

## ORDINARY POST

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# WHY ADVERTISING IS GETTING MORE SOCIALLY INCLUSIVE

In its new advertisement released last month, tea brand Brooke Bond Red Label from the Hindustan Unilever Ltd stable, featured an elderly woman who suffers from Alzheimer's. She is tended to by her neighbour, whom she mistakes for her son as the young man often drops by to share a cup of tea with her. Titled "Forgotten", the heartwarming ad shows how people with a neurological ailment like Alzheimer's face social alienation.

This isn't the first time that Red Label has brewed a socially inclusive piece of advertising. Its "Six pack band" video on India's first transgender band won the prestigious Glass Lion award at the Cannes Grand Prix last year. More recently, another ad from cough and cold brand Vicks (from Procter and Gamble) focuses on a transgender mother and her young daughter. The digital film titled "Touch of Care" also takes an inclusive approach and deals with the sensitive subject of transgender rights in India.

Interestingly, advertising of late is increasingly, truly, more inclusive and socially representative, featuring single mothers, differently abled people, transgenders, special children and much else. It highlights issues and themes that were earlier alien to brands and advertisers, who were more clichéd and conformist in their communication. Clearly, the messaging is moving beyond pretty pictures and perfect families. So whether it was a class full of special children in the Lenovo Yoga commercial last year or the eBay Things Don't Judge ad which featured a gay couple, a male kathak dancer and a Muslim woman celebrating Diwali, there is more slice-of-life advertising which is realistic and all-encompassing. Brands, looking beyond society stereotypes, are not fighting shy of diversity in their communication.

It's not difficult to see the reasons behind this change. For a start, society itself is changing. "There is a lot of acceptance. Of course there is a lot of intolerance too. But notwithstanding that, young people are expressing their voice. The attitude of people to different issues is changing," says K.V. Sridhar, founder of the creative outfit Hyper Collective.

There are indeed more conversations around subjects like gender equality, transgender rights, differently abled people and other relevant social concerns. According to Santosh Padhi, chief creative officer and co-founder at Taproot Dentsu, advertising is more realistic and more human now. "We always try and portray things that people care about or that they follow. Brands have to catch and present the flavour of the season in an engaging, interesting way. And the conversations being presented are happening right now. We can't push things down people's throats," he says.

However, Bobby Pawar, managing director and chief creative officer at Publicis South Asia, feels that the advertising being generated stems from the brands' need to have a purpose. "And brands find a purpose which is relevant to their DNA. Vicks, for instance, is related to care for the family. It reflects upon mother and child relationship. This time it found a different mother. So that comes from its DNA." Agrees Sridhar who says that brands must play a role in a consumer's life: "The value a brand lives by should be common to my values. However, in the case of the latest Vicks ad, the focus is wider and the brand says it cares about all families irrespective of the gender. It does not discriminate. So it is a much wider value."

There may be societal friction and cultural differences, but the brand, Vicks in this case, takes a stand. The point of view is important here, says Sridhar, adding that there's not just market leadership but thought leadership as well. Agrees Pawar: "Advertising, at most times, reflects society, sometimes it leads it."

Why advertising may be changing is also because brands desperately need to connect with people. They need to build affinity in an age where the buying experience is moving online leaving fewer opportunities for emotional touch points. So if brands are talking to millennials, these are the issues that are important to them. There are other reasons as well. Swati Bhattacharya, chief creative officer, FCB Ulka India, says in the world we live in today everyone has access to different stories thanks to digital media. "We are constantly sharing different stories. But there's hunger for more. Brands have realised that only the most unusual and best stories will survive. So they have to excite or completely touch somebody deeply or nudge the society in a particular direction," she says.

Besides, great stories can also be differentiators for brands to stand out in a clutter where they are being commoditized. "The ideas behind more inclusive advertising is to be top of mind, be a better story teller and get the best recall," says Padhi, adding that today people appreciate diversity. Women's rights, child education, gay rights, cleanliness are issues they empathise with.

To be sure, India struggles with a lot of issues. "And brands taking up these issues is not a bad thing. Advertising influences people. It can help change behaviour even if it has a subtle impact," says Padhi.

*Shuchi Bansal is Mint's media, marketing and advertising editor. Ordinary Post will look at pressing issues related to all three. Or just fun stuff.*

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