

Why responsible advertising to children should be top of the agenda

Unilever's 'Onslaught' film highlights the vulnerability of children to advertising.

'Talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does' is the tag line at the end of a short film from Unilever's Dove personal care [brand](#) showing how young girls are bombarded by advertising promoting a stereotypical vision of the perfect woman.

The film, [Onslaught](#), is a powerful and disturbing illustration of how young women will go to any length to get the 'right look', ranging from Bulimia to plastic surgery.

It also highlights the vulnerability of children to advertising and explains why a new set of [Children's Rights and Business Principles](#), created by UNICEF, Save the Children and the United Nations Global Compact, urges business to use marketing and advertising responsibly.

The principles say companies need to recognise children's greater susceptibility to manipulation, and the effects of using unrealistic or sexualised body images and stereotypes.

Keith Weed, chief marketing officer at the multinational consumer goods company, is under no illusion that advertising has a powerful influence on the way we live our lives. He should know, given that Unilever is the second largest advertiser in the world.

"There was an argument in the 80s that advertising just moves consumption around. I don't believe that," says Weed. "We need to make sure that children are brought up in a way that respects and develops them. Advertising has a responsibility. We can create positive imagery but also can create negative imagery."

Weed says the Dove campaign has had a tremendous impact in promoting a healthier vision of beauty and Unilever has banned the use of size zero models and ensures woman used by the company's marketers and advertising agencies have a certain body mass index.

But isn't Unilever being hypocritical given that its advertising for Lynx deodorant, which is directed at teenage boys, promotes the very stereotypes of women that Dove seeks to challenge?

Only last November Lynx advertisements featuring glamour model Lucy Pinder were banned for degrading women and treating them as sex objects.

Pinder was seen wearing very little and flashing her cleavage in a series of provocative video advertisements.

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) ruled that the campaign was ["unsuitable to be seen by children and could cause them harm"](#) and that the Rotten Tomatoes and Anorak websites, on which some of the films were placed, were not protected by age verification.

The ASA further ruled that the ads were "likely to be seen as gratuitous and to objectify women" and that the tagline in two adverts to 'Play with Lucy' would "also be seen as degrading to women. We therefore concluded that the ads were likely to cause serious and widespread offence."

Weed says Lynx advertising is tongue in cheek and that it is aimed at a youth market: "It's how an adolescent boy would love the world to be but that everyone, including them, knows it is not going to be.

"Occasionally we, like others, do not get every execution right. Since 1983 there have been millions of consumer impressions for Lynx and this is one incident and we responded accordingly.

"More than two billion people use our products every day and the last thing we want to do is alienate them. In fact mums are the biggest purchaser of Lynx so we are very careful they are not offended. If mums felt it was an inappropriate brand it would not go in their shopping baskets."

Seven years ago Unilever voluntarily stopped all marketing communications directed primarily at children under the age of six years because it recognised that this age group does not have the cognitive ability to distinguish between advertising/marketing and programming.

Two years later this was extended to restrict marketing to children between the ages of six and 11 for all food and drink products except those that meet Unilever's nutrition criteria.

Unilever also bans the use of cartoon characters and celebrities on packaging, labelling and point-of-sale materials.

Weed says he is a great believer in self regulation and points to the failed experiment in Sweden when restrictions on children's television advertising led to wall to wall American cartoons because there was no money to invest in local children's programming.

He also points out that the rise of social media means that parents have far more power to challenge inappropriate advertising directed at children.

"If social media can within three weeks bring down the Egyptian government that has been in power for more than 30 years, just think what you can do to a consumer brand," he says. "Social media is giving people a voice and this will be the most effective method for ensuring that companies do not get out of hand, especially when it comes to the sexualisation of children."

Unilever has been highlighted by UNICEF for showing best practice for its "Dirt is Good" advertising campaign for Persil and Omo because of its success in "creating awareness of children's right to play, the right to express themselves – in short, the right to be a child! It encourages parents to see the value of exploration, play, activity and exercise as critical to children's development and important for full and healthy lives, even if it means that children get dirty in the process."

Weed says the Persil/Omo campaign is a classic example of a brand's ability to create positive behaviour change by showing every child has a right to experiential learning.

He also points to Unilever's work to establish hand washing and teeth brushing at an early age in developing country markets.

"The humble bar of soap is an amazing step in the right direction because proper hand washing reduces diarrhoea by 50%, which limits the number of deaths, leads to better school attendance and helps prevent stunting – one in four children are stunted either physically or mentally," he says.

Unilever has made a commitment through its sustainable living plan to reach one billion people with its hand washing campaign by 2015, through a mixture of advertising, in-school education and NGO partnerships.

Its other campaigning is focussed around teeth brushing. Weed says that most behaviours are wired in as adults so the only way of building positive habits is when people are young.

"If we brush teeth twice a day, for example, it leads to 50% better oral hygiene, yet that does not happen for the vast majority of people globally," says Weed. "In fact there are more mobile phones in the world than toothbrushes. Our advertising shows fathers and their children having fun in the bathroom mucking around learning how to brush. By doing these campaigns we improve the behaviour around brushing."

Given that Unilever operates around the world, Weed says it is important to have one set of rule that apply to all markets "because a child is a child and has rights whatever culture you live in."

However, he says there are pushbacks from individual countries that believe the rules around children are too restrictive.

Advertising also has to be culturally appropriate. For example in China the Omo dirt is good advertisements had to be amended because the feedback from mothers was that experimenting with nature or playing with friends is considered frivolous and that children are expected to concentrate on their school work or learn to play a musical instrument.

Weed recognises the positive work that other companies are doing such as Colgate-Palmolive in the field of oral hygiene and points to the recent John Lewis Christmas campaign as an example of positive role modelling by showing the value of giving.

When asked to name the worst type of advertising aimed at children, Weed is quick to criticise marketing that encourages children to pester their parents to spend money: "That must be the worst because it adds an economic stress into the family."

Tell us your thoughts

Unilever says there is a clear distinction between its Dove self-esteem campaign, which challenges a one-dimensional view of womens' beauty, and Lynx's tongue-in-cheek stereotyping of adolescent and young men's sexual fantasies.

Do you agree with them or do you believe that Lynx advertising devalues the company's strategy to promote positive imagery and ensure that children are protected.

Is it fair to highlight the Lynx advertisements or should the company be applauded for its policies towards responsible advertising to children and the work it does in the developing world to encourage positive habits such as hand washing and teeth brushing?

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