



::view from the cheap seats::

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Turning Chinese

The world of global marketing is flattening, but ad agencies are in for a bumpy ride

While the judges in Cannes were fawning over Dove's "Evolution" video, another ad for a beauty product came to my attention.

This ad was for a product called "Fair & Lovely," a skin-whitening cream that's heavily marketed in India. The commercial showed a young girl who dreams of being a TV reporter, but as she narrates, "the obstacle to obtaining my dream job was my skin." Her skin was too dark for her to get hired. So in the ad, she proceeds to whiten her skin, land that dream job, and even score a date with a studly cameraman.

What's the problem? Turns out, both Dove and Fair & Lovely products are made by the same company: Unilever.

The Dove video (part of a campaign which I praised in a past column) shows the effects of makeup and retouching and says, "no wonder our perception of beauty is distorted." The Fair & Lovely ad suggests if you whiten your skin, you'll get your dream job. So how does a company like Unilever justify distorting the perception of beauty in India but celebrating "real beauty" in North America? Can you really just chalk it up to differing cultural mores, or two divisions of a huge company that don't interact?

I put the ads side by side on AdPulp.com, where people could see the dual messages for themselves. Then, a reporter for Radio Sweden interviewed me about the Internet's role in exposing the variations of global marketing. So what is an American guy doing on Radio Sweden talking about a company headquartered in Britain and The Netherlands who approved both a video created in Canada and celebrated in France along with a condescending ad created for India? I demonstrated that the world is getting too small for global companies to hide contradictory business practices. The advertising industry better wake up to this reality.

Global advertising is far more complicated than doing a 2 page visual solution spread ad for laundry detergent. I know very clearly that every day, my clients are impacted by decisions being made on the other side of the world. Your clients are impacted, too, no matter what category they're in.

You're personally affected, too. But only if you buy toys. Or dog food. Or shrimp. Or tires. Or toothpaste at the dollar store.

Have you heard the news recently? When the U.S. Food & Drug Administration decided to warn Americans against the use of imported Chinese toothpaste because it contained a chemical found in antifreeze, officials in China excused it away saying, "So far we have not received any report of death resulting from using the toothpaste. The U.S. handling of this case is neither scientific nor responsible."

That's a great USP to advertise: "Cooldent Fluoride. No one's died brushing their teeth with it. Yet."

Sorry to say, you can't use that line for dog and cat food imported from China, which has caused at least 16 pet deaths in America. Oh, and do you have kids? So far this year, 24 toys have been recalled for safety reasons. That's one toy a week. They were all made in China.

Or try this one: 450,000 Chinese tires sold here in the U.S are being recalled due to the possibility of tread separation. Of the recall, a spokesman at the Hangzhou Zhongce tire company said, "This is concocted out of thin air." Someone needs to give the Chinese a good PR lesson.

More and more goods being made in China are becoming health problems. And since more and more goods are being made in China, the problem will get worse and American companies and brands will get affected. Is your agency mostly catering to clients in service categories? Doesn't matter. Those little custom imprinted tchotchkes you order for your client's trade shows likely come from China.

This isn't just a health problem. Or an outsourcing problem. It's a brand management problem. Nothing kills a brand faster than a few toxic ingredients. Imagine if someone had died in a car crash due to those faulty Chinese tires. There would be a major uproar faster than you can say "Firestone."

Believe me, I'm not picking on China or India alone. American companies, importers, regulators and retailers are all complicit. There's nowhere for global brands to hide. Unsafe products, abusive employment practices, and condescending advertising can't get swept under the imported jute rug.

And thanks to the speed of global business, along with the power of the Internet to instantly communicate, consumers can find out what's going on for themselves and make purchasing decisions accordingly. Whether its distinct cultural mores, lopsided trade imbalances, or simply language barriers, companies who do business around the world will now get quickly exposed for duplicity when it exists, like Unilever and their brands.

As advertising and marketing professionals, we have an obligation to serve our clients as best we can, and yes, that often means we must focus on the details of small projects or short-lived ad campaigns rather than fixate on whatever impact we're making on the world as a whole. But like the viral sensation Dove's "Evolution" video became, every piece of work we do for our clients reflects on us, on them, and the values of our society. We can have a positive effect, and we can have a negative one.

Our industry is all agog over new media and the power of images and messages to reach critical mass in the blink of an eye. As a result, the whole world is now paying attention. Are you?