

# TO SELL, AT ANY COST

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"I am sick of cricket", a young man is depicted stating in one of the hundreds of advertisements that assault us with regularity these days. People may not be sick of cricket yet, irrespective of India's fortunes or misfortunes in the World Cup, but I am sure many people are sick of the advertisements. In fact, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Nawaz Sharif, apparently appealed for a ban on advertising during the cricket on the government-controlled television. The market, of course, will never permit this. How will we have cricket, or any sport for that matter, if we don't have advertising?

Admittedly, some of the advertisements specially planned for the cricket season are clever, funny and even entertaining. But several need to be seriously questioned for their content. In an endeavor to be "sporty" during the World Cup, some advertising agencies seem to have gone a bit too far.

Take the advertisement for a popular brand of television, for instance. You have this individual bungee jumping from the top of a high-rise, hanging upside down, and watching a match on someone else's television. The woman sitting in front of the television—a caricature of the couch potato—looks coy rather than alarmed at this intrusion.

Another, for the same product, has a man free—falling from a high rise building, landing on a trampoline on which he continues to bounce several floors high (suggesting a degree of athleticism clearly not evident in the choice of the model) to watch a match in someone's apartment.

Both advertisements flash a message that people should not attempt doing what is shown in the visual. But the message goes by faster than it takes to blink. If it is aimed at children, then it is certainly far from satisfactory as only the quickest eye will be able to read that message.

Why should major Indian companies resort to such irresponsible advertising?

There are at least two more advertisements in a similar vein that are objectionable from the point of view of their impact on children. And to argue that children are not affected is beside the point. Some child somewhere will be affected, as has already been evident with

the impact of "Shaktimaan" on children. That alone should be enough to deter advertising agencies from producing advertisements that depict perfectly ordinary looking individuals performing stunts that even professional stuntmen would find difficult.

One of the other questionable advertisements is for a scooter. You see a young boy intensely watching a cricket match through a window of someone's apartment. The problem is that the boy, leaning on the balcony railing, is not standing on the street outside. He is, in fact, one floor above the street, perched on the shoulders of a man, who sits on another, who sits on another, who sits on the shoulders of a man on a running scooter. The boy is watching the match through a window and relaying the score. Funny? Perhaps, depending on your sense of humour. But can you visualise young boys attempting to do precisely this and ending up with broken bones? Almost certainly.

And without sounding like a spoil sport in this season of cricket, finally the mad dare-devilry of Salmon Khan, all for a fizz drink, cannot pass without a comment. Is life really so desperate?

Advertisers will say that the very fact a viewer recalls these advertisements and the product means that they have done their job well. But is their job only to sell, or is it incumbent on them to take some responsibility, specially towards thousands of young viewers who are drinking in the cricket and the messages from the advertisements? A young person will remember the stunt, not the product.

In the early 1980s, many women's groups had begun raising objections to the depiction of women in advertisements. In several instances, newspapers had to agree to refuse such advertisements. The pressure on responsible advertising agencies did make some difference.

What is deplorable today is that in the desperation to sell at any cost, even if sex is not used in quite the same way as it used to in the past, other irresponsible tricks such as those mentioned above are used. To me this represents an absence of imagination, apart from an irresponsible attitude towards the inevitable fallout of the messages such advertisements contain.

Perhaps we need a campaign to protect our children now. ■