

## Case Study

### IS BEAUTY MORE THAN SKIN DEEP?

They are thin, possess flawless skin, and have beautiful hair. They are the models and celebrities we see in television, print, and billboard ads that tout the latest shampoos, anti-aging creams, and skin cleansers. The message is clear. Buy our product and you too can look like this.

Beginning in 2004, Dove, a division of Unilever, started to send out a radically different message when the brand launched its “Campaign for Real Beauty.” The first step in Dove’s campaign, a tactic to support its skin-firming cream, introduced the nation to billboards that showed unretouched photographs of “normal” women of various sizes in just their underwear.

Dove sent the message that women do not need to conform to the standards of beauty the fashion industry determines. Every woman, regardless of her age or body size, is beautiful. The campaign continued to build strongly over the next couple of years, and gained more steam with the viral release of the video “Evolution.” The ad featured an average-looking woman who enters a film studio. The video then speeds through a series of hair, makeup, and shocking computer-enhancement techniques. In 60 seconds she emerges as a gorgeous model on a billboard. Immediately after the final shot of the billboard, the video blacks out to the statement, “No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted.” This viral video was followed with “Onslaught,” an equally powerful ad, which shows the intensity of personal care, diet, and exercise advertising as viewed through the eyes of a young girl. The ad ends with another powerful message, “Talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does.” The latest ad in the campaign, “Dove Real Beauty Sketches,” shows us how critical some women can be in evaluating and describing their looks. It was inspired by research conducted by Dove that found only 4 percent of women around the world consider themselves beautiful.

An important part of the Campaign for Real Beauty is the Dove Self-Esteem Fund. With young girls reporting alarmingly low levels of self-worth, this arm of the campaign works to provide confidence-building tools and workshops for young girls. Dove partners with the Girl Scouts, the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and girls.inc to educate girls on the importance of self-esteem.

Dove reaped a lot of public relations benefits from the campaign, but it is not without its critics. Some charge that Unilever,

which owns Dove, is as guilty as the rest of the industry in promoting false ideals of beauty. Ads for the company’s Axe brand often are cited as flagrant examples of messages that objectify women. In addition, the anti-aging and firming creams Unilever sells thrive on women’s insecurities about their looks. If she is supposed to be satisfied with her natural beauty, then why does a woman need these products? In addition, there was controversy concerning the airbrush techniques Dove used to photograph these “normal” women. An article in the *New Yorker* cited a prominent photo editor who claimed that he had done a large amount of retouching and mentioned what a challenge it was to make the women look attractive. Unilever’s response was that it did not digitally alter the photos but retouched them only to correct color and remove dust. Still, this was a damaging accusation against Dove and its ad agency Ogilvy & Mather, especially since the “Evolution” campaign criticizes retouching tricks.

Finally, there is the question of whether such an emotionally charged campaign actually boosts sales. It certainly helps to break through the clutter and bring recognition to the brand, but does it resonate with the consumer over the long term? Apparently yes; Dove reported a doubling of its sales in the first 5 years after the campaign launched. Will this unconventional beauty theme continue to strike a chord—while it sells beauty products at the same time?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- CS 7-1** Dove’s campaign assumes that advertising has the power to determine what we find attractive or unattractive. Do you agree?
- CS 7-2** Some people argue that fashion products are “aspirational”; they encourage consumers to think about what they could be rather than what they are. Do women really want to see “average” models in advertising? Why or why not?

*Sources:* www.dove.us, accessed July 23, 2013; Neol Bussey, “Dove Abandons Its Soapbox to Focus on the Soap,” *Campaign* (August 28, 2008); Molly Prior, “Reality Check: Would You Buy Beauty Products from These Women?” *WWD* (April 20, 2007); Jack Neff, “Retouching Ruckus Leaves Dove Flailing,” *Advertising Age* (May 12, 2008).

### MyMarketingLab

Go to [mymktlab.com](http://mymktlab.com) for Auto-graded writing questions as well as the following Assisted-graded writing questions:

- 7-12** What does “the looking-glass self” mean? How do feelings about the self influence the specific brand people buy?
- 7-13** How do Eastern and Western cultures differ in terms of how people think about the self?
- 7-14 MyMarketingLab Only**—comprehensive writing assignment for this chapter.