



A Parliamentary forum for Media and Marketing Debate

Is advertising good for the soul?

“How can something which delivers so many benefits, material and spiritual, not be good for the soul?” This was the question posed by Charlie Meredith, Managing Director IPC Media. He was proposing the motion, ‘Advertising is good for the soul’ at the Debating Group debate at the House of Commons on 8 July 2013. The debate was sponsored by the Professional Publishers Association and chaired by The Rt Hon The Lord Black of Brentwood, Executive Director Telegraph Media Group.

Charlie Meredith held the truth of the motion to be self-evident. Nevertheless he went on to enumerate 10 reasons why it is true that advertising is good for the soul:

1. It pays his wages. But it also pays the salaries of 550,000 people in the UK, no small matter when the economy is under pressure. It directly employs as many people as the defence industry, 25% more people than the whole population of Manchester and also delivers £3.6bn in tax to the UK government every year.
2. Advertising is economic fuel driving the recovery. The economy needs the right mechanisms to bring products to market and advertising is key in this – a true economic enabler – the oxygen that ignites market success. For every £1 spent on advertising, the economy grows by £6. That’s a £100bn positive effect on the UK economy every year – 7% of total GDP.
3. Advertising drives exports. Successful advertising campaigns make UK brands famous globally. And in the digital age, when brands can compete across the world, our advertising expertise is more important than ever before in defending our share of the global economy. The advertising industry has a strong international reputation. We are global leaders in the industry, in creativity and innovation, winning more awards than any other country apart from the US. We export £2bn in advertising services each year.

Our leadership is recognised both by the world and by this House. Who are the most famous names in advertising? On the business side, Sir Martin Sorrell, among creatives there’s an amazing roll call of famous talent including Sir John Hegarty, Lord Puttnam, Sir Alan Parker and Lord Bell. Governments over the years have recognised the importance of these advertising giants by knighting them or making them peers.

Charlie Meredith acknowledged that people might question what this has to do with the soul. He stressed that money does matter. You cannot pursue life, liberty and happiness without it. Economic health is good for the soul. It is the foundation of well-being and it is only from the luxury of our privilege that we can imagine for a moment that it isn’t. Basic material things really matter to building a happy family life.

4. People like advertising. When magazine consumers were asked to rip their 10 favourite pages out of their favourite magazine, one third were advertisements. That is not actually surprising – if you buy *Vogue* you clearly like the fashion ads and if you buy *Country Life* it’s the ads for the huge country houses or estates that you love. If you buy *Angler’s Mail* you clearly like pictures of fish and tackle.

Some of the most popular content on the Internet is ads that go viral. A John West ad was viewed by more than 300million people.

5. Advertising pays for much of the entertainment content we love. It directly funds ITV, Channel 4 and commercial radio. It funds magazines, at nearly 40% of their revenue. And it indirectly funds cinema, art galleries and so on. So without advertising we wouldn't have *Coronation Street*, *Downtown Abbey*, *Broadchurch*, *Britain's Got Talent*, *Marie Claire*, *Woman's Own*, Tracy Emin or Damien Hirst. Nor would we have *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Life of Pi* or Harry Potter, because they rely on the power of global marketing to make their huge production budgets possible. People love great content which offers an oasis of pleasure in their busy lives and advertising is the patron of a vast array of arts and entertainment which simply would not exist without it. That's got to be good for the soul.
6. Advertising has enabled the digital revolution. The Internet would not exist now without advertising. Google, Facebook and YouTube are all ad-funded, all social media is, as well as instant messaging, delivering an immense quantity of information and entertainment to anyone, anywhere, anytime, although not necessarily delivering the tax revenues one might expect.
7. Advertising is a force for good. For example, a recent Stroke Awareness campaign meant that 10,000 additional stroke sufferers got to hospital quickly because someone called the ambulance immediately. And that saved £26m in care costs in just one year. When the government stopped advertising for blood donors a few years ago, the hospitals ran out of blood.
8. Advertising funds our favourite pastimes and sports. From the sponsorship of the America's Cup down to supporting the local blacksmith in Kent who only survives because he can advertise his services to the wider equestrian community, advertising is crucial to their continuing existence. And for many people their love of hobbies and sport is what keeps them going.
9. According to the IPC Insight team, advertising powered the growth of the male grooming market, the Lynx effect as it is known, where women are irresistibly attracted to men who use a particular deodorant.
10. Advertising provides information and enables choice, principles on which this House and our democracy are built. Advertising in its broadest sense simply means the transmission of messages about a product or service and that might be cosmetics, cars, nutrition, pet care, holidays, healthcare or even politics – anything where a decision based on information about various options is required.

