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The Ethics of Branding in the Age of Ubiquitous Media: Insights from Catholic Social Teaching

James F. Caccamo

ABSTRACT. Branding has long been seen as an effective means of marketing products. The use of brand-based marketing campaigns, however, has come under intense scrutiny over the past 10 years for its power to facilitate deception and emotional manipulation. As a way of proceeding through the many differing moral assessments, this paper turns for insight to the tradition of writing on social ethical issues within the Roman Catholic Church. The author suggests that Catholic Social Teaching offers a distinctive approach to advertising ethics that charts a middle course between the two poles of the debate on branding. This article introduces readers to the approach to advertising developed within Vatican documents on media, highlighting the basic values at stake and the particular moral norms for advertising that are articulated. The article then applies these values and norms to the case of brand-based advertising, ultimately suggesting that advertisers approach their work through the virtue of solidarity.

KEY WORDS: advertising, brand, Catholic Social Teaching, common good, development, social communication media

On many occasions, I have said: "I love advertising." I read it, I look at it, I listen to it, because I'm truly interested. Because you're really trying to get people's attention, advertising is among the best communication being done in the world today: through production values, through design, through choice of words and images. I am a fan of advertising, even though I'm not much of a consumer.

Archbishop John P. Foley (2003)
President, Pontifical Council
for Social Communications

Introduction

There is, perhaps, no more effective marketing tool than a powerful brand. Established brands allow advertising professionals to communicate a density of product information to consumers in an efficient, effective, and evocative manner, influencing purchasing decisions and developing consumer loyalty. Over the last two decades, companies have expanded the scope of their branding activities to encompass not merely information about the particular products they offer, but about the kinds of people that their customers can expect to become and the kinds of lifestyles they should expect to attain. By combining effective brands with lifestyle market segmentation, companies pinpoint ever more specific populations through identifying particular cultural and social values in order to sell their goods and services by appealing to their deepest – often unknown – needs, fears, and desires. Effective branding, it would seem, is one of the cornerstones of modern corporate success.

Yet, as the pervasiveness of brand-based advertising has increased, so have its detractors. Since Naomi Klein's influential 2000 book *No Logo*, a wealth of journalists, cultural critics, and scholars have offered critical appraisals of the practice of branding. Critics

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charge that in this age of ubiquitous media, branding does more than demonstrate the advantages of a company's products: it shapes identity (Barber, 2007), hinders psychological development (Schor, 2004), masks abuse of workers (Klien, 2000), creates unrealistic personal expectations (Quart, 2003), and even replaces religious imagination (Beaudoin, 2003), especially when targeted at children and other vulnerable populations (Linn, 2004). If branding is the cornerstone of modern corporate success, then the success comes as too high a price.

In light of the radically different conclusions that corporations and critics have reached regarding brand-based advertising, it can be difficult for a morally minded marketer to discern a way forward through the competing sets of concerns. Even though both sides of the debate can seem extreme, they both also seem to make fair points. As a way of proceeding, it might be helpful to get "back to basics" by turning to the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching on social communications (CST on SC) to help us get a handle on the underlying moral issues at stake in using brands to sell products.[1] This essay is meant to introduce readers to the approach to communication developed within Vatican documents on media, highlighting the basic values at stake in communication and the particular moral norms for advertising that are articulated. Grounded in a range of basic claims about human life, CST on SC offers an interesting "middle course" between the two poles of the debate on branding. CST on SC clearly acknowledges the value of advertising to the human community while, at the same time, recognizes the importance of avoiding dangers of aggressive brand promotion in an age of ubiquitous media. As a result, CST on SC offers both a broad context for understanding the recent critiques of branding and a useful perspective regarding a direction for advertisers – Catholic and non-Catholic alike – who seek to promote their products in a morally responsible manner.

Social communication in Catholic Social Teaching

Over the past 70 years, the Roman Catholic Church has engaged in regular examination of the religious and moral implications of "social communication," or the ways in which individuals and small groups share information with large groups of people.[2] The means of social communication have changed dramatically over this period, consistently challenging thinkers to expand their understanding of the ways in which the media shape our lives and our social world. By the early 1970s, the tradition had developed an account of social communication that is used to this day, providing the underlying values that are used to assess the morality of many different media phenomena. This account centers on understanding social communication as playing two fundamental roles in human life: it acts as a source for human development and means for critical social institutions.

