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Two Perspectives on Violence in Business

Ian Bristol Whatcott  
Brigham Young University, ian@whatcott.com

Karson Fronk  
Brigham Young University, karsonfronk@gmail.com

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Violence is nothing new to society. Mankind has fought each other for millennia, and certain elements seem ingrained into society’s culture. Countries seem to routinely combat each other and politicians verbally attack each other as part of their campaign.

Violence and aggression also have their foothold in business. Competition drives capitalism, company culture, and many business make millions of dollars from selling violent media. Society takes these business elements for granted, arguing that violence and sex sells. People routinely see violence and accept, that is the way businesses work.

However, several recent studies object to this idea. The studies argue that perhaps violence is not always best for a company and may actually hurt them. The following two sections look at how violent rhetoric affects company employees and how realistic the “violence sells” claim actually is.
Perspective 1: Violent Rhetoric
-Ian Whatcott

Violent rhetoric was too common during the most recent election cycle. Donald Trump was harshly criticized for his aggressive statements. He was censured for saying he’d “like to punch [a protester] in the face.” 1 The divisive language is almost iconic of this last year.

However, politics is not the only place to use violent rhetoric. Businesses use it often as well. Violent language is incorporated into the very language of business. Steve Jobs once planned for a “Holy War” between Apple and Google2, saying he would go “thermonuclear” on Android. 3 Managers may routinely use phrases such as “crush (or kill) the competition.” Society is filled with violence, both in politics, business, not mention the average entertainment.

Effects on Employee Ethics
A recent study wanted to know how employees ethics were affected by violent rhetoric. In the experiments, the participants read statements from managers that contained violent phrases such as “war,” “fight,” and “battle” and then asked questions on their actions. For some, the statements were their own managers, and the rest read statements by a competitor’s managers. In the first experiment, they were asked if they would leave an unfavorable review on a competitor’s website (an aggressively unethical action). In the second experiment, they were asked if they would extend credit to someone below the level company policy would allow (an unethical action construed as helpful to the business). The participants were also asked to rate how ethical they thought their action was.

As expected, the violent rhetoric resulted in unethical actions. However, the results differed depending on who gave the statement. Surprisingly, those who read violent statements by competitors were more likely to act unethically than those who read statements from their own CEO. When it came from an employee’s own manager, the employees generally held their ground. However, if a competitor’s CEO made the comment, the employees were more likely to choose unethical actions and not think they were being unethical.

This study highlights a new area of concern for managers who are eager to maintain an ethical company culture. Traditionally, companies focus on tone at the top, knowing that if the leaders of the company are ethical, the effect trickles down to the rest of the company. Now, managers need to be aware of how their competitors talk. Employees react to competitor’s violent or aggressive rhetoric with more unethical actions.

The study suggests that this reaction may be due to feelings of defensiveness. When a competitor acts more aggressively, employees may feel threatened and so justify unethical actions as ethical. While the study only looks at employee likelihood for a couple of small unethical actions (posting a fake negative review or extending credit), the risk of unethical behavior is still prevalent.4

General Exposure to Violence on Ethics
Another study looks at how a general exposure to violence in media can affect one’s ethics. The researchers conducted several different experiments looking at how the participants acted with different exposures to violence. They found causal evidence that exposure to violence increases the likelihood that the person will act unethically.

The study lead them to look at how companies perform in violent areas. The professors looked at financial statements across several demographics and found similar results to their first study. They found that businesses located in more aggressive areas tended to have more misstated financial statements and greater accounting irregularities, both signs of lower ethical standards. While the professors acknowledge that the violent areas do not definitively cause unethical financial statements, the results support their first causal claim that general violent exposure impairs business ethics.5

Business Culture Counterbalance
Strong ethics form the foundation of trust for the business. Unethical actions cost businesses millions of dollars every year. The U.S. Government has already acknowledged this and enacted laws like the Dodd Frank Act and Sarbanes-Oxley Act to enforce ethical standards. While these laws address ethical conditions...
within the company, they focus mostly on conditions within the company and not outside the company. A good tone at the top and the bottom of a business can surely help a company’s ethical foundation but these studies show that employees are influenced by things outside the company as well.

Employees bring into the business what they experience outside of the business, and managers should acknowledge this influence. While employers cannot directly affect what employees choose to see or hear outside the company, managers do have control over their work environment. A good ethical culture within the company is therefore critical to help counterbalance any outside influences on an employee.

Managers can directly control this through policies or standards they set for themselves and their employees. They can work with employees to address any outside rhetoric and create their own ethical culture. Outside culture and tone are powerful influences, but companies that create their own powerful cultures can create safety for the company’s performance.

