Ethical Marketing as an Enduring Philosophy

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Introduction

Ethical marketing is an enduring philosophy because every promotional decision affects more than a short-term sale. Marketing shapes what people believe about products, bodies, status, risk, happiness, and social belonging. It can help customers make informed choices, or it can exploit grief, fear, children, hidden sponsorship, personal data, and unequal knowledge. The original essay correctly argues that ethics should guide the entire relationship between a business and its customers rather than operate as a public-relations repair after controversy. Its McDonald's "dead dad" advertisement and Adidas Boston Marathon email are useful contrasting cases: one involved deliberate emotional strategy that many viewers considered manipulative, while the other involved wording whose traumatic association appears to have been overlooked. A strong ethical framework should evaluate truth, evidence, audience vulnerability, emotional proportionality, privacy, fairness, inclusion, and accountability before publication. Long-term prosperity depends on trust that is earned through decisions, not merely claimed in brand values (Murphy et al., 2005; Drumwright & Murphy, 2009).

Ethical Marketing as a Business Philosophy

An enduring philosophy influences product design, pricing, research, targeting, sales, customer service, and measurement—not only the final advertisement. A company cannot market ethically if the product is unsafe, hidden fees contradict the headline, or customer complaints are ignored. Ethical marketing asks whether the exchange respects the customer's ability to understand and choose. It also considers effects on people who are not direct buyers, including children, communities, workers, and people represented in the message. The philosophy must be operationalized through policies, review, training, incentives, and leadership behavior (Murphy et al., 2005; Drumwright & Murphy, 2009).

The Legal Minimum

In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission states that advertising claims must be truthful, not deceptive or unfair, and supported by evidence where required. Specialized rules apply to areas such as endorsements, health claims, environmental marketing, credit, children, and consumer reviews. Legal compliance is essential but not identical to ethics. A message may avoid a technical false statement yet create a misleading overall impression. A tactic may be lawful while exploiting a vulnerable audience or violating the brand's stated values. Ethical review therefore begins with law and then asks broader questions about dignity, fairness, and foreseeable harm (Federal Trade Commission, 2026).

Truth and the Overall Impression

Consumers interpret the complete advertisement—images, layout, omissions, demonstrations, qualifications, and emotional context. A disclaimer cannot necessarily cure a dominant misleading impression, especially if it is hidden or contradicted by the headline. Ethical marketers examine what a reasonable member of the intended audience is likely to understand. Claims should match the evidence and use language proportional to uncertainty. Words such as “proven,” “safe,” “sustainable,” or “guaranteed” carry strong meanings and should not be used casually (Federal Trade Commission, 2026).

Evidence and Substantiation

Objective claims need appropriate support before publication. The evidence required depends on the product and the seriousness of possible harm. A health claim may require competent scientific evidence, while a simple statement about product dimensions may require accurate testing. Marketers should not search for support only after a challenge appears. They should record the claim, intended meaning, evidence, limitations, and approval. When evidence changes, the advertisement should be revised or withdrawn. A brand’s confidence cannot substitute for substantiation (Federal Trade Commission, 2026).

Emotional Appeal

Emotion is not inherently unethical. Stories, humor, nostalgia, aspiration, and empathy help people remember and understand. The ethical question is whether emotion illuminates the product’s meaning or bypasses judgment by exploiting vulnerability. An appeal becomes concerning when it uses grief, shame, fear, insecurity, or social exclusion in a way disproportionate to the product. Emotional strategy should also respect the audience’s context. A campaign that is acceptable in one setting may reopen trauma or stigmatize people in another (Murphy et al., 2005; Drumwright & Murphy, 2009).

Vulnerable Audiences

Children, older adults, people in financial distress, patients, and individuals with limited literacy or language access may be less able to identify persuasion or evaluate risk. Marketing to vulnerable audiences requires additional care, not more sophisticated methods of influence. Children may not understand influencer sponsorship or virtual currency. A person facing illness may interpret hope as clinical proof. Ethical marketing uses plain language, avoids pressure, provides time and alternatives, and does not treat vulnerability as a profitable weakness (Federal Trade Commission, 2026; Murphy et al., 2005).