Charlie Meredith does not believe in limiting the information or choices we give people. "Tell them what's out there. They can make informed choices about what they want to buy and do and not what you think they should buy and do".

He concluded, "How can something which delivers so many benefits, not be good for the soul?"

Wants and needs

Opposing the motion, **The Revd Canon Dr Giles Fraser, Priest-in-Charge at St Mary's Newington**, and contributor to the 'Loose Canon' column in the *Guardian*, cited John Maynard Keynes who in 1928 wrote an 'Apologia for Capitalism' arguing that within 70 years capitalism would deliver 4-8 times growth. However he also predicted that people would live a life of leisure in a quasi-religious Garden of Eden, benefitting from the fruits of their labour. Keynes was right about growth. We have indeed seen 8 times growth, but where are leisure time and the Garden of Eden? He got that wrong – we now work harder than ever before. Why did the growth not lead to the Garden of Eden? Giles Fraser suggested that it is because people have not distinguished needs and wants. The basic human needs of food, shelter, space, love were met a long time ago. But wants are insatiable and people can be made to want all sorts of things that are not necessarily good for them. Giles Fraser used the phrase 'an acquired taste'. We can be made to want all sorts of things, and people whose wants are encouraged are on a treadmill. Giles Fraser cited an occasion when he was happily in his the garden. When he came in and sat in front of the TV, there were ads indicating that the life he had now was not good enough. He could be thinner, richer and happier. The ads made him feel unhappy and dissatisfied. They were in fact for Westfield – shopping was presented as the answer to all his needs. The trick advertising plays is to get you out of the Garden of Eden into Westfield! This is bad for the soul. People are encouraged to want things they can't afford. The creation of wants results in misery.

Giles Fraser went on to cite Nietzsche and his case against the church, Nietzsche suggested that the church made you feel unhappy and sinful. “Priests poison the wells of your happiness”. And then they present the church as an answer to all your troubles. The Alpha courses encourage people to feel discomfort. He compared this process with advertising which he argued was profoundly bad for the soul encouraging insatiable desires. Advertising encourages you to forsake your own back garden for an unobtainable Garden of Eden.

The world’s most powerful communication tool

Seconding the motion, **Philip Thomas, Chief Executive Officer, Cannes Golden Lions**, suggested that when people say they don’t like advertising, what they are really saying is they don’t like consumerism. They don’t want the TV show they are enjoying to be interrupted by a request to go and buy something. But we are talking about advertising and if we don’t like advertising, if we think advertising is inherently bad for the soul, then we are against all advertising. We should be prepared to ask the local butcher to take down the sign advertising 30p off his sausages and we should be happy to come down hard against the BBC trailer advertising the latest David Attenborough series.

Most advertising is not mass advertising. It’s a card through the door from a local plumber, selling a surplus bike or, at its most high pressure, trying to persuade people to change the way they vote on the doorstep, which proves that people are actually very difficult to shift, even when you’re advertising a product that’s free. We can’t have it both ways – if we don’t like advertising, if it is destroying our soul and everybody else’s, then we are yearning for a world unsullied by anyone trying to get our attention. Because that’s what advertising is – it is simply an attempt to get our attention. To give us information. To change our minds. Buy this instead of that, do more of this and less of that, think better of us than you do of them. It is often said to be synonymous with consumerism, but advertising is not consumerism. Without advertising *no* message could ever get across, and that includes messages that can make the heart sing, and change the world for the better.

‘Jesus saves’ is advertising. So is ‘Skegness is so bracing’ and ‘Get rich quick by donating to Oxfam’. Without advertising, all we have is basic information and bald facts. But advertising is much more than that; it is the provider of an emotional connection; it is painting a picture of a better life.

A few years ago, the Tobacco Education Campaign studied the effect of advertising on smokers. They found that anti-smoking advertising had become over 10% more effective than GPs in persuading smokers to kick the habit. Smoking kills 129,000 people annually, more than five times the collective death toll from car crashes, alcohol abuse, accidents, murders, suicides and Aids. Everyone who smokes knows it is bad for them but it takes smart advertising to really change behaviour.

Philip Thomas cited a moving Dove advertisement shown at the Cannes Lions festival which raised women’s self-esteem. “I defy anyone to watch the ad– in the full knowledge that this is an effort by the multinational Unilever to get you to buy their stuff and make their shareholders more money – and *not* feel that advertising is good for the soul”.

