The Ethics of Psychoactive Ads

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ABSTRACT. Many of today's ads work by arousing the viewer's emotions. Although emotion-arousing ads are widely used and are commonly thought to be effective, their careless use produces a side-effect: the psychoactive ad. A psychoactive ad is any emotion-arousing ad that can cause a meaningful, well-defined group of viewers to feel extremely anxious, to feel hostile toward others, or to feel a loss of self-esteem. We argue that, because some ill-conceived psychoactive ads can cause harm, ethical issues must arise during their production. Current pretesting methods cannot identify the potentially psychoactive ads; therefore, we offer some tentative guidelines for reducing the number of viewers harmed by psychoactive ads.

No professional, be he doctor, lawyer, or manager, can promise that he will indeed do good for his client. All he can do is try. But he can promise that he will not knowingly do harm.

Peter F. Drucker, Management

... Concern for consumer welfare includes an obligation to critically evaluate all marketing techniques that have indeterminant psychological effects.

Spence and Moinpour, 1972, p. 43

Consider the following three ads:

- An announcer first holds up a raw egg and asks the viewer to pretend that this egg is the viewer's brain. He then performs a demonstration: he breaks the egg and drops it into a hot frying pan, saying that this is what drugs do to brains.

- A boy had graduated from high school, and his father had wanted him to attend college. Instead, the boy had joined the Army. After a year, the son now returns home to visit his family. Dad now realizes that the Army has "turned his boy into a man," and therefore accepts his son's decision with a warm welcome.

- A young black stands beside a rural road, awaiting a bus — the one that will take him to college. It arrives; the driver opens the door; the young man stays beside the road as the bus leaves. The voice-over implies that the young man's family cannot afford to send him to college.

The goal of the first ad, which is a public service announcement, is to discourage teen-agers and adults from using drugs; the goal of the second ad is to encourage young men and women to enlist in the U.S. Army; the goal of the third ad is to solicit funds for the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). Each goal seems laudable. We assume that advertisers show these ads because they think them effective in furthering these goals by evoking an emotional response from viewers.

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Unfortunately, each of these ads may also evoke an extreme, unintended, emotional response from a meaningful, well-defined group of viewers.

- The anti-drug ad employs a high fear-appeal theme to "scare casual users and non-users straight." However, such an appeal can surely cause great anxiety in many addicted viewers; as a result, some may become suicidal and kill themselves.

- The recruiting ad for the U.S. Army employs a common, unambiguous stereotype to portray conditional love and acceptance: the stereotype of the strong father-figure. However, the depth psychologies of Freud, Jung, and Adler suggest that viewing such a figure could so anger some persons, who have a negative image of father, that they would lash out against their friends and family.

- The UNCF ad may anger some blacks: the ad implies that (1) blacks do not or cannot work their way through college, and (2) black parents do not or cannot save for their children's education. Thus, by ignoring the efforts of many proud, independent blacks, the ad could cause some blacks to feel a loss of self-esteem.¹

These seemingly innocent bits of imagery need, we suggest, more thought than may at first seem necessary.

**What are psychoactive ads?**

There is a widely-used tool of advertising, the full consequences of which are unknown: the emotion-arousing ad. It may be used by sponsors seeking a specific result, such as the election of a certain politician, or higher sales for their products, or less lung cancer, or more people seeking psychological counseling. Whatever it promotes, it does so by reaching out, grabbing its viewers, and demanding attention. It need not amuse the viewer: it can annoy; it can anger; it can alarm; it can sadden.

One type of emotion-arousing ad is what we call a *psychoactive ad*. A psychoactive ad is any emotion-arousing ad that causes a meaningful, well-defined group of viewers to feel extremely anxious, to feel hostile toward others, or to feel a loss of self-esteem.

Though all psychoactive ads cause viewers to respond emotionally, all ads that cause viewers to respond emotionally are not psychoactive ads. Neither upbeat ads nor warm ads are psychoactive. Upbeat ads are ads that cause viewers to feel alive, cheerful, happy, light-hearted, care-free, and so forth (Edell and Burke, 1987, p. 424). Warm ads are ads that cause viewers to feel a "... positive, mild, volatile emotion involving physiological arousal and precipitated by experiencing directly or vicariously a love, family, or friendship relationship" (Aaker et al., 1986, p. 366).

