

Washing Dirty Laundry

Topic: Advertising (Unethical Tactics)

Characters: Bruce Seth, project manager at a consumer products company
Priscilla Wheeling, Bruce's boss

Bruce Seth, a project manager at a consumer products company, was wondering how he should proceed with his recommendation for the Endirt commercials. Endirt had been doing well in the market, but not a week went by without a customer (or former customer) writing to complain about the commercial.

There were variations of the commercial, but the central theme was “Dirt on your shirt.” It typically featured a woman saying, “Dirt on your shirt! Dirt on your shirt!” in a taunting voice to a man whose shirt was soiled. The man looked at another lady (presumably his wife), who was very embarrassed at the entire situation. Later shots showed her washing the shirt after rubbing Endirt into it, and the other woman (or women) saying, “No more dirt on your shirt!” The complaining letters, almost exclusively from women, expressed objections to the commercial because it was demeaning to women and otherwise offensive as well. On the one hand, the brand was doing well; it was the brand leader in a growing market, though a much larger competing company was quite capable of beating Endirt with its brand. On the other hand, were the rights of the women being infringed? All the letters seemed to imply that. Bruce was a believer in the profit motive, but not at the cost of condoning unethical behavior. He had been asked to make a recommendation for the commercial for the next TV season. After reviewing the sales data and reading the letters of complaint, Bruce was contemplating his next move.

Marketing research managers and project managers worked along with brand managers on specific brand research issues. Bruce reported to Priscilla Wheeling, a marketing research manager, and would provide recommendations to her and to the brand manager responsible for Endirt. Priscilla was a capable, promising executive with excellent graduate degrees. She was supporting her husband through his Ph.D. in history. She did not like the Endirt commercial and made no secret of it. She proclaimed that she would never buy the brand because the message was offensive and because of the role of the woman in the commercial. Bruce was pursuing a graduate degree while working and putting his wife through college; he certainly needed the job and the income. He was a recent recruit still in his probationary period.

Bruce had reviewed all the letters, practically all of which were from women and strongly negative. Many of them said, as Priscilla did, that they would not buy the brand because of the offensive commercial and because it was demeaning to women. Secondary data showed that the primary decision makers and purchasers of the product were women. Part of the reason for Endirt's success was believed to be the advertising message, which not only had a high level of recall but a high level of association with the brand. Bruce wondered if, in spite of its apparent success, it was ethical to continue with the advertising message if it infringed on the rights of women, the major buyers of the brand.

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