Ethics in Advertising: Review, Analysis, and Suggestions

Patrick E. Murphy

The Pontifical Council's monograph on *Ethics in Advertising* (EIA) raises several important moral issues confronting advertising. This topic is one of ongoing importance to the advertising world, business community, educators, and society at large. For example, the perennial issue of sex-appeal advertising continues to raise tough questions from an ethical standpoint.

The perspective I take in the early sections of this article is that of an academic reviewer of the EIA document. First, I discuss the strengths of the monograph. Second, I examine the overall and specific weaknesses of it. Third, I address the current status of advertising ethics in America, and fourth, I provide several suggestions for improving ethics in the field of advertising.

**Strengths of EIA**

The EIA monograph contains several strong points. Initially, I examine several general strengths, then enumerate some specific section-by-section strengths.

The EIA represents a strong public position by the Catholic Church on the important topic of ethics in advertising. The Pontifical Council should be complimented for addressing the issue in a systematic fashion. The treatise evaluates advertising from both a theological perspective and one grounded in philosophical ethics. Specifically, the document discusses the benefits and harms of advertising, which is a classic utilitarian method of assessing any issue (Mill 1979). In the later stages of the report, more of a duty-based (or Kantian) perspective is taken with the discussion of the ethical and moral principles on which advertising ideally should be based. One recurring theme throughout the document is “responsibility.” The council does a fine job of identifying the responsibility of the advertising industry, the media, and individual persons; the statement indicates that “it is largely up to the advertisers themselves to ensure ethically responsible practices in their profession” (p. 33).

The report also outlines three key moral principles on which advertising should be based: truthfulness, dignity of the human person, and social responsibility. The other commentators on this report (Brenkert 1998; Lacznak 1998) go into depth on this topic, and I defer to their discussion. One additional significant strength of EIA is the effective use of quotations from various church documents over the years, including papal encyclicals, other Pontifical Council reports, and the Catechism of Catholic Church. One particularly effective quotation is contained in Section 9’s second paragraph.

Several specific sections of the EIA monograph stand out as especially strong. For example, the overview of advertising (Section 2) presents an excellent primer on the subject for a nonmarketing person. It provides a concise treatment of the complex topic of advertising. Furthermore, the chronicle of harms done by advertising (Sections 9 and 10) includes the negative economic impact, as well as the potentially serious abuses caused by advertising in developing countries where consumers may be stimulated to buy unneeded products. The discussion of women in Section 12 identifies stereotyping and exploitation of women in advertising. The use of sex-appeal advertising is an area in which advertising is justly criticized. The EIA monograph presents some provocative questions on this topic, which were taken from a message by Pope John Paul II, delivered in 1996. In the later sections of the report, the Pontifical Council calls for industries to adopt voluntary ethical codes and follow them in their daily practice (Section 19). Finally, of interest to the marketing and public policy field, the important role of the policymaker in helping set the tone for advertising is noted. Government can protect vulnerable consumers (e.g., children and older people), as well as regulate political advertising. The EIA properly notes that advertising needs the threat of regulation to “ensure that public morality and social progress are not gravely endangered” (pp. 31–32).

**Weaknesses of EIA**

The document suffers from several weaknesses that diminish its potential impact on both the advertising community and business in general. One weakness is its general nature. I understand that the intention of the Pontifical Council is to raise broad issues regarding ethics in advertising. However, specific illustrations would have added substantially to the discussion. For example, the report discusses the moral and religious harms of advertising only in a general fashion. It states that some advertising “deliberately appeals to such motives as envy, status seeking and lust” (Section 13). Although it would probably be going too far to mention companies such as Benetton by name, products such as cosmetics and personal care items that commonly use sex appeal could have provided concrete illustrations of this point.

Another weakness is that EIA mixes societal, economic, and church issues throughout. The report has multiple objectives, but it was hard to determine which issues were most central. The report discusses the use of advertising by the church for evangelization and examines a range of societal issues, from political advertising to “creating” needs, as well as the substantial economic impact of advertising. By attempting to be so far-ranging in its analysis, the overall impact of the document likely will be diminished. The monograph was also too idealistic or unrealistic in places. Some would say it even demonstrates a certain level of...
naïveté. Several of these limitations are discussed in the specific weaknesses that follow.

Finally, EIA references exclusively church documents. It is understandable that the Pontifical Council was reluctant to begin citing the secular literature. However, the manuscript would have had more credibility with those outside the Catholic Church if it recognized that many others have studied ethics in advertising previously and for an extended period of time. No mention of other work on this topic was included in the report. This appears to be a significant shortcoming.

I identify five specific weaknesses of EIA. The first weakness pertains to the section on cultural benefits of advertising (Section 7). There are undoubtedly many cultural benefits to advertising, such as creativity and entertainment, which were mentioned in the report, but the cultural benefits seem to be shortchanged. The one illustration on media presentations oriented to minorities seems somewhat of a stretch. A second specific weakness, and a rather serious one, relates to the discussion of brand-related advertising (Section 10). The report criticizes this type of advertising by indicating that it causes people to act on the basis of "irrational motives." Most advertising, however, is brand related; otherwise, companies would not invest in advertising. The type of brand advertising and identification that receives criticism in EIA appears to be the type in which

the brand defines the consumer. We are what we wear, what we eat, what we drive. Each of us in this room is a walking compendium of brands. The collection of brands we choose to assemble around us have become among the most direct expression of our individuality—or more precisely our deep sociological need to identify ourselves with others (Schor 1998, p. 57).

