

Writing Assignments

1. Using the periodical room of your library, select two ads from a foreign magazine that are more sexually explicit than two American magazine ads for similar products. Describe the differences between these ads? What do these ads demonstrate about the social mores of the two countries?
2. Write an opposing argument to this essay in which you disagree with McCabe's fairly liberal point of view about sex in advertising.
3. Describe an event in your life when you became aware of the sexual appeal of advertising, using McCabe's service station experience as a model.
4. McCabe contends that even though "some of today's magazine advertisements may be going too far . . . [many ads are still] smart and artful, charming or entertaining" (paragraphs 29–30). Write an argument in which you take the contrary position—that is, how, in spite of the artfulness of some ads, women are demeaned when presented as sex objects to sell products.
5. Write a letter to a friend in a foreign country, possibly France or England, explaining why American advertising is so tame compared to the advertising in their country. Take a stand either defending or criticizing the tameness here.

Sex Is Still Doing the Selling

John Carroll

Like Edward A. McCabe, John Carroll is in the advertising business. Carroll is the head of his own advertising firm, Carroll Creative in Boston. Also like McCabe, Carroll is very much aware that sex sells. But unlike McCabe, Carroll deplores the practice of using women's sexuality to push products. Written in direct response to Edward McCabe, "Sex Is Still Doing the Selling," which first appeared in *The Boston Globe* in July 1992, attacks both McCabe and the ad industry for the cavalier perpetuation of what Carroll sees as demeaning and debasing sexist stereotypes.

BEFORE YOU READ

Ask yourself why a professional advertiser would criticize another practitioner of the craft. Try to anticipate Carroll's views. Try to second-guess his strategies. Would you expect Carroll to rely on logical, emotional, or ethical arguments?

AS YOU READ

Notice Carroll's technique of letting those he disagrees with indict themselves by quoting seemingly disingenuous defenses of their own practices. Do you think Carroll's characterizations of McCabe are fair? Do they strengthen or weaken Carroll's argument?

If capturing the consumer's attention is half the battle in advertising, sex is the industry's nuclear weapon. Ads for products from perfume to power tools routinely employ images of women in various states of relevance and undress. But in the wake of last year's Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas fiasco and the Navy's current Tailhook sex-abuse scandal, people inside and outside the advertising business have been taking a closer look at the way women are portrayed in ads. The chances that any significant change will occur, however, are slimmer than a high-fashion model.

Despite the tenor of the times—the back-to-basics, family values movement espoused by politicians and average Americans alike—the ad industry resolutely clings to its belief that sex sells at least as well as Bill Cosby does. The latest defense of sex in advertising appears in this month's issue of—no surprise here—Playboy magazine. Its author is longtime advertising bigfoot Ed McCabe, whose claim to fame mostly resides in recognizing Frank Perdue's uncanny resemblance to his product. McCabe's article attempts the seemingly impossible: to orchestrate a politically correct celebration of advertising's use of sex as a selling device. Sure, he says, some of it is unnecessary and tasteless, but in general we should become more like the Europeans, whose ads display "nudity in all its logical glory."

The entire article, in fact, relies on that same "yeah/but" foundation. Yes, there are abuses, and yes, too many television spots continue to demean women, and yes, even some of today's magazine advertisements may be going too far. But advertisers "are just trying to stretch the rules to attract your attention. And, to a large extent, they're doing a damned fine job of pushing the edge of the envelope that contains the rule book. A rule book that, like all rule books, is hopelessly behind the times."

What McCabe seems to be saying is that machine-tool manufacturers should avoid sexual imagery, but for perfume companies, anything goes. Dance as he might on this head of a pin, his argument is thoroughly undermined by the captions to the ads illustrating the text.

The reader is told that the offensive Swedish Bikini Team from the Old Milwaukee beer commercials has been "regrettably grounded." A man and a woman wearing nothing but ski boots represent "playful nudity." And then there's this beauty: "While some people see the use of gratuitous sexual imagery as a distraction, we view it as an unexpected bonus."

That attitude, of course, fits perfectly with the magazine's Velveeta brand of air-brushed sexuality. Ironically, the same issue also contains a pictorial "Salute to the All-American Housewife." A paean to motherhood? To community service? Nah, just the encyclopedia salesman's dream: naked women washing windows, ironing clothes, carrying bags of groceries. Processed cheese cake.

Ed McCabe certainly doesn't speak for the entire ad industry, but it's fair to say that his sentiments are shared by a majority of advertising professionals. And those sentiments aren't likely to change in the foreseeable future.