First, social communication is understood within CST as playing a part in the development of the human person. Like many who reflect upon the nature of the human person, the Catholic tradition views human existence as a life-long process of growth and development through which one attains fulfillment and completion (Gula, 1989, pp. 66–73; Janssens, 1980, pp. 3–13). Terms like "fulfillment" and "completion" suggest that human development focuses upon developing "higher level" capabilities like intellectual growth and spiritual engagement. Yet, human development also includes developing the ability to meet "lower level" needs such as food, shelter, and basic education. At its best, development reaches into the breadth of human experience so that all people are enabled to grow into fullness to whatever extent they choose. Within CST, this kind of broad-based development is referred to as "integral human development." Development that is integral treats the person in a holistic manner, engaging the whole of one's life, from the economic, political, and psychological dimensions of human existence, to the artistic, social, and spiritual, all in equal measure (Paul VI, 1967, paras 14–21). Only through development that is integral are human beings able to enjoy the fullness of life and live into the richness of what it means to be human.

The media of social communication play a key role in this process of integral human development by opening the door to the many things that lie beyond our limited horizons. Indeed, as the Vatican put it in 1992, "much that men and women know and think about life is conditioned by the media; to a considerable extent, human experience itself is an experience of media" (PCSC, 1992, para 2). In

print, we encounter the classic ideas of human history. On the radio, we hear songs about what it means to be loved. On television, we see ourselves as we might someday be. On the internet, we see what is happening around us throughout the world. Insofar as these experiences of social communication enable growth that is in keeping with the nature of the human person, they play a valuable role in advancing integral human development.

Second, social communication is understood within CST as playing a central role in the maintenance of human social life. While many agree that humans are social animals, rarely do we think of sociality in terms other than recreation and interpersonal relationships. Yet, the ability of human beings to engage in productive social relationships is central to our ability to survive and flourish (Janssens, 1980, p. 8; PCSC, 1971, paras 12–16, 19–62). Popular belief in self-reliance notwithstanding, very few of us can actually provide for ourselves every single thing that we need for survival and fulfillment. As a result, we live alongside others who are willing to work with us to make our lives possible. Rather than rely on *ad hoc* arrangements, people develop concrete social institutions that will ensure ongoing flourishing. Some social institutions, such as businesses, farms, lending institutions, social services, and governmental bodies, enable people to obtain basic needs such as food, housing, medical care, and security. Others, such as schools, churches, and civic organizations, provide the resources necessary for providing opportunities for meeting higher-level needs such as intellectual growth, spiritual engagement, and moral development. Robust social institutions are a necessary precursor to integral human development.

From the perspective of CST, societies are at their best when they work to create conditions that will enable all people to pursue integral human development (John XXIII, 1961, paras 63–67; Second Vatican Council, 1965, paras 24–26). Societies that work to develop social structures that place the resources of the group at the service of widespread pursuit of development are referred to within the tradition as seeking the "common good."[3] While the principle of utility would suggest that sacrifices should be made by the few for the many, and the principle of efficiency would demand cutting out wasteful efforts, the common good demands that despite costs and inefficiencies, allowing some

people to "fall between the cracks," thus unable to develop integrally, is inhuman and unacceptable. In terms of the functioning of society, the common good characterizes the moral good to be pursued.

The media of social communication play a key role in this process of maintaining the social institutions necessary for all to develop. In part, this is because SC can help create the cooperation and mutual understanding necessary for the functioning of social structures. Business, medicine, education, law enforcement, and food distribution all depend on a basic level of social cohesion and trust. The various media help us understand one another better by expanding our knowledge of and empathy for others (PCSC, 1971, paras 16, 73). Without social communication, human beings remain alien from one another and are destined to come into conflict. But through social communication, people are able to share their hopes and dreams, and begin to cooperate with one another to improve their condition (PCSC, 1971, paras 12, 102).

In addition to advancing social cohesion, social communication itself serves as the heart of many social structures necessary to the material functioning of society. Through advertising, businesses share information with potential customers about products that might prove useful to them. Through news broadcasts, journalists inform citizens of important events that will shape their lives. Through editorials and blogs, commentators give voice to public opinion so that leaders can hear the needs and views of their constituents. Through televised debates, politicians educate citizens so that they can make informed and responsible decisions (PCSC, 1971, paras 24–32, 34, 36, 44–47). Indeed, social communication is considered so vital to the proper material functioning of society that the Vatican has argued that human beings have a fundamental right to accurate information (Second Vatican Council, 1963, para 5; PCSC, 1971, paras 34, 36, 44–47) and a fundamental moral duty to voice their views as part of the process of forming "public opinion" (PCSC, 1971, paras 24–32, 116–120). Without the flow of truthful information within a society, critical social structures would be impeded and good governance would cease. Within CST, social communication provides not only a means for individual development, but also functions in such a way as to create the social dynamics and structures necessary for life in society.

