



# Does sex still sell?



## THE POWER OF AUTHENTICITY IN TODAY'S MARKETS

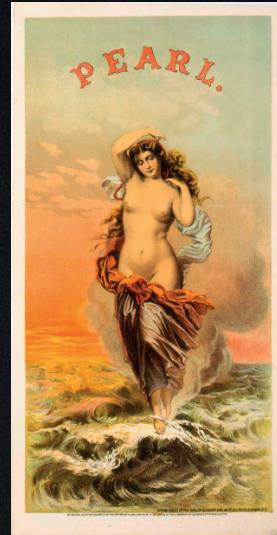
Most people like sex. What's not to like? In fact, sex is so popular, that many advertisers and marketers use it to sell brands and products to consumers. The predominant belief is that "sex sells." But does it? In this article, we discuss recent trends in advertising, consumer behaviours, and company sales to determine if, indeed, provocativeness is profitable.



There is an age old adage that sex sells. Take a picture of a scantily clad woman or a brooding shirtless man, tack some words onto it, and you have yourself an ad. Throughout the years, almost every industry, from food to clothing, has used some form of sex appeal to market to its customers. And while provocation has been a dominant trend in the advertising world for sometime, is it still effective? In today's political and consumer climate, does sex still sell?

## VICTORIA'S SECRET LOSES ITS WINGS

Thanks to clever marketing and branding, Victoria's Secret has become a company whose name is synonymous with sex. It's hard to ignore the obvious sex appeal of their advertisements and marketing campaigns, which are often filled with half-naked models in compromising positions. Other clothing brands, such as Abercrombie and Fitch, used to rely on attractive, shirtless models standing outside their outlets to lure customers in. These types of brands are the epitome of sex in advertising. However, according to a recent article published by Forbes, L Brands, which owns Victoria's Secret, saw sales fall by 4% this past December (Forbes). It isn't the only brand to suffer. Abercrombie and Fitch sales have been declining steadily as well, due to an inability to attract new, younger customers (Time).



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*Many brands that use sex appeal in their advertising and media campaigns have seen declining sales over the years.*



## BRANDS DITCH SEXY, AND EMBRACE THE UN-AIRBRUSHED

While these brands have been struggling lately, not all apparel and lingerie companies have faced the same hardships. Aerie, a sub-brand owned by American Eagle Outfitters, saw a 16% growth in 2016 (Euromonitor). So what makes Aerie different? Body inclusive. Starting in 2014, Aerie launched a campaign to feature un-airbrushed models in an effort to challenge stereotypical supermodel lingerie ads. Featuring slogans such as "The real you is sexy," and, "The girl in this photo has not been retouched," Aerie was able to tap into the young millennial

market who are more receptive to truthful, authentic ads, as opposed to the over sexualized, fantastical campaigns of brands such as Victoria's Secret and Abercrombie and Fitch.

## 2017: THE SUPER BOWL WITHOUT SEX

It isn't just clothing brands where this is an apparent trend. Car companies, food organizations, and countless other industries have been turning away from sexy advertising, and towards something more real. Take, for example, the 2017 Super Bowl commercials. Instead of seeing commercials with attention grabbing sex antics, we saw commercials based on politics and authenticity. Airbnb launched a powerful campaign that pushed a message of inclusive and global acceptance (Automobile Mag). Kia, Ford, and Audi, three large car companies in an industry that often puts out sexy and sleek car commercials, opted this year for more inspirational messages. It seems as though there is a general trend away from sex and towards emotion, authenticity, and social activism. But why?

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## MILLENNIALS ARE DRIVING THE PUSH TOWARDS AUTHENTICITY

The answer lies with millennials. They are the most coveted demographic in the marketing world, and a difficult one to market to at that. And yet, the successful brands such as Aerie, Panera, Dove, and TOMS, all realized the same thing: you need to market to today's current consumers in a meaningful way. In 2015, Forbes wrote that 75% of millennials

said that “it’s either fairly or very important that a company gives back to society instead of just making a profit” (Forbes). Now, this doesn’t mean that every company has to do charity work in order to reach younger populations, but it does speak to the broader trend of authenticity in marketing. Generally speaking, young people today are very active and politically passionate. In fact, millennials are often called the “passionate generation” (Hubspot). And now, more than ever, we see them lashing out at body shaming, pushing for diversity, and turning towards brands that have environmental or social benefits.

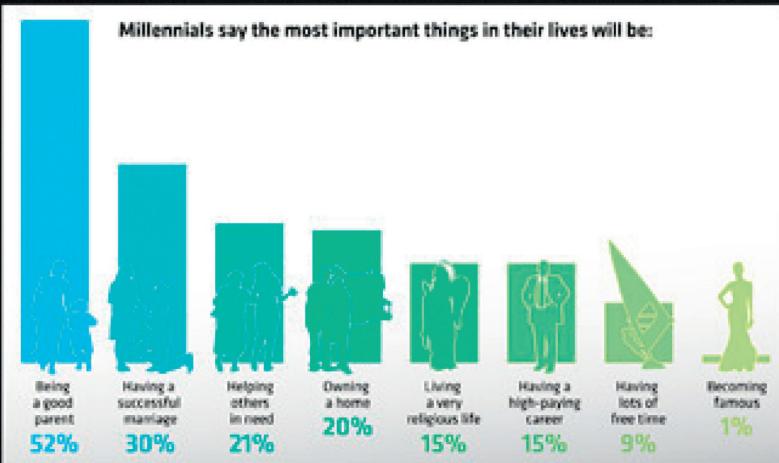
If you want to market to millennials, you have to tap into the issues and the trends that they care about. And right now, it’s not sexy. A recent study has shown that millennials have less sex than previous generations (Time). As shown in the stark contrasts between Victoria’s Secret sales and Aerie sales, young consumers prefer things that are real, and that they can relate to. They are more likely to be receptive to media campaigns if they do not feel as though the campaigns are exclusive or idealized. Just look at the history of public backlash against retouching in advertising (the most recent being the outcry over retouching Ashley Graham in the Vogue cover), and you can see that public opinion, and not just in millennials, has turned against traditional sexy advertising.

