

# The Five (Wrongheaded) Complaints Against Advertising

by

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Coercive, offensive, and monopolistic. That's what critics say about advertising. You've probably heard most of the complaints: advertising sends subliminal messages to make us buy products we don't need or want, it creates the very needs and wants it aims to satisfy, it is offensive to good taste and needs to be better regulated, it erects barriers to market entry, and it increases prices.

The first two are the coercive arguments and together with the offensiveness complaint constitute the so-called social criticisms of advertising; the last two are the monopolistic arguments and constitute the economic criticisms. Let's take these one at a time.

*1. Subliminal advertising, the alleged ability to motivate action with messages that are below our threshold of perception, doesn't exist.*

Advertisers exert great effort to make their messages—whether filled with sexual innuendo or not—blatantly explicit. Whatever is beneath our threshold of perception is not perceived and, therefore, cannot influence our purchasing behavior.

A 1957 movie theater "experiment" that allegedly increased sales of popcorn and Coca-Cola by flashing messages on the screen at a speed that no one could perceive has been argued to be a hoax; subsequent, well-controlled experiments produced no effect.

Subliminal embeds in the 1970s—the word s-e-x, for example, spelled out in the ice cubes of a Gilbey's gin ad or a sexual orgy "embedded" in the clam-plate special of Howard Johnson's restaurant menu—were products of the overly active imagination of a journalism professor who admitted that his students could not see the embeds until he pointed them out.

Explicit, above-threshold messages in advertisements are what sell; hidden, muffled, or unperceivable messages do not.

*2. John Kenneth Galbraith's supposed dependence effect holds that needs, wants, tastes, and demand are all dependent on, and therefore are created by, the process of production, especially advertising.*

But needs, wants, tastes, and demand all originate within the consumer. A sign that says "Lemonade—5¢" cannot create a desire for the product if the consumer is not thirsty or does not like lemonade.

Advertising can make us aware of needs and can stimulate our wants, tastes, and demand, but the final value judgment to say "no, I don't want that product" resides with the consumer.

Advertising is only a necessary, not sufficient, condition for the existence our desires.

*3. Advertising, this third complaint states, offends good taste and needs to be banned from the airwaves or, at least, more tightly regulated.*

But what is taste? Tastes are values that are morally optional, that is, values that not everyone must adopt in order to remain ethical. I like Fords, you like Toyotas, he likes to walk. I like sexy models in my television commercials, you like PBS pledge breaks.

Tastes are not disputable, so says the Latin phrase (*de gustibus non est disputandum*). Good taste is discriminative ability based on a specified standard, such as good taste in wine, clothing, or commercial execution.

What is the standard that is being used when something is said to be in bad taste? That is not often specified or is assumed by the speaker to be his or her own optional taste.

Advertisers, to be sure, should not offend the tastes of their target audiences, but advertising is a mass communication that sends messages to many people beyond the target audience; it is these mistargeted consumers who often complain about particular ads being in poor taste—because the ad does not meet their taste.

To regulate or ban allegedly distasteful advertising would be a violation of free speech. Advertisers and journalists both seek to earn profits with the messages they send to their audiences; both practice commercial speech that is protected by the US Constitution.

*4. Advertising, through its large budgets, allegedly erects barriers to market entry by differentiating the product and thereby creating brand loyalty.*

The loyalty is the supposed barrier because competitors would have to spend an equal or greater amount to dislodge the consumer attachment. In fact, advertising is a means of entry and it is the product that creates the loyalty.

A new product that is truly better than established brands attracts customers simply by advertising that it is better. Consumers try out the new product. If they like it, they buy more and spread the good word (favorable word-of-mouth) to others.

Microsoft and Apple, two companies that did not exist 35 years ago, have done quite well for themselves dislodging customer loyalty to IBM products. And both started off with small advertising budgets. A true monopolistic barrier is the U.S. Postal Service's control over the delivery of first-class mail.

In the absence of such controls, the Davids of business can readily slay, and historically many times have slain, the Goliaths.

*5. The final complaint against advertising is a continuation of the previous one and states that advertising increases prices.*

As noted above, advertising differentiates the product and creates brand loyalty; this brand loyalty, in turn, further brings about an inelastic demand that enables the advertiser to raise prices. The result, allegedly, is a reduction in overall output and waste of society's resources.

But in the end it is advertising that contributes to lowering real prices over time. Advertising creates a larger market than would otherwise be possible, leading to economies of scale in production, distribution, and even in advertising. The unit

cost of the product declines and so does the price—in real terms.

The effects of inflation must be removed when making price comparisons over time. A 100-tablet bottle of Bayer aspirin in 1938, for example, cost 59¢; in today's 2007 dollars, that would be \$8.47. Today, on drugstore.com, a 200-tablet bottle of coated Bayer aspirin is priced regularly at \$9.99, discounted to \$6.99—and “coated” here means that the product is a better product than it was in 1938. Advertising is not the only cause of real price declines, but it is a contributor.

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The complaints against advertising are seemingly endless, limited only by the creativity of its critics, but advertising is fundamentally benevolent. It is a communication technique that attempts to influence the behavior of others—no more nor less so than the techniques used by parents, journalists, teachers, and politicians.

Indeed, in a contest of ethics and taste, advertising and its practitioners can hold their own against these four groups. Advertising is everyone's favorite whipping boy.

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