

It turns out sex doesn't sell. Someone should tell the Wheat Board

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Images of farmers – male or female – are extremely rare in the news or popculture, despite the fact that all of us depend on their labour for our survival. So last month, when the Canadian Wheat Board launched a new advertising campaign that featured an artist's rendering of a female rancher straddling a wooden fence, the picture stood out. Unfortunately, for the wrong reasons.

Along with her lasso and red cowboy boots, the pin-up-style poster girl in question sported blue eye shadow, serious lipstick and a flirty black mini skirt.

Her naked thighs gripped a splinter-infested two-by-four, which had successfully pierced her unsuitable clothing.

Not surprisingly, the campaign's message, extolling the sales benefits of the winter wheat pool in very small print, was upstaged by the skin show. Also not surprisingly, genuine cattle ranchers – female and male – objected to the depiction, calling it “stupid”, “sexist” and in “very poor taste”.

Which is not exactly what the CWB was aiming for. Defending the campaign in news reports, the board's chief strategy officer explained that the ad was intended to show its innovative side.

Ouch.

Having recently drawn on the attention-getting power of a retro advertising aesthetic



myself, I appreciated the campaign's artistry. But there's a big difference between harnessing a vintage image that will stand out, and relying on outdated stereotypes that instead serve to demonstrate how you haven't kept up with the times.

Even if the campaign's release hadn't coincided with the election of Canada's sixth female premier, women's presence in business, the professions and the trades has been on the rise for decades now. And smart marketers have long taken note of how that presence – not to mention women's buying power – has influenced values and changed expectations. There's a reason that pin-up girls are passé.

Notwithstanding the ubiquitous claim "sex sells", the ability of under-dressed come-hither models to move products via marketing campaigns is highly overrated. Fifteen years ago, curious about the effectiveness of sexual appeals in advertising, I reviewed the available research literature. I then supplemented the published studies by interviewing half a dozen senior executives in Canada's advertising community. To a man, they echoed the research findings.

It's true that sexual appeals – like the Wheat Board ad – often do a good job of attracting attention. But although viewers may remember a sexy image, they often won't recall what it's promoting. And even then, it isn't likely to motivate buying behavior unless the product or service on offer is actually associated with sex. So featuring cleavage or washboard abs when flogging perfume or cologne can lead to sales, but employing a similar strategy in pursuit of banking customers? Not so much.

More importantly, the use of sex in an advertising campaign has as much capacity to alienate as it does to appeal. A decade ago, footwear manufacturer Terra learned this the hard way. In an effort to promote its work boots, the company plastered images of lingerie-clad women wielding power tools on 600 billboards across the country. Two days after the posters went up, an e-mail campaign mounted by offended members of the Canadian Auto Workers union – the very people who use power tools and wear work boots – forced the company to take them down.

Defenders of such campaigns can counter – as Terra briefly did – that critics lack a sense of humour, but that's not the issue. The issue is, are you prepared to waste your marketing budget on a strategy that's not going to work?

One of the farmers who expressed dismay at the CWB's cowgirl ad hedged his criticism by confessing "I'm not an advertising executive." But the truth is that many people intuitively understand the other problems with sexist marketing images: they're tired clichés, and they insult the intelligence of both men and women.

Meanwhile, those who imagine that the national news exposure earned by the CWB campaign more than compensates for the criticism received might ask themselves, eight paragraphs later, what the ad was promoting.

(See what I mean about recall and impact?)

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