

The power of 'illusions'...

- The evolution of marketing
- Ethics? What ethics? ...

So let it be known for the record that I do not watch *Generations*. It so happens that I know certain things that happen on the show by ... let's say, default. So there is a certain commercial bank in South Africa that just launched a new tagline – very nice I think. It really talks to banking and what we want from banks besides the loans and credit cards of course – I really really like it. Now, the question of it suiting that particular bank is an issue for discussion on another day.

It seems that the concept of product placement has been taken to another level. So yes, the other night when I sort of watched *Generations*, they aired that bank's ad for the first time at the same time that New Horizons was celebrating the launch of a successful campaign. That I must say was just classic.

Product placement on TV shows and movies is nothing new. If you recall that Jim Carey flick where he discovered that his life was actually one big ad where all he did was endorse all these different products – the cereal he ate, the toothpaste he used and all that. Yes, the Truman Show is what it's called. I'm sure we all agree that this is a very powerful tool of communicating how good one's product is. But I also wonder if it is completely 'morally' appropriate or were we views just beign exploited. Remember on *The Simpsons* – Homer wearing that 'Free Truman' t-shirt? Coincidence?

A few years back there was a character on *Generations* named *Ntsiki Lukele* – really hope that is how you spell the name but Pamela Nomvete to simplify things. She was attacked by people on the streets because they hated *Nsiki* from the show, because of her scheming ways. Relevance? Some people cannot differentiate what is real and what is not with regards to TV – they dive in shoes and all. As much as the products placed on these shows are real and some are admittedly quite good – the manner in which they are communicated can get people hooked without them noticing. So successful product placement hence increased sales, I'm sure this is mission accomplished for the Marketing or PR dude behind the scenes. But is it really not borderline deliberately or negligently misleading the consumer? Think about it for a second, well actually a minute.

I asked Tony Koenderman of the *Finweek* (he's the guy who does the annual *AdReview* and has a weekly column in the *Finweek* on advertising, its trends etc), his thoughts on product placement and he had this to say; "Product placement has become widely accepted as a marketing tactic, and the more subtle it is the more it is admired. For example when it is woven into the story in an entirely natural way. But I am concerned that it is deceptive. If people don't realise they are receiving a marketing message they will not apply the same critical appraisal that they apply to advertising. This means they are more easily misled. Another problem is that product placement is usually done on an exclusive basis, other competitors are not given equal opportunity."

Same thing goes for smokes really. If I had a show where all the 'cool' people smoked a particular brand but 'forgot' to mention the health hazard – you think that is fair, especially to our youth who are easily led into temptation. Have you realised the number of kids with Mohawks and skinny green jeans?

But what is it that we are really watching here? Knight Professor of Journalism Ethics Ed Wasserman, on the ethics of product placement said "Scriptwriters are being pressured to make provision for explicit mention of products, and narratives are being altered to enable the plugs to be seamless, graceful, even amusing. (And don't forget, legitimate creative options are foreclosed too: Tony Soprano from the *Soprano's* won't be throwing Captain Crunch in AJ's face. And he won't complain that his mother would never have served such junk to him instead of a proper, hot

breakfast.) Even if product placement comes to be accepted, that acceptance will come at the cost of a belief we deserve to have, that the people whose work we watch and not to—listen to are intending to entertain, illuminate, provoke, inspire quietly nudge us in a direction they're not telling us they're being paid to encourage.”

Product placement is soon becoming a widely accepted marketing tool, but is it what we want we really want for our entertainment on TV – all advertising? I am sure that is not what I am looking for.

Just a thought.

By Oteng Majuta