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Culture, Product Advertising, and Advertising Agency Operations

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Abstract

Advertising is a means through which products, services and ideas of organizations are brought to the public knowledge. As a means of telling the market about a new product, advertising persuades and reminds the audience of their continuous support of the advertised item. In the face of globalization, varying cultures are shown to have impacted enormously on product advertising. The more companies undertake to market their products and services, the more linguistic and cultural challenges they come across. These cultures create some hurdles which an advertising agency must encounter before a successful advertising is recorded. This study adopts qualitative approach to examine the fusion between culture and production

marketing, especially with regards to operations of advertising agencies. It concludes that advertising is very essential and for a product, service or idea to survive and sustain itself in these rough tidings, the advertiser should always embark on meaningful research to understand the market and marketing environment with a view to achieving advert objectives.

Introduction

At the inception of the innovations brought into the telecommunication industry, MTN as one of the Global System Mobile (GSM) Operators was waxing strong and later became a household name in Nigeria. In one of its foremost advertisements carried by Nigeria Television Authority (NTA), a young pregnant mother delivered a baby boy and the husband in the course of informing his mother of the incident told her, “mama na boy” in Pigeon English through phone conversation. This particular advertisement was later withdrawn by MTN because several women organizations rose against this (www.nairaland.com/226644/MTN-TV-com...). To Anyida, (2005), MTN TV commercial “mama na boy” is gender sensitive thinking of the commercial, though it was criticized, the truth is that it actually gives a true picture of the discrimination against the female child that still exist in Nigeria and parts of Africa.

For the women this advert caused more harm in the Nigerian homes because it could amount to gender discriminations especially men going crazy about male issues and rejection of female issues. The above is true because in the part of Africa and in the world, certain level of importance is attached to giving birth to male issues than female issues and women organizations have been fighting this gender discrimination. Here, the intent of the Advertiser may be to showcase its products as a very quick and easy means of reaching everyone even in the rural areas. This was shown in this particular advertisement in which the man in Lagos reaching the mother in the rural area of Delta State through the use of telephone services provided by MTN. Sensibilities were naturally offended by the supposed negative impact this advertisement may have caused in the families by provoking men to demand for baby boys instead of accepting the gift of God no matter the sex. Thus, instead of promoting the cause of the business empire, a negative impact was recorded. And worried by the chiefs of this organization, they had no option than to phase out that particular advertisement so as to protect the market share of their product.

The relevance of this topic can also be shown by the true story of the Gerber Company. According to Franziska (2002) over the years advertising had helped them become a household name in production of baby feeds. Reports soon came back from the distributors, announcing zero sales. Later reports also came from national news telling of rioting in the streets as well as casualties.

Worried Company chiefs watching television back in the United States thought they glimpsed people burning copies of their poster in the background. Much later it transpired that in many African countries there was a very real but hitherto undocumented assumption that what you see on the label is what's in the jar. This came over to consumers as a coarse hint that the little boy far from endorsing the product was the product; people thought they were being expected to feed their babies with white baby.

To the people this is immodest proposal which eventually culminated in violence. Looking at these stories they show that culture has an enormous impact on advertising. The fact that made it more important that it has never been before is the issue of globalization.

In as much as more and more companies are taking decisions to market their products, they are facing both cultural and linguistic problems. It is the intention of this paper to raise such issues and proffer solutions to them. It is obviously clear that there are cultural impressions that hamper product advertising and the operations of advertising agencies.

Understanding Key Concepts

In order to bring this study to a clear conception, there is need to take note of some key concepts and give a broad definition to them. Some of these concepts are: advertising; product advertising; culture and advertising agency.

Advertising

Advertising is the process of bringing to the knowledge of the audience as "to describe or praise publicly; to call public attention; to seek or offer goods or services in the news media". Advertising from the professional point of view is non-personal form of promotion that is delivered through selected media. In the view of advertising practitioners' council of Nigeria (APCON), it is a

form of communication through media about products, services, or idea, paid for by an identified sponsor.

Fletcher (1979) defines advertising as: dissemination of sales message through purchased time and space. To Bovee and Arens (1986), advertising is the non-personal communication of information usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature about products, services, or idea by an identified sponsor through the various media.