Table I describes psychoactive ads, defined and organized by type. On this view, ads that can cause extreme anxiety rely on appeals using pathos, tragedy or heroism, or fear; ads that can cause hostility toward others rely on appeals that incite Freudian, Jungian, or Adlerian complexes, cater to unFashionable value systems, or promote hatred or contempt of others; ads that can cause a loss of self-esteem employ some myth contrary to the viewer's self-image. The value of this speculative schema is presently under empirical study by the authors.

Our discussion of psychoactive ads proceeds as follows. First, we discuss the reasons that emotion-arousing ads are widely-used. Then, we argue that a type of emotion-arousing ad, the psychoactive ad, can cause harm. Next, we discuss why current pretesting methods cannot help advertisers distinguish between merely emotion-arousing ads and psychoactive ads. Finally, we propose some common-sense ways to reduce the number of viewers harmed by psychoactive ads.

**Emotion-arousing ads: current practice and theory**

Today's advertiser has to work hard for the attention of viewers: viewers are generally inattentive to ads in the first place, they are besieged by many competing ads, and they use VCRs and remote controls to avoid TV ads. Increasingly, advertisers try to grab a viewer's attention by provoking an emotional response.

Advertisers try to arouse emotions for three
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pathos</td>
<td>An ad that shows a helpless person, usually a woman or child, crushed by forces beyond her control. This type of ad does not seek viewer identification, only viewer sympathy.</td>
<td>Some ads about drunk driving (MADD), poverty, child-abuse, life insurance, and political candidates (e.g., the 1964 Johnson Atomic Daisy ad).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tragedy or heroism</td>
<td>An ad that shows a noble person crushed is tragic; one that shows the person overcoming opposition is heroic. These ads often imply that the person’s fate is in the viewer’s hands.</td>
<td>United Negro College Fund; Save the Children; outreach programs; an ad portraying a desperate wife and child trapped in a bleak situation without cash (American Express ad for MoneyGram).</td>
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<td>Fear</td>
<td>An ad that arouses fear in the viewer regarding the effect of the viewer’s suboptimal lifestyle.</td>
<td>Anti-smoking ads by the American Cancer Society; anti-cavity toothpaste (Crest); breath-freshening mouthwash (Scope); deodorant soap (“Aren’t you glad you use Dial?”).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freudian, Jungian, or Adlerian complexes</td>
<td>An ad that sets up a scene which illustrates one of the neuroses identified by these psychologists.</td>
<td>A man who needs a long-distance phone service because he can’t leave his mother (AT&amp;T — Freudian Oedipus complex); a father handing down a tradition to his son (Chivas Regal — Jungian Senex/Puer complex); a coffee-spilling nerd who is pushed aside (AT&amp;T — Adlerian Power complex).</td>
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<td>Unfashionable value systems</td>
<td>An ad that says, “When the rest of society condemns you for liking this product, it is just sour grapes.” This ad is used to fight popular trends.</td>
<td>A man sneering at vegetables on cheeseburgers (Jack in the Box); “75 years and still smoking” (Camel); “for people who like to smoke” (Benson &amp; Hedges).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hatred or contempt</td>
<td>An ad that assumes a derogatory or chauvinist stereotype. These ads are often tucked away in specialty magazines.</td>
<td>Love ’em and leave ’em (Playboy ad for “Scotch” cologne); NBA basketball star (Michael Jordan) shows contempt for small, intellectual male (Spike Lee) by dunking a basketball in the intellectual’s face (Air Jordan sports shoes).</td>
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<td>Myth</td>
<td>An ad that ties a product to a mythical figure or lifestyle.</td>
<td>Rough, two-fisted woodsmen (Jack Daniels); party till you drop (some tequilas); “ Marlboro country” (Marlboro); picture of bloodied lineman in football ad with headline “You think your day was tough (ESPN);” Jolly Green Giant; Tony the Tiger (Frosted Flakes).</td>
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distinct purposes (Mizerski and White, 1986; Zeitlin and Westwood, 1986):

1. emotions per se can be an important benefit derived from a product or brand;
2. emotions can sometimes help communicate the benefits of a product or brand; and
3. emotions can directly influence attitudes.

Each of these purposes help advertisers sell goods and services.

Many advertising researchers now recommend using emotion-avoiding ads. After years of analyzing consumers in terms of information processing, these researchers have begun to acknowledge the importance of emotion-avoiding ads.

For the marketing company, emotion should be considered as an integral, possibly central, aspect of the communication activity (Zeitlin and Westwood, 1986, p. 35).

Furthermore, Mizerski and White (1986) suggest that:

Emotions might be profitably used to teach consumers to purchase the brand when they find themselves in emotional states they wish to alter or extend (p. 67).

