



Is Feminine Perfection Still Good for Sales?

Contrary to popular opinion, those bikini-clad young models draped over the show-room Ferrari might be doing your sales more harm than good these days.

Marketing executives have long relied on the idealised female image, usually in the form of a celebrity or model embracing a product or draping themselves across it, in the belief that the placement of these images positively influences purchase decisions.

That may have worked when it was men making most of the purchasing decisions, but today female customers are a force to be reckoned with, and they are not amused. New research by INSEAD reveals a fine line between creating a positive, aspirational image - which makes people open their wallets - and a threatening one that turns away a potential purchaser.

In **Defensive reactions to slim female images in advertising: The moderating role of exposure**, **Amitava Chattopadhyay**, INSEAD Professor of Marketing and the INSEAD Chaired Professor of Marketing and Innovation, examined the blatant versus the subtle positioning of models in advertising which showed two very different results.

Across three studies, he showed that the blatant positioning of the model elicited a negative association with the product, whereas the subtle placement evoked a more positive perception. Consistent throughout, however, was that the very presence of the model led to a loss of self-

confidence as the consumer (female) looked at the advertisement. The difference between being turned away and making a purchase depended on how consciously aware they were of the model's ideal features and beauty compared to their own self-image.

Female participants in the studies were shown various advertisements and asked to judge the attractiveness of models, the suitability of the product in the photographs, while also measuring their resulting self-image evaluations afterwards. Those asked to pay closer attention to the model's features felt more threatened.

Customer vs the Model

"Essentially when you see somebody who is very attractive, there is a natural comparison with yourself, that's the human nature, it's a default option when you say 'how do I compare with this beautiful person?' Given that this person has this idealised face and figure, most people don't match up so you feel bad about yourself," said Chattopadhyay.

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As Chattopadhyay’s research finds, the placement can mean everything. When the model is in a very obvious, blatant position (left), the recipient is consciously aware of the model’s threatening presence and the intrusion on their self-perception. Their reaction is to attack the source of that threat.

“They start thinking about what the advertiser is trying to do and that then leads them to have a negative reaction towards the advertised product because it’s seen as manipulative. They cope with that negative feeling that they derive from not being as perfect by denigrating the source of that negative feeling,” he added.

So does this spell the end of the idealised female model in advertising? Not just yet.

As Chattopadhyay goes on to note, although a more subtle placement of the model still evokes a feeling of lower self-worth, consumers of more subtle advertisements react more positively to the advertiser’s advance.

”When it’s subtle, as in this example (right) which had the product and the model separated on two sides of an open magazine page, they don’t necessarily connect the discomfort that this picture is leading to with the model. If the product that’s being sold is related to it, as in a beauty product, then you kind of see it as a solution to this

discomfort: ‘I’m not feeling so beautiful so therefore if I use this perhaps it’ll solve my problem’ and so then the behaviour becomes much more compliant and in line with what the advertiser’s original intention was,” he said.

Female Purchasing Power on the Rise

As more wealth continues to be generated and spent by the world’s increasingly professional and mobile female consumer market, especially in Asia, these findings have important implications for marketing to this segment. According to the Boston Consulting Group, female earnings in China are projected to grow from US\$1.3 trillion in 2010 to US\$4 trillion in 2020. Women in India will be bringing in close to US\$1 trillion by the same year. Understanding what makes or breaks a purchase in this market will mean the difference between success and failure.

“If the consumer sees what you’re trying to do then they’re going to react in a way that is not consistent with the goals of the advertiser, so keep that in mind and perhaps when you pre-test the advertising before putting it in media, you would check to see whether people are actually noticing the connection or is the connection sufficiently subtle that people don’t naturally think ‘I’m being manipulated.’”

Chattopadhyay’s study also has implications for marketers in other sectors, not just female beauty products.

Advertisers Take Note

“For example, I say ‘Have this medication because it’s going to improve your mental prowess’ targeting it at say elderly consumers who might be suffering memory deficits. Would we get similar results? Our intuition is that the results would be similar because at the end of the day, the underlying mechanism is the same because my self-image is threatened. When my self-image is threatened, I feel bad and I want to repair it,” he said.

“Then there are two parts to repair, either I can repair it by improving myself which would be the compliant route and I do what the advertiser wanted me to, go buy the pills and improve my memory...hopefully. On the other side I would say, well, I really don’t need it because they’re just trying to sell and this is not in my best interest.”

“When consumers change, your approaches have to change so I would think that given what we’ve found, it would suggest that advertisers would have to be far more cautious than they once thought,” Chattopadhyay said.

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