Food Ethics Council

Food choices, advertising and ethics

What role for advertising in moving towards an ethical food system?

A report of the Business Forum meeting on Tuesday 24th March 2015

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About the Business Forum

Ethical questions around climate change, obesity and new technologies are becoming core concerns for food businesses. The Business Forum is a seminar series intended to help senior executives learn about these issues. Membership is by invitation only and numbers are strictly limited.

The Business Forum meets six times a year for an in-depth discussion over an early dinner at a London restaurant.

To read reports of previous meetings, visit foodethicscouncil.org/businessforum.

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Introduction

Advertising exerts a hugely powerful influence over people's behaviours; an influence that is increasingly being challenged. The relationship between food advertising and society's ills – from health and well-being to food poverty and environmental degradation – is under the spotlight as never before.

How can the food advertising industry shake off its tarnished image and become a force for good in society? Can it be harnessed to drive the shift to an ethical food system, or will it always be seen to pull in the opposite direction? What does the future of advertising look like when it is hitched to a consumer culture that is itself unsustainable?

The March 2015 meeting of the Business Forum explored the impacts food advertising has had on society, and the extent to which advertising may have been responsible for some of the food-related problems that exist today. It asked whether too much food choice has created growing anxiety amongst citizens and what might be needed in order for food advertising to play a net positive role developing a sustainable food system.

We are grateful to our keynote speakers, Craig Mawdsley (Joint Chief Strategy Officer at AMV BBDO), Renata Salecl (Slovene philosopher, sociologist and legal theorist from the University of Ljubljana and professor of the School of Law, Birkbeck College) and Jon Alexander (Founder of the New Citizenship Project and member of the Food Ethics Council). The meeting was chaired by Geoff Tansey, trustee of the Food Ethics Council.

The report was prepared by Anna Cura, Liz Barling and Dan Crossley, and outlines points raised during the meeting. The report does not necessarily represent the views of the Food Ethics Council, the Business Forum, or its members.

Key Points

- Over simplistic notions of 'good' and 'bad' food – and 'good' and 'bad' advertising – can be unhelpful.

- When considering advertising power, it is helpful to distinguish between *qualitative* and *quantitative* issues – the *type* and the *amount* of advertising. With the former, it was argued that the messages used in advertising do not always support communal or societal aims – although some might argue that 'shooting the messenger' is not necessarily helpful. The *quantitative* issue is around the sheer *amount* of advertising, which can dilute or confuse a message, whether positive *or* negative. It was suggested that advertising was perhaps better regarded and more trusted when there was less of it than there is now.

- Arguably, food advertising comes with more responsibility than advertising across some other sectors, as food directly affects people's health and wellbeing, and is closely linked to societal issues such as animal welfare and environmental degradation.

- In parts of society, there seems to be an increasing obsession with food, most visibly with the exponential rise of celebrity chef culture.

- The theory behind the Paradox of choice is that the more choices we are faced with, the more anxious we become. And when we are anxious (as we increasingly are), we tend to be very passive as social subjects/ citizens. Every choice made implies a loss somewhere else, and there is a growing sense that people have lost their ability to choose – not just in the supermarket, but also in the ballot box.

- Should there be 'advertising-free' zones? Should advertising be limited in certain *places* (for example only healthy foods to be served at sporting events), at certain *times*, and/ or for certain *groups* (for example children). Simply banning food advertisements *on its own* is unlikely to make a huge difference, as advertising is only one factor amongst many in terms of influencing food habits and cultural change.

- Demonising advertising does not seem to have had much effect to date. Whilst it is important to challenge the fundamental role and purpose of advertising, there is surely a need to engage with progressive people in the advertising industry about what *positive* contributions advertising can make to fair and sustainable food and farming.

Advertising power

The term 'advertising' is broader and more complex than many realise. It relates to a wide variety of activities from paid marketing to unpaid PR. Whilst there is a tendency to see advertising as a 'vanity cost' for businesses, it is important in helping to build brand awareness and reputation, and in levering competition. However, there is a skewed perception as to how much advertising influences what people buy and eat. For instance, it was argued that it only accounts for 4% of variability of sales. It was reported that evidence suggests there is no correlation between where advertising spend goes with what people buy – although some may dispute this.

