

Marketing ethics, responsibility and ubuntu



By [Linda Hamman](#)

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Almost 40 years ago, the *New York Times* magazine published a famous (infamous?) article written by economic guru Milton Friedman, entitled "The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits." Things have changed since then.



The then future Nobel laureate in economics had no time for those who claimed that "business has a 'social conscience' and takes seriously its responsibilities for providing employment, eliminating discrimination, avoiding pollution and whatever else may be the catchwords of the contemporary crop of reformers."

In Friedman's view, the only social responsibility of a law-abiding business was to maximise profits for the shareholders.

A sense of social responsibility

Things have changed since then, and the idea of business with a sense of corporate social responsibility is not new, seen by some new companies as important in establishing a business, and of lasting core-business value for others.

Socio-Economic Development and its corporate social initiatives imply business decision-making based on ethical values, compliance with legal standards, and respect for communities, their citizens and their environment. Business for Social Responsibility defines it as "operating a business in a manner that meets or exceeds the ethical, legal, commercial and public expectations that society has of business... a comprehensive set of policies, practices and programmes that are integrated throughout business operations and business decision-making processes."

In the development of corporate strategies, the marketing component is fundamental: in fact it is difficult to make a distinction between "corporate" and "marketing" in the context of strategy. The marketing concept that the customers' interests come first is one which is now ensconced firmly in many corporate missions.

But not all, by any means. There are marketers who do not subscribe to the idea of putting the customer first, and if you were to ask how they defined marketing, they would tell you that it meant selling products or services, advertising, and running campaigns that entice people to buy.

Of right and wrong

Ethics, the science of morals, of right and wrong, is defined as the department of study concerned with the principles of human duty. It follows that it is our duty, as marketers, to 'do the right thing'. The loop-hole here, though, is whether 'the right thing' is seen by the marketer from the viewpoint of the company, or the customer or the community. We need to ask ourselves the question whether we really care about the well-being of our customers, or whether our concern begins and ends with the company's bottom line. We need to ask ourselves how far we are prepared to go to inveigle customers into buying our products. We need to ask ourselves if there's a line we will not cross.

The basic principles of marketing ethics dictate that:

- we take responsibility and accountability for our products, our services and our decisions and their outcomes
- we are honest and fair in our dealings with all the stakeholders
- we respect the consumers' rights of redress, to information and to privacy

Ethical marketing places specific importance on protecting those who are open to manipulation, such as the elderly and children. This brings me back to a question I believe we need to ask ourselves... "Is there a line we will not cross?"

Manipulation of very young children

In my opinion, we have already crossed that line. In expressing my abhorrence of the marketing manipulation of very young children, I do not believe I am alone. Some of the current practices indicate that freedom may have been mistaken for licence. (We are zealous about our rights, but decidedly less enthusiastic about the corresponding responsibilities.) It is unethical that young children should be identified by their consumer habits, but that is how they are portrayed in the media, and that is how they see themselves.

The practice of engaging psychologists to assist marketers in targeting children more accurately must surely have breached the ethics of marketing: it certainly outraged many psychologists, who saw it as unethical, distorting authentic values and inculcating in young children a burgeoning, excessive desire for material goods.

An exhaustive report on the subject was published by the American Psychological Association in 2004, and while the APA cautioned that children should not be treated unfairly, much more information was apparently needed on what was seen to be a very complex issue. In her book *The Shelter of Each Other on modern family life*, author Mary Pipher expressed concern that the consumer-saturated culture could be inducing feelings of "narcissism, entitlement and dissatisfaction" in young children .

Children in a healthy society should be raised to be responsible citizens and not brainwashed consumers: it is an insidious means to an unhealthy end. It does not enhance marketing's status as a societal force.

The brighter picture

I chose to emphasise the marketing manipulation of young children because that is where marketing ethics place the most emphasis. The bigger, brighter picture is of a marketing industry engaged in "the beneficial process of exchange that allows consumers to satisfy their needs and promote their greater well-being". ("Greater Good", Quelch and Jocz, 2007)

As a social force, marketing has the power to contribute to the improvement of standards and national economic development. It can facilitate the advancement of democracy: enabling poor consumers worldwide to experience the advantages of the developed world's innovations at very low prices. Some marketers pursue this with the zeal of

missionaries. However, there are missions of universal importance that we all, as marketers, should adopt.

Companies exist in order to generate profits, and that is undeniably their right and their purpose. From a social perspective, those profits are a means to an end. As marketers we should be more mindful of the social significance of what we do; more alert to the ethical principles that influence our day-to-day decisions; and more committed to our social responsibility.

“ *"umntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu" ('A person can only be a person through the help of others' [Xhosa])* ”

As expressed in the humane African philosophy of Ubuntu - each one of us can only exist effectively as a fully functioning human being when we acknowledge the roles others play in our lives. In short - "I am because we are."

ABOUT LINDA HAMMAN

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