A third weakness of EIA is that the central role of advertising agencies (Section 14) is not mentioned explicitly. The agency business is a huge industry that is equally responsible with advertisers and the media for the ethical posture of advertising. The report uses the term "advertisers" to denote those who commission, prepare, or disseminate advertising. This description does not convey the scope of advertising accurately. Those in marketing and advertising would consider only the company whose brands are promoted as the advertiser. The fourth weakness pertains to the social responsibility theme (Section 17), which seems rather limited in its interpretation. The responsibilities that are noted are ecological ones and those dealing with "authentic and integral human development." The discussion that follows does not delineate clearly what these social responsibilities should be. Fifth, the report indicates that the public should be involved in developing ethical codes (Section 19). This suggestion appears rather naive and unrealistic. Many other stakeholders, including employees, suppliers, dealers, and even media, could have some impact, but the church leaders likely will not have a role to play if they do not join together with other recognized stakeholder groups. Although the final report contains additional weaknesses, I believe that enumerating others is counterproductive and not in the spirit of the document.

Current Status of Corporate Advertising Ethics

Although EIA did not discuss specifically the current status of ethics in advertising practice, I believe that an analysis is necessary before making any suggestions on how advertising could be improved, both in the United States and worldwide. I examine three specific topics: One deals with a survey of major corporations conducted in 1997, a second pertains to company ethics statements, and the third provides a rationale for the perceived low level of ethics regarding advertising throughout the general public.

I conducted a survey in September 1997 of large, U.S.-based companies. The sample was drawn from Forbes 500 companies, which were reported in the April issue of that magazine. A two-page survey was sent to the 785 companies appearing on that list. At the cut-off date, 198 of the firms had responded, for a response rate of 25%.

One of the questions in the survey asked whether the company's written code of ethics contained specific guidance in 14 areas, including advertising. Of the 14 categories listed, advertising ranked the lowest, with just more than 25% of the firms indicating that their code incorporated guidance on ethics in advertising. In contrast to advertising, more than 60% of the responding companies indicated that they provided specific guidance on selling practices to their employees. The most mentioned category was gift giving and receiving, with approximately 90% of the firms stating they had specific policies on that issue (Murphy, in press).

A recent book examining ethics statements of major organizations (Murphy 1998) includes five companies with exemplary statements on advertising ethics. First, the Campaign Advertising Code deals specifically with political advertising. Candidates who sign this code would refrain from negative political advertising and other approaches that were criticized in EIA (Section 11).

A second example is the Dayton-Hudson code, which includes a two-paragraph statement about advertising ethics as one of the 14 sections in its Business Conduct Guide. This section sets parameters for advertising agencies and media that seek the company's business.

A third illustration of a specific statement on advertising ethics is the Nahser Agency's short values statement, which aligns both personal and organizational values. The chief executive officer, Ron Nahser, has articulated his philosophies on advertising elsewhere (Nahser 1997), and his personal values have been featured in a book on corporate leaders (Liebig 1994).

A fourth company that makes reference to ethics in advertising is Saint Luke's, a U.K.-based firm founded by former Chiat Day executives. Its corporate credo recognizes the agency's Total Role in Society and lists ten principles that the company follows (Alburty 1997).

A fifth noteworthy ethics statement is Nalco Chemical Company's Equal Employment Opportunity Policy. In its policy, the company makes explicit reference to its advertising position. Nalco's stance on advertising seems to come closest to the aspirations of EIA. It reads as follows:

Our policy of non-discrimination is also reflected in advertising done by Nalco. We are committed to including women, racial
minorities, those over 40 years of age and persons with disabilities in our advertisements as a way of indicating publicly that we accept, serve and employ everyone equally. We are also committed to the use of minority-owned and oriented media such as newspapers and magazines for appropriate advertising messages (Murphy 1998, p. 154).

A possible reason for the lack of attention to advertising in ethics statements, as well as the generally low status of ethics in advertising, is what might be labeled an "unholy trinity" in advertising. Advertisers, agencies, and the media represent the three major parties in any advertising campaign. Among these three parties, it appears no one is willing to accept primary responsibility for raising ethical standards. Consequently, ethics in advertising is perceived to be rather low. This is borne out in Gallup's Honesty and Ethics Poll, which consistently ranks advertising as one of its lowest categories (McAneny 1995).

In an evaluation of this trinity from an ethical standpoint, three reasons may explain the current situation. First, each of the parties has multiple objectives in entering into an advertising campaign. For the advertiser, it is to sell products or create a favorable image and reinforce current consumption patterns. For the agency, it is to keep and maintain clients, express its creativity, and place advertisements in appropriate media. For the media, advertising supports the editorial portion of the business, provides entertainment to the public, and sometimes educates society. Therefore, advertising must serve many masters, and creating advertisements that depict high levels of ethics is probably not a major objective for these three groups.

