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Case Study: Sexism in Advertising and Airlines

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This case study outlines an ethical dilemma faced by a young female student who is planning to buy airline tickets. Her purchase decision is influenced by cost and advertising strategies. The case discusses advertising ethics, ethical moral philosophies, including teleology and deontology, and sexist advertising with examples from the airline industry. This case will be beneficial for marketing students to discuss the topic of advertising ethics, and for business students to discuss the topic of organizational ethics. Students enrolling in aviation related classes will also benefit from this case. The teaching notes for instructors are available upon request.

INTRODUCTION

Ella Williams, majoring in Mechanical Engineering at a private university based in the Southeastern part of the US, was excited about the upcoming volunteering opportunity for her sisterhood student organization. The organization would spend spring break installing a solar water purification system as a part of an organized university effort in Haiti due to the earthquake. On January 12, 2010, a catastrophic earthquake with a magnitude 7.0 had occurred approximately 16 miles west of Port-au-Prince; Haiti's capital. The death toll was estimated to be around 230,000-316,000 people with another 300,000 people injured, and 1.5 million people initially displaced (CNN, 2014). Most of the country's infrastructure has been destroyed. The earthquake caused major damage to Port-au-Prince, and nearby regions. Organizations and private individuals from all over the world provided rescue and relief efforts, humanitarian aid, and participated in the aftermath recovery. Over 100,000 Haitians struggled to gain access to clean, drinkable water. As a result, diseases were inevitable. Approximately 664,282 cases of cholera were registered with 8,173 deaths (CNN, 2014).

Ella and her friends were proud to be selected to participate in the relief efforts. The project was to install a solar water purification system in one of the Haitian villages which did not have access to a clean water supply due to the earthquake's destruction. The project had a special importance to Ella because she

was actually involved in the system's design during her engineering classes. Ella had always dreamed of doing something meaningful, where she could apply her skills. Now this was the moment.

As treasurer of her student organization, Ella was tasked to organize a group flight from Florida to Port-au-Prince. As a smart customer, Ella used search engines to compare flight fares. The search engine came back displaying Spirit Airlines first, offering the cheapest fare, followed by JetBlue, American Airlines, and US Airways. The fare difference between Spirit and JetBlue was \$364 at first. However, Ella wanted to check the baggage fee totals, which were in addition to displayed fares, as the group would be carrying the needed supplies with them for the solar project. Taking into account that Spirit charges for all checked-in bags, an estimated \$125 per group member would be needed additionally for baggage fees. JetBlue with the next displayed lowest fares did not charge for the first bag, but overall, the cost difference was large enough to still recommend Spirit for booking flights to Haiti.

AM I ON THE RIGHT SITE?

Ella had never flown with Spirit Airlines before, and was curious to learn more about the company and the baggage fee structure. Ella googled the Spirit home website and learned that Spirit was advertised as an ultra low cost carrier based in Florida. "What a fun looking site, bright yellow in color with a cartoonish art design" she thought. Ella was intrigued. Suddenly on the front panel Ella was shown a flash message asking her to learn all about Spirit's "Stripped Down Bare Fare™". Ella wondered what this was all about as a new image quickly popped-up, "Bare Fare. Jack or Theresa. Take a Peek." The message accompanying the image read "Jack's is going to show you just how much stuff he can fit in a personal item. Check him out and learn about our stripped down Bare Fare" (Spirit, 2014). "This is absurd" thought Ella. "Who wants to watch some dude stripping down to learn what you can fit in your free personal item bag?" Ella decided to watch Theresa instead. The video displayed Theresa fitting at least two changes of clothes into her super small personal bag as she striped down to her bra and panties to fill the bag. However, Theresa did not bother to pack any toiletries or other personal care items in the video. Ella was puzzled with the whole scenario. In addition to the questionable video, Ella found Spirit charged for everything including drinking water. "What if I choked on peanuts or pretzels?" Ella thought, "Yeah, there is nothing to choke on because nothing is provided for free on a flight".

