

## CMO STRATEGY

# Let's Put Censorship In Its Place

Lighten Up: Advertising is not the moral compass of the 21st century

By BILL SCHWAB

I'm a little confused by the current selective nature of advertising censorship.

As every industry professional knows, advertising is routinely subjected to several levels of screening before it gets produced. There are legislative and industry rules about what and how products can and can't be advertised. Additionally, with focus groups, one-on-ones, agency lawyers, client lawyers and network clearances, sometimes it seems miraculous anything gets on the air.

But that is nonselective censorship. There is also selective censorship, in which censors seemingly appear from nowhere and get ads pulled. Who are these people? Do they have a personal ax to grind? Or do they represent an enormous group with offended sensibilities and reasonable, passionately held beliefs? Could they be on to the fact that the best way to get press for your cause is to get an ad pulled?

We know Glenn Sacks is a person concerned about men's issues. We found that out when Arnold CEO Fran Kelly felt



obligated to respond to the blogger's protests concerning a Fidelity TV commercial that Arnold produced, an ad Mr. Sacks viewed as portraying men and fathers as idiots.

Mr. Sacks subsequently was allowed to



air his grievances in a trade journal article that was considerably longer than any paid ad copy I've heard or seen in recent memory.

After the annual Super Bowl ad derby, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against

# CMO STRATEGY

Defamation and Human Right Campaign (GLAAD) put on the censorial robes, probably without their combined names stitched on the back, and decided to take issue with the now infamous Snickers commercial.

"I don't know what kind of mind-set it takes to think it's OK to slug another guy because of a mistaken kiss," said Neil G. Giuliano, president of Glaad, in a Feb. 7 Washington Post article. "It's just unacceptable."

The client pulled the ad. Mr. Giuliano's objections received widespread press coverage.

Old Spice, an aftershave brand long associated with a sailor heading out to sea with a wink and a wave, has recently left that image behind. "Keep It Clean," a theme line states, while we look at a beautiful blond woman lasciviously licking an ice-cream cone. Another ad shows us a man holding a farm animal. "This man loves sheep," the headline reads. "Keep It Clean" the theme line implores. All the while the innuendo comes at us with the subtlety of a battle cruiser.

I guess most people would call the Old Spice ads an example of "guy humor" and let them slide. Don't get me wrong: I

think the Old Spice work is very smart. But I wonder: No censors writing letters? Does that make it OK? What do we do know? Wait to see if somebody objects? And if they do, would that mean we did something bad?

As communications professionals, we have to ask: What is the cost? The answer: very high. The average commercial costs \$425,000, but can easily be twice that amount. Add another \$50,000 for research, a couple hundred thousand for agency fees and top it off with tens of millions for the media placed behind the ad, and the cost of pulling an ad becomes considerable. Is it right that we fund the PR efforts of others?

While I believe we always need to be alert and mindful to the sensitivities of others, what are we to do when the sensitivity of others is claimed to be the sensitivities of everyone?

If I develop creative work based on who might be offended, as opposed to whether the work will help my clients' business, I do a disservice to the client with no assurance I've not injured a special-interest group.

Are we just getting more sensitive as a society? Recently, "Good Morning America" broadcast footage of a 101-year-old woman

being beaten to her knees. This is the environment in which marketers have to compete for the viewer's attention. So we go about the task with all the skill we have to attract people to our products and services. The choices we make concerning the way in which we attract them is inevitably subjective.

Do we need censors? Yes. But before you (Mr. or Ms. censor) take the time to write the next letter, consider: They are only ads. You are not seriously proposing they become the source for what is right and wrong behavior, are you?

In an industry that values youth, a little maturity of judgment both on the agency and client side might save the campaign that deserves to live, and avoid doing serious harm to consumers with genuine concerns.

Let's trust in our collective common sense when we make ads. And when we view them. And then move on.

Using my mature and considered judgment, those are my opinions, but if you don't agree with me, please don't waste your valuable time writing me a letter.

Use it to get *Huckleberry Finn* off position No. 5 in the top 100 most-challenged book list.

the gate



*Bill Schwab is creative director at The Gate Worldwide, a marketing-communications firm. He is co-author (along with fellow Gaters David Bernstein and Beau Fraser) of **Death to All Sacred Cows**, to be published this summer by Disney's Hyperion Books.*

The Gate Worldwide  
11 East 26th Street 14th Floor  
New York, NY 10010  
212 508 3400  
www.thegateworldwide.com