

The Business World in Advertising Industry

The advertising industry world portrayed in *What Women Want* is characterized by fierce competition among big advertising agencies. Every agency is trying to win the contract of big companies such as Sears, Macy, Nike and etc. These contracts are generally known as the big accounts. It is a win-or-lose situation when each agency makes a pitch for the big accounts ad campaign. The client will form a board of executives to review the proposal from each agency, and there will be only one winner at the end of the game. Winner who landed one big account could provide sustainable revenue for a number of years and completely turnover the company.

During the reviewing process, the presentation, normally featured by the creative director or chief designer, was the major channel to deliver ideas and win the review board. One high quality presentation can win the client and land the account. The presenter, as a result, will claim the credit and become the star of the company. In such competitive environment, every agency realizes that only hiring the best talents who can design the best million dollar idea can win the contract. Thus, big shot designers who can produce block buster advertisement campaign are the heart and soul of every agency. Therefore, competition of big accounts becomes competition of the best designers in town.

Advertising industry was changing drastically during the last 30 years. In 1980's, products marketing primary to male, such as alcohol, tobacco, cars and etc, were the majority clients of main stream advertising. However, in the 1990's, men stopped dominating how dollars were spent in the ad industry. Female-driven advertising became the market booster, which totaled \$40 billion annually in later 90's. Women between the age of 16 and 24 are the fastest growing consumer segments. Thus, girls who were born in the mid 80's are the primary targets of advertising activities. The new market trend reformed the scope of ad industry and endangered the profitability of traditional ad agency that depends on male-driven advertising.

Sloane-Curtis, the fictional advertising agency in the film, used to be the leader with the best campaign ideas for male-driven advertising in Chicago. While Sloane-Curtis was still the leader of male products advertisement, the industry has been transformed. If the company does not reposition itself beyond the natural ability, its market share will continue to diminish. Such drastic change in external environment forced the executives of the company to reposition their products and services by shifting their strategy to align with the industry trend. The plot of the film was unveiled in such critical turning point of the company.

Business Ethics Issues

Nick (Mel Gibson), portrayed as a male chauvinist, charming but with big ego, king of male-vision advertisement and the lender of the pack. In the film, he was the star of the company. Successfully landed and managed many male-related advertising campaign contracts. He was prepared to be promoted as the new creative director - a position Nick

was longing for a long time and working hard for. Given the competitive industry environment, it is not difficult to see that internal competition within the agency is also intense, sometimes even brutal. To be the big shot designer means center of the attention, control of resources, and absolute power in the company. The position of creative director is every advertisement designer's dream, and Nick was so close to it.

Just at the moment when Nick was already uncorking the champagne to celebrate, Nick's boss introduced Darcy McGuire as the new creative director. The board made the decision based on Darcy's impressive record of snagging \$500 million in female related business wins, while getting into a women's psyche is not exactly Nick's strong suit. Darcy McGuire was portrayed as an award-winning and visionary advertising executive who specialized in advertising female-driven products. Thrilled by the new opportunity, Darcy was looking forward to build a productive team and offer company the skills that she was hired for. However, the reality is not always in favor of the good people.

Depressed with the board's decision, Nick was determined to undermine his new female boss's efforts. Nick schemed to outshine and outwit Darcy, hoping to send her back into the ranks of the unemployed. After a bathtub accident at home, Nick electrocuted himself with a hairdryer and lost consciousness. When he woke up the next morning, Nick suddenly was blessed with the gift of mind reading every woman's thoughts. Reading women's mind certainly gives Nick the edge over Darcy at group meetings. Nick started to enjoy the power of get into women's head and reach them on a very real level. However, great power does not necessary come with great responsibility. Nick decided to use the miraculous power to set up Darcy so that he can push Darcy out of the company. As a result, Nick will assume the position he was supposed to have.

Business ethical dilemma - 1

How the issue was portrayed?

Betrayed and under-valued, should Nick use his power to sabotage Darcy and take back what he thought to be rightfully his?

How was the issue resolved?

Without any hesitations, Nick used his new power to get into Darcy's mind and take her ideas as his own. Nick managed to impress his boss and take all the credits, while at the same time made his boss think Darcy was unqualified for the job and hiring her was a big mistake. Like every Hollywood movie, the adversaries felt in love as they know more about each other. At this point, Nick and Darcy were working on a big project to win the Nike account, which will save the company if landed. Who will make the pitch? Obviously, the one making the presentation will get the credit and become the hero of the company. Darcy, in dear need to impress her new boss so as to keep her job, offered the chance to Nick because she did not know that the whole idea was hers. Finally, Nick nailed the presentation and landed the Nike account which saved the company and win

back his boss. Just before Nick decided to confess to Darcy, he got the position he always wanted. Darcy was fired.

How should the issue have been resolved?

