RESPONSE TO “A SIGN OF OUR TIMES?”

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Ms. Dufner’s claim that billboard advertisements for a local radio station are an “attack on the family” are dubious, at best. There is little room for moral argument in this case, advertisers have a limited arsenal for selling their products and sex is quite often the medium for a sales pitch. The business of advertising is to identify the key demographic, and tailor the product to their interests. Automobiles such as Cadillac use a young, sexually charged Kate Walsh to declare “in today’s luxury game, the question isn’t whether or not your car has available features like a 40-gig hard drive. It isn’t about sun roofs or Sappeli wood accents, popup nav screens or any of that. No, the real question is: When you turn your car on, does it return the favor?” Who is the target market for this ad campaign? Older men who see the spiked heel of Ms. Walsh’s sandal pushing on the gas pedal and surging through a tunnel; the Freudian implications couldn’t be more obvious. Are we to infer from Ms. Dufner’s pique regarding photographs of women in bathing suits that women should be banned from advertisements? Surely her children have had to endure the Cadillac commercial when they view television, or perhaps Ms. Dufner has sheltered her children from the crass influence of mass media altogether.

However distasteful one may find an advertisement, there is the protection of freedom of speech for advertisers that, I would argue, needs to be strenuously upheld. A capitalist society is dependent upon goods and services being freely exchanged throughout the society. And the means for that exchange are advertisements. The American Marketing Association adopted a code of ethics in 2004 that holds three fundamental norms: marketers must do no harm, marketers must foster trust in the marketing system, and marketers must work to improve consumer confidence in the marketing exchange system. The advertising agency that produced the campaign for Rock 102 clearly upheld these norms. They identified their demographic (young males), assured them
that the music would accomplish the goal of satisfying their musical and libidinal adolescent needs, and they were honest in what they had to offer. If Ms. Dufner has cause for concern it should be with the content of that radio station, not the advertisers. Take, for example, Jay-Z’s “big pimpin’” rap music directed at young men:

*You know I - thug em, f*** em, love em, leave em*
*Cause I don't f**in need em*
*Take em out the hood, keep em lookin good*
*But I don't f***in feed em*
*First time they fuss I'm breezin*
*Talkin bout, “What's the reasons?”*
*I'm a pimp in every sense of the word, bitch*
*Better trust than believe em²*

The message for young men is much more misogynistic than a billboard with the back of a one-piece bathing suit clad woman. But this is nothing new, sexually explicit lyrics have been on the airwaves since the 70s. Marvin Gaye’s 1983 recording of “Sexual Healing” seems tame compared to the 90s “I Touch Myself” by the Divinyls. Music serves multiple functions, and sexuality is clearly one of those functions. Many rock radio stations have adapted their advertising to capture the diminishing market of radio listeners with loud, often raunchy DJs, who appeal to the most base instincts of adolescent males. The billboard for Rock 102 seems a quaint nod to the innocence of music tethered to sexual awareness.

The key question that this case misses is identifying the ethical issue. It states that the case is ethical in nature because “it is complex, it has many differing views, many stakeholders who could not agree to a right or wrong answer to this issue.” (italics mine) but what, exactly, is the issue? For Ms. Dufner the issue appears to be censorship, for the radio it is freedom to advertise its product, and for society at large a question of when (if ever) to censor public speech. Ms. Dufner’s claim that the advertisement is an “attack on the family” is simply silly. There is no ethical issue involved, nor is there a legal issue. The courts have consistently upheld the right of businesses to advertise their products honestly and cleverly. The billboard has no bearing on the family, or—at least—no more than a billboard for planned parenthood, or any other potentially objectionable service. If the ethical issue is whether the radio station has an ethical issue to refrain from using sex in its advertisement, I would suggest that advertisement as a whole would have to retrench. Marketers use sex to sell everything from automobiles to window shades.
It has become the palette for the marketer’s pitch. And, lastly, if society is to censor speech that is symbolic in nature (e.g. “turn you on” with its double entendre) we will forfeit one of the greatest freedoms a society has ever granted its citizens: freedom of expression.

Ms. Dufner is to be commended for her concern about how society portrays women, but the method for improving that state is education, not censorship.

ENDNOTES