Advertising in Catholic Social Teaching

Throughout its work on social communication, the Vatican has used these categories of integral human development and common good to reflect upon the religious and moral implications of the new ways in which human beings were beginning communicate. In general, these writings have focused on investigating the issues surrounding particular technologies (e.g., film, television, the internet)[4] or issues of concern that span communication technologies (e.g., pornography, violence, portrayal of women in society).[5] However, only one genre of programming has been considered so important that it merited its own document: advertising. In 1997, the Pontifical Council for Social Communication (hereafter PCSC) – the body within Vatican responsible for writing and teaching on matters dealing with the media and communications – examined the realities of advertising in the mid-1990s and offered its thoughts on best practices in the document *Ethics and Advertising*.[6]

For those who are unfamiliar with CST on SC, much of *Ethics and Advertising* might come as a surprise. Given the Catholic Church's reputation for condemning media and criticizing capitalism, one might expect the document to offer a wholesale rejection of contemporary advertising. Yet, as it turns out, *Ethics and Advertising* celebrates advertising as an indispensable part of contemporary life. The Vatican explicitly rejects view that contemporary advertising should be viewed in "unrelievedly negative terms" (para 4). Contrary to many contemporary critics who seem to approach advertising as an inherently suspect act, the Vatican views advertising as a type of social communication, that is, like all forms of communication, morally neutral in and of itself (para 9). Each event of communication receives its moral species from the extent to which it promotes integral human development and common good. While advertising is often criticized as failing to promote either, the Vatican believes that it has the potential to provide great benefits for both.

Harms and benefits of advertising

In CST on SC, advertising provides information about the characteristics and price of goods and services so that audience members will be able to make rational choices about the best way to meet their needs. *Ethics and Advertising* identifies four particular ways that this endeavor benefits society. First and foremost, advertising produces substantial economic benefits. Within the market economies that characterize the contemporary world, "advertising can be a useful tool for sustaining honest and ethically responsible competition that contributes to economic growth in the service of authentic human development" (PCSC, 1997, para 5). Advertisements provide accurate information about products and services to potential customers, enabling them to make "informed, prudent," and rational decisions about how to meet their particular needs (para 5). The sales that result from ads stimulate the economy through job and wealth creation, which, in turn, increases standards of living. This support for positive economic activities is consistent with the modern tradition of CST, in which private property and economic initiative are considered rights that, while limited, are central to human life.[7] By supporting social structures and making available information about things that will support human development, advertising provides significant benefit to society.

Ethics in Advertising goes onto suggest that in addition to producing economic benefits, advertising produces three other distinct benefits to society. Within democratic systems, political advertisements contribute to the common good by informing citizens about candidates and policies, enabling them to make good decisions at the ballot box (PCSC, 1997, para 6). Advertisements also provide cultural benefits, both by supporting programs and publications of "intellectual, aesthetic, and moral quality" and by themselves being instances of uplifting "popular art" that inspire the best in their audiences (para 7). Finally, advertising by "benevolent social institutions, including those of a religious nature" provides educational and motivational messages that improve the moral and religious character both of individuals and society as a whole (para 8). At its best, advertising can function to improve the lives of communities and their members.

Even the most optimistic among us, however, would admit that advertising is not always "at its best." Indeed, while *Ethics in Advertising* argues strongly that advertising "can have, and sometimes

does have, beneficial results," it suggests that advertising "often does have a negative, harmful impact upon individuals and society" (para 9). Advertising, for instance, incurs economic harms when, through misrepresentation, it leads people to make purchases that do not meet their needs, and when, through persuasion and motivation, convinces people that fulfillment lies in the purchase of another meaningless object. Advertising inflicts political harm and impedes the democratic process when it bars the entry of all but the wealthiest candidates and when it appeals to emotions and base instincts through attack ads and fear-mongering. Advertising can inflict cultural harm when it uses base images and stereotypes to promote products, when it ignores the legitimate educational and social needs of certain demographics, and when it is used to fund programs that are themselves base and lower the state of the arts and discourse. Finally, advertising can inflicts religious and moral harm when it exploits religious themes and images to sell products and when it "is used to promote products and inculcate attitudes and forms of behavior contrary to moral norms" (paras 13, 9–12). Rejecting the oft-made claim that advertising "simply mirrors the attitudes and values of the surrounding culture," *Ethics in Advertising* recognizes that advertising "shapes the reality it reflects" (paras 2, 3). Unfortunately, some advertisers choose to shape reality in a way that, while benefiting corporations, harms development and common good.

