Marketing: malevolent and manipulative?
By Michelle Swart

Lesson: Everybody is accountable for their own actions

The latest Journal of Marketing Power Breakfast debate held on 11 September at the Michelangelo Hotel in Sandton was based on the premise that if consumers are blameless, it must be the clever marketers’ fault, with their deep insights into human behaviour, and their manipulative ways.

The panel included Gail Schimmel, an advertising regulation consultant from Clear Copy; Rodger Sinclair, managing director of Brandmetrics and professor emeritus at the University of Witwatersrand; Francis Blitz, chairman of Publicis; Adrian Botha, director, Industry Association for Responsible Alcohol Use; and Francois van der Merwe, CEO of the Tobacco Institute of South Africa.

The breakfast kicked off with host Jeremy Maggs commenting – with his usual flair – that marketers are bottom-feeding scum who use behaviour tactics to create an absolute need among consumers for a product that they could very well have lived without. It goes without saying that the panel disagreed wholeheartedly.

Blitz pointed out that advertising is often used as an easy scapegoat and, is not evil, but rather provides the consumer with choice. “There are evil people in every industry,” he says, “but that does not make the industry evil.”

Van der Merwe said that many people thought that marketers ambushed consumers in clever ways to get them to buy. “And while tobacco may be a controversial product that is severely restricted in terms of the way in which it can market itself, there has been a negligible decline in consumption since restrictions were imposed upon its advertising and marketing initiatives.”

He said where previously 28% to 30% of South Africans were smokers, about 25% were now. On a world-wide scale, 24% - 25% of all adults were smokers – a figure that had not been altered by the regulation of advertising and marketing of tobacco products.

Botha said that when consumers were in the market for a product, they would pay attention to relevant advertising. This same advertising would otherwise be ignored. He said 50% of alcohol consumed throughout the world was not commercial and therefore not advertised. However, marketers should be careful in how they advertised certain products, especially those like alcohol, which could be harmful.

Botha cited an example of the World Health Organisation statistics on alcohol trends. He said that consumption had increased from 1961 to 1982, but had been flat ever since 1984. This demonstrated that it was only a perception that there was a link between advertising and product growth. For example, in the 1920s alcohol was banned and therefore not advertised, but it became the biggest thing ever when its creation and consumption went underground.

Asked if current regulation is too stiff, Schimmel said scam advertising was evil, and that regulation did help, but it did not solve the problem. She used an example of weight loss products that she believed prey on susceptible people. It was here that regulation failed as it was centred on marketing and not consumer behaviour. As much as she believed that freedom of speech was important, more regulation in the industry would be dangerous. She suggested that regulations could be better targeted to address the heart of the problem instead of the symptoms.

Sinclair noted that in the days before regulations were so stringent, some great advertising was produced. Today the industry was heavily governed by certain regulations that placed a severe constraint on how advertisers could deliver their message. It was, however, argued that this should stimulate creativity and not stifle it, as marketers now had to find alternative ways of reaching their audiences within the bounds of the regulations.

The panel agreed that self-regulation was more important than imposed regulation. Concerns about the cost of compliance with regulations becoming too high were also raised by the panel.

Van der Merwe said that marketers of products whose advertising was severely restricted had to go to great lengths and expense to get their product information to consumers. Tobacco companies were an example. “But,” he said, “when the cost of compliance becomes too high, unscrupulous dealers will punt cheaper products that are not highly regulated, and that is not a good thing.”

Maggs asked if we underestimated the power of advertising and overestimated the consumer. Blitz pointed out that advertising increases awareness, but it cannot manipulate or persuade. Sinclair believes it’s all about personal experience. Sure, an advert may tempt you to try a certain product, but once you have, it’s up to you whether to accept the product.

At the end of the day, marketing, in any one of its many forms, is all about getting information about a particular brand to the right target audience.

The question remains, if it is legal to sell a product, why are there restrictions placed on marketing and promoting that product?

The marketing industry is not an evil one. Everybody is accountable for their own actions, and while marketing may encourage the use of certain products – whether they are bad for the consumer or not -- that is a choice for the consumer to make, and it’s one that has never been taken away from them.
The Guests

Bridget van Holdt & Paul Middleton

Gail Shimmel & Roger Sinclair

Anthony Naidoo, Nina Wellsted, Rebecca Phiyega & Grace Nhlapo

Jeremy Maggs, facilitator and Editor of JOM

Graeme Futter & Nico Retief

Francois van der Merwe and Francis Blitz