

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



12.18.2002

Screw Unto Others...

Religion and Advertising: Two very similar, and sinister, concepts

I was setting up my Beanie Baby Jesus nativity scene when it struck me that no one should get too worked up or too surprised about the increasing crass commercialism of the holiday season.

In fact, I think Jesus, Moses, Allah and Buddha would all be ad people if they were alive today.

What do advertising and religion have to do with one another? Plenty.

Advertising and marketing are borrowing basic tenets of religion to increase customer loyalty and sales. Nike created a belief system around its brand. So did Ben and Jerry's, Harley-Davidson, Saturn-- all established a set of values their brands were based on. On Sunday morning, you can go to church to feel a sense of enlightenment and community. You can also go to Starbucks and feel the same thing.

A few years ago, an ad agency declared that "brands are the new religion." Human beings are tribal beings —joiners at heart. Everyone wants to feel like they're a part of something bigger than themselves.

If Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc, won't do the trick, maybe driving a Saturn will. Is it a spiritually empty way to embrace a brand instead of a god? Maybe, maybe not. But advertising has legitimized thinking of brands as having value systems one can believe in. Consequently, many consumers have bought into this.

What's dangerous is that positive messages in both advertising and religion always come with negative implications for disbelievers.

You can easily intertwine similar ideas about religion and advertising. I'll do it in the same sentence: If you don't believe in this deity or buy this product or live this type of lifestyle, then you are damned, you will go to hell, you are not a complete person, you are not sexy or successful, you will never get laid.

Simply put, "you are not one of us"—that's the inherent premise of most fundamentally religious people-or brand-conscious people.

Too much belief in a certain religion, or brands that represent status, turn rational decent people into intolerant and critical ones. Don't believe me? Think back to the cliques you saw in high school—if you didn't look or dress a certain way, boy you'd get a lot of crap.

This isn't just an abstract concept, it affects our daily relationships and the people we work with. Someone who proudly preaches "I'm a Christian" and someone who says "I only date people who wear Prada" share the same holier-than-thou attitude, and look down upon those who don't.

Think back: Did you ever have a client tell you to do an ad based on the message, "our product is the best"? You're not really given a solid reason why that product is the best--it just is. Myopic clients believe in the basic superiority of their product--no matter what the truth is. That's also what each religion believes about itself.

We, as a society, prefer believers. Take the flip side: In mainstream America, people who don't believe in organized religion and people who encourage others not to buy stuff or conserve resources are treated like outcasts and pariahs.

Both religion and advertising risk losing credibility. The perception is out there that they are responsible for badness as well as goodness. While unwavering belief in a religion contributes to the destruction of certain groups of people, mass consumption contributes to the destruction of the earth's resources.

I know, it's a heavy topic. It's just what I think about when I get stuck in traffic on the way to the mall.