Moral norms for advertising

In order to avoid these harms, *Ethics in Advertising* articulates three concrete moral norms that can help advertisers in their efforts to avoid creating harmful ad campaigns. First, advertisements should communicate information about the product or service being promoted in a truthful manner (para 15).[8]

Second, advertisements should always respect the dignity of the human person. Human beings, properly understood as persons rather than simply biological entities, are endowed with a host of qualities and rights that incur upon others particular obligations with regard to treatment. Ads that portray persons as less than fully and integrally human or as objects for exploitation fail to live up to these

obligations. Importantly, dignity must be upheld both in the way the product is promoted and in the actions the ad seeks to instigate. Simply avoiding the use of vulgar images to entice people to purchase a product is not enough. The use of respectful and sophisticated images to convince people to purchase a product that, when used, degrades the user is as problematic as degradation in the advertisement itself (para 16).

Third, advertisers should always act in a socially responsible manner. For the PCSC, social responsibility refers primarily to the obligation to promote integral human development. Communicators have "a serious duty to express and foster an authentic vision of human development in its material, cultural, and spiritual dimensions" (para 17). For advertisers, this means promoting products in a way that does not advance the view that "the good life" consists in acquisition of material or other lesser goods. Such a practice both undercuts integral human development by encouraging the substitution of apparent goods for authentic goods and undermines the common good by encouraging a level of consumption that is ultimately ecologically unsustainable.

The *modus operandi* of brand-based advertising

Taken together, these three norms provide a rubric that can help advertisers use their arts to fulfill the underlying personal and social purposes of social communication. Yet, it can be challenging to apply these norms in the era of brand-based marketing. The norms of truth, human dignity, and social responsibility do not seem, at first glance, to apply particularly well to brand-based marketing. It is not entirely obvious, for instance, what it might mean for golden arches to be untrue. Nor is it clear how the Pepsi logo could violate human dignity. Nor is it easily apparent how the Jolly Green Giant encourages social irresponsibility. These norms, while quite useful in some cases, seem to provide inadequate traction for examining the morality of brand-based ad campaigns.

For their part, scholars and marketing professionals who write on branding do little to simplify matters. In many cases, authors portray establishing and using brands as exceedingly complex processes

that demand wisdom, finesse, and not a little bit of luck. Indeed, it is not even entirely clear what a brand is. For Adamson (2006), a brand is an idea about what separates one company's products and services from another's. For Kapferer (1992), the core of a brand is the identity that is created through people's engagement with the products associated with it. Aaker (1997) focuses on the ways in which brands succeed by becoming imbued with personalities. For Knapp (2000), a brand is a promise to customers about the product associated with it. Upshaw (1995) draws upon these aspects in her account of brands, while also noting the importance of a good name or logo to the brand's success. In contrast, Demming (2007) rejects these approaches, arguing that a brand is, at its core, a feeling. For their part, Schulz and Schulz (2003) seem to have little interest in providing a definition for a brand at all, suggesting that a brand is simply anything that helps a company make money. With such a wide array of approaches, it is perhaps no surprise that people assess the morality of brands in very different ways.

Brands as signs

One helpful way of proceeding might be to turn away from branding research toward research into the underlying mechanisms that make brand-based advertising possible. At its core, branding works on a relatively simple principle: brands are signs. While specialists in the fields of linguistics and semiotics disagree about the mechanisms by which signs function, human communication is based in signs. Philosopher C. S. Pierce offered what might very well be one of the simplest definitions of a sign when he suggested that, generally speaking, a sign is "something which stands for something (*object*) to somebody...in some respect or capacity."[9] The word "mouse" is, for instance, a sign: a grouping of squiggles (letters) or sounds (phonemes) that refers us to a small, furry rodent. In another capacity, the same group of squiggles or sounds can also refer to a device attached to a computer, so long as the people involved are familiar with computers. At root, brands are no different: words, images, and sounds that are created by companies to refer to objects offered to consumers.[10]