Another example was from Ecuador, He had been invited to place a Gold Cannes Lion into the National Museum, The Lion was awarded for an idea the advertising agency Grey came up with for the Government of Ecuador. Oil had been found in the rainforest and the Government had the choice: we can have the money from the oil or we can leave the rainforest untouched. Grey suggested you could have both. You could sell an idea to rich governments using all the advertising skills at your disposal, asking them to *pay* the government of Ecuador not to drill for oil. This ingenious, elegant idea, beautifully communicated via the UN and other channels, has so far raised more than 500 million dollars for Ecuador to keep the rainforest pristine.

Philip Thomas argued that given a black and white choice one would say that literature is good for the soul. It is the same with advertising. Vote against the motion and you condemn all advertising, all efforts to change people’s hearts, minds and behaviour. You condemn it because people confuse it with consumerism, because some of it does appeal to our base instincts and because sometimes it intrudes

when we least want it to. But vote against this motion and you will be coming down against the world's most powerful communication tool, one with the power to change things for the better, to open up our view of the world, to help make sense of what's important and help us decide what to do with our time and our money. One of the biggest advertisers in this country is the Government, showing that advertising plays a vital role in making the complex understandable and helping people make choices.

Advertising frees us up, helps us navigate life and far from being just 'not a bad thing' is actively a *good* thing, even when created by profit-seeking multinationals.

Philip Thomas concluded, "Skegness is so bracing. Jesus saves. And advertising is good for the soul".

Defensive Narcissism

Seconding the opposition, **Zoe Williams, columnist, journalist and author**, argued that advertising ignites desire in you that makes you feel inadequate, and it does this by persuading you that other people are better. Often they are, but only in this strain of culture does that seem like a bad thing, "I never sit down to watch sport and think, goddammit, Serena Williams is better than me at tennis". Advertising makes you feel inadequate when other strands of culture don't. The fundamental principles are that you are unworthy and that you can make yourself better by buying something. Someone else's excellence merely serves to heighten your inadequacy – "so that even though I still get the same frisson of admiration for Angelina Jolie that the ancient Greeks most probably had for Helen of Troy, the image is only effective if it spurs me into envy, if it makes me want to be her". So all the visual vocabulary that builds around this as a form is designed to take human admiration and pervert it into something like jealousy.

Another quite subtle effect of advertising is to undermine solidarity. Its purpose is never to make you want a potato. It is only effective if it makes you want a particular type of potato. Not even a genus, but a brand. If a lot of human empathy and bonding is founded on us all wanting fundamentally the same things, then advertising is at its core, interested in dividing us, highlighting our differences and amplifying them, making that quirk of taste that drives one of us to prefer a McCain's while another favours the Rooster into a fundamental part of what makes us us. We can all build resilience not to mind when someone tells us how useless we are. But can we resist a force that drives these persistent wedges between us, breaks us into groups of varying status, in order to persuade us that the only way to rise up in status is to make consumer choices of the highest order?

The great advertising paradox is that it works by making you feel useless. But your uselessness can only be used to consumerist effect if you also feel important. So the message is really two-pronged, perfectly encapsulated by the L'Oreal campaign, which is why people still quote it, though according to Zoe Williams the ads themselves were incredibly boring: because I'm worth it. "I'm so sub-standard that I need to continually improve; but I'm worth the constant effort and vigilance because I'm so important". This has had a huge impact on our society, creating what the *Spirit Level* called 'defensive narcissism', 'threatened egotism' or 'insecure high self-esteem'. In the 50s, according to the authors, (Wilkinson and Pickett) 12% of American teenagers agreed with the statement 'I am a very important person'. In the 90s, it was 89%. They ascribe the rise of 'defensive narcissism' to the absence of any true feelings of worth, in societies where the value of a person is counted in cash and many people don't have much. We have a whole industry devoted to making us feel self-important and inadequate at the same time.

The end result of this, as the industry strips away any real sense of self-worth, is that we start to build our identities on what we can consume, and how close we are to whatever consumption goal we set ourselves. This will never make us happy. There is no conceivable human appetite that is sated by the purchase of a new thing. All it does is create more appetite for more of the same, or a better version. This scenario, this way of building our identity got us into a lot of debt.

