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**Boston Globe, Boston, MA**

**Sorry, Nike, I Just Don't Get that Ad**

**September 24, 2000**

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I AM SORRY THAT THE MARKETING MOGULS AT NIKE THINK I'VE LOST MY SENSE OF HUMOR. IN THE AFTERMATH OF A FLAP OVER THEIR OLYMPIC ADS, IT APPEARS THAT THE CORPORATE HONCHOS ARE LOOKING DOWN THEIR NOSES AT ANYONE WHO DIDN'T "GET IT."

Let's go to the videotape. During the opening ceremonies and between assorted swimming and gymnastics competitions, NBC broke to an ad featuring a woman in a remote cabin. She is getting ready for a bath when a hockey-masked, chain saw-wielding Jason figure pops up in her mirror. He chases the screaming woman through the woods. (Are you laughing yet? Thirty seconds later, this woman, Olympic runner Suzy Favor Hamilton, gets away because she's in better shape than the would-be slasher. The moral: "Why sport? You'll live longer."

I can just imagine the Madison Avenue creative geniuses sitting around a table applauding this work. "Hip." "Edgy." "Postmodern." "Ironic." There are high fives all around.

But those of us who did not share the hip, edgy, postmodern, ironic sensibility of these sophisticated ad mongers were just plain horrified by the ad called "Horror." Within short order NBC had thousands of protests and pulled the ad on the network and its younger siblings MSNBC and CNBC.

Nike, on the other hand, remained unrepentant and promised to go on running the ad on ESPN. They even posted the patronizing remarks of the company's vice president, Mike Wilskey, on their Web page: "Our rule has always been to respect the intelligence of our consumer. . . . We know they get the joke."

As someone who didn't get the joke, I would be glad to explain to Mike why a slasher ad is as welcome as a fork in the eye of the Olympic family audience. This alleged satire of women's fear on a program about strengths didn't strike my funny bone. I'm sure it didn't make some girl tuned in to see Andreea Raducan break into giggles.

But I am most dismayed by the utter disconnect between the ad makers and the audience. If I may echo one reader's e-mail: What was Nike thinking?

This disconnect is at the heart of advertising violence to kids, a subject that has at last gotten our attention. But violence isn't the only unhealthy product being pushed.

This month, the Golden Marble Awards were bestowed on "the best advertising aimed at kids." Again, it was the creativity of the ads and not the value of the products or the ethics of the business that got the plaudits.

The common word of praise was "hip." But what were the winners selling? Foods like Hostess Twinkies and restaurants like McDonald's. The judges praised the Happy Meal toy campaign because it "required parents and children to keep coming back to McDonald's to get pieces of their toy."

Susan Linn, a Harvard Medical School psychologist who has clearly lost her sense of humor about child obesity, says, "You don't see ads for broccoli for children." Linn joined a band protesting the ceremony for "essentially rewarding creativity used to manipulate children for profit."

If you need any more proof of the disconnect between the business and the ethics of this marketing mania, the Government Accounting Office has a new study of advertising in one of the newer venues: schools.

Talk about a captive audience. If it isn't Channel One on school TV or Zap Me on school computers, it's Pepsi in the halls and Clairol ads on the book jackets. As Alex Molnar at the Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education says, "The start of the school year now resembles the release of a blockbuster movie with all the gimmicks aimed at children."

Overall, the amount of money spent marketing directly to kids - which is to say, around parents - has nearly doubled in seven years, to \$12 billion. Molnar describes this "like the wind that blows off the ocean. It shapes and bends everything it blows against. It's shaping kids."

Our hip, ironic, postmodern friends at Nike are not overtly advertising to children (though teen-age males are an important part of their market), but even here, kids get the collateral damage. Only occasionally is a commercial so outrageous that all of us pay attention to the overwhelming ad-vironment.

"We have a de facto ministry of culture, and its capital is Madison Avenue," says Molnar. In this capital, the folks in "creative" can't tell the difference between selling shoes and selling horror.

Remember what the Nike veep's said: "Our rule has always been to respect the intelligence of our consumer." Now that's funny.