

Dove: Changing the Face of Beauty?

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The world is plastered with images of flawless men, women, and children who all appear to have hit the “genetic jackpot”. They appear on billboards, in magazines, and on television. Everyday, people are bombarded with persuasions to adhere to an unrealistic ‘global standard of beauty’ – to be “5’11”, eight stone, with long hair, ideally blond, with a perfectly symmetrical face, flawless complexion and under the age of 30”(Johnson 4). In 2004, Dove took note of these unrealistic criteria set forth by the media, and responded by launching the DOVE Campaign for Real Beauty. The message of the campaign, to “see beauty in imperfections” and not to “worship stereotypes,” has both raised the morale of women worldwide and greatly increased Dove sales revenue (Dove). However, Dove’s efforts have not yet succeeded in revolutionizing the beauty industry – especially within their parent company. The advertising campaigns of Lynx/Axe, also owned by Unilever Corporation, are exactly the kind the Dove fights against in that they widely promote the conventional ‘global standard of beauty’. Although the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty is successful and meaningful in the presentation of their argument for the acceptance of unconventional beauty, that triumph is negated by the hypocrisy of Lynx/Axe’s brand marketing.

The Campaign for Real Beauty

Unilever originally launched Dove as a soap brand in 1951. By 2001, the company had “fundamentally changed,” including many other beauty items in their sales

line up (Johnson 1). With that change came a need for a new advertising campaign. Dove assembled a brand team, composed mostly of women, to figure out how to set their brand apart from the heavily populated personal care market. The team examined their desires for a beauty brand and almost immediately,

Each member...had the intuitive sense that the way other beauty brands behaved wasn't quite right (in the moral sense, not the commercial sense). So, what was wrong? It was the type of beauty promoted by these brands – it was all about a physical idea that most of us fall short of. This made the members of the global team feel miserable about themselves. (Johnson 1)

The team got to work and ultimately turned their dismay about the beauty market into the Campaign for Real Beauty. Advertisements launched around the world asking if the shown women (none of whom fit the 'global standard') were "wrinkled or wonderful", "oversized or outstanding" and "gray or gorgeous" (Dove).

Possibly the most successful component of the Campaign for Real Beauty is the short film, "Evolution". Since its launch in fall 2006, millions of people have seen the transformation that occurs and considered the question of 'Real Beauty'. The first few seconds of "Evolution" show a good-looking, ordinary pale woman with flat hair and uneven eyebrows sitting in front of a black background. During the next forty-five seconds of the video, the plain looking woman is turned, "mostly by computer alternation, into a stunning billboard pin-up"(Barrett 27). By the current "global standard of beauty", the woman looks fantastic. "Evolution" ends powerfully with two simple sentences against a black background: "No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted. Every girl deserves to feel beautiful just the way she is." Those phrases together serve as the thesis of the video, prompting people to question their views on beauty and advertising.

In 2007 Dove followed up “Evolution” with another short film, “Onslaught”. The film begins with a long shot of a cute, small, red-haired girl walking to school with an innocent smile on her face. It then launches into a forty-five second rapid-fire of media images of women – all of who conform to ‘global beauty standards’. The images show yo-yo diets, makeup ads, products to enhance/diminish body parts, and other things young girls do not need to be exposed to. Similar to “Evolution,” “Onslaught also ends with a striking thesis: “Talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does”.

Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty has been immensely successful, both financially and morally. Though Unilever spent 8 million Euros more on Dove’s brand marketing than any of their other companies, according to Unilever’s 2008 Fact Sheet, Dove is one of their “billion € brands”, leading the company in sales (Brownsell, Unilever 1). The company has also been successful in raising self-esteem around the world. The Campaign, originally a creative marketing idea based on a morale issue, has become a full attack on ‘global beauty standards’. Dove sponsors workshops, conferences, events and movies around the country, all of which focus on appreciation of inner beauty. The Dove website features many articles about self-esteem, the fat language, “sizism”, and other issues affecting the beauty industry. There are statistics about teenage self-esteem problems, tips on talking to loved ones, and instructions on “how to change a life.” There is even a section of the website designed for girls only – the “self-esteem zone.” A quick look through the Dove website shows the company’s dedication to their cause (Dove). While Dove may be doing well on paper, there is some question as to whether it is doing well morally.

A Campaign of Different Sorts

Another one of Unilever's "billion € brands" is Lynx/Axe, a men's body care brand (Unilever 1). For a target market mostly separate from Dove's, Lynx/Axe takes a strikingly different approach in their brand marketing. One popular commercial depicts hundreds of bikini-clad women running on a beach towards the man ("The Axe Effect"). Another, dubbed "Man Mash", has sexily dressed women scrubbing a man carwash-style ("Man Wash"). While Lynx/Axe advertisements differ in setting, they all typically involve the same scenario: multiple tan, fit, busty women fawning over a man using Lynx/Axe products.

