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Drawing The Line Between Targeting and Patronizing: How “Vulnerable” Are the Vulnerable?

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Abstract

Purpose

This article aims to address the nature of vulnerability and the basis for protecting certain audiences from targeted goods and services. It aims to evaluate the need for protection as well as marketers' defense that protection merely patronizes audiences.

Design/methodology/approach

This article cites published research that offers guidelines for determining vulnerability in the marketplace and examines conclusions from a case study that argue for holding companies to have standards of both individual and collective responsibility.

Findings

Categories of vulnerability are offered, and distinctions are drawn between the vulnerable and the disadvantaged to provide a rationale for deciding when some form of protection is needed. Arguments are given for addressing both individual and collective responsibility in order to determine whether charges of misplaced marketing are justified.

Practical implications

Marketers can gain better knowledge of targeting potentially vulnerable audiences and can better predict the likelihood of public outcry.

Originality/value

Questioning the issues helps key players including marketers, consumers, and members of regulatory bodies balance conflicting needs within society.

Keywords

Target markets, Advertising, Responsibilities

There is nothing inherently wrong with target marketing. In fact, it offers greater efficiencies to marketers, who can concentrate on their best prospects, and greater satisfaction to consumers, who can avoid being targeted for unwanted products. However, the concept of target marketing takes on an almost sinister connotation when two other factors are part of the mix: marketing to a group perceived as “vulnerable” and promoting products that are potentially harmful (Davidson, 2003).

When messages are perceived as beneficial (e.g. announcements that discourage young teens from smoking), there is no public outcry. However, when vulnerable groups are targeted for “sin” products such as alcohol, tobacco, casino gambling, pornography, and firearms, Davidson (2003) cautions marketers to expect strong public outcry from the groups themselves and their advocates. Criticism can also come from non-users of sin products, whose motivation is simply to prevent others from using them (Rotfeld, 2001). Despite the fierce attention paid to these products, harsh criticisms are also leveled at the marketers of “non-sin” products when weak consumer segments appear to be exploited in favor of the bottom line. Such is the case with “predatory lending practices that exploit the poor and economically naïve”, “life insurance selling that needlessly ... targets the elderly”, and “gross exploitation of low wage workers in Third-World countries to yield pricing advantages ...” (Laczniak, 1999, p. 125).

In their defense, manufacturers and service providers argue that protecting vulnerable groups from access to targeted goods patronizes them. They claim it sends the message that these groups lack the ability to think for themselves – that the poor are unable to resist casino advertising, that African-Americans are unduly influenced by malt liquor advertisements, etc. While many find truth in the argument that such protection is patronizing, Davidson (1995, p. 10) claims that marketers who use that defense will usually lose. Right or wrong, marketers have left themselves open to charges of unethical practices:

The public is only too willing to believe that marketers once again are attempting to exploit some disadvantaged group.

These examples demonstrate the need for answers to certain questions. What makes a group vulnerable to targeting? Is the targeting of certain groups inappropriate or misplaced? Is the attempt to protect vulnerable groups misguided? Though the questions are complex, Brenkert (1998a) offers some insights. First, he points out that marketers have certain advantages over consumers through their expertise on targeting, understanding of the wants and needs of consumers, resources for the promotion of products, and greater knowledge of the product in general. In turn, ordinary consumers in the marketplace have certain competencies that allow them to navigate the system because they know how to shop comparatively, are competent in evaluating quality and price, know their basic legal rights, and have the resources to enter into market transactions. When a marketer confronts an ordinary consumer for any individual campaign, no special protection is necessary; however, when a marketer confronts a person who lacks these competencies, the potential for harm exists. As such, special protection for vulnerable groups has taken different forms, as in the case when insurance companies are prevented from approaching those coping with grief.

Brenkert (1998a) further maintains that the vulnerable are not simply “disadvantaged” people who suffer inequalities in the marketplace relative to other consumers (e.g. the poor, immigrants, the elderly, children, racial and ethnic minorities, and the physically handicapped). Vulnerability is based on several types of limitations: physical, cognitive, motivational and social. Those with physical vulnerability include people with allergies or special sensitivity to substances, whereas groups with cognitive vulnerability include young children, the elderly, and the uneducated. Motivational vulnerability is often attributed to the grieving or the gravely ill, whereas social vulnerability is characteristic of the poor or new mothers in developing countries.

However, vulnerable people are usually unaware of their limitations and are significantly less able to protect their interests. They are potentially harmed in the marketing process due to their manner of obtaining goods and services, regardless of how they compete against others; e.g. women shopping for cars are at a disadvantage to men but are not included in the common definition of vulnerability. When marketers try to exploit the characteristics of the vulnerable in order to sell goods, they are treated unfairly whether or not actual harm occurs. Thus, “it is the combination of their special characteristics and the means or techniques which marketers use that render them specially vulnerable” (Brenkert, 1998a, p. 15).

In practice, few people disagree that these examples constitute vulnerability. The more common problems arise when claiming vulnerability for the disadvantaged groups. In order to illustrate how these various concepts play out, Brenkert (1998b) examined Heileman Brewing Company's failed attempt to target inner-city blacks with a malt liquor product. Accordingly, the marketing of PowerMaster drew three objections, which ultimately lead Heileman to withdraw the product:

1. that the advertisements drew on themes related to power, which offered a cruel substitute for a lack of power in the lives of inner-city blacks;
2. that the company lacked moral sensitivity by promoting a potentially harmful product to a group with a disproportionate rate of cirrhosis of the liver; and
3. that the company exploited a vulnerable group, susceptible to messages of power, self-assertion, and sexual success.

After weighing the evidence, Brenkert concluded that the objections lacked merit. The product was marketed using the same strategies as competing brands without boycotts or public outcry. Inner-city blacks are adults who should be allowed to make their own choices – even harmful ones – so long as they are not deceived or coerced when making those choices, and they do not harm others. Without charges of deception or coercion, “it is an unacceptable form of moral paternalism to deny them what they might otherwise wish to choose” (Brenkert, 1998b, p. 5). Finally, Brenkert discarded the claim of vulnerability because no evidence was presented

that inner-city blacks are cognitively unable to process information, motivationally unable to resist ordinary temptations, or socially unable to resist various enticements.

When logically examining individual marketing campaigns, Heileman's marketing strategy should not automatically be labeled misguided or misplaced. However, Brenkert (1998b) notes that the picture is incomplete without looking at the collective whole in which a company operates. It was not so much PowerMaster's individual presence in the market that was an issue, but its collective presence as one of many alcohol products targeted to a group of heavy users who suffer disproportionately from alcohol-related illnesses. Metaphorically, it was the straw that broke the camel's back. Instead of simply holding single companies to a standard of individual responsibility, Brenkert argues that we should also hold them to a "collective responsibility". Marketers should not merely ask whether their marketing is in line with that of competitors, but they should also consider the sum total of the marketing efforts directed at a single group for a given product category. Such a concept is at odds within an individualistic society that is unaccustomed to thinking collectively, and certainly its implementation would require effort, but without some consideration of collective responsibility, we may fail to recognize a vital component of the problem. In cases where the source of the harm is collective, it is the sum total of marketing messages for a class of products to a specific group that is misplaced.

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