

Sex and the older consumer

In many ways, sex is wasted on the young, and not only the young, but the young and dim-witted.

Well, at least they appear dim-witted. One Super Bowl commercial featured a big-haired sexy waitress, a geek teenager, and a pizza whose cheese-filled ends you could pull off and pop directly into your mouth. Yes, it was a totally stupid concept, and that is central to the issue here. Most television commercials are aimed at males 18-34 years old, and whether they employ sex or not, they leave the impression that the males and females in the commercials are barely smart enough to hear thunder and see lightning. I refer you to the kid for whom ordering take-out is just too much, so he consults his "Dashboard Jack" who says, "Tacos." "How many?" the kid says. "Thirty," says Dashboard Jack.

We might grieve for humanity until we remember the kid is an actor, and a good enough actor to land a spot in a national Jack-in-the-Box commercial. I would guess he actually has pretty good intellectual chops, a decent incentive level, and could play Hamlet if you asked him to.

He might also feel a twinge of conscience at partaking in a pitch that talks down to a broad demographic in order to connect with the small percentage of legitimate dimwits who are always a feature of any demographic group. But most of those kids are smart. They understand that (most) dimwit television commercials are satire; satire done with a paint roller, perhaps, but satire nonetheless.

And they like sex. Of the roughly 250 million Americans over age 15, probably 90 percent like sex, and 50 percent will admit it. Those figures are way above the maximums the media knows it needs to use sex to sell products. In television, for example, if a show gets a Nielsen rating of 10, and 3 percent of that audience responds to a commercial (actually buys the product), then everyone gets rich. Television is truly a vivid demonstration of the power of small numbers.

In the sex-fueled commercial, the targets still look moronic and the sex objects are portrayed as bimbos (female) or hunks (male). The sex objects, like any demographic group, will include its small percentage of true nitwits (Paris Hilton), but most of them, interviewed in person, may be above-ordinary in intellect and incentives. Same for the targets. They are, after all, all trained professionals.

But what about the total viewing audience? Of an audience of 20 million (the equivalent of a prime time Nielsen rating of 8 to 10) seeing the commercial, perhaps 5 percent (1 million viewers) are certifiable nitwits. That means television, talking down to reach the nitwits, has bypassed the interests of 19 million people. Is that good business? Well, yes, so long as the commercial achieves a 3 percent response.

But as an intelligent, mature man who likes sex, I cry out to the moguls: you can use sex to sell things to ME. All that sex, wasted on the YOUNG. Media stories, both print and television, have told about the “Valet Girls” now working outside trendy establishments in Los Angeles. Not young, athletic men in vests, but attractive young women in little black dresses, will park your car. There is cultural-based debate about the future of the idea. A Los Angeles columnist, Joel Stein, said maybe in L.A., but not in the middle of the country, where people “aren’t interested in beautiful women”. Excuse me, as a middle-of-the-country native, if I ask Joel Stein what planet he is from. My wife, additionally, who is gorgeous (and sexy) (and smart) lived for a decade in the middle of the country and received two or three proposals of marriage daily.

In the stories, the Valet Girls, all twenty-somethings, come off as bimbos, but that is only the usual commercial stereotyping. We don’t know anything about them, until we talk to them. And, again, the effort is wasted on the young. Certainly, I would think it interesting to watch long legs in a black skirt open my car door, but I would ask her the same question I ask every beautiful young twenty-something that I encounter in the trades: “Are you still in school?” Eighty percent of them are. Some of them have been my students. Another 10 percent have graduated but are doing this trick while they look for a job commensurate with their degrees.

I want an older woman. In my mind’s eye, I am assembling an outline of an hour-long television program that would be impractical now (expense per viewer) but will become possible in the looming Web-based world, where expense per viewer may be only 10 percent of what it is now. The program would provide depth to current events, the same way MSNBC’s “Countdown” follows up the “Evening News,” and it would be informed and intellectual, but looser and more collegial than the Lehrer product. And it would have sex. I say sex, but what I really mean is sensuality, which lets the players keep the game going as long as they want to.

Such programs already employ sex to attract males. Pay attention to the beautiful women, both hosts and guests, on network and cable news, and keep a count of the leg shots on the “Today” show alone. Does Katie Couric really have more shoes than Imelda Marcos? But I’m not talking about Katie Couric or Elizabeth Vargas (ho hum) or (eek!) Rita Cosby. I want Susan Sarandon in a gray business suit, white blouse, red cloud of hair, hem two inches above the knee, black nylons and black business pumps, casually engaging guests and correspondents in the events of the day. I guarantee she could sell me a Carl’s Jr. Breakfast Burger.

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