

I love marketing

I want to start by saying that I think advertising does many great things. Many of the things we rely on as a society; from the free press, to most of the web services we take for granted are free – email, maps, apps, Facebook - to name just a few, rely on advertising revenue. Any criticism of advertising will inevitably be a criticism of ourselves as citizens and consumers.

On the other hand, as a species, we continue to consume in ridiculously inefficient ways. And we are starting to see the effects of this socially and environmentally. The advertising industry is at the vanguard of pushing conspicuous consumption in a resource constrained world. The argument, sometimes used by advertisers, that advertising merely redistributes consumption, i.e. takes market share from other products rather than making the market bigger, has been refuted. Advertising creates needs that did not exist before. Full stop.

So how do we move out of this gridlock?

The elephant and the rubber band

I do believe that advertising holds great potential to use creativity and psychology to make consumption more sustainable. There are great examples of this – Unilever, Patagonia – in fact any example of a profitable consumer-facing business creating sustainable products rely on getting the right messages across. The problem is this. For every one marketer pushing brands towards more sustainable practices, there will be nine pushing for business as usual. It is a marginal activity and will continue to be so in the foreseeable future. The elephant and rubber-band metaphor illustrates this well: If the elephant represents business as usual for advertising and marketing, anyone interested in changing those practices can only ever gently pull the elephant in that direction otherwise the rubber band will snap. We may add a thorn (parents' protesting children's advertising, fatty foods, etc.) as well to indicate push and pull effects. Advertising alone is never going to solve the problem.

Peak advertising

It may be good news that advertising, as we know it, will cease to exist. Some of you may have heard of peak oil – the theory that we will reach a peak level of oil extraction and from then on it will be in terminal decline (a bell curve). A similar theory has been articulated around advertising: peak advertising. Like the theory of Peak Oil that it references, the goal is not to look to the immediate upcoming quarter, but to think on the decade-long scale about the business models that sustain the Internet. The theory comes with an important reservation; it only applies to the web.

The theory in 30 seconds:

- Key indicators for online advertising effectiveness have declined since the launch of the first banner advertisement in 1994.
 - when the first banner advertisement emerged online in 1994, it reported a (now) staggering clickthrough rate of 78%. By 2011, the average Facebook advertisement clickthrough rate sat dramatically lower at 0.05%

- As the number of ads increase across all channels, advertisers effectively fight over ever smaller slices of user attention, potentially culminating in users ignoring advertising messaging altogether.
 - Use of blocking software
- The flow of revenue supporting the internet will decrease. Existing alternatives appear at present to be insufficient to replace lost revenue from near-future declines in the value of display, search, and mobile advertising.
- These developments suggest important (and potentially painful) implications for market structure, privacy, and authenticity online.
- The future is a matter of technological innovation and human choice; the big question is what kind of internet do we want to have?

The discussion then becomes much wider: advertising is no longer the responsibility of advertisers; it will become the responsibility of media in general. More so than it ever was in the past and currently is. Let's just remind ourselves exactly how important media companies are in modern society.

Media companies hacking society since...

What do you see in this picture? Everyone who knows what is happening in this picture, please raise your hand.

What you see here is a group of people representing 'Fighters for a Free North Korea'. As you can see, they are not carrying guns, but media content or what they refer to as "weapons of truth". What they do – under the cover of the night and when the wind is right – is that they launch thousands of balloons from South Korea which then drop in North Korea. Since 2005, they have launched 2 million balloons. The balloons contain DVDs with popular soap operas, booklets explaining how capitalism works, USB sticks with simplified versions of Wikipedia, radios pre-tuned to specific news stations and leaflets showing South Korea as free, democratic and welcoming of defectors.

Does this work? Well, the gentleman behind these balloons, Park Sang-hak, has been labelled as "human scum", an "evil conservative gangster" and "living trash" by the North Korean regime and in 2011 they sent an assassin to try and poison him. Unsuccessfully, luckily. Even amongst South Koreans, he is a wanted man. Many fear North Korea will retaliate against the country. There are two conclusions to draw: a) Park is a very brave man and b) this must be working.

Why is this relevant to responsible consumption and advertising? Let me explain. We don't live in North Korea, but every day we run into hundreds of media 'balloons', whether online, in print or on screen. The example shows us that media content changes the mentality of people consuming it. It changes who we are, how we see ourselves, the values we hold and, of course, how we consume.

Examples of consumers vs citizens

As explained before, with advertising creeping into other forms of media content, we may increasingly be encouraged to “save less, borrow more, work harder and consume greater quantities of material goods.” The distance between media content and what we could call the market is diminishing. Paradoxically enough, only very few media companies have made any attempts to understand what the social and environmental impacts of their ‘balloons’ are, including that of the advertising they carry. And if they have, they have done it for content engineered specifically to have an impact, for example, charity appeals, never across their full range of programmes.

In the long run, I don’t believe any industry can get away with not understanding, mapping or managing its key impacts. Imagine if BP refused to recognise oil spills or Carrefour refused to acknowledge the detrimental effects of child labour in its supply chain. Compared to other sectors, media will increasingly be held to account for its impacts. I don’t believe in sending in assassins to this effect, but I will give you some final pointers, many of which are explained in more detail in our report ‘Mirrors or Movers?’. Partly to summarise, partly to suggest further action:

- ‘Responsible advertising’ will no longer be the responsibility of the ‘advertising industry/department’, it will form part of media companies’ core editorial and creative processes;
- Media companies will increasingly be held to account for the impacts of their content, they might as well be proactive;
- Transparency around how advertising affects media content will become a key commercial differentiator;
- New businesses/business models will emerge allowing audiences/users ‘safe havens’;

Further discussion

Media CSR Forum – working through the issues as a sector – <http://mediacsforum.org>

Mirrors or Movers? Framing the impact of media content – <http://mirrorsormovers.org/>
#MirrorsOrMovers

Peak Advertising – <http://peakads.org>

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