Choice Architecture and Dark Patterns

Digital marketing often operates through interface design rather than traditional advertisements. Preselected options, confusing cancellation, false scarcity, disguised ads, repeated pop-ups, and hidden charges can steer users toward choices they did not intend. These “dark patterns” exploit attention and friction. Ethical design makes acceptance and refusal comparably clear, states recurring charges before purchase, and allows easy cancellation. Conversion rate should not be improved by creating consent that users would withdraw if the interface were understandable (Federal Trade Commission, 2026).

Data, Privacy, and Targeting

Behavioral advertising can deliver relevant information, but it depends on extensive data about browsing, location, purchases, relationships, and inferred interests. Legal consent notices may not produce meaningful understanding when tracking is complex. Ethical targeting minimizes data, avoids sensitive inference, protects security, and respects user choice. Companies should be cautious when targeting based on health, financial hardship, children, religion, or intimate identity. A message can be accurate and still unethical if the company obtained or used the audience data unfairly (Murphy et al., 2005; Drumwright & Murphy, 2009).

Influencers and Endorsements

Endorsements are persuasive because audiences trust the person rather than the advertiser. Material relationships must therefore be disclosed clearly and conspicuously. A vague hashtag or disclosure hidden after several clicks may not be sufficient. Influencers should describe genuine experience and avoid claims the advertiser could not make directly. Brands remain responsible for training and monitoring endorsers. The 2023 FTC Endorsement Guides and rules concerning consumer reviews reflect the need to protect authenticity from undisclosed payment, fake reviews, and testimonial manipulation (Federal Trade Commission, 2023).

Environmental Claims

Words such as “green,” “eco-friendly,” “carbon neutral,” and “biodegradable” can imply broad benefits without explaining scope. Ethical environmental marketing specifies what was measured, which lifecycle stages are included, and what limitations remain. A small recyclable component should not make an entire product “sustainable.” Offsets should not be presented as equivalent to direct emission reduction without qualification. Greenwashing damages both consumers and genuinely improving firms because it makes meaningful differences harder to identify (Murphy et al., 2005).

Representation and Inclusion

Advertising helps normalize who belongs, who is desirable, and who holds authority. Inclusive marketing can broaden representation, but tokenism and stereotype can cause harm. Diversity should not be added only visually while product design, workplace practice, and customer service remain exclusionary. Images of disability, race, gender, religion, age, and family require context and consultation. Ethical representation treats people as complex participants rather than props used to display brand virtue (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009).

Pricing and Promotion

Promotional ethics includes accurate reference prices, transparent fees, genuine scarcity, and clear conditions. A “sale” based on an inflated price or a “free” item that requires hidden payment can mislead. Drip pricing delays disclosure until the customer has invested time and attention. Dynamic pricing can be legitimate but raises fairness questions when customers cannot understand why prices differ. Essential goods and emergencies require special caution because consumer choice may be constrained (Federal Trade Commission, 2026).

Internal Governance

Ethical review should occur before creative work becomes too expensive or emotionally defended. A cross-functional process may include marketing, legal, compliance, product, privacy, accessibility, and representatives who understand affected communities. High-risk campaigns can use scenario testing and external review. Approval records should identify concerns and decisions. Governance must also address incentives. Employees rewarded only for clicks, sales, or virality may reasonably ignore harms that the scorecard does not measure (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009).

A Prepublication Ethics Test

A practical test asks: Is the central claim true and supported? What overall impression will the audience receive? Which facts are omitted? Is the audience vulnerable? Does the emotional strategy fit the product? Was personal data obtained and used fairly? Can the user decline or cancel easily? Are sponsorship and editing clear? Could the representation stigmatize or exploit? What would the company say publicly if the full decision process became known? This test does not eliminate judgment, but it creates a disciplined pause before exposure becomes irreversible (Murphy et al., 2005).