**Millennials want to see activism in brands. Surveys show that younger generations value companies that give back to others, and stand up for social issues they believe in.**

**“People, millennials especially, want authenticity”**

# WHO ARE THE MILLENNIALS?

## THE DEMOGRAPHICS



### Other names for Millennials:

#### Generation Y:

Refers to the generation to succeed Generation X.

#### The Echo Boomers:

Refers to the fact that many Millennials are children of Baby Boomers.

#### The Net Generation:

Refers to the internet being a part of their lives that they grew up with and take for granted.

#### The Boomerang Generation:

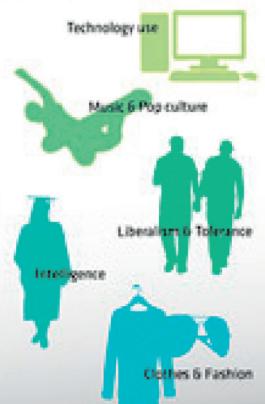
Refers to the tendency for many Millennials to move back in with their parents after going away to college.

#### The Peter Pan Generation:

Refers to delaying the rates of passage into adulthood longer than most generations before them.

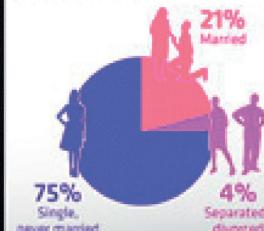
### Top 5 things that make Millennials unique:

(according to Millennials)



### Marital status

(Millennials ages 18-29)



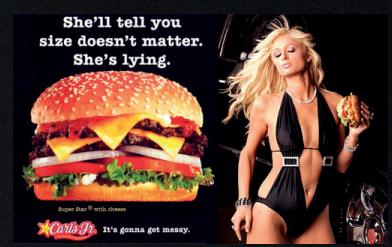
### Educational attainment

(% of Millennials ages 18-29)

	High school	Some college	4-year college
Males	15	34	35
Females	15	40	28

## EVEN FAST FOOD CHAINS ARE ADOPTING AUTHENTICITY

And it isn't just the clothing industry. Carl's Jr. and Hardee's, companies owned by CKE Restaurants, are famous for their controversial and often sexist ads, often featuring women in bikinis eating hamburgers. Brad Haley, chief marketing officer of the company admitted that, "one of the hallmarks of the millennial generation is they want authenticity" (AdAge). In this case, it translated to a marketing campaign featuring real employees talking about the process of making food. In the fast food world in general, there is a larger trend towards wholesome, authentic ads.



## SO IS SEX IN ADVERTISING OVER? NOT QUITE...

Now, this doesn't mean that all companies and advertisers should abandon the "sex" ship just yet. The saying is there for a reason. Sex really does sell. It just depends what market. Carl's Jr. and Hardee's, even though they have released some more "wholesome" ads, still rely heavily on sex to market to customers. For some companies with target demographics of men aged 18-34, they might consider it prudent to use sexuality in advertising. And to some extent, subtle sexuality, seen in perfume and car ads that imply sex without the obvious use of it, work in selling consumers an idea of sensuality and beauty.

## IN THE END, KNOW YOUR MARKET

It all comes down to knowing your market. This might sound obvious, and it is. Anyone in the advertising or marketing industry knows how important it is to communicate ideas to your target demographics. Keeping this in mind, it is important to know that yes, there are still demographics that respond well to sex in advertising. And no, it isn't going anywhere. But the overall trend in millennials and in the public in general is moving away from sensuality and towards authenticity and activism in media campaigns. Sure, sensational ads may garner attention, and they might boost brand awareness, but as a 2015 study released by the Psychological Bulletin describes, people pay attention to these types of ads, but that doesn't always correlate to sales.

**"Sex still sells for certain brands and products. To know if provocativeness is profitable, you need to know your market"**



## WHAT SHOULD COMPANIES DO?

- Asses your market. Then, asses yourself. What kind of company are you? What do you want to sell to your consumer? Do you want to sell beauty? How about youthfulness? Maybe happiness and wealth? Or what about inclusive and acceptance?
- Maybe after all you do want to promote sex. And that's fine! People like to feel sexy. Just beware of over sexualization. Consumers nowadays can smell fakeness from a mile away. They know when something has been over produced or over edited. And they don't want them.
- Ads should be authentic and meaningful. Consumers are smart. Give them something deeper to hold on to.

If nothing else, keep in mind that the world is changing. Advertising is changing. Consumers are changing. And in this day and age, authenticity is sexy.