One increasingly common type of emotion-avoiding ad, the so-called fear-appeal ad, seems to be highly effective, under some circumstances, on certain demographic and sociopsychological market segments (Stuteville, 1970; Burnett and Wilkes, 1980; Zeitlin and Westwood, 1986). Empirical studies by Thorson and Friestad indicate that subjects better remember and more frequently recall ads that portray fear than they do warm or upbeat ads or ads with no emotional content (as reported in Psychology Today, 1985). LaTour and Zahra (1989) indicate that viewers hold more positive attitudes toward fear-appeal ads when such ads cause them to feel energized, rather than tense. (Aaker, et al., 1986; Burke and Edell, 1989; and Edell and Burke, 1987 claim that a positive attitude toward an ad enhances any already favorable attitude toward the brand and increases the intention to buy the brand.)

Because advertisers and advertising researchers consider fear-appeal and other emotion-avoiding ads to be effective ads, we see such ads frequently. However, some advertisers try to create emotion-avoiding ads that work "psychoactively." As Freedman (1988) reports:

Advertisers have long known that commercials that make you feel good are likely to make you feel good about the product. But, more recent research indicates that advertisers might be able to do even better with ads that evoke unpleasant feelings. If getting you to suffer will boost sales, don't expect advertisers to shrink from the task (Freedman, 1988, p. 6).

Thus, emotion-arousing ads are widely used because advertisers believe such ads are effective. However, many emotion-arousing ads are also psychoactive ads. Because we believe psychoactive ads can cause harm, we now argue that it is unethical to carelessly or ruthlessly produce such ads.

The argument

Consider the following hypothetical example. Boris, a misguided social scientist, believes that frequent exposure to emotion-arousing television ads about the horrors of child abuse causes some postpartum depressive mothers to commit infanticide. To test his belief, Boris conducts an experiment. First, he develops the following null hypothesis:

H₀: The probability that a mother, suffering from postpartum depression, will commit infanticide is independent of her exposure to emotion-arousing television ads about child abuse.

Boris then produces several 60-second emotion-arousing ads about the horrors of child abuse. Next, he infiltrates the offices of several local hospitals and the TV-Tyme Cable Company. (The TV-Tyme Cable Company operates a sophisticated, uniquely addressable split-cable system with subscriber-monitoring capabilities.) From stolen patient lists and subscriber lists, Boris selects 200 households, each one with (1) a new mother who suffers from postpartum depression, and (2) a subscription to TV-Tyme Cable. He assigns 100 of these households to a control group, and 100 of these households to an experimental group. Next, for one month, he manipulates all advertising televised to each household in the experimental group as follows: for each viewing session, 60 seconds of Boris' child abuse ads replace the first 60 seconds of scheduled advertising. In the homes of the control group, a neutral ad replaces any televised ad against child abuse. After one month, Boris finds, as he expects, that the
number of infanticides is significantly higher in the experimental group than in the control group. Thus, Boris rejects his null hypothesis.

We are morally offended by such an experiment, one which would not be performed by any reputable social scientist. What are the reasons for calling Boris' experiment immoral? First, we already know that women who suffer from postpartum depression are prone to infanticide (O'Hara, 1986). Common sense tells us that subjecting them to such disturbing images and violent thoughts would ensure that at least some of them would hurt themselves or their infants. Second, because we feel certain that any intelligent person could see the danger of such an "experiment," we condemn Boris for his actions. In short, Boris is unethical because he does harm, and because he knew, or should have known, that he was doing harm.

Now consider the following realistic situation. The policy of television superstation KABC is to regularly broadcast emotion-arousing public service announcements designed to reduce child abuse. Many postpartum depressives across America who subscribe to a television cable service do in fact see many of these ads. For these postpartum depressives, such ads are psychoactive ads; such ads may cause them to feel hostile toward their newborn children. Because far more than a hundred postpartum depressive mothers regularly view such ads, KABC's management thoughtlessly replicates Boris' unethical experiment almost every day.

Thus, the argument suggests that the management of superstation KABC is acting at least as unethically as Boris, the misguided scientist.

Is the argument reasonable?