This implies that advertising is separated from other forms of communication when the term commercial or paid is added to it. Advertising is paid for by a sponsor who expects to induce some kind of action on the part of the reader, viewer or listener that will be beneficial to him. This makes advertising a “mass paid communication” that ultimate purpose of which is to impact information, attitude and induce action beneficial to the advertiser (Meziobu 1986). He further states that the ultimate purpose of most advertising is to help bring about sale of a product or service. Advertising’s job is to increase propensity to buy i.e. to move the consumer to buy (to move the prospect inch by inch).

Nwabueze (2006,p.163) contends that one major way of keeping consumers informed about the existence of a product in the market, the products competitive edge over other brands and why money should be spent on that product is through advertising. Nwabueze (2006) states advertising as a non personal communication process through which an identified sponsor promotes his products to target audience Nwabueze adds that advertising is a key promotional technique which plays up a product’s advantages with a view to wining customers and keeping them. This is to say that for such a technique to be regarded as advertising, the advantages of such products or services must be revealed to the listeners or audience and eventually induce them to plan and purchase such products. Not only to purchase such goods but such consumers and customers must be won and sustained to keep patronizing the product in question.

Product advertising

“Commercial advertisers often seek to generate increased conception of their products or services through the process of branding” (Wikipediaorg/wiki/advertising). Products refer to the broad range of both consumer goods and industrial products. In case of consumer goods, they are those goods meant for ultimate consumption. According to Ozoh, (1998) they include “an assortment of products such as beer, confectionary, food

seasoning, beverages etc”. The firms falling within these advertising categories of products are therefore referred to as advertisers of consumer products. As Fletcher (1979), notes that manufacturers of such consumer products advertise for these reasons: to launch a new product, to promote an existing product and to add value to a product. In the case of industrial products they are used in production process to produce the ultimate products. People who buy them use them in their work.

In most cases, the goal of product advertising is to clearly promote a specific product to a targeted audience. Marketers can accomplish this in several ways from a low-key approach that simply provides basic information about a product to the blatant appeal that tries to convince customer to purchase a product (persuasive advertising), that may include direct comparison between the markets products and its competitive offering (comparative advertising)

Culture

Culture is a term that has many different inter-related meanings. However, the word “culture” is mostly commonly used in three basic senses: on integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behaviour that depends upon the capacity of symbolic thought and social learning the set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices that characterizes an institution, organization or group (Douglas 2011).

A German non-positive sociologist, George Simmel defines culture as “the cultivation of individuals through the agency of external forms which have been objectified in the course of history” (Donald 1971). In American anthropology, the word “culture” has two meanings: the evolved human capacity to classify and represent experiences with symbols and to act imaginatively and creatively. Secondly the distinct ways people living in different parts of the world classified and represented the idea created by members of a society. Thirdly, the material culture which includes physical things created by members of a society. However, in this study not much has to be done with material culture.

This suggests that culture to become a culture must be accorded or associated to a people who are identified with certain common attributes. The more reason parker (1985; p.9) cited in Chude (2007) takes culture to be the deposit of knowledge, experiences, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, timing, roles, spatial relations, concepts of universe, material objects and possessions acquired by a large group of people in the course of generations through individuals and group strivings. Okunna

(1999) seems to be in agreement with the above assertion when she describes culture as a people's way of life that embodies such intangible concepts as values, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as material objectives and possessions acquired by such a people. These intangible concepts as well as the physical objects and possessions can always be associated with the people, though depending on the degree of relevance attached to this by the group. Just like the Igbo's as a people are noted with new yam festivals with much value attached to this just like they believe that masquerades represent their ancestors who are spirits but normally come in that form to direct their affairs. Therefore neglect to the actions and directives of these masquerades amounts to a sacrilege which attracts heavy penalty and the masquerades remain untouchable.

In fact, DeFleur et al cited in Nwodu and Fab-Ukozor (2003, p.23) agree that culture is the specific system of norms, beliefs, practices, techniques and objects that the people of a society have inherited from their forebears, have invented or have adopted from other sources. In other words whether it is invented, inherited or borrowed, so far it is being practiced by the people, it is a culture. Chude (2007) summarizes culture as the totality of people's way of life.