Ella googled more Spirit ads. "What???" "Check out the oil on our beaches" with the picture of a tanned girl in regards to the 2009 BP Oil disaster in Gulf of Mexico, "The Weiner sale", "Threesome sale", "World Traveler Fare (WTF)", "Many Islands Low Fares (MILF)", the Spirit "Stripper-Mobile", a box track with windows, and a dancer on a stripper pole with the ad on the side "I'll go both ways for \$18", which promoted flights from Las Angeles to Las Vegas. Ella was in disbelief. Spirit's CEO in an interview had commented that the strategy of using sexist ads with sexual puns was a determined strategy of the airline to get publicity with comments and postings on social media sites (Nicas, 2012). Ella in her search found other sexist advertising in the airline industry. Ryanair, an Irish budget carrier, came up with Red Hot Fares displaying a bikini girl and a yearly bikini calendar. Avianova, a bankrupt Russian budget carrier, displayed flight attendants in bikinis washing the airplane.

Ella did not bother to search any more. She was upset and angry at the airlines' suggestive ads, which were not in any relation to the services offered. In addition, the sexist and sexually suggestive ads were a trend for global budget air carriers. The images and messages used were not what her parents, school, or her religious group taught her about the role of females in society. Ella was humiliated. Ella recalled her marketing and business ethics professor's lecture.

ETHICS AND ADVERTISING

Ethics play an important role in an organization's performance, behavior, attitudes, and communication (Sanayei et al., 2012). The organizational environment includes ethical norms and principles within the company, and influence the decision making process including marketing programs and advertising (Singhapakdi et al., 1995). Advertising ethics is defined as what is right, and what is

good in the conduct of the advertising function (Drumwright and Murphy, 2009). Advertising is a very complex process that helps companies transform inputs into outputs measured by sales figures (Shi, 2012). Advertising helps to create product differentiation, and to promote the company's image. The American Marketing Association states on its website:

"As marketers, we recognize that we not only serve our organizations but also act as stewards of society in creating, facilitating and executing the transactions that are part of the greater economy. In this role, marketers are expected to embrace the highest professional ethical norms and the ethical values implied by our responsibility toward multiple stakeholders (e.g., customers, employees, investors, peers, channel members, regulators and the host community)... Respect – to acknowledge the basic human dignity of all stakeholders. To this end, we will: ... Value individual differences and avoid stereotyping customers or depicting demographic groups (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation) in a negative or dehumanizing way" (AMA, 2014).

Advertising strategies range from the informational to the emotional. Emotional strategies appeal to particular feelings, or stir emotions. These include fear, humor, warmth, irritation, and sexual arousal (Vezina and Paul, 1997). However, the use of provocative images has become more common and acceptable over the last twenty years (Pope et al., 2004). It has become a strategy to get consumers' attention. One of the first firms to use provocative appeals in advertising is considered to be Benetton, the Italian clothing company (Vezina and Paul, 1997). Sexual appeal can be classified as a subset of provocative appeal if it is used in a context that has nothing to do with the advertised product or service (Vezina and Paul, 1997). Sexism, nudity and racial discrimination are common tactics to gain attention by shocking the viewers. While the sexism approach is based on female stereotypes and sexual appeal, discrimination is based on gender inequality, and often portrays females as sexual toys (Chan et al., 2007).

Academic literature reports conflicting results on effects of this type of advertising. While some researchers suggested that this approach increases attention and recognition, others indicated that it has little impact, or a negative one on brand recognition (Pope et al., 2004). Consumers' negative feelings generated by advertisement can transfer to the brand, which might in turn negatively affect the purchase decision (Chan et al., 2007). The combination of a variety of elements in the ad, such as visual, verbal, and musical, influence individuals regarding the ethicality of the ad displayed (Gould, 1994). There is a fine line between what people think is acceptable, and what is not.