There are two issues to consider when talking about advertising power. Firstly, there is the **qualitative issue.** It is argued that the messages often used in advertising may not support communal or societal aims. Others argue that shooting the messenger is not helpful. It is not the *product* that is unhealthy or dangerous or antisocial, it is *how it is used*.

Secondly, there is a **quantitative issue** around the sheer amount of advertising, which can dilute or confuse a message, whether positive *or* negative. It was suggested that advertising was better regarded and more trusted when there was less of it.

Arguably, the role of food advertising comes with more responsibility than advertising across other sectors. Food directly affects people's health and wellbeing, and can also be linked to other societal issues from animal welfare to environmental degradation. If one accepts this responsibility, then advertising has a key role to play in promoting healthy and sustainable food choices. However, it must be remembered that it is only one of many ways to help create sustainable food systems.

Beyond quick fix

Advertising operates in a world predicated on growth. Yet some progressive businesses are telling investors that a continual drive for growth compromises long-term business security. How might advertising respond to this emerging shift in perspective?

It was argued that advertising could take a long-term approach which would support more sustainable decision-making by customers, rather than 'quick fix' advertising, which remains widespread. Advertising could also boost brands' moral messaging. Many major brands are already embracing longer term,

responsible positions, and their associated advertising focuses on these 'positive goods'. Examples include Mars' 'Doing-good marketing'[1] which illustrates the shift in marketing strategies in the industry. Could advertising agencies more strongly encourage food brands to develop sustainable and responsible business models?

Beyond good and bad

Food choices beg questions. What makes a food 'good' or 'bad'? Is a high salt content worse than saturated fat? Are 'healthy' foods more expensive, and if so what are the ethical implications of denying them to low-income families?

It was reported that there has recently been a rise in the association of good and bad food with being a 'good' or 'bad' person, and a rise in the "wellness syndrome". It was explained that *feeling* good is increasingly associated with *being* good. One such example is Sainsbury's 'Be Good to Yourself' range of diet foods. Gluten and dairy free diets are also on the rise, with marketing supporting the view that this is the 'good' or healthy option.

Has advertising played a significant role in this redefinition of 'good' and 'bad' food? Some would argue not so much – after all, advertising might spark debate, but the arena for discussion is the media, on social networks, or over the garden fence. This is associated with an increasing obsession with food, such as in the exponential rise of celebrity chef TV shows and recipe books. It was argued that these shows are popular because they stand in for individuals doing the 'right' thing regarding food.

There has been a shift in societal anxiety over the past half century. There has been a collective move away from worries about external threats such as nuclear attacks that were prevalent up to the 1980s. From the 1990s onwards food scandals like BSE and Foot and Mouth have positioned some foods as 'the enemy'. Recent cuts in food safety budget cuts can only emphasise this perceived danger. This has given rise to distrust amongst some of large food retailers, and to sanctions and prohibitions – mostly self-imposed. People may not feel able to control external pressures in their lives, but they can control their food.

Rational choices?

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[1] http://www.mars.com/global/about-mars/mars-pia/our-brands/cause-marketing.aspx

As has been seen with climate change, there is an increasingly fractious debate over the science that defines whether a food is good for you or not. Advertising has historically prided itself on its neutrality, and often assumes that people can make rational choices. In effect, advertising is predicated on utilitarianism - the doctrine that 'the moral action is the one that maximises utility' (whether defined as pleasure, economic wellbeing or the lack of suffering).

However, this assumption may not be true for food. The link between food and desire has long been acknowledged. More recently research has studied the cycle of consumption, desire, anxiety, sense of guilt, addiction and a need to regain control.

What is interesting is that utilitarianism does not work in the context of addiction. Instead people will stick with pain no matter how irrational. This could, some say, create an argument for advertising to move to a less neutral stance and tap into a new morality for positive incentives. The question was raised as to whether food choices would be talked about in the same context if 'sugar addiction' was recognised as a genuine problem.

The power of choice
The theory behind the Paradox of choice is that the more choices we are faced with, the more anxious we become. And when we are anxious (as we increasingly are), we tend to be very passive as social subjects/ citizens. Every choice made implies a loss somewhere else, and there is a growing sense that people have lost their ability to choose – not just in the supermarket, but also in the ballot box.

If it is difficult enough to make choices that affect our own bodies, it is even harder to make choices that affect communities or society as a whole. When it comes to food, should people think in the context of the individual or society? How they make that choice can depend on various factors, including what others are choosing and what is perceived as "good".