Lynx/Axe's advertising style noticeably pushes "the very sort of image that Dove decries"(Wells B01). The campaigns "feature women that frankly could have come straight from those used in "Onslaught": pouting, curvaceous, and instantly turned on by the merest whiff of shower gel"(Marquis 10). This sends an extremely different message than Dove's Real Beauty Campaign. Upon examination, the hypocrisy of Unilever is remarkable – one brand advocates need for 'Real Beauty' and condemns the world's current beauty standard, while another frequently presents and encourages unrealistic beauty ideals. That hypocrisy has not gone unnoticed.

"Ax the Axe"

Activist groups such as Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood (CCFC) also noticed the hypocrisy in Unilever's marketing. The CCFC sent over 2500 letters to Unilever's CEO, stating "If [he is] serious about changing the toxic media environment that undermines girls' healthy development," he can start by axing the Axe marketing. Other people, such as Rye Clifton, an advertiser himself, have also taken note of Unilever's brand hypocrisy. He did some creative editing to "Onslaught", replacing images in the beauty "rapid-fire" section with images

from Lynx/Axe advertisements (Wells B01). The tagline at the end reads “Talk to your daughter before Unilever does”(“A Message From Unilever”). Clifton’s main goal in creating his video, creatively titled “A Message from Unilever”, was to “add to the conversation already happening online”(Wells B01). However, Unilever’s response to the public’s demand for less hypocritical ads is disappointing.

Unilever publicly denies any problem with their brand marketing. They claim that the Lynx/Axe advertisements only “poke fun” at cultural stereotypes, and that “people view it exactly as such”(Wells B01). Simon Clift, head of marketing at Unilever says that “The advertisements should be taken with a pinch of salt: ‘it’s a spoof on the marketing game. The joke is on the boy”(Mortished 43). The joke may be on the boy, but that doesn’t negate the appearance of the unrealistic, stereotypically beautiful women – “The fact that it’s funny doesn’t diminish its power,” says Susan Linn, head of CCFC (Mortished 43). The ads still encourage unattainable, unrealistic standards of beauty, which millions of people see and attempt to achieve daily.

In stating that the Lynx/Axe advertisements are purely jokes, Unilever detracts from the validity of its other advertising campaigns. The viewer is supposed to intuitively know that the Lynx/Axe ads are jokes, but that knowledge often isn’t present. Once alerted to the fact that Lynx/Axe is joking in their ads, one wonders if Unilever views its other advertisements as jokes, which detracts from the power of the Campaign for Real Beauty.

Unilever skirts around the issue by emptyily stating that the Campaign for Real Beauty isn’t “anti-beauty industry, but is an attempt to tackle the problem of low self-esteem among girls and young women”(Barrett 27). Statements such as those miss the main point – in the Real

Beauty campaign, Dove isn't trying to *eliminate* beauty, it is trying to broaden the definition of it. The company's mission statement advocates for every woman to feel beautiful, which is by no means an anti-beauty message. Unilever is correct in their assertion of the Campaign raising self-esteem: "The Campaign for Real Beauty is currently focused on how girls today are bombarded with unrealistic, unattainable messages and images of beauty that impacts their self-esteem". Dove is worried about the self-esteem issues the media (i.e. Lynx/Axe) provokes, which Unilever fails to recognize in any of its public statements.

The fact that the Unilever puts out advertisements encouraging the very actions it is fighting is hypocritical. It doesn't matter if the advertisements are meant as jokes, or are 'anti-beauty'. It matters that one company sends two extremely different messages. The Campaign for Real Beauty appears to be revolutionary and monumental, yet when the company presenting it doesn't adhere to its recommendations, it quickly becomes only a creative way to sell products. The hypocrisy makes one reexamine Dove's claims and mission statements, and wonder if it is "just very smart piece of brand positioning"(Marquis 11).

What Should be Done?

The inability of Unilever to be consistent with its own ideas is disheartening and deceptive. Although the hypocrisy is yet to manifest as a real problem for Unilever, there is a definite potential for it to become a setback. To prevent this, Unilever has a few options. They could do as the CCFC suggests, and "Ax the Axe"(Wells B02). This would mean Unilever giving up one of their most successful brands. Another option would be to shift the focus of the Campaign for Real Beauty or get rid of it entirely. This would also be harmful to Unilever, as the Campaign caused a dramatic sales increase. It would also send a negative message to the world –

that an acceptance of real beauty isn't feasible, or at least isn't economical. Journalist James Wells suggests that Unilever does as it has before, and "pretend that Dove exists in isolation"(Wells B02). Although this is the most probable option, it isn't the most morally correct one.

If Unilever really wants to make the difference it campaigns for with Dove, it should align all of its brand's goals and messages with the Campaign's. None of their companies should feature advertisements with unrealistic, retouched women (or men). They should push for natural, real beauty, and encourage other companies to do the same. While this option is what should happen, it doesn't make much sense from a marketing perspective. Unilever's brands do what they do because in the end, that's what will sell them the most products – the ultimate goal of the company. If pushing for 'Real Beauty' in one of its brands is what works, that is what Unilever will do. At least, that is what it will do until it interferes with another brand.

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