

13. Shock Marketing

Schaqra Enterprises, a once failing clothier, had recently become profitable. The management attributed the company's success to its new marketing department. These "Young Turks," an energetic and aggressive group of recent grads, had convinced the management to take a gamble on shock advertising. The theory was simple: they needed to get everyone talking about their company—even if the talk was critical or outraged. Public outrage would generate protests, letters to editors, and news coverage, all of which was free publicity. But if enough people knew about them, it didn't matter how many people hated them. All it took was a small percentage of people interested enough to try out their products. The high quality of their products would then speak for itself.

Flush with the company's sudden profitability, Schaqra's management sought to expand the small, overworked marketing team by interviewing and hiring a new marketing MBA. Each interviewee learned that the new hire would be assigned to one of three ongoing projects. The first project was a line of dress shirts, targeted at young men. The ads in this campaign featured tense dialogues between men and women. Their attitudes and postures ranged from sultry to ominous, their conversation vague or rambling. Their entire figures were never quite visible, the image being cropped so their torsos filled the screen. The men were never wearing Schaqra clothes. At the end of the ad, a male voice delivered the tag line: "Looking good sure beats rape."

The second project was a line of simple, feminine dresses, targeted at women in their twenties. These ads featured a painfully sharp image of a somewhat grimy, out-of-shape man slouched on a chair in the foreground and a slender woman out of focus in the background. Both figures faced toward the camera, but the image was cropped so neither person's head was visible. As the woman talked to the man, he distractedly agreed. She clearly wanted him to get up from his armchair and do something. The tag line was, "Wear it just for you: he's too stupid to notice." The third project was a line of business suits, some for men, some for women, and was targeted at yuppies. This campaign had appeared only on billboards in urban business areas. Each billboard contained a giant, black-and-white photograph of some shocking or unnerving image: the face of a blind beggar, an extreme close-up of a pierced male nipple, a cow's eye in a martini glass, and so forth. The image was never in any way connected with clothing. The company logo was the only indication that this image was meant to be an ad. At first, the logo had been fairly visible, but as the campaign progressed, the logos became smaller and smaller. In fact, no one needed to see the logo to know that Schaqra was involved. The campaign was so successful that locals had started saying of any outrageous behavior or incident that it was "Schaqing, totally Schaqing." The current set of billboards featured a photograph of a young boy with eight flippers instead of legs.