

Advertisers still behind times, gender focus study states

Men are doing more housework, but you'd never know it from most commercials, Shannon Proudfoot reports.

Shannon Proudfoot

The Ottawa Citizen

Wednesday, March 12, 2008

One ad shows a child's hand lifting a toilet seat alongside text offering women a product to help clean up after a husband who "wasn't quite as accurate as he likes to think he is."

In another, a woman smiles fondly at a mop, her gleaming kitchen floor apparently the fulfilment of all her dreams. A third shows a mother offering up a steaming casserole to the eager children and husband waiting at the dinner table.

The latest census figures in Canada show men are taking on more housework and childcare, but you'd never know it from commercials like these.

"What I find funny and very unappealing is the fact that these women look overjoyed to be cleaning their homes with these products," says Emily Spensieri, president of Female Engineered Marketing in Toronto. "I just find it silly."

A new study scrutinizing magazine ads has found that, while many skirt the gender issue by not addressing anyone specifically, those that do still overwhelmingly target women with food, cleaning and childcare product pitches.

"I think most marketers still have a long way to go to catch up," Ms. Spensieri says. "They're still stuck in far too many stereotypes."

University at Albany researchers combed through issues of four widely circulated magazines, including Better Homes and Gardens and Family Circle. Of 299 ads focusing on family-friendly products, most simply used images of children or the product without specifying its target. That's a shift away from the dominant 1980s "supermom" image of a woman carting a briefcase in one hand and a toddler in the other, the authors say.

However, 16 advertisements in the most recent sample directly addressed women, and all but one was selling food, cleaning supplies or medication. Of just four ads that targeted men, one sold a truck and another a fun leisure activity. Mothers were more than twice as likely as fathers to be shown in family-oriented scenarios, the researchers found, and parents were depicted in very different roles.



CREDIT: Rod MacIvor, The Ottawa Citizen
Contemporary advertisements involving domestic products tend to focus on women and when men are seen, they are portrayed as incompetent buffoons.

"Mom would often be shown taking care of a sick child, while dad would be shown out playing in the backyard with the kid," says Bryan Robinson, a PhD candidate in sociology who co-authored the study with Erica Hunter. "Or mom would be shown cooking the dinner while dad would be shown eating the dinner with the kid."

The paper will be published in the April issue of the Journal of Family Issues.

Catharine Fennell, managing partner of Swing Think Inc., a female-centric marketing agency in Toronto, says advertisers have become so paranoid about doing the wrong thing and offending someone that they resort to animations or silhouette graphics that obliterate any sign of race or gender. The latest symptom is a crop of ads depicting men as incompetent buffoons and women as domineering taskmasters, she says.

"In the last number of years, the pendulum has almost swung too far the other way," Ms. Fennell says. "It's a focus on women at the expense of men."

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