Somehow, the parallel between the noble efforts of KABC's management and Boris' highly unethical experiment may seem weak. The argument might seem unfair for any of the following reasons:

- The intentions are different. The public service announcements aim at preventing child abuse, and thus saving children's lives, whereas Boris' experiment invites murder.
- Any ad could provoke some well-defined group of people. Thus, if the argument is taken to its logical conclusion, all advertising would be immoral. The legal implications would be staggering: advertising as we know it would disappear simply from the prohibitive costs of product liability insurance.
- The argument uses scare tactics; it preys on the reader's pity by using images of women and children. It relies on sentimentality, apparently to muddy the issue, rather than clarify it.

We will examine these objections one at a time.

Scare tactics

To object to the argument because it uses scare tactics is to object to scare tactics, whether we use them or advertisers use them. Thus, the objection concedes the argument.

Scare tactics are often used by people who have non-substantive arguments. But people who have good arguments also use them to make their point memorable. The presence of scare tactics does not invalidate an argument.

Put aside the image, for a moment, and look at the structure of the argument. The structure is simple and clear:

- Many groups of people are known to be hurt or offended by exposure to certain images.
- Hurting or offending people is wrong.
- Therefore, to show these images publicly, knowing that members of these groups cannot help but see them and be hurt or offended, is wrong.

To circumvent the scare-tactic objection, simply pick another group of highly sensitive people plus an appropriate, but disturbing image. Then restate the argument in those terms. Some possibilities would be: people who have just lost a spouse, plus a "keep in touch" ad; recent amputees plus a "be all that you can be" ad; and so forth. Pick one that does not seem unfair, yet fits the argument outlined above.

Intended results

Let us strengthen the example. Suppose that the televising of emotion-arousing child abuse ads by
KABC caused five more infanticides than would have occurred without the televising. Suppose also that fifty more child-beaters sought professional help than otherwise would have; as a result, ten fewer children died from abuse. The net result of televising the ads would then be that five more children lived than would otherwise have lived. The management of KABC can therefore claim a net benefit to society, whereas Boris has no such defense. How can we say the cases are parallel?

This objection might look powerful on a casual glance, were it not that saving some lives is always a poor excuse for taking others. The objection ignores the issue of whether it is right to expose a person against his or her will to harmful or seriously offensive images. One must suspect that a thoughtful management of KABC could have found a way of doing good without also doing harm. In failing to look for a solution, these managers were not malicious, as was Boris, but negligent.

*Taken to its logical conclusion, all advertising is immoral*

If any ad could trigger an anti-social response from a group of vulnerable viewers, why wouldn’t all ads be dangerous? What would keep the courts from being inundated with complaints about injuries caused by broadcasted or printed ads? Surely ads are not so sinister, surely the argument with such an absurd outcome must be absurd.

Consider the following seemingly parallel example. Bathtubs are dangerous; many people slip and seriously injure themselves in bathtub accidents. Any ad that increases the number of baths also increases the number of accidents. The argument seems to lead to the absurd conclusion that advertising bath products is immoral. Aren’t the arguments parallel?

No, the cases are very different. A person chooses to take a bath, but emotional responses to psychoactive ads are not freely chosen. Thus, the real issue is not one of producing bad consequences, but of preying on vulnerable innocents.

Furthermore, the bath product company could act morally to reduce the number of bathtub accidents. In fact, the problem of bathtub accidents, if recognized, could even become a marketing opportunity. The ethically-minded bath product company could choose to run this special promotion: mail in five proofs-of-purchase of their product and receive a free bath safety mat. Thus, even the conclusion of the bath argument is not as absurd as it sounded at first. Advertising any dangerous product, whether it be bathtubs, beer, or blasting caps, may be done more or less responsibly.

*Protecting viewers from psychoactive ads*

Viewers cannot expect government to regulate the use of emotion-arousing ads.

If the advertising industry gets any better at employing subtle psychological strategies . . . it may become nearly impossible [for viewers] to figure out the ways in which commercials are hitting home. That may be a little frightening, but it’s not illegal — so don’t expect the government to protect . . . [viewers] from high-tech advertising, at least not in today’s climate of deregulation. In the end, it’s strictly viewer beware (Freedman, 1988, p. 7).

Thus, the community of advertisers is morally responsible for vulnerable viewers. Perhaps this is just as well; free markets prefer self-regulation to government intervention, *ceteris paribus*.

How should advertisers protect vulnerable viewers from psychoactive ads? An obvious suggestion would be to pretest each emotion-arousing ad. If a pretest suggests that a well-defined, meaningful group of viewers will psychoactively respond to an ad, that ad should not be shown to that group. If it is impossible, even through careful media targeting, to protect these viewers from that ad, then that ad should be discarded.

