

Liisa Uusitalo • professor • Department of Marketing, Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration

The Ethics of Marketing and Advertising

Marketing and advertising are often mis-takenly blamed when the entire economic system should be the proper target of the critique. The paper discusses first the issue of finding a balance between free markets on the one hand and citizen political influence and self-determination on the other. It is argued that different communities, including nation states, and the norms and practices maintained by them form a necessary precondition of the efficient functioning of the markets.

The moral question, "what is good?" has been given traditionally only little attention in economic theory, apart from the classics. However, moral considerations may become more salient in marketing, because moral factors increasingly guide consumers' product choices and investment decisions. With regard to the professional ethics of marketing, "what is right to do", it is claimed that striving for the internal goods in the practice of marketing should be an important goal. This would reduce the need for complex auditing systems, which often are detrimental to the internal motivation of the actors. Marketing is a means to form and uphold relationships. Therefore friendliness is one of the central virtues of the profession.

The paper suggests that the ultimate ethical goal of economic activity is human economic and social well-being and its just distribution. Given the general nature of this goal, it should be complemented by more specific ethical goals, such as environmental concern, not trading unethical goods, and paying attention to the ethical behaviour of suppliers and subcontractors.

The ethical code of marketing is fairly elaborate and constantly evolving. For example, the internal ethical codes applied in advertising are manifold. However, the requirement that advertising should not use emotional appeals has become questionable in contemporary culture. Advertising can be seen as part of the cultural creation of meanings. From a consequential point of view, advertising of high quality, with its provision of aesthetic pleasure and new meanings, is good also from an ethical point of view.