



Marketing Morality

Is that an oxymoron? Is it possible to hold a marketer morally responsible?

Let's start at the beginning:

Marketing works.

Marketing (the use of time and money to create a story and spread it) works. Human beings don't make rational decisions, they make emotional ones, and we've seen time and again that those decisions are influenced by the time and money spent by marketers.

So, assuming you've got no argument with that (and if you're a marketer who doesn't believe marketing works, we need to have a longer discussion...) then we get to the next part of the argument:

Your marketing changes the way people act.

Not completely. Of course not. You can't get babies to start smoking cigars and you can't turn Oklahoma into a blue state. But on the margins, especially if your product or service has some sort of archetypal connection to your customers, you can change what people do.

Now it gets tricky. It gets tricky because you can no longer use the argument, "We're just giving intelligent adults the ability to make a free choice." No, actually you're not. You're marketing something so that your product will have an edge over the alternative.

Everyone knows about milk. The milk people don't need to spend \$60 million a year advertising milk in order to be sure we all get a free choice about whether to buy milk or not. No, they do it because it makes milk sales go up.

What a huge responsibility.

If you're a good marketer (or even worse, a great marketer), it means that you're responsible for what you sell. When you choose to sell it, more of it gets sold.

I have no standing to sit here and tell you that it's wrong for you to market cigarettes or SUVs, vodka or other habit-forming drugs. What we do need to realize, though, is that it's our choice and our responsibility. As marketers, we have the power to change things, and the way we use that power is our responsibility-- not the market's, not our boss's. Ours.

The morality of marketing is this: you need to be able to stand up and acknowledge that you're doing what you're doing. "By marketing this product in this beautiful packaging, I'm causing a landfill to get filled a lot faster, but that's okay with me." Marketers can't say, "Hey, the market spoke. It's not my decision."

The phone rang yesterday. The recording said, "We're sorry to disturb you. This call was meant for an answering machine." Then it hung up. Actually, the marketer wasn't sorry. The marketer was using his market power to violate the do not call registry and to interrupt my day (on my machine or otherwise) so he could selfishly try to sell me something. While it may or may not be legal to do this, it's irrelevant. What's relevant is that the marketer decided that the ends justified the means, and he needs to acknowledge that on his way to work today.

The same way the marketer at Malboro needs to acknowledge that by being a good marketer, she's putting her kids through college at the same time she's killing thousands of people. It's a choice--her choice.

We're responsible for what we sell and how we sell it. We're responsible for the effects (and the side effects) of our actions.

It is our decision. Whatever the decision is, you need to own it. If you can't look that decision in the mirror, market something else.