LaTour and Zahra (1989) advocate using such pretests to identify unethical (i.e., tension-producing) fear-appeal ads.

Each ad, even those with a supposed “low level” fear appeal, should be evaluated . . . . Extensive pretests of each ad should be performed to ensure effective balance between the message and associated levels of tension (p. 68).

One common pretesting method involves showing an ad to a group and then asking them about it. Unfortunately, such a procedure is problematic.

The mental or cognitive activity prompted by the advertising may often operate at a level below conscious
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awareness. In other words, the cognitive activity initiated by the emotional cues in an advertisement may occur so rapidly that the individual cannot observe and report on the process as it happens. This has significant implications on the choice of copytesting procedures. Because of the unconscious mental activity, data gathering techniques based on verbal self-reports may be totally ineffective for gauging the intensity of type of emotional experience(s) developed after exposure to the ad (Mizerski and White, 1986, p. 62).

Because viewers may be unable to report psychoactive responses to an ad, such pretests are not the complete answer.

Along similar lines, advertisers could pretest their emotion-arousing ads by exposing them, in a controlled setting, to hundreds of subjects hooked to psychophysiological apparatuses. Unfortunately, these apparatuses only measure a subject's level of activation; they do not identify the activated emotions, nor do they suggest the potential consequences of these emotions. Furthermore, marketing researchers suggest that our present knowledge of psychophysiological responses is too primitive for us to apply them practically (Rothschild et al., 1986; Stewart and Furse, 1982). Therefore, such pretests are not the full answer either.

LaTour and Zahra (1989) suggest another alternative in their discussion of fear-appeal ads:

To minimize abuse of fear appeals, some effective, functional, and practical ethical guidelines need to be adopted by firms sponsoring such advertising (p. 68).

Thus, we propose that advertisers adopt the following simple practices whenever they design and place an emotion-arousing ad.

Three simple practices

Carefully target the medium as well as the market

Obviously, to guard against every possible negative side-effect of an ad would be impossible. First, psychotics cannot be outguessed; because they will interpret even the dullest images to fit their delusions, no amount of care taken over an ad will remove all chances of its doing harm to these people. Second, if a person named Spuds MacKenzie were to die in a freak yachting accident, his bereaved wife might be upset by some recent Budweiser commercials; Anheuser Busch cannot and should not plan for these circumstances.

Instead of worrying over unique psychoses or strange coincidences, advertisers should use common sense and psychological theory to identify large groups of people whose members are prone to be hurt by the images used in emotion-arousing ads.

Advertisers will easily recognize some groups. For example, common sense (as well as psychological research) suggests that the following groups may respond psychoactively to emotion-arousing ads:

1. AIDS victims (Atkinson et al. (1988) report that many are deeply psychologically disturbed);
2. Vietnam combat veterans (Pitman et al. (1987) report that these veterans are highly susceptible to combat-reminding imagery);
3. young women (Gould (1987) and Regier et al. (1988) suggest that many (i.e., 10%) have anxiety disorders because they are prone to be publicly self-conscious and socially anxious);
4. young men (Caprara et al. (1987) report that young males who first viewed aggressive ads then acted more aggressively toward other males); and
5. compulsive gamblers (Roy et al. (1988) report that compulsive gamblers are attracted to sensation-seeking events).

It will be more difficult for advertisers to recognize other groups. One not-so-obvious group is non-institutionalized adults with affective disorders or anxiety disorders. (A survey by the National Institute of Mental Health (Regier et al., 1988) found that, of non-institutionalized adults, 5.1% had affective disorders and 7.3% had anxiety disorders.) Persons with affective or anxiety disorders have high levels of negative affectivity. Negative affectivity (NA) reflects pervasive individual differences in negative emotionality and in self-concept; high-NA individuals tend toward distress, aggression (sadistic or masochistic), and negative self-image (Watson and Clark, 1984). Relative to low-NA, high-NA are more likely to (1) identify with any aggressive, antisocial behavior shown in ads, (2) read negative things into ads, and (3) dwell on threats and loss of self-esteem posed by ads (Watson and Clark, 1984).
Thus, high-NAAs are more likely to respond “psychoactively” to emotion-arousing ads.

This leads us to our first recommended practice: **Advertisers should carefully target the medium as well as the market.**

Because the ad rates charged by broadcasters and publishers are based largely on audience size, advertisers have long recognized the economic reasons for advertising in just the media viewed, heard, or read by their current and likely customers. But now, it seems that there are also ethical reasons for targeting.

