

Ban on junk food advertising is misguided

 By [Chris Mberdyk](#)

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A strident call this week from a group of "influential international obesity experts" meeting at a global conference in Australia, to the World Health Organisation to ban junk food advertising, is another voice adding to the demand for action by the WHO to stop the world from eating itself to death.

Only a few weeks ago data from a recent survey showed that in spite of all the abject global poverty, more than half of the world's population right now is obese.

Bans inevitable

And just as tobacco ads are banned virtually worldwide now, along with advertising to children under the age of 16 in many countries in the European Union and the impending restrictions on liquor advertising, so too is a ban on junk food ads in most developed countries and our own nanny state as inevitable as sunrise.

What I find infuriating is not only that these ad bans amount to selective morality of the worst possible kind, but that the advertising industry in this country doesn't seem to protest too much when Government threatens to chip away at its lifeblood.

One has to question the motives of politicians when it comes to banning ads. Because they know perfectly well that banning advertising is simply the easy way out. It is a politically correct action that negatively impacts on only a tiny minority of voters - the businesses concerned and the ad industry - who generally just lie down and play dead anyway.

Safe bet

So Government has no fear whatsoever of toyi-toying protest marches, losing too many contributions to party funds at election time and are absolutely guaranteed to have the support of the vast majority of voters.

Simply because the advertising industry in most countries has done such an appalling job at educating the consumer into what advertising is actually all about, the general impression of the average Joe right now is that it is a trivial pursuit and complete waste of money.

Just listen to any phone-in show on a talk radio station when the subject of advertising is raised to get a very clear picture of how ignorant the public is with regard to advertising and just how inconsequential advertising is, in their opinion, in the greater scheme of economic things.

No parental control

Governments, the WHO and other organisations that choose advertising bans as the easy way out must surely know that the reason children particularly gush themselves on fast foods is simply because there is a complete lack of parental control and not because kids blindly follow everything advertising tell them to do.

Right now one of the biggest problem the mass media in South Africa has (and presumably it's the same in many other countries) is that they battle like nobody's business to reach the 16 -24 year old age group.

And if the mass media can't reach these kids, then how on earth is advertising managing to influence them? Research is already showing that things that are popular with kids today - iPods, cellphones, SMS-ing and Mxit along with current teenage clothing fashions - do not result from ad campaigns but rather peer pressure.

Close down outlets

Banning junk food ads aimed at adults will not make an iota of difference either because the addicts are just that - already addicts. The only thing that will make them curtail consumption of junk food is if the fast food outlets are closed down. And even then they'd probably make up their own - the fixings of which are readily available at any supermarket.

Which means that if the WHO want to stamp out obesity it will have to try some other way of persuading kids to stop eating themselves to death. Banning ads isn't going to achieve anything because kids aren't even seeing the ads let alone reacting to them.

Parental cop-out

What is happening in this country right now is that all these strident calls to ban advertising comes from parents who are trying to get government to take responsibility for bringing up their kids. Parents who are probably too damn busy or just plain scared of confronting their own kids and start laying down the law in terms of social behaviour and eating habits.

That too is the problem with the ad industry. Everyone in it is so busy with day-to-day survival or greed, depending on whether they are in a boom or recession, that they simply do not have the time nor the inclination to either protest government intentions to ban advertising, nor to knuckle down and educate the public about just how important advertising is to the economy.

I remember about the years ago talking to Independent Newspapers chief executive in South Africa, Ivan Fallon, about the then impending ban on tobacco. I asked him why the media industry was not contesting this more vigorously and his response was that a ban on tobacco was inevitable and that no amount of protest would stop it from happening.

He also commented that the media and ad industry should let Government have its tobacco bans because even though it meant losing hundreds of millions in advertising revenue, there were always new products such as cellphones coming on to the market that would fill the gap in adspend. He was convinced that the ad bans would stop at tobacco and go no further. .

The problem is, now that governments have got onto an ad banning roll and have found it to be a politically safe thing to do, they will not stop at tobacco, liquor, junk food and advertising to children.

What next?

Already more products are being earmarked - dairy products and motor cars being just two of many already identified.

How long before hordes more foodstuffs and other products are added to the list - sugar, confectionary, potato chips, soft drinks.? Television ? Motor bikes?

Because the problem is that overdoing the consumption of anything is not good for any human being and right now advertising is being accused of forcing people to consume more than they should.

Oh how marketers wish that advertising was that powerful.

ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK

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