And because it is the totality of people's way of life, culture rarely diminishes and even when it seems to diminish, the few minority with deep interest locates a veritable means of reinvigorating and sustaining it for the very purpose of future generations learning and passing it on. Thus "culture is the learned behaviour of members of a given social group" (Baran 2009, P.9). As a learned behaviour, it envelops the people and is hardly dropped. No wonder Okafor (2006, P.130) cited in Wilson (2009, p.72) writes about culture in this manner:

.....Culture of course is very possessive of the society in which it operates. And that is why human beings all over the world feel that their own cultures are the best. The problem of ethnocentrism particularly in a multi-cultural society is that it creates many flashpoints and many points of Conflicts between the people.

It is this very "possessive" quality of culture that advertising agencies must watch out to see in the course of promoting or advertising any product in order to tap the inherent sauce (s) and dodge the negative implications associated with such multi-cultural society.

Advertising agency

An advertising agency is a service business dedicated to creating, planning and handling advertising (and sometimes other forms of promotion) for its clients (Mackay 2004). According to Mackay, an advert agency is independent from the client and provides an outside point of view to the effort of selling the clients products or services.

According to Bovee and Arens (1986), cited in Ozoh (1998) advertising agency is an independent organization of creative people and business people who specialize in the development and preparation of advertising plans, advertisements and other promotional tools. Bovees and Arens(1986) further observe that advert agencies also arrange or contract for the purchase of advertising space and time in the various media.

What these entail is that advertising agency constitutes of professionals who provide thorough pattern of marketing products of an organization and at the same time place such an outfit on an advantageous public purview in terms of image build-up. No wonder Nwabueze (2006, p. 194) states that advert agency is a professional who undertake the business of creating advert copies, suggesting media to use and placing advert in these media as well as carrying other advert related activities for clients for a fee. To him (Nwabueze) their basic role is to ensure that professional advice backed up with action is made available to clients that consult them.

This is the more reason why Ozoh (1998), argues that by their placement in the advertising tripod, agencies serve as the link between advertisers and the media and therefore perform distinct and important functions for each of them.

Advertising agencies can be classified into two categories: full service agencies and non-full service agencies. A full service agency according to Bovee and Arens cited in Ozoh (1998) is such an agency that is equipped and does indeed render services required by the clients.

Rieck (2005), citing Burnet writes that the work of an advert agency is warmly and immediately human. It deals with needs, wants, dreams and hopes. It's "products" cannot be turned out on an assembly line. This means that an agency should creatively appeal to the minds of the target audience in such a way as to provoke their desire for such products or services or ideas being projected by the advertiser.

According to Mackay (2004), advertising agency can be further classified in this order: generalized advertising agency; specialized advertising agency; in-house advertising agency and social media agencies. Like in the social media agencies they specialized in promotion of brands in the various social media platforms like blogs, social networking sites, question and answer sites, discussion forum, microblogs. The two key services of media agencies are – social media and online reputation management.

Place of culture in product advertising

Advertising is a kind of popular culture and it is a major way that we learn how to interpret other kinds of popular culture. Film trailers for instance, not only seek to sell their cinematic products, but they also hope to shape the way we think about the movie. Advertising is a major mode of socialization telling us how to think and feel and what problems we need to worry about. Viewing older advertisements can tell us great deal about past eras and our own. One thing revealed about studying other advertisements is that aesthetic styles change over time.

O’Sullivan (2002), states that import of advertising is heightened by the fact that its audience is increasingly living in a cultural vacuum, away from traditional sources of cultural influence such as family, church and school. The implication is that viewers or listeners of advertisements do so at the peril of their sources of cultural impartation. Suggestively, advertising transcends influential sources such as family, church, school and age groups. Douglas and Craig (2011), therefore acknowledge that in encoding verbal messages, care needs to be taken in translation. This apparently is because language is an integral part of culture and wrong interpretation could have far reaching effect. Numerous examples exist in translation problems with colloquial phrase. As Douglas and Craig (2011) notes, example when the American Dairy Association entered Mexico with “Got Milk?” campaign, the Spanish translation need “Are you lactating?” Low level literacy may result the need to use visual symbols.

This invariably shows that certain words when translated may give different meaning to other people different from what others take it to be. The choice of words to be used in advertising is very essential so as to avoid degrees of misinterpretation. Therefore in product advertising to capture both the literate and low-literate ones, more of visual symbols can be used which may give faster understanding of the advertising.

More reasons why Douglas and Craig further state that, “pitfalls can arise due to differences in colour association or perception. In many tropical countries, green is associated with danger and has negative connotations. Red on the other hand is associated with weddings and happiness in China”, but this is quite different from what is obtainable in Nigeria where green is associated with nature and life while red is associated with evil, satanic or death. These are vestiges of culture which should be considered in product advertising.

