

Raise your marketing to a higher moral ground

by LuAnne Speeter

What do we expect out of our audiences and our marketing? Should the message appeal to the lowest common denominator for all audience members? Or, if we're truly striving to establish a relationship that requires conscientious decision making, perhaps we could invite the individual to embark on a journey of deepening understanding.

Really good messaging "educates" an audience. So to be effective, you'll want to understand the different levels of adult learning and moral reasoning. Educators have long based learning models on Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development – that throughout childhood and adolescence, a person's understanding of reality moves from one stage to the next, each time achieving a higher, more complex level of insight and reasoning.

But for those who want to develop a more socially conscious marketing approach, you may want to consider Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development. Kohlberg applied Piaget's theory to moral reasoning, defining it as a continual process that unfolds throughout a person's lifetime.

According to Kohlberg, humans make moral decisions based on the following levels of reasoning:

Stage 1: Obedience and punishment. Obeying rules are important in order to avoid punishment. This is primarily a child's reasoning, but applies to many adults in certain situations.

Stage 2: Individualism and exchange. In a moral dilemma, decisions are based on how they serve individual needs. The needs of others may be taken into account, but only if there are reciprocal benefits.

Stage 3: Interpersonal relationships. Decisions are made in order to fulfill a socially expected "role" or in consideration of a relationship.

Stage 4: Maintaining social order. Actions support the need for law and order, respecting authority and doing one's duty.

Stage 5: Social contract and individual rights. At this stage, individuals acknowledge varying viewpoints and needs existing within a society and seek to agree upon a social order.

Stage 6: Universal principles. Decisions are made to support universal, internalized principles of ethics and justice, even if they conflict with society's rules.

How does Kohlberg's theory apply to marketing? It's critical because to communicate well in marketing, you need to understand those triggers that engage your audience, what messages are internalized and what it takes to move your audience to action.

And if you want to integrate your brand with a social message, you'll increase your effectiveness by matching your level of conscientious marketing with your audience. Better yet, help your audience move to a higher level of moral reasoning and judgment.

For example, take [Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty](#). Through the campaign, Dove seeks to challenge stereotypes about beauty and help raise the self-esteem of girls and young women. Ongoing surveys and marketing efforts are also addressing narrow perceptions of beauty in terms of a woman's age and weight.

So Dove is attempting to move society to a higher level – perhaps akin to Level 5 – to encourage greater acceptance and appreciation of individualism. It could also be argued that, at the same time, Dove is hoping to enhance its own brand perception.

The stages of moral reasoning can also be applied to other business marketing considerations, such as your code of ethics or environmental practices. Do you set your standards to simply ensure compliance and avoid a lawsuit, or do you go to the next level by establishing proactive, life-affirming business practices?

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