Nick's action of exploitation can be classified as Kohlberg's stage 2 theory. Morality is doing what it takes to reach personal goals, even if the action can be harmful to others. In the perfectly honest world, Nick should not consider using his power to achieve his goals by exploiting other people's work. Darcy has the skills necessary to accomplish the job that she was hired to do. The credits and rewards should rightfully belong to her, since she is the one come up with the winning idea. Great power should come with great responsibility. Nick should use his power wisely. For example, he can visit places filled with women, such as reaction center and nail polish shop, to read women's minds. Then, he can apply the findings to develop ad campaign that will echo the feelings of the target audience.

Business ethical dilemma - 2

How the issue was portrayed?

After Darcy was fired, Nick found that he regretted his actions, especially as his "talent" made Darcy miserable and jobless. Nick had the option to keep it as a secret and take full credit for landing the Nike account. On the other hand, Nick could be honest with Darcy and tell her that she was the one behind all the ideas and therefore should not be fired.

How was the issue resolved?

It certainly takes courage to tell the truth. Nick made the right choice this time. First, Nick confessed to his boss that Darcy was the primary contributor of the project and therefore should get credits for winning over the Nike contract. Moreover, he convinced his boss that the implementation of the project would not be smooth without Darcy's involvement. The client brought Darcy's idea, and it would be disastrous if it is implemented without Darcy. Later on, Nick told Darcy that it was he who was sabotaging her, picking her brains and swiping her ideas. Nick admitted that it was his intention to push her out of the company so that he could take back the position.

How should the issue have been resolved?

Clearly, Nick was doing the right thing by telling the truth. It is hard for someone to do the right thing; it is even harder for someone to admit that he was wrong. At the end, Nick resolved the ethic issue by correcting his mistake.

Business ethical dilemma - 3

How the issue was portrayed?

Of course Nick is not always using his power in an evil way. After divorce his wife, Nick teenage daughter resented him for many years of neglect. The situation got worse when her older boyfriend showed up. He knew that the only reason her boyfriend wanted to be with his daughter is to take advantage of her and then dump her. Why would Nick know? Nick had used his charm to do the same thing to many women. However, he did not want his daughter to be the victim this time.

How was the issue resolved?

Using his power of mind reading, Nick tried to become closer to his daughter and advise her to take right action. However, Nick's reputation certainly made his advice hard to believe. His daughter went to prom night with the boyfriend, but refused to be taken advantage of. Nick was there just in time to render comfort and fatherly love when his daughter needed the most.

How should the issue have been resolved?

In reality, many people have double standards on ethic issues. People take different action when different group of people are involved. This finding is consistent with Kolberg's stage 3 theory, where morality is relationship-driven. People live up to group expectations for the sake of social recognition. People in nature will react differently depends on who is the "victim". Such finding can also relate to the Milgram's experiment where people have a tendency to use less coercive power if they know the victim on a personal base.

Take-Aways from This Exercise

The ethic issue presented in this movie can be summarized to the following questions introduced in this class:

Is it okay to use power in business in order to accomplish organizational goals?

Employees should be encouraged to use power in business to accomplish organizational goals as long as the action does not result in harm to other people. Nick actually used the power of mind reading women's thoughts to discover what women really want. Such advantage allowed him to design the ad campaign that will echo women's deep desires and positively contribute to the project.

When and how can we use power? Should there be any limits on our use of power?

People should take the responsibility and use power with moral constraints. Human history indicates that absolute power or power without check-and-balance will lead to dictatorship and catastrophic consequences. There should be legal and ethic limits on how and when to use power. One rule of thumb is to use power to achieve goals without causing harm to others.

Does the end justify the means?

The end certainly does not justify the means. Otherwise, Nick would not feel guilty when he took all the credit of landing the Nike account and got the position he wanted so much. End result can not be used as a measurement of business ethics. It is the method and effects to major stakeholders related to the method justify the means. However, many managers, if not most, take the end result as the measurements and reward employees based on that. Such logic further encourages people to do whatever it takes to achieve the objects without thinking about ethic issues.

Is it okay to exploit other people in order to achieve personal or organizational goals?

Exploitation of other people to achieve personal or organizational goals is common in business world. Whether it is ethical depends on the definition of exploitation. For example, it is unethical if exploitation involves Nick used Darcy's idea to achieve his personal or organizational goal and caused Darcy to lose her job. On the other hand, it is morally correct if exploitation means Nick use his mind reading power to read women's mind on the street and apply the findings to his work. The later case does not cause any harm and will contribute to Nick's personal or organization goals.

Observation about Kohlberg's Stage Scores theory

In the movie, Nick's behaviors and stage score changed according to the context and environment. For example, Nick is a stage 3 person at the beginning. He protected the company's interest and expected the company to reward him for doing so. However, as soon as he was under appreciated and betrayed by the company, he went back to stage 2. His later behaviors were topical stage 2, which involves doing whatever it takes to achieve his personal goals. Even if his actions will harm the company's interest by losing qualified employee, Nick still focus on his person goals rather than the organizational goals. As Nick became attached to Darcy emotionally, Nick jumped back to stage 3. He considered Darcy as member of his group and trying to protect her interest as well. In general, migration of stage could happen frequently as the external environment evolves.