


# #FEMVERTISING: HOW TO CREATE ADS THAT DON'T STEREO-TYPE WOMEN

EDWARD SSENTUMBWE



**A car advertisement:** Slim, beautiful woman sits seductively on the bonnet of a sleek car, dressed in an above-the-knee skirt. A man walks in, slides his arm through her, and together they enter the car.

**A washing detergent advertisement:** Woman is busy at home, washing and hanging clothes out to dry on the wire. Her husband returns home from work with the children, and she rushes to the kitchen to make dinner for the family, finishing by washing the dishes with the sparkly washing detergent.

For years, advertising has portrayed women in roles that have created and grounded stereotypes about them – that they are sex objects, supposed to be slim and beautiful. The advertisements have portrayed scantily-clad females in alluring poses, most often advertising products used and loved by men.

Advertising has also portrayed women as homemakers, whose role is to take care of their husbands, children and homes, as opposed to getting a job and contributing directly to the family's economic welfare. For the few advertisements that have shown women at work, the women have generally been employees not bosses, followers rather than leaders.

This kind of portrayal has been criticized as stereotypical and exploitative. The exploitation of women in mass media is the use or portrayal of women in those media (such as television, film and advertising) to increase the appeal of media or a product to the detriment of, or without regard to, the interests of the women portrayed, or women in general. Feminists and other advocates of women's rights have criticized such exploitation.

Critics of the way women are portrayed

in advertising assert that this kind of (negative) portrayal has resulted, among others, into women becoming more and more obsessed with how their bodies look. The need to have the 'perfect body' is a result of various messages that society, both directly and indirectly, sends.

Additionally, the sexual objectification of women in advertisements has a detrimental effect on girls and young women. Research shows that when girls have extended exposure to content in which female super heroes are dressed in over-sexualized costumes, they become more aware of their own body competence. Seeing this sexual exploitation of women on TV and having the message that you have to be perfect physically has a very negative impact on how these girls see and feel about themselves.

At the end of the day, such adverts

contribute to unrealistic expectations by men of how women should look or behave, as well as an increase in the likelihood and acceptance of sexual violence.

During the 1990s, dramatic changes started occurring in the depiction of women in advertising. Advertisers were coming under severe scrutiny from feminist groups, women's organizations and students of mass communication. As the debate over women's images in advertising intensified, the US National Organization for Women, founded in 1966, sought to eliminate gender-based stereotypes in the mass media.

Women Against Pornography, a U.S. lobbying group, were concerned about the sexual images of women portrayed in advertising and the influence of such images on sexual violence against women. The group founded an annual awards program to applaud and censure ads on the basis of presence or absence of sexist overtones.

By the turn of the 21st century, many key positions in advertising were occupied by women, enabling them to exert a major influence on ad campaigns. Some critics of the portrayal of women in advertising hoped this situation would give rise to more positive images of women. Another factor that contributed to the change in the portrayal of women was the fact that women make a substantial amount of all purchases, and so it makes business sense if they are happy with how advertisers are portraying them.

The change in the portrayal of women, from negative to more positive, has led to the rise of what is being referred to as "femvertising" – a notion that has become extremely important in the world of advertising. "Femvertising" refers to the making of advertisements that aim to celebrate and empower women and girls, as opposed to those that objectify and sexualise them. It is advertising that

employs pro-female talent, messages and imagery to empower women and girls.

The fact is that the reality has also changed – more women are getting educated, getting employed and are therefore independent and can make major decisions. Women also know that it is not only their looks or body shapes that can enable them to advance in life. Advertising needs to reflect that reality. Advertising also reflects ideals in our society. Because advertising agencies are realizing the effects advertising has on men and women, companies are making greater efforts in representing women positively to change society's ideals.

Advertisers are now shifting towards a different portrayal of women – the independent woman who, although married, drives her own car, has a fulfilling job and participates in or makes major purchasing decisions. Women are being shown in distinctly non-traditional roles - fixing cars, etc. Women are no longer being featured in aprons and scarves covering their hair, but shown as confident, young women in tailored pantsuits pursuing traditionally male-oriented activities.

The advertisements being made these days are those that build awareness-generating, stereotype-busting messaging and images into ads that target women and girls.

A big theme for many of the femvertising spots has been encouraging young women and girls to be more confident, to grab opportunities, and not to worry about preconceptions. They are advertisements that aim to improve young girls and women's self-esteem. Femvertising is positively impacting the perception of women and breaking down negative stereotypes. They are effectively captivating audiences. The brands implementing these types of campaigns are favorable among different

consumer groups and are being not only noticed, but remembered.

Dove is an excellent example of the shift advertising needs in order to transform the way women are conveyed in advertising. Not only is the campaign highly successful, but it uses advertising to help society, teaching women that beauty extends to more than just thin, air-brushed quality. This iconic campaign has increased sales from \$2.5 billion to \$4 billion since it originally launched, but more importantly, it has been teaching women to love themselves.

In 2010, Nike launched their Make Yourself Campaign, focusing solely on women. The main objective of the campaign was to motivate women to be the best they can be and craft a better version of themselves. The campaign celebrated women and their active lifestyle, promoting fitness and healthy as beautiful, including the sweat and pain. The campaign composed of several female athletes, such as US Field and Track Olympian Allyson Felix and Chinese Tennis player Li Na, to highlight the idea of becoming the best version of yourself.

Marketing campaigns that empower women and girls rather than perpetuating stereotypes are proving to be hits with consumers and highly effective at generating sales, according to the US Advertising Week panel of industry leaders behind some of the past year's top female-focused campaigns. It is important for all advertisers to know that femvertising ads are empowering women — and making money for brands.

**The writer is a volunteer at ACFODE.**