Of course, some might object to this description, arguing that there is a good deal of difference between a simple word and a strong brand. The richness and depth that is brought to mind with a brand name like "Hershey's" far outstrips evocative power of most words. Indeed, this may very well be true. Yet, this does not mean that "Hershey's" is any less a sign than "mouse." The difference lies not in whether or not each is a sign, but in the depth of each sign's connotations. As it turns out, when I use the term "mouse," unless the mouse in question is actually present, the person to whom I am speaking does not have direct access to what I mean when I say the word. Rather, she or he has access to her or his own connotation of the objects to which "mouse" has been used to refer: a set of impressions and ideas grounded in her or his own knowledge and experience of the thing to which the sign "mouse" refers (Langer, 1942, pp. 53–79). If the connotations of the sender and receiver of the sign correspond closely enough, then they will understand one another. Misunderstandings occur when conceptions do not match. Connotations act as a middle term between a sign and an object, providing the means through which the object is apprehended when the sign is invoked.

It is precisely at the point of connotation that the signs "mouse" and "Hershey's" differ. While both terms are signs, the connotations of the word "Hershey's" have, for some people, a richness that renders the word much more powerful than the word "mouse." Where "Hershey's" once simply referred to a particular family, its connotations have been broadened by experience of the company's products and intentional manipulation through marketing practices. Indeed, for some, the sign "Hershey's" has become what theologian Rahner (1960, pp. 224–225; 1971, pp. 220, 224–227) would refer to as a "primordial symbol": a sign that makes its object present to the receiver by engaging a rich set of deeply held feelings and experiences, even to the point of disclosing part of the deepest mysteries of life. While Rahner reserved this designation to words with consistent religious or spiritual association, it seems clear that some brand-signs seem to have achieved this status. Thus, what distinguishes effective from ineffective brand-signs is not the mechanism by which each operates, but the character and power of the connotations associated with them.

Brand-signs in advertising

In addition to providing a window into the inner workings of brands, this sign-function model also offers insight into the means by which brand-based advertising achieves its goal of increasing sales of products and services. In its most basic form, an advertisement consists in providing accurate product information in order to encourage potential consumers to make purchases.

Ad → product x info → viewer $\rightrightarrows$ purchase x

This information might take the form of direct statements about the characteristics of a product, its benefits, and its price as well as images of the product. Such statements may also be supported and enhanced by musical or visual elements that set the tone or a mood for the ad and enhance the appeal of the product. Such ads, however, emphasize providing accurate product information so that people can make informed decisions about allocating their resources with the hope that they will follow the guidance of the ad.

Advertisements that employ brand-signs in an intensive manner shift this process by replacing product information, in part or in whole, with the brand-sign itself.

Ad → brand sign x → viewer $\rightrightarrows$ purchase x

In effect, brand-based advertising marketers "swap out" direct product or service information for signs that have useful and attractive connotations. While potential consumers might be left to guess about the actual characteristics and quality of the product, the desire for information can be satisfied by the presence of connotations within the "information space" of the communication event. Brand-signs thus act as surrogates for concrete information on products and services. When the audience's pre-existing connotations are well developed, brand-signs can communicate a density of information, elicit emotional responses, and draw audience attention in ways that product information often cannot. As a result, for brand-signs with rich positive connotations, replacing information with a brand-sign can prove more effective than directly stated information, especially when the differences between the advertised product and its competition are negligible.

In order to increase the effectiveness of brand-sign at replacing product information, companies produce advertisements whose purpose is to develop in consumer's positive connotations for the brand-sign. These kinds of ads, as part of "branding" or "brand management" strategies, are a critical part of contemporary marketing. For audiences who do not have connotations of the brand-sign, such ads seek to provide ready-made positive connotations to consumers rather than wait for people to develop their own experience-based connotations (e.g., the MasterCard "priceless" commercials). For audiences who have connotations of the brand-sign already, such ads reinforce positive connotations or, in the case of negative connotations, attempt to enrich them in a positive manner (for example, Microsoft's Mojave commercials). Through these types of ads, companies enhance positive connotations for the brand-sign that will, at some later point, encourage purchases of the goods or services associated with it.

