The Rough Guide to Responsible Desire

“Business has become the most powerful institution on the planet. The dominant institution in any society needs to take responsibility for the whole.”

William Willis Harmon, Co-Founder of the World Business Academy

Ethics and the idea of ethical advertising have recently become an extremely hot topic at HHCL (UK Advertising agency). The whole issue has captured peoples’ attention both for personal (doing some good for our consciences) and professional reasons (doing some good for our bottom line as well as our Clients’). However, there are a wide variety of interpretations of what this means and how committed individual people are to the idea.

The discussion has reached such a level that it is now important that everybody understands what this ethical thing is and feels comfortable talking about it and introducing it to their day to day work.

This rough guide has been put together to help you explore a more ethical approach to advertising by providing a better explanation of the subject and greater guidance and help.

While reading this it may help to remember that anything HHCL has ever done, from establishing modern media planning to romping, has always been about creating better work and more successful clients. The ethical debate is no different.

What the hell does ethical mean?

One of the key issues here is that ethical is such a subjective term – what is ethical to one person may not be to another. Moreover the concept of what is ethical is not fixed in stone – for example it used to be thought ethical to advertise cigarettes but not condoms however, these days the position has completely reversed.

The reality is that ethical is not an absolute term and the word ethics, strictly speaking, merely means the moral code by which someone decides right from wrong and is therefore highly personal.

That said, the term ethical has acquired a very specific meaning over the recent past. When we use the word ethical we mean an activity that doesn’t do harm. For example the term ethical investment fund implies that money will not be invested in companies that cause harm to people, animals or the environment.

In a sense then ethics really boils down to respect. Ethical people, ethical companies and ethical activities show respect for the world around them and are aware of the consequences of their actions upon others. Contrast the respective reputations of both Esso and BP both of which are engaged in the same industry. Esso is currently subject to a global consumer boycott because its denial of climate change is seen to show enormous disrespect to the environment and the people of earth. BP on the other hand is seen as more ethical because they show increasing respect for the world beyond the boardroom table and the oiling.

What should we respect?

Clearly the concept of ethics becomes a little unmanageable if you are watching out for ‘all things bright and beautiful’. Fortunately there is now a really easy way of understanding what you need to respect in order to be more ethical.

This is the idea of the triple bottom line.

Traditionally the business world has operated with one bottom line – the profitability and financial sustainability
of the company. However, the concept of a triple bottom line suggests that this is an oversimplification since the sustainability of a business depends on more than profitability alone.

The three components for a company’s triple bottom line are:

- Profitability – respect for a business’ effect on the economy
- Social responsibility – respect for a business’ effect on society
- Environmental responsibility – respect for a business’ effect on the environment

In other words, for a business to be sustainable it needs to generate a profit, not harm society and not degrade the ‘natural’ capital (the earth’s resources) that it requires to function.

**What the hell has all this got to do with advertising?**

Because advertising is guilty of a lack of respect.

The advertising industry has rarely looked beyond the immediate success of its work and the profitability of individual agencies. It has tended to operate in a vacuum with its only responsibility being to the Client’s marketing objectives.

Sustainability, either of the advertising industry or its Client’s businesses has also rarely featured in the consciousness of agencies. Selling today is of paramount importance not respecting people or the environment so that you can also sell tomorrow and the day after that. For all the rhetoric about building long-term brands advertising is riddled with short termism.

In short advertising has lacked respect for the wider world. And people in the advertising industry have traditionally seen it as ethically neutral. Witness the way advertising people used to justify the continued advertising of tobacco in the face of overwhelming opposition. The argument went that it wasn’t for the advertising industry to decide what was right or wrong, that was the job of governments. As long as tobacco was a legal product, people in the industry argued, we should be allowed to advertise with impunity regardless of the harm it was doing to people.