Douglas and Craig believe that appeals to sex or humor needs, should be treated with considerable care as their expression and their effectiveness varies from one culture to another. They further then write that the British dry sense of humour does not always translate effectively even to other English speaking countries.

Advertising agencies, culture and product marketing

Cookson (2012) writes that the work of an advertising agency is to promote products and services and get results which help brands get recognition in the market. This means that a marketing consultant from an advertising agency should be able to know how to enhance the public image of its clients and create market for the client’s products. In other words, before launching any marketing campaign or advertising strategy, the marketing consultant makes sure that he understands the objectives and goals of his clients. He should carry out detailed study of the customers’ business and diligently understand the target customer, find out the unique selling point, consumer behaviour, popular culture of the people, short comings of similar products/services, market trends at a given time and situation. All these help the agency to develop cutting edge marketing strategies for its clients. Cookson is of the opinion that after gathering all the significant information, the advertising agency promotes the product of a firm in the most appropriate manner, required for a particular campaign.

A good advert agency would always choose a combination of advert media so as to give the product maximum exposure. Starting from print to broadcast, a professional advert agency adopts all the best tools to make sure a brand gets results which can create a good business turnover.

To achieve the above, Cookson (2012) opines that the agency must get creative professionals which will include web designers, copy writers and graphic designers to conceptualize the promotional message for their customers. The whole team works together to ensure the message becomes highly interesting and engages the targeted audience. This could be achieved

by creating attractive punch lines, developing striking logos, designs so as to stand out from the rest of the competing advertising.

Essence of advertising is to promote whatsoever advertisers intend to bring to audience knowledge. Cultural impediments must be avoided so as to attract the needed results for the brand being promoted.

However, effective and efficient an advert agency operation may be, there is need for such operators to understand that in doing all these works and in carrying its assignment, adequate consideration must be put in place with respect to the culture of the people.

For example, in the Muslim communities especially in the northern part of Nigeria where sharia laws have been enacted, to project an advertising of a brewery product (beer) or alcoholic drinks on a bill board or outdoor advertising will amount to a violent provocation of the Muslim adherents. This is the more reason why beer products only get to the north through smuggling and are marketed only in the military barracks where the fanatics will find it difficult to assault anyone. Nigeria's ideals vary from place to place; the north is mostly Muslims and south mostly Christians. Young and old, rural or urban, Ibo, Hausa or Yoruba; each group sees the world differently, so Nigerian advertisers' must be both deft and sensitive in partaking adverts targeted at people in a multi-cultural society like Nigeria.

Many southerners would enjoy advertisements involving voluptuous women dancing intently. But such advertisement would be provocative if run in the North. When in 2002, *This Day Newspaper* printed a light-hearted column speculating that prophet Mohammad might have enjoyed the Miss world contest, 200 people died in the riot that followed, the newspaper office was touched and the writer flew out of the country to Norway (The Economist 2011). Similarly, an advert that is seen to be provocative would elicit similar response from the audience in the north. This is why it is essential to understand the culture of the audience before packaging an advert that targets specific audience group.

Challenges to advertising agency

Despite the obvious successes recorded in the recent past in the world of advertising agencies and their operations, there are yet some challenges that are yet to be surmounted. Among these challenges is the cultural diversity in the ethno-religions country like Nigeria where different ethnic groups are

identified with divergent cultures. This therefore brings a huge burden on the advert agencies in terms of satisfying the necessary target audience.

The level of education among the audience also poses a great challenge to the agencies. How to develop an advertisement that will cut across the literate, low-literate and non-literate audience demands extra-ordinary patience and fast thinking.

Determination of the target audience in the open-ended field of customers apparently becomes a hard nut to crack. It is a world of so many tough competitors whose aims seem almost the same to push the products and services or ideas into the same market, to cut a market share of the customers requires an extra-strategic configuration of the advertiser and advertising agency operations to promote such products.

Words speak volumes but pictures speak louder than words. In consideration of the cultural milieu and attachments to things heard and seen by the people, it poses a great challenge to advertising agency especially when the picture content of an advertisement appeals to sex and humour. Most cultures in Nigeria demand that issues relating to sex should be handled by mature and grown up people. Therefore, placing an advertisement on a bill board, television, newspaper or magazine where both adult and under aged have access to such adverts will provoke ill-feelings in the sensibilities of the people.

