

Controversial Television Advertising

Contributed by Neil

At the root of the problem over controversial television advertising is the concept of free speech. The question becomes "Do advertisers have the right to present their product on the commercial airwaves as they see fit?" Some of the same controversy exists about banned books or music or photographs. To some extent the controversy itself become a television marketing tool. The issue stirs up enough curiosity that the controversy attracts viewers and buyers of the product or service. From other than a moral sense, a withdrawn ad of Paris Hilton washing a car probably generated more free publicity than the ad itself cost to produce, and perhaps that was the point.

Controversial television advertising usually falls in one of several main categories.

Cruelty or discomfort to animals

The ongoing controversy over animal rights plays a large role in this storm. Not only is it inappropriate to show an animal being mistreated physically—such as being left outdoors at night by a forgetful owner; but an ad can be pulled, if there is a determination via public outcry that the animal might have been embarrassed or caused discomfort during the MAKING of the television commercial.

Use of alcohol, drugs or tobacco

Many years ago, now, cigarette advertising was removed from television channels. At the time of removal of the big tobacco companies revenue from the advertising coffers, a prediction was made that the loss of tobacco company advertising revenue would mean the end of television. Yet, television is still producing programming and showing advertisements. Other advertisers have simply filled the gap in advertising airtime minutes. Controversial television advertising is ongoing; it's just switched to other products. For example, while cigarette commercials have disappeared from television airwaves, advertising for the use of tobacco and smokeless tobacco remain.

Sex, violence and profanity

This is an area which is not as blatantly obvious in its controversial component, but some have found fault with the depiction of sexually suggestive scenes in various commercials. The proponents of not censoring advertisements point out those actions proscribed by the commercials rarely happen in real life, furthermore that viewers can see the same things as happens in the commercials go on in the life of the actors on screen and off.

Regardless of the type of controversial television advertising, the right of the society to have free speech must be balanced against public mores in determining what content goes beyond what recognized standards of community decency and morality and should therefore be removed.