Morality has increasingly been linked with food in recent years, with debates about what is 'good' and what is 'bad'. The diet industry is one of the fastest growing sectors despite many people putting weight back on quickly. It was argued that there is a prevailing sense that people to need to de-clutter and to cleanse themselves of 'bad' emotions, and that citizens are in trouble and need to find some kind of 'peace'.

There are other factors that affect individual choice, but they can be subtle influences. In food, pricing and promotion is argued to play a large role in whether people buy a product or not. This could mean that there are opportunities for the marketing industry to help people make 'good' decisions (although 'good' for society or the individual is a moot point).

But manipulating citizens to make 'good' choices could be argued to deny them agency – effectively assuming that the individual is not capable of making a choice. There is an argument for allowing people to make their own informed choices and giving them the opportunity to understand the implications of these choices. Some say this worked with tobacco (although other factors played a huge role in reducing smoking levels – including taxes), so it may work for food too.

Some businesses are taking steps intended to help parents make healthier choices, such as McDonald's and its "Free Fruit Fridays", although such moves are not without criticism.

Choice inequality
If the dynamics of choice were not complicated enough, choice *inequality* adds a new dimension. People's food choices have been linked to the demographics and the stratification of wealth, although considering the social range of citizens, it is hard to generalise. Those on lowest incomes are often perceived to have limited dietary choices, prioritising calorie intake over taste and pleasure. There is however an inequality of opportunity, which suggests that poverty eradication could have the biggest impact on other issues such as education.

Consumers versus citizens
In today's society, it would seem that society is increasingly called upon to act as *consumers*, who tend to be less environmentally conscious, and not as *citizens*. This results in people becoming increasingly passive when it comes to social decisions. What would society look like if we talked about food issues as citizens? Being a good citizen is not just about making the right choices, but also about shaping the range of choices available in the first place. And when it comes to children, what are the implications of getting them to identify themselves as consumers? The question was asked as to how genuine creativity might be applied to citizen participation in relation to food.

In other countries, citizen participation has influenced markets. In Switzerland, there was a referendum on

the minimum gate price for milk. In Bhutan, cigarettes were banned following a citizen vote.

A new era for advertising
The advertising landscape is changing. While it may shift in form or shape, it is unlikely to go away. We are already seeing a shift towards watching TV on 'catch up' and avoiding adverts, and accessing news and entertainment online. Some predict that advertising as we know it will collapse and change dramatically with the arrival of new technologies (as observed with the music industry). If the TV is removed, it will create a very different playing field for the industry and could cause dramatic culture change. But it is questionable whether we understand what needs to change in the system or what is at the root of the problem.

It was suggested that it may be worth increasing advertising awareness and literacy, to understand what messages are trying to really do. For example, the shopping environment affects shopping behaviour, but do customers know? If you want to educate kids about advertising, one argument put forward was that they should be exposed from a young age (appropriately). Media-smart is the latest version of media-literacy. There is a new generation growing up that will have the technological tools to avoid adverts, an issue that is seen as a real threat to the industry. Whilst the space covered by social media and the internet is covered by advertising codes of practice, by their nature it is difficult to know the age of those using the media and so arguably young people today are less protected from aggressive or inappropriate advertising than they were when entertainment came primarily from the TV. What role is there not just for *advertising* literacy, but for *brand* and indeed *capitalist* literacy?

Some argue that there should be clearer lines between what an advert *is* and what it is *not*. People often believe that advertising is a magic wand that will solve all our problems, but there is a need to understand what the roles of advertising and marketing *are*, and *should be*. Advertising could be used more explicitly to promote better lifestyles.

Possible interventions
Different interventions could create cultural and societal shifts - some which might accelerate the transition towards a sustainable food system; others that slow it down. As with any behavioural change, it is important to target specific changes at specific audiences, and then to work out what strategies might be most effective for them, rather than applying a broad brush approach.

"Offsetting" (i.e. doing "good" advertising to balance out "bad" advertising somewhere else) as a strategy was not generally felt to be appropriate, as it allows 'bad' advertising to continue guilt-free.

The question was raised as to whether further regulation is needed, given that advertising is already quite heavily regulated. Should there be 'advertising-free' zones? Should advertising be limited in certain *places* (e.g. only healthy foods be served at sporting events), at certain *times*, and for certain *groups* (e.g. children)? It was argued however, that simply banning food adverts *on its own* is unlikely to make a huge difference, as food habits are driven by many factors.