The real power of a brand-sign with strongly established positive connotations to act as a surrogate for product information can be seen clearly in the case of brand extension, or the use of established brand-signs to promote products outside the category of products with which the brand-sign is typically identified. In brand extension situations, the connotations of the brand-sign are used to suggest characteristics of a particular product that is as of yet unknown to the consumer. Such is the case, for instance, when the Starbucks brand-sign is used to encourage sales of a coffee-flavored ice cream or the Harley Davidson brand-sign is used to sell clothing.

Ad → brand sign x → viewer $\rightrightarrows$ purchase y

In these cases, advertisers "swap out" the product typically advertised with another product, relying on the prior connotations associated with a brand-sign to achieve sales of the new product. The ability of positive brand-sign connotations to entice people to purchase products that they know nothing about is a testament to the extraordinary power that something as simple as a sign can wield.

Brand-based advertising in light of CST on SC

By considering brand-based advertisement in terms of the use of evocatively connoted signs in order to increase sales, assessing its morality becomes a more straightforward affair than it initially appeared. In light of CST on SC's concern for integral human development and the common good, it becomes clear that there are several important ways in which the use of brand-signs in advertising easily can become morally problematic.

One way in which brand-based advertising can become morally problematic is through deception. If there is anything upon which the proponents and critics of branding agree, then it is that brand-signs can be powerful. Once deep brand-sign connotations are formed, they are difficult to undo. The power of a brand-sign to surreptitiously elicit positive connotations and instills confidence in a product's ability to meet needs means that advertisers are left free to use as little product information as they choose. This is especially true in brand-extension situations, where brand-sign connotations are used to promote products with which consumers have no experience. In the absence of concrete information, consumers will naturally "fill in the blanks" by making assumptions about the merits of a product or service based on brand-sign connotations alone. From the perspective of CST on SC, failure to provide concrete product and price information in an advertisement constitutes a failure to be truthful, not through false claims, but through false implication and omission of critical information.[11]

By giving advertisers the ability to deceive customers in a manner that exceeds other types of advertising, brand-based advertising can impede integral human development and undermine the common good. According to CST on SC, advertising should provide information about the characteristics and quality of a product or service so that people can make rational choices about whether or not the advertised item provides the best way to meet their needs. When consumers are misled by brand sign connotations, they may very well purchase products that, in the end, do not meet their needs. When this happens, human development is harmed because resources that should have been used to meet a need have been wasted in pursuit of products or services that fail to meet any

need. This practice is felt most acutely by those with limited financial means, where the use of resources on non-end-meeting pursuits could hamper the ability to meet basic human needs. In tough economic times, however, many middle class families who are forced by rising prices or lowering wages to cut back on development-enabling activities can ill afford to be misled. On the international level, the use of deceptive connotations in industrial and trade advertising can negatively impact development and common good in developing nations when products and services purchased to create and maintain social structures fails to live up to expectations. Thus, as is the case in advertising generally, the use of brand-signs to deceive – either through commission or omission – is morally problematic.

A second way in which brand-based advertising can become morally problematic is by encouraging consumers to substitute emotion for reason in purchasing decisions. While CST recognizes the importance of emotion and intuition in human life, prudent, thoughtful judgment has always been seen as central to decision-making. In many brand-based ads, however, advertisers use the emotional connotations of brand-signs to stimulate desire for the items being advertised as a way of bypassing rationality in purchasing decisions. Brand-signs whose connotations elicit deep attachments have the power to engender sales even when rational examination – were it done – militates against the purchase. Roberts (2004, p. 66), CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, goes so far as to argue that the goal of advertisers should be to develop in consumers what he refers to as "loyalty beyond reason". The phenomenon of the Apple "fanboy," who maintains unquestioning support for Apple-branded products despite reasonable criticism of the products, is an example of this unreasonable attachment to particular brand-sign connotations.[12] In an environment characterized by the profusion of consumer choices, where it is difficult to compete on price or quality alone, the use of brand-signs to substitute affective triggers for rational persuasion offers an attractive option for advertisers.[13]

Unfortunately, by giving advertisers a sophisticated ability to discourage the use of reason in purchasing decisions, brand-based advertising can impede integral human development. In part, this claim is grounded on underlying belief that one cannot reliably achieve development or common

good through irrational choices. "Irrational mo-
tives" such as "'brand loyalty,' status, fashion, 'sex
appeal,' etc." "raise serious problems" because they
lead consumers to expend resources to purchase
inferior products that will often not live up to the
claims made about them.[14] They also can encourage
emotional attachments to products and services that
cannot possibly meet the deeper human needs for
love and fulfillment.[15] It is precisely this enticement
to redirect one's affections away from relationships
and "things that matter" toward consumer products
that people so often identify under the rubric of
consumerism (Kavanaugh, 1981). In the categories
of Pope John Paul II, the alienation that people feel
in the contemporary world is rooted specifically in
this kind of "reversal of means and ends" (Pope John
Paul II, 1991, para 40). By shaping consumers to
make decisions using emotional alone, brand-based
advertisements can negatively impact integral human
development and the common good.[16]