And there is the small issue of sanctioning strategies and creative ideas that manipulate consumer desire by making people deliberately dissatisfied with what they have and with their lives. Think, for instance, about the way insurance companies scare the living daylights out of people in order to sell them a policy or the way that the relentless advertising of expensive trainer brands to children has helped fuel the increase in playground bullying.

It’s not that advertising people are bad people hell bent on making the world a worse place but that we don’t take responsibility for our actions and we don’t respect anything but our client’s immediate business success and our financial bottom line.

**So what?**

Well for starters there is your own sense of self worth. In a recent Gallup poll advertising was ranked 43rd out of 45 professions based on ethics and honesty. While for many of us advertising is a stimulating and rewarding way to make a living, it is also increasingly criticised. At best people think our work is entertaining if trivial at worst many despise what we do and to a certain extent we only have ourselves to blame. Is it any wonder people think you and I lack integrity and honesty when we have treated these values with so little respect?
The bizarre thing is that it would be hard to find a group of people anywhere in Britain that are as bright, creative and good as the 200 people at HHCL. If for no other reason than personal pride you should engage in the debate on ethics in advertising.

It is time that we all recognise the powerful influence we have both intentionally and accidentally on our economy, society and environment and behave in a more responsible manner. At one level we need to ensure that our work never does harm by respecting the unintentional consequences of our actions. At another we need to start to harness that power to do some good – not only to make our clients more profitable but to make our society happier and more cohesive and our environment healthier and more sustainable.

**Isn’t this the longest suicide note in advertising?**

The idea of ethics in business is not an hhcl flight of fancy. It is all part of a powerful new agenda with in the business community and a topic of constant discussion around the boardroom table. Whether its called corporate social responsibility or business ethics there is a sea change happening in the way that businesses regard their roles with in society. As Sir John Brown, CEO of BP maintains “these days businesses have to be a positive force for good” and this from an oil man!

This month the Stockexchage launches FTSE4good. This monitors the performance of companies that comply with a series of ethical benchmarks that precisely match the elements of the triple bottom line. The very existence of the FTSE4good is proof of just how seriously business is taking the issue. Not least because they have to as by law all pension funds now have to disclose whether they are taking in to account environmental and social issues. And earlier this year Morley fund management declared that it would vote down the annual accounts of any FTSE 100 company that does not include an environmental report.

Bandwagons are traditionally things that HHCL creates rather than jumps upon but in this case we are definitely following the pack and not leading. Or at least it depends on what company we keep – as per usual we are way ahead of the rest of the ad industry on this.

The long and short is that while it may not have reached the marketing department yet but all of the issues that we have raised here are being discussed within your Clients’ organisations.

Increasingly business believes that good is good and we need to be in step with this.

**What is HHCL’s answer?**

We see a future in which more ethical advertising builds brands that behave more ethically and we call this the creation of responsible desire. We are going to use the words responsible desire to describe an important new part of HHCL’s thinking.

Responsible desire is the idea that though we are still in the business of creating powerful desire for our client’s brands we have to start doing this responsibly. If for no other reason this is because we want to go back to people and create the same desire year after year without hindrance either from regulation or consumer rejection.

Responsible desire is not a new positioning for the agency, it is a new way that we think about the way advertising works and a way of developing challenging and engaging strategies and creative work. More than this responsible desire is the next stage of HHCL’s rejection of orthodox advertising and the orthodox ways advertising agencies work.

Above all responsible desire is about better work and more successful clients.
Applying responsible desire to your work

There seems to be a general interest in making advertising and marketing more responsible but when it comes down to creating work few people seem clear on what is expected of them.

There are two ways to approach responsible desire on your accounts.

1) Not doing harm

At a basic level creating responsible desire is about being aware of the unintentional consequences of the advertising you are creating.

Is there anything about ads, the idea, their casting, the dialogue or even the media plan for instance that is likely to show a lack of respect to people who will see it? For instance every time that an ad is played out that suggests that the average Briton is white, all men are incompetent and all women are interested in the quality of their wash we do harm.