The consumer behaviour is another challenge to the agency. Assuming an advert agency in the bid to gain an approval and market support of a brand of condom and the agency packages an advert showing Ach. Bishop Olubumi Okojie holding a pack of such condoms with an insignia "it's safe". If pressed so hard even when he Okojie accepted to be used in such advertisement may deny and the result will be massive protest by mostly Catholic adherents and their eventually withdrawal from use of products emanating from the advertisers firm. All these means that consumers of products tend to follow their partners in purchase of certain goods. In this instance the advert tends to derogate the Catholic Priesthood where an oath of celibacy is usually administered before one becomes a priest. How then can a priest who supposedly does not have canal knowledge of a woman profess through an advert that condom is safe.

Another big challenge facing advertising agencies is the consideration of the advertising critics who see advertising to demean and corrupt culture. In the words of Baran (2009, P.384-385).

....Our culture we values beauty, kindness, prestige, family, love and success. As human beings we need food, shelter and words, sex. Advertising succeeds by appealing to these values and needs. The basis for this persuasive strategy is the IADA approach – to persuade consumers advertising must attract attention, create interest, stimulate desire, and promote action. According to industry critics, however problems arise when important aspects of human existence are reduced to the consumption of brand-name consumer products critics argue that ours has become a consumer culture, a culture in which personal worth and identity reside not in ourselves but in the products with which we surround our selves.

Culturally, in south East Nigeria, personal worth of an individual does not rest in the amount of advertised products he surrounds himself with. However, today advertisements have corrupted this important culture. A youth of today who watches advert of house in Asokoro, Maitama, Aso villa in Abuja will pounce his chest and swear to own property in these choice areas in Abuja either by crook or any other method that do not bestow any atom of regard on our culture that follow due process in matters of prosperity.

Advertising agencies have to contend with certain ethical issues. In the view of Baran (2009), children are simply not intellectually capable of interpreting the intent of adverts and at the ages of 7 and 8 years cannot rationally judge the worth of the worth of advertising claims. To him this makes children advertising inherently unethical. Take the issue of cigarette advertisements on television, indomie noodles, and other alcohol beverages. Our culture is that parents determine what children eat and at what time they eat them. But the exposition those children have today over such adverts have created in them the attitude of defining what they eat and at the time they eat it.

In other to overcome these challenges, the advertising agency in its operations must understand the nitty-gritty of cultural attachments of the various ethnic groups in the country and make room to avoid clashing with the people's culture. The professionals in the agency should read in-between

lines before publication in order to expunge all offensive materials before the copy goes to the media.

Conclusion/recommendations

It is obviously clear that in this modern day world if you do not say I am here no one will know you are there. That is why Burnet notes that advertising says to people “Here’s what we have got. Here’s what it will do for you. Here’s how to get it” (Rieck 2005). And this is what advertising is like in the production and manufacturing of goods. For a manufacturer or producer of commodities to survive, he must engage the services of a well constituted advertising agency who in turn fashions out plausible way of persuading the would be target audience to purchase such products in the market. And for an advertising agency to carve a name in the industry, it must clear some hurdles placed along the advertising road by the culture of the people. This is because it is practically clear that culture of people is so diverse and must be considered in packaging a successful advert.

Conclusively therefore, as much as culture plays good role in advertising, it also has certain negative impediments on the advertising, product advertising and advertising agency operations if not well understood before packaging an advertising.

We therefore recommend that government; advertising agencies and advertisers should initiate and sponsor further studies on culture and advertising. Students and scholars of advertising should endeavour to accept to read this work to enhance their knowledge on the discoveries made so as to grapple with the hurdles that culture holds for advertising and product market with regards to advert agency operations.

A synergy of the cultural values and norms of the people in backing advertising becomes imperative so as to achieve the purpose of the advertiser and the advertising agency.

Advert agencies should as a matter of obligation pre-test any advertisement in advance with a selected group of certain cultural origin to ascertain their reactions before projecting such advertisement to the general public. On witnessing any negative reaction among a target audience, the advertiser and the advertising agency must as a matter of urgent importance withdraw such advertisement in question from circulation and find it reasonable to apologize to the affected audience whose culture is affected.

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