

# VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS

---



7.8.2002

## **I'm Not Lying To You Right Now**

*Did corporate America learn the art of lying from advertising?*

The last few weeks have been rough. See, I'm a WorldCom shareholder. Or, uh, I was. And I'm pissed. Some people need to go to jail. Hell, I want to make a citizens' arrest.

WorldCom is only the latest in a long line of corporate clusterfucks. Seems that many executives think it's perfectly fine to lie straight-faced to the media, stockholders, customers, and most importantly, their employees. What MBA program teaches that lying is an acceptable practice?

If profit and greed were the motives for all this illegal activity, then the executives who made these decisions were simply in pursuit of serious wealth. More wealth than anyone really needs, which I wouldn't ordinarily have a problem with. Except in this case, screwing over other people in pursuit of this wealth wasn't an obstacle.

Which led me to think: Did the advertising industry legitimize lying for the rest of the country?

Any student of advertising knows that back in the early days, stinky breath, B. O., and lifeless hair were all touted as sure tickets to living a life without friends and no chance of ever getting laid. (Those facts haven't changed, but it really is a little subtler now).

Over the years, however, the ad industry upped the ante. Advertising promotes the good life. Nicer homes, nicer cars, nicer stereos, nicer wrinkle-free faces, etc. It didn't matter if a person couldn't afford the lifestyle, that's what credit cards and second mortgages were for.

But corporate executives had other methods of acquiring wealth: cooking the books, ludicrous stock option packages and golden parachutes. It's possible the corporate thievery and greed we're reading about these days have been perpetrated by people who were hell-bent on living the lifestyle that advertising told them was possible.

I really hope advertising isn't the root cause of the current malaise. I like to believe that advertising serves a good and valuable service in a capitalistic society. We send the messages, but we don't coerce people to take action. If a person has a fundamental sense of right and wrong, and some self-control, no amount of advertising can make someone dishonest in the pursuit of wealth or nicer goods.

Reading the headlines, however, makes me wonder if anyone has self-control these days. Our actions have come back to haunt us. The ad industry is in a deep recession because we're now on the ass end of a boom our marketing imagery helped create.

As a society, do we need to pull back on the relentless pursuit of more and better stuff? Can advertising agencies and clients survive a change like that? Or are we resigned to a culture of relentless consumption and greed?

The problem is that the more drastic the economic situation is and the tighter competition gets, the more marketers will do to skirt the rules to sell as much as possible. As a result, the fine print gets longer and the little white lies get bigger. To promote the corporate image, companies will pass themselves off as healthier, more viable businesses than they really are.

We can find a middle ground. I believe the advertising industry can promote its clients' products in an engaging, informative way without causing consumers to overextend themselves. I believe corporations can market themselves and pursue their profit motives without doing it at the expense of the rest of the population.

Of course, I also believed WorldCom stock was a good investment.