• When we made the Tango megaphone ad the idea that it would encouraging bullying (the reason it was banned) never crossed our minds. All Tango advertising is edgy but we have never sought to deliberately cause harm in this way. The only thing that we were guilty of was not thinking through the implications of casting an overweight actor as the persecuted Coke drinker. That said the PT now believes that this was a mistake and the longevity of the ad might have been assured by a little more vigilance during pre production.

• The ‘Egg and you’ ads that we made showing a rather over enthusiastic level of customer service were extremely uncompromising and hugely successful. Like all good hhcl work it polarised opinion in research but it needn’t have caused such controversy when played out if the media had been more appropriately targeted, an over sight by the media planner.

It’s important to understand that this is not about creating bland advertising that is uncontroversial or is overflowing with lowest common denominator political correctness. Responsible advertising can be controversial especially when it is exposing the lazy conventions of the rest of our industry and the many advertising and marketing conventions that people never question.

• A few years ago we produced some Christmas posters for Tango. Each one showed a 1930’s style illustration of cute small children praying at the foot of their beds on Christmas Eve. One carried the headline ‘Dear Lord let it be Tango’ and another ‘Let the poor children have Tango too’. The Church had a real go at us for the work but though controversial there were no unintended consequences of those ads as the response was the response we had anticipated and were happy with. Our feeling was that every brand in Britain flogs its wares at Christmas using children, pets and quasi-religious imagery (how about the ‘Holidays are coming’ Coke ad?) and we were exposing this and making people think about it.

The easiest way to approach responsible desire is simply to be aware of the unintended consequences of the ad you are making and doing something to prevent this. The majority of advertising that does harm does so out of laziness not intent.

It can also be helpful in making our advertising distinctive. Before we took over the advertising for Iceland their ads looked the same as every other supermarket with a white middleclass mum and a couple of rosy cheeked cherubs. Since our appointment Iceland ads have reflected the diversity of its shoppers ethnically, in terms of gender and in terms of family structure and this has been an important part of the reason that they stand out.

2) Doing good
The second approach is a little more fundamental. It involves harnessing the power that brands and advertising has to do some good.

This is a far more challenging area because its about how the client presents their product or service to the world and requires the client to be far more engaged in the concept of responsible desire.

Let’s take strategies first. Here responsible desire is about creating and manipulating brands so that their appeal is wholly or in part because of the ‘good’ that they do or the respect that they show the world around them.

• Working with TXU we created, launched and promoted a product called Stay Warm in which people on means tested benefits could pay a flat fee per month (taken from their benefits at source) and have guaranteed unlimited power. This benefitted the company by reducing collection risks and benefitted the customer by giving them a cheap, unlimited source of electricity.

• The Iceland strategy and the advertising that resulted from it exposed a whole raft of food issues that the rest of the industry was sweeping under the carpet from genetic modification to artificial additives. We capitalised on the underdog nature of the brand to yap at the heels of the industry and also propel the brand in to greater public consciousness.

• We are currently repositioning Texaco as the driver’s petrol company – recommitting them to the driver and the things that are important to him or her. The soon to be launched advertising pledges that Texaco will put the service back into service stations while we are also working with Texaco on a more fundamental project to combat congestion.

Of course our relationship with our clients doesn’t always allow for such fundamental influence on the brand strategy but it usually allows us to create work that exhibits responsible desire.

For instance, hhcl has always rejected the sort of advertising that promises a Client’s products will give its customers a better and more fulfilling life – so called image advertising. In many ways we fell out with Martini because they liked the type of advertising that suggested that if you drink Martini you will lead a more affluent, beautiful and aspirational life and we refused to create that sort of work believing it to be disingenuous.

When it comes to developing creative work responsible desire can be about ensuring that you aren’t using dishonest or misleading techniques to sell the brand in question. It is clumsy manipulation that most increases consumer cynicism towards the work we do.

