

Moral shortsightedness common in business, research says_51704

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By Ken Camp

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ARLINGTON—Many advertising executives fail to see any ethical implications of their work, and if they do see moral problems, they refuse to talk about them, a University of Texas professor has discovered.

And she firmly believes that “see-no-evil, speak-no-evil” attitude permeates much of the corporate world.

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“Our thinking is that the problem extends to other industries as well,” said Meme Drumwright, chair of the bridging disciplines program in ethics and leadership at the University of Texas at Austin.

Drumwright, associate professor of advertising at UT, and Patrick Murphy, a marketing professor at the University of Notre Dame, interviewed more than 50 advertising practitioners at 29 agencies in eight cities to discover how they perceive ethical issues.

The researchers found most of the people they interviewed suffered from “moral myopia”—a distorted moral vision that keeps ethical issues from coming into focus—and “moral muteness”—an unwillingness to talk about moral concerns.

In an article to be published in an upcoming issue of the Journal of Advertising, they wrote: “We do not believe that moral myopia or moral muteness is unique to advertising or marketing. Indeed, the recent round of corporate scandals suggests that moral myopia and moral muteness are apparent in many industries. Our data were collected before the Enron debacle, and as we watched it unfold, we saw evidence of rampant moral muteness and moral myopia, which paved the way for serious ethical breaches by people of good and ill intent.”

Drumwright, whose father was dean at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and whose mother has been a Baptist missions prayer strategist, presented many of her key findings as part of a panel discussion on morality and relativism during a recent national leadership conference sponsored by the John Newport Foundation.

Ethical issues seldom are discussed at either the corporate or individual level in most major-market ad agencies, Drumwright observed.

Generally, they are not talked about because they are not seen, her research revealed.

“They don't see the ethical issues unless they are tied to their own self-interests, such as when they think someone is stealing their idea,” she said

Drumwright and her colleague concluded advertising executives—and by implication other business people—may be affected by moral myopia to varying degrees.

Some are morally shortsighted, and others may be practically blind to ethical issues, she observed. Often, moral vision is distorted by rationalization.

“A common rationalization we heard was: If it's legal, it must be moral,” she said.

Drumwright quoted an agency president who told the interviewers advertising is “one of the most ethical businesses there is (because) it is so regulated. Everything that we do has to go through our lawyers to make sure it's conforming to the law, and then our client's lawyers, and then we have to send it through the networks and their lawyers. ... It's really hard to be unethical in this business even if you wanted to.”

Rather than seeing legal requirements as the “moral minimum,” many advertisers equate legality with morality, setting the bar no higher than what the law demands, she said.

Another problem advertisers face is becoming so immersed in their clients' corporate culture they lose all objectivity.

“Anthropologists refer to this as 'going native,'” Drumwright said.

For ad agency representatives, “going native” means becoming so identified with their clients' perspective and product claims they lose the ability to make critical moral judgments. They believe their own lies without recognizing them as such.

Another way advertisers rationalize unethical behavior is by compartmentalizing—"separating work life from personal life," Drumwright said.

She pointed to the example of an ad agency executive who had a young daughter. As a mother, she expressed concern about the potential influence waif-thin models could have on her daughter's concept of beauty and self-esteem. But as an advertising practitioner, she told herself clients have the right to run their businesses the way they want to and project any image they wish.

Other advertising professionals displayed ethical concern by refusing to work for clients representing certain businesses, such as cigarette-makers.

But they saw no problem accepting bonus money from their employer if the agency that employed them benefited from cigarette accounts.

Drumwright saw that as "a form of compartmentalization."

Research did uncover isolated examples of advertisers with moral vision who were willing to talk to coworkers and clients about ethical concerns, she noted.

Some even displayed what she called "moral imagination"—the ability to "think outside the box" to generate moral alternatives beyond simplistic answers.

These individuals differed from their industry peers primarily in one respect: They worked in a corporate culture that valued ethical behavior.

"It matters what kind of organization you are in. The corporate culture and community make a difference," Drumwright said.

She drew several conclusions about how to foster ethics in ad agencies—and by implication, in the general workplace:

- ◆ Leaders set the tone.

Leading both by word and example, people in authority can create a workplace context where moral imagination can flourish.

They also can create systems in the workplace that reward rather than punish workers who “blow the whistle” on unethical conduct.

- ◆ Good communication fosters good ethics.

Researchers found a correlation between high levels of communication in the corporate culture and high levels of ethical sensitivity.

- ◆ Community matters.

When good habits are cultivated and nurtured in the workplace, ethical behavior becomes the norm rather than the exception.

“There is a huge role for the church to play,” Drumwright observed. “When there is not a supportive community in the workplace, the church can be that nurturing community with respect to teaching and encouraging virtue.”

In addition to teaching ethical decision-making skills, church also offers a place where Christians can interact with people who work in a variety of jobs, providing the opportunity for dialogue with people outside their own narrow vocational fields, she said.

“Churches can make a huge difference by helping people translate what they learn on Sunday into what it means being a Christian in the world—in their Monday-through-Friday work life,” she said.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.