For example, specialized magazines, such as Field & Stream, Ebony, American Baby, Soldier of Fortune, Millionaire, and Hustler, to name but a few, have special, fairly well-defined audiences. A reader of one of these magazines comes to expect certain types of ads and certain types of thematic emotional appeals. By recognizing the acceptable appeals for the readers of these magazines, advertisers can create appropriate ads. Such a precaution will not only reduce one source of unwanted side-effects, but it would also cost the advertiser less than the less responsible approach.

**Clearly label psychoactive ads**

A general rule of thumb for designing emotion-arousing ads is: Give the viewer a fair chance to avoid the climax of the ad. This rule is based on two assumptions: (1) viewers know best which images they can tolerate and which they cannot, and (2) viewers threatened by an image used in an ad will actively avoid it if they are given a fair chance to do so. As Caprara et al. (1987) suggest,

> [1]In the case of programmes such as movies, cartoons, and championship fights, the audience is always free to select and therefore, to a certain extent, be prepared to see what is portrayed on the screen . . . [2]In the case of commercials, because of their unexpectedness, their effects are usually out of the viewer’s control . . . [In] television advertising one has the impression that the viewer is often left to the mercy of the advertising agent (Caprara et al., 1987, p. 24).

This rule does not cover every possibility, but it does offer a useful guide for most normal cases.

Thus, our second recommended practice is: **Advertisers should introduce their emotion-arousing ads with an announcement.**

If viewers know of the strong nature of the imagery or themes prior to their onset, they have ample time to decide whether to see or avoid the ad. Advertisers could place brief warnings, in advance of a video or radio ad, or at the heading of printed copy, about the nature of the ad, much as warnings often precede the airings of movies or political announcements. For example,

**Due to its emotional subject matter, the following pro-abortion message may be offensive to some people.**

This practice requires that the advertiser keeps the element of choice in mind while considering the ethics of a proposed course of action. If the viewer of a visual image has consciously chosen, on the basis of accurate information, to see it, responsibility for the consequences is shared by the maker and the viewer of the image. Many people will not willingly watch a movie which they suspect contains intolerable images. Nonetheless, these same people, in watching an ad, may find themselves besieged by the same images, held off until the last few seconds. People consciously censor what they view, and it is not the legitimate prerogative of an advertiser to override these efforts at psychological self-protection.

On the other hand, such warnings could do no harm. By taking the trouble to warn the audience about the content of a commercial, advertisers could actually draw more attention to their ads — attention, that is, from those people who are the proper targets.

Advertisers should note that content-specific warnings, i.e., warnings that refer to specific ad content, may actually sensitize viewers, and thus increase the negative effects of psychoactive ads. In studying the effect of forewarning on a viewer’s emotional response to horror films, Cantor, Ziemke, and Clark (1984) found that the more explicit the forewarning about the graphic nature of the film, the greater the viewer’s fright and upset. Thus, advertisers should be careful, even in their forewarning, to use only the most general warning messages.
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Avoid trick endings

Trick endings appear often in ads that rely on appeals using pathos, tragedy or heroism, or fear. A trick ending is an unexpected plot twist, such as a MADD ad in which a little girl, happily playing along the side of the road, is suddenly killed by an intoxicated truck driver.

Clearly, such ads are designed to shock viewers into modifying inappropriate attitudes (e.g., it is acceptable to first imbibe, and then drive) and behaviors (e.g., driving when intoxicated). Though shocking ads may save some lives, such ads will also cause many viewers to feel tense (LaTour and Zahra, 1989). When these ads cause many susceptible viewers to feel extreme anxiety, these ads become psychoactive ads. Thus, advertisers should refrain, for ethical reasons, from showing such ads.

If the ending is really a trick, viewers have no chance to avoid it. Although a clever twist may be amusing when used for humor, it should never be used for a powerful, emotion-arousing message.

Thus, our third recommended practice, which also follows from our rule of thumb, is: **Advertisers should avoid trick endings in their ads**. This practice should minimize the abusive use of fear appeals.

**Conclusion**

Advertisers often use emotion-arousing ads to promote goods, services, and ideas. We have argued that, because emotion-arousing ads are often psychoactive, advertisers should take care when they deploy them. We therefore propose some simple rules for a more responsible use of emotion-arousing ads. These rules would neither hobble such ads nor greatly increase their cost.

**Note**

1 In a pretest designed to help us select the psychoactive ads we would use in a subsequent empirical study, one of the authors received such responses from a large number of black subjects.

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