with the Technology of Communication. Like Pandora’s box, the lid is off. Elitist Exclusion is a form of power base as primitive as the totem and taboo. We can but be sensible to control the speed to psychologically manageable limits - but we cannot plug the dam to stem the flood.

The die is cast - the media will swirl the consumer, until the next distant cycle, when generics will prevail, and the Adman
like the dinosaur will be gone. A Ninja Turtle named Samsara may take the roads into a totally green world, where life would be the only permanent factor, while all else was bio-degradable including manipulative media - (a virus could be infected to erase memory and intended response!). Wants might be less, and the world, a duller, saner, place, without supply and demand and only the monotony of the wheel of Life rolling on and on.