8 As advertising clutter grows, it becomes exponentially more difficult for any ad to attract attention. Not only that, many products are marketed solely to men, so even if certain ads do offend women, the impact on sales is minimal. Insensitivity to women is only part of the problem. Cold calculation plays an even bigger role.

9 Further complicating matters, it's not just unzipped flyboys like McCabe who create sexual stereotypes of women in advertising. Witness this opinion, voiced right after the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings by Cathi Mooney, chairman of a San Francisco ad agency. "I'm sure most Americans are not even paying attention" to the Thomas controversy, she told a Boston Globe reporter. "The way I do advertising is: What's going to be a strong message to the consumer? I don't want to sit there and say, 'How are we treating women?'"

10 Andrew Dice Clay on line one, Ms. Mooney.

11 On another front of the women's libido movement, Linda Bartlett Keys, a Citrus Hills, Calif., graphic designer, created an ad for QuadCache software that featured the headline "Fast and Compatible" over a black-and-white snapshot of a young woman in low-slung jeans and a checked bustier. The sub-headline read, "QuadCache Will Remind You Of Your First Date With Angela West."

12 A male executive at the company called it an effort "to inject a touch of sweet sexuality and humor into the adolescent, male-dominated computer industry. They don't call them nerds for nothing." Nothing, as it turned out, was exactly what they saw. In a highly unusual move, MacWeek magazine eliminated the snapshot and substituted the handwritten words "Photo removed by request of publisher," which roughly translates into "Your fantasy here." The censored ad was arguably more provocative than the original.

13 Although the software company agreed to the censored version, no one involved was particularly pleased with the solution. Keys expressed surprise at the negative reaction she received. "It's supposed to be funny," she said. "Every high school had a girl like that—you know, fast and compatible. People shouldn't take it so literally and seriously. It's just advertising."

Sex or Sexism?

14 "Just advertising" has a significant influence on all of us, though. Jean Kilbourne, a media critic and visiting scholar at Wellesley College, believes that advertising is one of the most powerful educational forces in our lives and a major way we learn our attitudes toward others and ourselves.

15 In "Still Killing Us Softly," a production of Cambridge Documentary Films, Kilbourne says, "What we learn [cumulatively from ads] is that woman's body is just another piece of merchandise. Not only is she a thing, she's a thing for sale. And women's bodies and products are completely interchangeable in the world of ads."

A typical example she cites is an ad that shows a woman straddling a man's out-stretched leg and pulling off his cowboy boot. "Treat 'em good and they'll treat you good," the headline promises. The copy begins, "Some men treat their boots better than their women. Not altogether admirable, but certainly understandable."

Kilbourne and other critics say this mix of sexuality and aggression doesn't necessarily cause violence, but does make us more callous to it. Much the same could be said of the advertising industry. Although protests over the depiction of women in ads have grown in recent years, the response has been tepid at best. Old Milwaukee, for one, replaced its bikini team with standard-issue footage of men hiking, camping and drinking in the great outdoors—classic malt-bonding stuff. Other advertisers have atoned for ads that offend women by employing reverse sexism and showing men as "himbos." That's nothing more than equality by subtraction, creating in the end the "double-ditz" couple.

Even the industry's efforts at self-enlightenment are prone to backfire. Bozell, a New York ad agency, recently held a seminar for its employees to try to eliminate sexism and exploitation from their advertising. According to The Wall Street Journal, "in announcing its seminar, Bozell put up in-house posters showing a grainy photograph of a woman's naked torso taken from a Calvin Klein Obsession ad. Between the woman's two erect nipples ran the line, 'Two of the points Ron Anderson will be covering at his next seminar.'"

Despite the Virginia Slims slogan, women still have a long way to go. But not as far as advertisers do—at least not as long as they continue to value a clever headline over good taste, and increased sales over basic decency.

Topical Considerations

1. In contrast to Edward McCabe, how does John Carroll view the use of sex in advertising? What current events focused attention on sex in advertising when the article was written?
2. What is Carroll's perception of *Playboy* magazine? What is your perception of this publication?
3. Carroll states in paragraph 12, "The censored ad was arguably more provocative than the original." To what is Carroll referring? Do you agree that something left to the imagination is more stimulating than "letting everything hang out"?
4. According to Carroll in the last paragraph, which are more important: clever headlines or good taste, increased sales or basic decency? Do you think that this is the usual view of advertising people?

Rhetorical Considerations

1. Contrast Carroll's use of authorities for supporting evidence with that of McCabe. Whose argument seems stronger and why?