Culture change
Could there be a shift from a culture of *consumption* to a culture of *enough*? What will it take for there to be a seismic shift in the way corporations operate, including the range of products they are selling and why they promote and advertise them – recognising that culture change tends to happen slowly?

More often than not, advertising is blamed for what may be considered "bad choices". However, it can be useful to think of culture change as a team game, with perhaps advertising as its popular star – part of the 'team', but not its *only* member. As for cigarettes, it was suggested that culture change happened due to a restriction on use and health and safety messaging.

Advertising is part of today's culture and arguably, when used positively, it could enrich culture. NGOs and governments could use advertising more effectively to change behaviours and to nudge people towards sustainable life choices. It is important to think what specific changes people want and to collectively work out how to make those changes happen. How can individuals be empowered so they feel able to participate in a better food system?

Reflections
Demonising advertising does not seem to have had much effect to date. Whilst it is important for some to challenge the fundamental role and purpose of advertising (particularly in relation to advertising to children), there is surely a need to engage with progressive people in the advertising industry about what *positive* contributions advertising can make to fair and sustainable food and farming.

Speaker biographies

Renata Salecl is a philosopher and sociologist. She is Senior Researcher at the Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law, Ljubljana, Slovenia and Professor at the School of Law, Birkbeck College, University of London. She is also recurring Visiting Professor at Cardozo School of Law, New York. Her last book is Tyranny of Choice, London, Profile Books, 2010. Her previous books include On Anxiety (Routledge, 2004) and (Per)versions of Love and Hate (Verso, 1998). Her work focuses on the studies of ideology, as well questions of subjectivity in today's time. In 2013 she was a speaker at TED Global. In her home country, Slovenia, she was named Woman Scientist of the Year, as well as Woman of the Year.

Craig Mawdsley, Joint Chief Strategy Officer runs AMV BBDO's strategic output, in partnership with Bridget Angear. Craig and Bridget have been voted London's #1 strategists three years in a row (a unique achievement), as well as building the AMV strategy department to Cannes Effectiveness Grand Prix's, IPA Effectiveness Agency of the year and APG Creative Strategy Agency of the Year. For Craig it all began at Bath University with a Business degree and then a 10 year stint at Saatchi & Saatchi, working on most of the brands in the agency, including Visa, Sony and P&G. For the next 10 years at AMV, Craig has led the strategy on organisations including Mercedes, Sainsbury's, The National Lottery, BT, The Economist, Eurostar and Cancer Research UK. Craig is one of the few planners to have won the Grand Prix at APG and The Marketing Society and the Marketing Week Engage Awards.

Jon Alexander is founder of the New Citizenship Project, a thinktank and consultancy specialising in promoting the role of the individual in society beyond that of the Consumer. Jon worked for a decade in advertising and marketing with a continual bent to finding ways to apply the skills of the industry for genuinely positive social and environmental ends. He piloted an idea called MyFarm with the National Trust in 2010, an early experiment in promoting participation rather than consumption. This led Jon on to Project Wild Thing, a feature length documentary project which led to the establishment of the Wild Network, a collaboration of over 1,500 organisations committed to tackling issues around reconnecting children with nature. Jon is a passionate believer in the power of creative thinking, but an equally passionate advocate of thinking harder than we currently do as a society about how we use that power. He has had several appearances on Radio 4 and a forthcoming TEDx talk, and holds three Master's degrees, in Classics, Responsibility and Business Practice, and Global Ethics and Human Values. Jon is a member of the Food Ethics Council.

Geoff Tansey is a freelance writer and consultant on food, agriculture and related intellectual property issues. He has degrees in Soil Science, and History and Social Studies of Science. He is an honorary research fellow in the Department of Peace Studies, Bradford University and honorary fellow at the Centre for Rural Economy, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne. His books include The future control of food, co-edited with Tasmin Rajotte, and The food system: a guide, with Tony Worsley. In June 2005, he received one of six Joseph Rowntree 'Visionaries' Awards, and won the Derek Cooper Award for best food campaigner/educator in the 2008 BBC Radio 4 Food and Farming Awards. He curates the new online Food Systems Academy, an open education resource for transforming our food systems, and chairs the Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty. Geoff is a Trustee of the Food Ethics Council.