• The historic advertising for Egg for instance challenged the cynicism consumers have about financial services advertising by overtly attacking the techniques that these brands use to communicate with customers. We exposed the claims and stereotypes that they use to peddle their wares in ads like token black man (which won a Council for Racial Equality Award for its troubles).

• Going further, our work for the AITC deliberately undermined financial services brands like Lloyds TSB that claim to care for a customers hopes and ambitions as well as looking after their cash. The AITC creative route dramatised the idea that Investment Trusts, rightly, don’t give a damn about anything else but making you money. That might not seem at first wholly ethical but it was brutally and effectively honest and showed respect towards the viewer of the ads.

• We are currently working with AA insurance on a campaign that attacks the idea that you have to make potential customers frightened in order to sell an insurance policy. It shows that life isn’t all gloom and doom but in the very unlikely circumstance that something happens to you the AA will be there.
Responsible desire can also be more directly concerned with society and the environment, using these as central to the creative idea.

- Our work for Fuji used the opportunity that photography presents to challenge stereotypes and preconceptions.
- While Homepride dramatised the authenticity of its product by using ethnically diverse British families.

Both were engaged in fostering greater cohesion in our society by representing its diversity and the need to accept difference.

Is responsible desire compulsory?

It is really important to understand that there is no compulsion to do work whether executionally, conceptually or strategically that its in some way ethical - we haven’t relaunched as an ethical advertising agency. By introducing the concept of responsible desire into the way we think and work we are simply trying to make our work more ethical – not to mention more interesting and effective - as time goes on. The expectation is simply that you consider responsible desire when developing or executing ideas.

What about greenwash?

Greenwash is the essentially ethical spin. It is where companies present themselves as ethical without any, or at least a commensurate, change in their behaviour. It is vitally important that we avoid greenwashing clients and so like all advertising it is our responsibility to ensure that any strategy, creative idea or execution is credible.

The most commonly criticised case of greenwash at the moment is the advertising that accompanied the launch of BP’s beyond petroleum identity. BP’s sincerity about a post oil future is not in doubt (they are years ahead of the American oil companies), nor is the commitment to sustainability on the part of their CEO. The issue was that the advertising led consumers to believe that BP is a green oil company when a relatively insignificant part of their business is actually ‘beyond petroleum’ at the moment.

So are we just going to handle ethical clients?

It is the responsibility of all businesses to address the ills on their doorsteps, to look at their sectors and clean up the harm that they do. The concept of responsible desire is an attempt by an advertising and marketing communications agency to reform advertising and marketing. It is not an attempt to reform business as a whole and it is not our responsibility to try and do this.

Of course we believe that businesses that build more ethical brands using more ethical means will be the long term winners (as the FTSE4good will help to prove) and we want to that we want to elevate the debate on ethics beyond one of risk management towards one of demand generation because we believe that brands that do good should use this as way of building business – after all trust is the bedrock of all brands. This will be the goal of any upstream consultancy and planning work that we do with Clients and our aim will be to get into onto the radar of any organisation starting to think about these issues.

On a day to day basis we will continue to evaluate every potential client on an individual basis looking for a clear matched competitive agenda (of which an interest in responsible desire will increasingly play a part).

However, we will not automatically refuse to work with any particular organisation or sector as a matter of principle. Having said that we have always believed that people do their best work when they believe in their client’s business so what you work on at HHCL is a matter of personal choice.
Is HHCL an ethical business?

Responsible desire is a systematic and deliberate approach to our product rather than a new way of running HHCL. The question should always be is our work creating desire responsibly rather than are we an ethical business.

That said there are going to be some areas where we need to smarten our act up in the way that we run the company. In the spirit of putting our own house in order we are currently undertaking an ethical audit of HHCL with the SMART company, a consultancy with links to the Chime group. Obviously, as ad agencies go we think we have always been ahead of the game but that is not to say that in comparison to business in general there aren’t some glaring gaps in what we do. These should be highlighted by the audit and we will then seek to resolve any issues that arise.

