

Woke advertising doesn't work

Rainer Zitellmann(<https://reaction.life/author/rainer-zitellman/>) February 5, 2024(<https://reaction.life/2024/02/05/>)



Credit: Shawn Goldberg / Shutterstock



David Ogilvy (<https://www.ogilvy.com/ideas/ogilvy-75-quotations-david-ogilvy>), the famous British advertising guru (1911–1999), had a very clear idea of what good advertising should look like. Good advertising, he repeatedly emphasised, must do one thing above all else: sell. That sounds like a no-brainer, but Ogilvy had to increasingly fight against “creatives,” who saw advertising primarily as entertainment. Whether their ads actually resulted in more of a product being sold wasn't that important to them. They were not primarily interested in getting the consumer to embrace a product, they sought recognition from their colleagues in the advertising industry.

The primary goal of many advertisers, as Ogilvy criticised in his classic *Confessions of an Advertising Man* (https://onlineshop.oxfam.org.uk/confessions-of-an-advertising-man/product/HD_301663433), was to win awards for their creativity. They didn't care one bit whether their spots increased sales, provided they were entertaining and won awards. These creative entertainers had done immeasurable damage to the advertising industry, he lamented in speeches and interviews.

Eventually, Ogilvy banned his employees from entering award contests, which sparked a small mutiny within his company. Ogilvy countered by establishing his own award – for results. The David Ogilvy Award was given to the campaign that demonstrably did the most to boost a client's sales or reputation. Ultimately, however, he was unable to maintain the ban on taking part in award contests. Nevertheless, he did maintain his opinion that most campaigns that delivered real sales increases never won an award.

Many “creatives” feel called to greater things. Some even see themselves as unrecognised artistic geniuses. After all, Andy Warhol also started out in advertising.

Today, we have gone one step further. Advertising to increase sales and profits in an age when profit is considered immoral is a goal advertising people widely reject. Apparently, advertising is no longer about promoting a product's benefits in an attempt to increase sales. Entertainment is also not enough. No, advertising must **proclaim political messages and re-educate people** (https://reaction.life/the-job-of-corporations-is-to-sell-stuff-not-indulge-in-social-engineering/?_rt=M3wxfgR5bGFuIG11bHZhbmV5fDE3MDcxMzY4NDU&_rt_nonce=e324d0710c).

A few years ago, Gillette prompted a backlash with **its campaign against “toxic masculinity.”** (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYaY2Kb_PKI&ab_channel=GuardianNews) It is because of the traditional toxic image of masculinity, Gillette claimed, that children bully each other, men sexually harass women, and male employees do not let their female colleagues have a say. While the ads generated a lot of attention, they certainly didn't help sell more products.

Mars announced that its M&M anthropomorphic candies would be moving away from only one “body size” to create more respect for the real-world diversity of body shapes. In addition, less emphasis is being placed on the gender of the candies and more is being done to highlight their nuanced personalities. For example, one of the female M&Ms is now dressed in sneakers instead of high heels to reflect her confidence and empowerment as a strong female, so says the company.

The Calvin Klein brand, which previously ran adverts featuring attractive women and men with great figures, also joined **the progressive trend** (https://reaction.life/what-next-adidas-male-model-cavorting-in-a-female-swimsuit/?_rt=NHwxfGR5bGFuIG11bHZhbmV5fDE3MDcxMzY4NDU&_rt_nonce=b7077c8c4b) and instead ran a campaign with an overweight man and an overweight woman. Responses to the photoshoot were predominantly negative. A tweet reading: “Calvin Klein wants to go bankrupt” went viral and was viewed seven million times. The ad featured a trans man living in the **Netherlands** (https://reaction.life/stop-and-look-the-allegory-of-painting-by-vermeer/?_rt=NHwxfG5ldGhlcmxhbmRzfDE3MDcxMzY3ODU&_rt_nonce=2b95db85e1) alongside the plus-size model. Both are wearing the brand’s sports bras. The campaign sparked predominantly negative comments: “Which women should this appeal to?” was asked thousands of times on social media.

The American beer brand Bud Light also caused its own advertising disaster when it launched a politically correct advertising campaign with the trans star Dylan Mulvaney. Sales and the company’s share price plummeted. The company achieved its goal of generating a lot of attention, but attention in itself is of no value if you alienate the actual target group that your product is intended to appeal to.

It’s impossible to pinpoint exactly when all this started, but Benetton’s famous advertising definitely marked a turning point. The Italian fashion brand shocked consumers in the late 1980s with large billboards depicting child labour, a blood-soaked T-shirt from a war zone, and an electric chair. Each image appeared with the Italian clothing manufacturer’s logo. The advertising industry still celebrates this campaign and its creator, Oliviero Toscani. For the company, this campaign represented a financial fiasco from which it has not fully recovered to this day.

Advertising people do not measure the “success” of their campaigns on any increase in sales they might achieve, but rather on the approval of the politically conformist left-wing advertising industry. No industry is as uniform in thought as the creative industry, warns the well-known German brand expert Oliver Errichiello.

The only absurd thing is that the CEOs of large companies allow these so-called creatives to convince them that this is what advertising should look like today. No one says: “The emperor has no clothes.” Some opportunistically follow every fashion, others are afraid of a “shitstorm” and being targeted by left-wing “activists.” But such campaigns actually do much less damage to a company’s sales than a failed marketing strategy that forgets that the whole point is to sell a product.

Even the biggest scandals and media witch-hunts cannot harm a company if the product is good. Behind Toyota, VW is the world’s leading automobile brand. After the **VW “Dieselgate” scandal of 2015** (<https://www.theguardian.com/business/ng-interactive/2015/sep/23/volkswagen-emissions-scandal-explained-diesel-cars>), when the German car manufacturer used special software to cheat on emissions tests and deceive consumers, universal prophecies of doom claimed the company had destroyed its brand and was facing a “fight for survival.” But consumers don’t evaluate brands or products according to the same yardsticks as woke marketing strategists.

Today, VW is the most trusted car brand in **Germany** (<https://reaction.life/the-sick-man-of-europe-dont-write-germany-off/>). In 2016, the year after the emissions scandal, VW sold more cars than at any point in its existence. I predict that if VW ever destroys itself, it will probably be because it opportunistically conforms to the dominant environmentalist spirit of the times and offers no resistance to the EU’s ban on combustion engines from 2035.

Consumers’ decisions are based on completely different criteria than advertising people think. If you watch commercials that constantly mention “sustainable,” “save the planet,” or even “diverse” and “vegan,” you get the impression that the companies believe that the normal population is also thoroughly progressive. That’s not the case.

The tide has now changed and more people have become skeptical about the green ideology. But that won’t impress the missionaries in the advertising agencies. If I were to start an advertising agency today, I would do so with the promise that my advertising campaigns would be guaranteed not to be sustainable, woke or green, but would be aimed exclusively at consumers and their needs in order to sell more products for my clients. Might this just catch on?

*Rainer Zitelmann is the author of **In Defence of Capitalism** (<https://in-defence-of-capitalism.com/>).*

Write to us with your comments to be considered for publication at letters@reaction.life (<mailto:letters@reaction.life>)