McDonald’s “Dead Dad” Advertisement

In 2017, a McDonald’s advertisement showed a boy asking his mother about his deceased father and discovering that both apparently shared a preference for the Filet-O-Fish. The campaign used bereavement to connect a menu item with family identity. Viewers and bereavement organizations criticized the commercial for using grief, and the advertisement was withdrawn. The problem was not the presence of sadness in advertising. It was the mismatch between the seriousness of childhood bereavement and the commercial payoff. The product appears to resolve the child’s search for connection, which risks trivializing grief and converting vulnerability into appetite (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009).

Why the McDonald’s Appeal Failed

The narrative was designed professionally and may have intended warmth, but ethical analysis considers foreseeable interpretation, not intent alone. The child’s grief gave the food an emotional significance unrelated to its functional value. Bereaved children and parents could encounter the message unexpectedly. A better process would have included consultation with grief specialists and affected families, clear assessment of proportionality, and willingness to reject a creative idea despite likely attention. The withdrawal was appropriate, but prevention would have protected both the audience and the brand.

Adidas and the Boston Marathon Email

After the 2017 Boston Marathon, Adidas sent participants an email with the subject line “Congrats, you survived the Boston Marathon!” In ordinary sports language, “survived” may describe completing a demanding race. In Boston, however, the phrase recalled the 2013 bombing that killed spectators and injured many others. The company apologized after criticism. Unlike the McDonald’s case, the harm appears to have resulted from inadequate contextual review rather than an intentional strategy to use tragedy. The case demonstrates that common phrases can acquire local historical meaning (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009).

Lessons From the Adidas Case

Automated campaigns need human review. A standard congratulatory template should be checked against event history, location, recent crises, and audience sensitivity. Teams may be distant from the community and fail to recognize an obvious association. Local reviewers and a short delay can prevent major harm. Apology should acknowledge the specific mistake without defensiveness, correct the message, and revise the process. Claiming that no offense was intended does not answer why the foreseeable context was missed.

Comparing the Two Cases

Both campaigns linked emotion with brand communication, but their ethical mechanisms differed. McDonald's intentionally built a story around bereavement and failed the proportionality test. Adidas used a familiar endurance metaphor without adequately considering the event's traumatic history. One case illustrates problematic strategy; the other illustrates contextual negligence. Ethical governance must address both. Creative intent should be evaluated, and ordinary wording should be tested against audience memory and circumstance (Murphy et al., 2005; Drumwright & Murphy, 2009).

Responding to a Marketing Failure

An effective response stops the harmful campaign, acknowledges the issue, explains corrective action, and avoids attacking critics. The company should preserve records and conduct a review of decision points, not search for one employee to blame. Questions include who approved the message, what audience testing occurred, whether concerns were raised, and which incentives favored speed over care. Remediation may include direct support, revised training, new approval gates, and monitoring. A public apology is credible when internal systems change (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009).

Long-Term Business Value

Ethical marketing supports loyalty, lower complaint risk, employee pride, regulatory resilience, and more reliable customer relationships. It can also require rejecting profitable tactics or slowing a campaign. The business case should not be the only reason for ethical conduct; some practices are wrong even when they increase sales. Nevertheless, firms that repeatedly mislead or exploit must spend resources repairing trust and may face legal consequences. Ethical discipline improves decision quality by forcing marketers to understand the customer rather than merely trigger behavior (Murphy et al., 2005).

Conclusion

Ethical marketing is an enduring philosophy because the relationship between a business and its customers is created through repeated decisions about truth, evidence, emotion, privacy, vulnerability, representation, and choice. Law requires advertising to be truthful, nondeceptive, fair, and appropriately substantiated, but ethical responsibility extends beyond avoiding enforcement. The McDonald's "dead dad" advertisement demonstrates the risk of deliberately converting profound grief into a commercial association. Adidas’s Boston Marathon email demonstrates the risk of automated language released without historical and local review. Both failures could have been prevented through structured prepublication testing and incentives that value trust alongside performance. Marketing prospers sustainably when persuasion respects the audience’s capacity to choose rather than treating emotion or data as a means of bypassing it (Federal Trade Commission, 2026; Murphy et al., 2005; Drumwright & Murphy, 2009).

References

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