Perspective 2: Does Sex and Violence Sell?
-Karson Fronk

We are constantly bombarded by companies advertising their products using either violent or sexually explicit content. Poggi (2014) found that “of the 25 most expensive [television] programs to purchase ads in during the 2014–2015 season, 44% were rated TV-14 or TV-MA for violence, and 40% were rated TV-14 or TV-MA for sex.” In 2013 a study found that since 1985 the amount of gun violence in movies has more than tripled (Bushman and 3 others). We know that some films will purposely try to get placed with a PG-13 or R rating because it will increase the popularity of their shows.

From these statistics it appears that violence and sex sell more; however, confounding variables could exist that may distort some of these statistics. Time can help anyone find a causal relationship among variables that may not actually exist. Nonetheless, these statistics beg some of the following questions:

· Does it increase the bottom line of a company?
· Do companies like Carl’s Jr. benefit from selling violence and sex rather than their product?

Both the argument for and the argument against sex and violence in ads will be explored.

An Argument Against Sex and Violence in Ads

A recent study by the Robert Lull and Brad Bushman (Ohio State University) discussed the ill effects of violence and sex on ads. They ran multiple experiments and tested the results based on memory, attitudes, and buying intentions of the subjects after watching multiple ads.

Memory
This study tested memory in four ways: (1) recall brands, (2) recall ads, (3) recognition of brands, and (4)
recognition of ads. In their analysis they combined the four types and found that “memory for brands and ads was significantly impaired in programs containing sex, violence, or both sex and violence.” They tested further to see if memory was better for ads that contained violence, sex, or both; their tests did not lead to any conclusive conclusions.

The purpose of advertising coexists perfectly with the importance of memory. An advertiser strives to have their product come to a buyer’s memory first when the person needs that type of product. Many consumers mentally compare products to choose the best one. This study found that the product and the ad content needed to match, improving the recall and recognition of brands and ads. If the unique features of a product cannot be remembered, then consumers will be less likely to buy it.

Brand Attitudes
Lull and Bushman ran another test to examine the effects of differing content on brand attitudes. They did this by using one company, but running two different ads; one that was neutral and the other was violent and sexual. The test results shows that subjects’ brand attitudes were less favorable towards advertisements that contained violence and sexual content than those that ran the neutral ads. “The higher the level of sexual content in the ad, the more negative the attitude for the brand.”

The importance of brand attitude is crucial when purchasing a product. Many students own a PC or a Mac. After reading those two words (PC or Mac), many will feel pride for one or disgust for the other without a good reason why. These attitudes either increase or decrease the likelihood of purchasing a product. As a marketer, why would you want to decrease that with your ad?

Buying Intention
Due to their negative attitudes, viewers’ buying intentions were less favorable if they have a harder time remembering the product, or have a negative attitude toward the brand, then they will be less likely to purchase it. Not surprisingly the study found that consumers were less likely to purchase the product if the ads contained sexual or violent parts. In the end, companies couldn’t seduce viewers to buy certain products; companies had to convince viewers that they needed them.

An Argument for Sex and Violence in Ads
A contradictory example comes from Carl’s Jr. - who has run multiple advertising campaigns using sexually explicit images of women with burgers to lure in potential customers to buy their food. According to Andrew Puzder, CEO of Carl’s Jr. (who was also a nominee for President Trump’s cabinet as Secretary of Labor), their ads are successful and will continue to run because they single out the market he wants. He prefers the ads to be offensive to the common person because they are not Carl’s Jr.’s target population; he wants to feed young men (or those who want to be young men) in any way the company can.

Many advertising companies focus on the amount of views that their ad generates in order to measure the quality and effect of their ads. A June 2016 statistic shows that a recent ad by Carl’s Jr., “All Natural,” appearing during Super Bowl XLIX had over 2.5 billion media impressions and 9.5 million YouTube views worldwide. This ad was one of many over the past decade that contained sexually explicit content.

Although Carl’s Jr. continues to claim that their ads work, (and it is hard not to believe them having run the ads since 2005) other reports found that this ad campaign - particularly the most recent ads - are not bringing favorable results for the company. It is indeterminable whether the increase in sales is due to the growth of the company (they have purchased a few companies in recent years) or to this sales campaign.

Conclusion
Ads are designed to attract customers and convince them that they need a product. That can be done in a variety of ways. The two aforementioned views by two researchers and a CEO leave the question open. Dr. Bushman and Dr. Lull found that violent and sexual ads negatively impact our memory, brand attitude, and buying intention when compared to neutral ads. In
essence, violent and sexual ads do not increase the bottom line for companies that are not selling a violent or sexual product. However, Carl’s Jr. CEO, Andrew Puzder, claims that his sexual ads have improved the sales of Carl’s Jr. and thus their bottom line. Questions abound in determining the impact of violence and sex on selling. Two questions remains above the rest:
- Will you buy it?
- Will you sell it?

The costs and benefits are not as obvious as society would claim.

The Bottom Line:

Studies show negative correlation between violent/sexual ads and brand memory.

Notes