Zoe Williams argued that far worse than the debt was a sense of purposelessness, a tacit cultural agreement from the tail-end of the last century until year 7 of this one that nothing we thought mattered really mattered. This gave us post-modernism or 'post-irony' and the implosion of high culture and low

culture, since if nothing matters, what difference can it make how seriously you talk about it – “quite an empty, Primark period of popular culture”. But that was nothing on the post-crash version: what does it mean, this ad-driven sense of self when you can’t afford to consume? “You become depressed. It might be a kind of formless rage, such as we witnessed in the 2011 riots...but more likely you’ll get depressed”. On February 23 of this year, we made fewer journeys by car since records began. And we were prescribed more Prozac than at any time since Prozac was invented. There’s a town in Wales where one in six people is on anti-depressants and that includes children. “This is why”, according to Zoe Williams, “advertising is bad for the soul. Not because it’s evil or because it’s bad to be greedy, or because the earth is finite, or because we should be sharing. It’s because it makes us miserable”. This is the cultural result of not being able to consume in a culture where what you consume is who you are.

Discussion from the floor

Contributors made the following points from the floor:

For the motion

- Advertising helps us to make decisions and gives us informed choice. The contributor could not see how the removal of advertising could make us less miserable. However information rather than advertising is good for the soul. ‘Seller beware’.
- Advertising can be effective and can lead to depression. But it can also raise your aspirations.
- A lot of the arguments against advertising are based on its techniques. But the best techniques are those advertising learned from the Church which is a master of advertising. The first great branding is in the Gospel. Last year the Vatican launched a website ‘I confess’ which allows you to download your sins.
- The arguments against the motion seem to be based on the consumer not understanding advertising. What is the alternative? A ban on advertising is an attack on press freedom.
- We would be a poorer place without advertising.
- The contributor cited particularly brilliant ads: Hamlet, Tango, Apple, *the Guardian*.

Against the motion

- If advertising wants us to make informed choices, why do some advertisements lie about body image?
- There are strong arguments that some advertising is good for the soul. Who said that Christianity is good for the soul?
- Advertising has become obsessive. You get cookies and are inundated. There is much advertising which is very good, but this motion says that ‘advertising is good for the soul’. Some of it is, but not all of it e.g. ads to children, ads for lawyers after accidents, PPI, Payday loans, equity release on homes.
- Advertising is good for the economy but not for the soul. The contributor’s soul lifts in an advertising-free zone. Leaving Westfield and going into Hyde Park is good for the soul.
- The contributor opposed the motion because she wished to be happy.

Neutral

- The contributor believed that advertising should be good for the soul. We need brands that put something back into society and make initiatives possible e.g. large sportswear companies which help young footballers.
- According to Susan Greenfield we can only hold seven things at a time in our short-term memory. Research shows you only remember advertising if it particularly salient to you. So we don’t need to worry much about advertising in memory, although there are memorable ads which tell a story. As for the soul, the contributor was neutral.

Summing up

Summing up for the opposition, **Giles Fraser** stressed that the opposition was not asking for advertising to be banned. You don't ban things that are bad.

Advertising has turned the Cross into something that it is not. An instrument of torture has been turned into an item of jewellery. This illustrates both the genius and darkness of advertising.

We are not complaining about consumerism. But advertising has moved away from information. Ads like Nike's 'Just do it' and O²'s Bubbles are not information. They are 'Hidden Persuaders' which manipulate change and desire.

Giles Fraser quoted Philip Thomas "If you are against this motion you are coming down on the world's most powerful communication tool". "True", said Giles Fraser.

He concluded "Metaphors that are good for the soul are about spaces that are free from advertising".

Summing up for the motion, **Charlie Meredith** argued that we have to see the motion as a whole and take a rounded view. In the mass market people do not think they are unworthy. It is a mistake to patronise people.

The Nike ad is an affirmation. Advertisements do often ignite wants not needs, but in the case of potatoes, the advertisements are about information.

Advertisers have recognised that body image is an issue and have responded accordingly e.g. Dove. Advertising is well-regulated and is responsible.

Soul is animus, which is also the word for mind, and the intellectual part of a person. What's good for the soul is good for the mind. Advertising can be a force for good e.g. health warnings. Charlie Meredith reminded the audience of the 10 reasons he believes advertising is good for the soul and re-iterated that you have to see *all* the benefits it provides.

The result

The motion was carried.

Next debate

The next debate will take place on **Monday 28th October 2013** sponsored by the Direct Marketing Association. For more details contact Doreen Blythe, Debating Group Secretary, on 020 8202 5854, e-mail: doreen.blythe22@btinternet.com www.debatinggroup.org.uk