

IT-enabled marketing

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The world of marketing has always struggled to establish a favourable reputation in the eyes of the public. Whether it is reasonable for the public to be wary of all marketing is debatable. What is certain though is that it only takes one thing to damage a favourable or improving reputation to the point where that reputation may never be recovered. This edition of ETHicol discusses two examples of questionable IT-enabled practice in the world of marketing which appear to hold marketing in unfavourable light.

The first example concerns the marketing organisation Metronomy. Information on its website (www.metronomy.com) explains that, "Metronomy is an innovative desktop marketing concept that aims to bring TV quality advertisements into peoples' homes via a PC. This allows advertisers to show fully interactive TV-quality adverts to specifically targeted households." The company states that it will give "households a free IBM PC for 3 years in exchange for their pledge to watch up to 3 minutes of advertising per hour on the PC screen." This is a commitment to 1080 hours of viewing.

Details about the household and its members must be submitted to Metronomy as part of the application process. Households must agree to connect to the Internet at least once per month and must subscribe to an Internet Service Provider for 36 months. A monthly update of advertisements will be sent to households each month and must be installed within 7 days in order for the PC to remain operational.

PCs will be monitored to ensure households fulfil their advertisement viewing obligations. Other details will not be monitored. All users' personal information will be kept confidential. A monthly update confirming household viewing patterns will be automatically sent to Metronomy. This will be used together with consumer type and location data to tailor the advertisement updates on the CD ROM sent each month to households.

There are many issues raised by this new form of interactive marketing directly into the home. Vulnerable people are likely to be attracted by the lure of a free PC without realising the hidden costs of committing to 36 months of ISP subscriptions and the need to insure the PC. It is unclear what happens to the information either supplied by households or collected automatically. It is unclear what data is recorded about PC usage. There is no clear information that advertisements will be targeted based on collected information. There is no stated privacy policy. There are no published policies for handling complaints or dispute resolution. There are no details of how breaches in contract by the householder will be dealt with.

In an article written by Jo Best for silicon.com, John Thornhill, chief executive of Metronomy is reported as saying, "Metronomy believes that the offer of a free PC will benefit millions of UK households. We are delighted to be working with some of the world's leading media and technology companies including IBM, Omnicom and Interpublic, whose support has been instrumental in developing this ground-breaking initiative." The implication of this being a social good is very misleading. This is simply a new form of marketing attractive to many suppliers of goods and services who can see the benefit of using enticing and interactive advertising directly into the homes of specifically targeted households. Metronomy have a responsibility to ensure people fully understand the proposition that is being offered. Currently the information supplied on their website falls way short of fulfilling this obligation. The one thing households should remember is there is no such thing as a free PC!

The second example concerns the use of digital images to market products and goods. In a recent article for the Guardian, Sean Dodson discusses the latest generation of digital images of females and their sense of realism with the inclusion of human blemishes. So realistic are these images that they are now being used as a marketing tool.

Dodson writes, "On television adverts, in movies and, very soon, on your mobile phone, the use of ever more complicated digital models is becoming more commonplace. In Germany, the design studio NoDNA is populating European interactive TV channels with a procession of virtual presenters. In France, the digital model Eve Solal has been signed by the Ford model agency and she even has her own Saturday morning radio show. Closer to home, the DA group of Glasgow produce what it describes as a range of "interactive agents". It, too, has a virtual pop star in the form of Tmmy (pronounced "Timmy") and it has also recently created Seonaid, an online news presenter for the Scottish Executive. The company's next plan is to bring digital models to mobile phones with a range of avatars that will perform instant messaging tasks. In Japan, digital models have been used to sell anything from cosmetics to computers to cash loans."

Whilst animation of digital models is still in its infancy, static images are often mistaken for real people; for example, a group of 100 students were unable to distinguish correctly between real and digital images in set of 12 pictures. What is certain is that digital models will be increasingly used in the marketing of all sorts of products and services. The concern is that these images are always of females suitably created to have maximum appeal. They are designed to prey on our desires and egos. It is only a matter of time before the animated digital model will be indistinguishable from the real form. How will they be used by marketing to entice us to purchase goods and services that we perhaps neither need nor can afford?

The two examples illustrate how marketing can use IT to increase its power and influence over the consumer. The balance between the acceptable and the unacceptable has become more acute. The responsibilities and obligations of marketing in the information age needs to be redefined and accepted by all those working in the area.

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

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