



The Advertiser's Advocate

By Staff -- Broadcasting & Cable, 7/23/2007

Washington legislators are turning up the heat on advertisers over childhood obesity, drug ads and violent content, to name a few issues. Adonis Hoffman's job is to help explain why advertising should not be the government's "default" scapegoat. He is senior VP/counsel at the American Association of Advertising Agencies as well as director of the Center on Responsible Marketing and Media, of the American Business Leadership Institute in Washington. Complex problems can't be solved with simplistic solutions, he says. At stake is more than \$10 billion worth of food advertising to kids.



How seriously are advertisers taking the childhood-obesity health issue?

The issue is perhaps one of the most important public-policy issues to come on the agenda in a while. First, we're all concerned about the health of children. Second, advertisers have been front and center on critics' lists as one of the leading causes of childhood obesity.

Is that a fair criticism?

I don't think so. It is clear that many, many factors contribute to childhood obesity. Advertising and marketing is remote at best. While policy makers, public-health experts and the food industry search for solutions, the implications for business are extremely important. Marketers of junk foods have been postulated by many as the chief contributors to childhood obesity. I think there is a disputable scientific basis for the claim, but it has taken root in an activist sector that wants to limit or abolish advertising.

You acknowledge that there is some industry responsibility for the problem as well as for the solution?

There is certainly a responsibility for the solution, and I think that, if you want to look at media as a factor in behavior, yes, media is a factor in behavior for a lot of things.

If childhood obesity is a legitimate threat, shouldn't the government step in to protect kids wherever it can, including regulating TV ads, as FCC Chairman Kevin Martin said it might have to do.

Here are some areas where the government can be helpful. How about lack of exercise? What about stimulating physical-education programs that get kids off the couch? Diet has a big, big role to play. Parental choices. Helping parents become wiser.

The FCC limits ads in children's shows. Why shouldn't it limit food ads in those shows, as Rep. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) has suggested?

The commercial time limits are a legitimate use of the FCC's regulatory authority because it has nothing to do with content. It's a time limitation. To take that authority and extrapolate it into content— as in, you can only advertise food that somebody determines is healthful—that gets us into a qualitative determination by the government into what we can say and consumers can hear. There is no such thing as an unhealthy food. There are unhealthy diets.

What is the biggest government threat to commercial speech?

I am very troubled by the notion that advertising and marketing has been seen as the cause of so many societal ills, whether it is obesity, the high cost of prescription drugs, violence. There has been an automatic default to go immediately to marketing and advertising.

What is driving this issue? Politics?

Sen. Sam Brownback [R-Kan.] and Sen. Tom Harkin [D-Iowa] have taken on the childhood-obesity issue and have legitimate concerns about the public-health issue. To ask the advertisers and marketers to come into a larger group of stakeholders is perfectly legitimate. To zero in on marketing and advertising as the single most controllable factor for solving the problem misses the mark.

A lot of activity has developed around these issues. It is driven in part by public advocates and public policy, but it is also driven by the marketplace. I can't tell you how many *Dateline NBC* specials there have been on advertising to kids, junk food, the perils of food marketing. And yet in some very credible research and polls, parents rate marketing and advertising way down in the single digits as causes of childhood obesity.

On the viral-marketing front, the FTC has been asked to look into the practice. Should parents be concerned that kids are being sold products by marketers posing as fake online friends?

To the extent that those practices exist, they represent a very small portion of marketing and advertising practices. Social marketing is a reality. I would like to see disclosure for social marketers and buzz marketing. If my next-door neighbor who just got a Chevy Tahoe and says it is the best truck he's ever had and he is a paid endorser, I want to know that. But I don't think the viral marketing to kids is at such a serious level at this point. I would like to see perhaps an FTC guideline or rule that, like every other form of marketing, you have to be truthful, fair and accurate.

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