Second, advertising appears, from an ethical evaluation, to strive for the lowest, rather than the highest, common denominator. Each of the parties appears to pass the responsibility to others. Although not stated explicitly in the Pontifical Council document, this point is alluded to in several places when the harms caused by advertising are delineated.

A third, and final, reason rests with the issue of power. Depending on the situation, one of the parties may have more power in the exchange, but the question is who has the most power? The large advertisers and the networks would seem to be good examples of powerful members of this trinity. Similarly, advertising agencies are consolidating to form more powerful organizations. The ethical issues relate to the power-responsibility equilibrium (Davis, Frederick, and Blomstrom 1980). If advertisers, agencies, or media are unwilling to accept their social and ethical responsibility, they are likely to lose power. When this situation occurs, regulatory agencies play a stronger role in advertising. I now turn my attention to improving the ethical posture of advertising.

**Improving Ethics in Advertising**

In the spirit of EIA, several suggestions are offered for improving the ethical practice of advertising. The first proposal deals with industry self-regulation. To improve the perception of advertising and forestall government regulation, the industry must be vigilant in policing itself. Several advertising self-regulatory initiatives currently exist. The most commonly known is the National Advertising Review Board of the Better Business Bureau in the United States and Advertising Standards Authority in the United Kingdom (Laczniak 1997; Petty 1997). They generally have been effective in regulating the advertising industry. However, if the overall ethical stance of advertising is to improve, the self-regulatory bodies not only in the United States, but also worldwide, must play a stronger role.

A second suggestion for improving the ethical posture of advertising is a strong Federal Trade Commission (FTC). The FTC is the chief regulator of marketing and advertising in the United States (Murphy and Wilkie 1990). It historically has dealt with the most aggressive forms of deceptive advertising. However, in the past several years, the FTC has taken an active role in influencing ethical, not just legal, judgments on advertising. Two of the illustrations are the FTC report on environmental problems and the recent report on privacy on the Internet (Federal Trade Commission 1998). The advertising industry needs a strong regulator that serves as a threat to police deceptive and illegal activities. Following the general philosophy of EIA, it is important that advertisers also aspire to raise the standards and not just meet the legal minimum. This notion is addressed in the subsequent suggestion.

As was mentioned previously, the EIA document uses both utilitarian and duty-based ethics as a foundation for its analysis. However, the statement does not address specifically another major ethical theory—virtue and character ethics. The vices of "envy, greed and lust" are mentioned multiple times in the EIA. However, the thrust of virtue and character ethics is that people aspire to higher levels of ethics. The emphasis on a "higher calling" seems an implicit message of EIA.

One important aspect of virtue ethics is the "ethic of the mean." This notion represents the balance idea, in which both excess and deficiency are unacceptable. If the ethic of the mean was applied to the three principles proposed by the Pontifical Council, the result should lead to the heightened ethical posture of the industry. For example, the "truthfulness in advertising" principle would state, as Aristotle did, that the deficiency of truth is deception, whereas the excess of truth is boastfulness. What is required is advertising that seeks this middle ground. Furthermore, the "dignity of the person" moral principle would benefit from the ethic of mean perspective. The advertiser that either promotes the vices of "lust, vanity, envy and greed" or attempts to exploit vulnerable groups is violating the dignity of the person. However, it seems unrealistic to assume that advertising practitioners will take a "holier-than-thou" position regarding the dignity of the person and only promote positive features. Again, the ethic of the mean logic seems appropriate.

Regarding the third moral principle of social responsibility, members of the advertising community should assume their social responsibility. Similar to the preceding line of reasoning, though, an advertising agency or media outlet that only pays attention to its social responsibility while placing its financial or economic responsibility in a secondary position likely will be unsuccessful. Therefore, the ethic of the mean appears to be an excellent benchmark that can be applied to many ethical issues in advertising.

The final suggestion for improving ethics in advertising is that both church officials and academics should take a leadership position in advocating higher standards of ethics in
this industry. The EIA report represents a positive step, and I applaud the Pontifical Council of the Catholic Church for developing and promoting this document, but churches and spokespersons from other faiths must reinforce this point. The ethical problems in advertising also reflect poorly on academics. Therefore, professors must be staunch supporters of high levels of ethics in advertising and not avoid discussing this topic with students. Unethical advertising should be criticized, and students must be made aware that higher ethical standards should be upheld. Only with a concerted effort will ethics in advertising improve in the future. Everyone involved loses with the low perception of advertising ethics by the general population.

Conclusion
This article both commends and criticizes the Pontifical Council of the Catholic Church for its treatise on Ethics in Advertising. Although the document contains several positive features, it also suffers from the limitations noted previously, which will diminish its impact. The current status of ethics in the advertising world does not appear especially favorable, both from the viewpoint of industry attention devoted to advertising ethics in company codes and in the perception of the general public, according to opinion polls. Therefore, the advertising community, public policymakers, and academics all must shoulder joint responsibility for raising advertising’s ethical standards in the future.

References