But surely our membership of the Chime group compromises our integrity on this?

It is easy for commentators to try and undermine our intent by claiming that sister agencies also handle extremely unethical clients from Monsanto to General Pinochet.

The reality is that this is an extremely old fashioned view of Chime. The principle business of the Chime group is managing reputation whether an individuals, a brand’s or an entire company’s. One of the single biggest developments in the arena of reputation has been in corporate social responsibility and many of the forty something Chime companies are at the forefront of this most notably SMART (as mentioned above) and the PR agency QBO.

Mind grenades

In the process of convincing Clients and the industry to take responsible desire seriously we have pulled together a series of mind grenades that should help you to build arguments in its favour.

**Advertising**

- The Gallup poll on attitudes to the advertising profession was taken in the US in 1999. It placed advertising 43rd out of 45 professions based on honesty and integrity.
- In the UK research for the Future Foundation reported that 60% of consumers get ‘very angry’ at companies who say things that may not be true just to sell them.
- “If the media gets it wrong, society gets it wrong” Chris Smith, former Culture Secretary

**Quality of life**

- A NOP poll last summer for Resurgence magazine asked people how they would like to be remembered. Polling highest 36% said ‘as a kind person’, 32% said ‘as a good parent’, 17% said ‘as someone who made the world a better place’. Only 2% said as a wealthy and successful businessperson.

**The City**

- £3.3bn is invested in ethical funds in the UK. It represents only 1% of investment but has doubled in the last 7 years
- The FTSE4good launched on the 31st July 2001 and follows in the footsteps of the Dow Jones Sustainability index
- 96% of CEOs believe reputation is very important while 65% say they give more time to “reputation” than 5 years ago
• It’s the Pensions Act (2000) that demands that pension fund trustees include ethics in their annual statement of investment principles

Business strategy

• “We’ve learned that there is a very fine line indeed between scientific confidence on the one hand and corporate arrogance on the other. We didn’t listen very well to people who insisted that there were relevant ethical, religious, cultural social and economic issues as well.” Robert Shapiro, former CEO of Monsanto talking about the disastrous performance of the company in the face of consumer opposition to GM foods.

Consumers

• In a Mori poll 52% of consumers described themselves as caring about companies’ social and environmental responsibilities and acting on this.
• And 1 in 6 consumers said they frequently buy or boycott products because of the manufacturers reputation.
• A NOP poll last summer for Resurgence magazine asked people which method was the best way to protect the environment. Polling highest 32% said by boycotting products, 24% said by public protest, 15% said ‘by writing to your MP’. Only 5% said it should be left to business
• 1 in 10 UK adults are members of an organisation concerned with the environment or animal welfare
• 39% of UK consumers agree that “Companies should make profit, pay taxes, provide jobs and obey all laws AND do all this in ways that set higher ethical standards, going beyond what is required by law, and actively helping build a better society for all.”
• In 1980 58% of consumers in the UK agreed with the statement that “the profits of large British companies help make things better for the consumer” by 1999 this had dropped to just 27% (source: MORI)
• Yeo Valley organic foods is now the 4th fastest growing consumer brand in the UK (source: AC Neilsen)

About the Authors

HHCL (formerly Howell Henry Chaldecott Lury and Partners) was an advertising agency based in London, and was prominent in the 1990s. The agency was famous for its work on Tango, creating the famous Orange Man (also known as Slap) commercial in 1991 as well as the commercial, St George for Blackcurrant Tango in 1997. In 1994 it created the Does exactly what it says on the tin campaign for Ronseal. The firm won fame (and notoriety[2]) for its innovative working practices, and was voted ‘Agency of the Decade’ by Campaign magazine[ in 2000. After mergers and a name change to United London, the agency was closed in early 2007.