The ethicality of advertising can be viewed from the normative ethical theories of moral philosophies, which can be classified as teleological or deontological (Blair et al., 2006; Gould, 1994). While teleological philosophy states that the individual should examine and determine the consequences of actions and behaviors in a specific situation, deontological philosophy focuses on specific actions or behaviors without regard to the consequences of the actions (Blair et al., 2006). Blair et al. (2006) explained, from the teleological view, the use of sexuality in advertising can include unintended side effects, such as appeals to sexuality and lust, which in turn can promote sexual preoccupation, dissatisfaction, and pornography. This can be harmful to women and children as promoting the atmosphere of disrespect and sexist attitudes. From the deontological view, the sexual advertisement can be judged on the overall moral rightness or wrongness. In this case, norms and values of all parties need to be considered, including intentions of marketers, whether those intentions were good, or exploitive and degrading.

Effective advertising is very challenging, and there is no one solution on how to advertise ethically. Blair et al. (2006) suggested to focus on the product or service sold, and its target audience. Companies should conduct research on not only how the consumers view and describe the ad, but also how the ad makes consumers feel (Edell and Burke, 1987). This will help to provide additional insights into the effects of advertisement strategy.

AIRLINE ADVERTISING

The aviation industry is considered to be one of the most competitive industries worldwide. The resource-based view of a firm states that a company should possess a bundle of tangible and intangible resources such as assets, capabilities, and endowments that create a sustainable competitive advantage (Wernerfelt, 1984). Advertising plays an important role to form a brand image. It is very important for airlines since there is little perceivable difference between their product offerings. Airlines operate similar type of resources, including airplanes with similar features, and often offer service to the same destinations.

Lyth (2009) researched that in the US in the 1920s, the primary purpose for advertising was to inform and educate the public about air travel. However, by the 1950s, airline ads were portraying air hostesses, and emphasizing female sexuality. While in the 1950s, the air hostess image was "the girl next door" who was marriage material, by the 1960s, the image was more of the "Playboy Bunny". National Airlines, the former US carrier, launched a new campaign in 1971. "Hi, I'm Cheryl and I'm going to fly you like you've never been flown before". This provoked a movement from female airline employees in regards to exploitation of female staff members as "sex objects", which was contributing to the harassment of flight attendants. The Stewardesses for Women's Rights (SFWR) organization was launched in 1972 to help air hostesses address any discriminatory issues including the exploitation of females in advertising. By the 1990s, airlines in both the US, and Western Europe changed their strategies to concentrate on the promotion of their offerings in a friendly and even glamorous manner, as a safe and comfortable means of travel, and reducing the flight attendant sexuality aspect. However, the rise of budget carriers brought new players into the global arena with new competitive rules and advertising strategies.

THE DILEMMA

Ella wondered how low companies can go in their advertising campaigns and promotions? Do they take into account people like her and her friends who might be upset by the displayed images? What about girls from Haiti or other parts of the world? Do they find this offensive? She thought about the upcoming humanitarian aid trip to Haiti. What should she do? Should she share her discovery of Spirit advertising with her student organization sisters? Nobody will want to fly with this airline after that. However, students will be over the approved budget if they choose another carrier. Should she compromise her beliefs and buy tickets for a group to fly to help Haitians? After all, it was just a flight.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS*

1. How would you advise Ella to address the situation? What ethical criterion will support your argument?
2. Which ethical criterion can justify the Spirit Airline advertising campaigns from the company perspective, and which criterion will oppose?
3. Discuss the relationship between ethics and organizational culture.
4. Discuss the relationships between individual moral beliefs, offensive advertising, and consumer purchasing behavior.
5. How does sexism in advertising effect the company image?
6. Are there any differences in the gender responses to sexism advertising?
7. Does sex sell after all?
8. Should marketers develop any guidelines for sexual advertising?

** Instructor's teaching notes available upon request.*

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