A third way in which brand-based advertising can
become morally problematic is by undermining
public confidence in companies and other critical
social institutions. In the previous examples of mor-
ally problematic brand-based advertising practices, it
was assumed that the advertisements in question
effectively achieved their goals: through brand-signs,
consumers were misled about the products advertised
or were convinced to make decisions based on irra-
tional motives. Yet, this is not always the case. Some
people have been trained to be aware of the decep-
tion and emotional manipulation that is frequently
present in advertising. Others, however, only de-
velop a suspicion of brand-intensive products after
being disappointed by products that did not live up to
the expectations instilled by brand-sign's connota-
tions. Indeed, it is precisely this awareness of the
disconnect between connotations and reality that
forms the root of recent anti-brand sentiments.[17]
Advertisements that feature high promise, high
connotation brand-signs create expectations that of-
ten cannot possibly be fulfilled, and can lead con-
sumers to turn away from brands entirely.

By undermining public confidence in companies
and other critical social institutions, brand-based
advertising can endanger integral human develop-
ment and undermine the common good. While
CST certainly celebrates as good those who become
savvy media consumers and who turn away from

lower things in life, the health of business is also
considered a real and critical good. As *Ethics in
Advertising* suggested, advertising can help businesses
make economic gains by increasing sales, thus pro-
viding jobs and income for families involved in those
companies. Such jobs provide the means for stability
and development within the family as well as
broader society. But these benefits depend upon
trust in the organizations behind the brands. When
consumers lose their trust in companies in response
to "overbranding" and stop buying products, it
endangers the livelihood of the workforce, com-
promising social stability and human development.
As relational networks broaden in our "wired" age,
reputation and trust are playing increasingly impor-
tant roles in business, government, and media
(Joinson and Paine, 2007; Rheingold, 2002; Solove,
2007). Where trust is paramount, a damaged repu-
tation can spell certain disaster. By running the risk
of undermining public confidence in companies and
other critical social institutions, brand-based adver-
tisements can negatively impact integral human
development and the common good.

Conclusion: brand-based advertising in the spirit of CST on SC

In the end, it seems that in light of CST on SC, what
is true of advertising in general holds true for brand-
based advertising. On one hand, there is much that
could be celebrated in brand-based advertising. As a
particularly effective form of marketing, it has the
power to provide all of the economic, political,
cultural, religious, and moral benefits that advertising
in general can bring to bear. On the other hand,
because it is so powerful, it also brings with it the
danger of undermining personal and civic life
through deception, irrationality, and undermining
trust in companies and social institutions. In an age
of ubiquitous media, where we are exposed to
brands virtually every waking moment of our lives,
both the promises and perils become magnified.

Because of the dangers associated with the use of
brand-signs in ads, critics are often inclined to seek
legal means to protect consumers. Modern CST on
SC, however, has shied away from recommending
heavy regulation. While the Vatican does support
occasional regulation of media that violate human

dignity, especially when aimed at children, it has been reluctant since the middle of the twentieth century to support widespread bans on media that some might find offensive (PCSC, 1971, para 86). Instead, it views industry self-regulation as the most effective long-term strategy for forming a media culture that supports both freedom and responsibility. Industries that establish their own codes of conduct and structures for enforcement stand a much better chance of developing cultures of attention to standards within their profession than do those for whom regulations are imposed from the outside.

In terms of developing particular policies, one good place to start would be to encourage marketing professionals to develop the habit of "sticking close to the product" when developing and using brands in advertising campaigns. While not exclusively the case, many of the problems with deception, emotional manipulation, and undermining trust can be traced back to using the connotations of a brand-sign to create an image of the advertised product or service that goes far beyond the realities of the product or service itself. Customers are empowered to make good purchasing decisions when brand-sign connotations connect to the actual product performance rather than ideal or imagined performance. Customers are enabled to experience long-term, appropriate satisfaction with products when they are convinced by connotations that are grounded on the merits of the product rather than on elusive promises of profound emotional satisfaction. Customers are less likely to become alienated from companies and social structures if they believe that the brand-sign connotations are legitimate rather than fabricated for the purpose of manipulation. While it is impossible for advertisers to ensure that customers will not make decisions that compromise integral human development and the common good, keeping brand-signs "close to the product" will reduce their culpability for such choices.

In the end, however, it may very well be that rather than developing ever more rules for advertisers to follow, what is really needed is the cultivation of the virtue of solidarity within the advertising community. As a virtue, solidarity refers to a particular way of being in the world, a habit of looking outside ourselves and acting with and for others (Beyer, 2009; Hinze, 2005; Pope John Paul II, 1987, paras 27–45). Solidarity entails, first, a deep

recognition of the radical interdependence of human beings grounded in the common bond of our humanity. This recognition involves not simply rational assent, but heartfelt experience of compassion for those who share our humanity, yet suffer in a way that is inhumane. Second, solidarity entails a movement to act with those who suffer in order to heal the suffering in the world, eventually working to eliminate its root causes. For advertisers, this would mean trying to "step into the shoes" of those to whom we want to sell our products, not merely to figure out how to better sell to them, but to understand how our advertising may impact their lives in a negative way. Such recognition does not necessarily mean that we identify specific cases in which "our ad caused hardship," although it very well could. Rather, it involves admitting that all who work in the advertising industry are necessarily complicit in manipulating people through creation and use of brand signs and that, in some cases, this manipulation really does negatively impact integral human development and the common good. For advertisers, developing the virtue of solidarity would also mean committing to keeping this awareness in mind when developing brand-based marketing campaigns. Only through such continued awareness will we be able to work to minimize the role of brand-based advertising in human suffering.

Notes

[1] For an overview of the themes and development of Catholic Social Teaching on social communication, see Caccamo (2008).

[2] Soukup (1998, p. 333) distinguishes social communication from smaller scale processes of "human communication, such as rhetoric, interpersonal, and group communication."

[3] For an investigation of the concept of common good and its use as a criterion for social communication, see Flanagan (2008).

[4] See, for instance, Pope Pius XI (1936), Pope Pius XII (1957), PCSC (2002), and Pope John Paul II (1993).

[5] See, for instance, PCSC (1989) and Pope John Paul II (1996).

[6] *Ethics in Advertising* builds substantially upon occasional minor remarks from the preceding 25 years, including PCSC (1971, paras 59–62), Pope Paul VI (1977), and Pope John Paul II (1988, 1994, 1996,

2004). The document would later serve as the basis for an address by the President of the PCSC, Archbishop Foley (2003).

[7] On the right to private property and work, see Pope John XXIII (1961, paras 104–121). On the right to economic initiative, see Pope John Paul II (1991, paras 13, 24–25, 43–48). For an excellent study of Pope John Paul II's contribution to economic thought in CST, see Naughton and Laczniak (1993).

[8] The PCSC does recognize that, as a genre, advertising employs "rhetorical and symbolic exaggeration." As a result, it suggests that, within the bounds of recognized practice, this type of exaggeration differs from the morally objectionable act of deliberate deception and is acceptable (1997, para 15).

[9] C. S. Pierce quoted in Hawkes (1972, p. 126).

[10] Riewoldt (2002) offers a fascinating account of the ways in which spaces can function as brands.

[11] Or, as another attendee at a recent conference put it, "advertising is telling as much as you can about the product so that it does not hurt your efforts."

[12] Atkin (2004) goes so far as to liken such brands to religions, referring to them as "cults."

[13] This situation, noted by Corstjens and Corstjens (1995), was only exacerbated by the advent of the Internet; most consumers can find some version of a product that is either cheaper or better made – if not both – within minutes.

[14] PCSC (1997, para 10). This concern is the single specific mention of branding made within CST.

[15] Quart (2003) is particularly helpful on the role of brands in taking advantage of insecurities relating to body image.

[16] Beaudoin's (2003) examination of the role of brands in the formation of imagination and Barber's (2007) work on the role of brands in identity development are examples of such concerns.

[17] Even Mark Gobé (2002, pp. 179–181), a staunch proponent of branding, recognizes that the economic impact of critics like Naomi Klein and the anti-branding magazine Ad Busters is attributable not to overzealous critics, but to problematic overzealous branding practices of modern corporations. For an interesting analysis of the connections between the success of and backlash against branding, see Palazzo and Basu (2007).

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