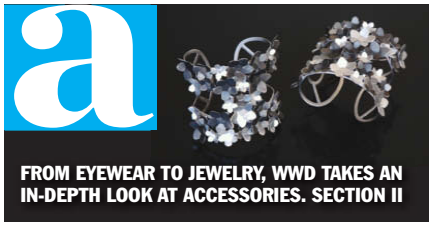

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FASHION ADVERTISING

CONTROVERSY

Where Has It Gone?

By LISA LOCKWOOD

Outrageous, edgy fashion ads that get everybody talking. Where did they go?

Gone are the scandalous days of Calvin's rippling abs and come-hither youth; Abercrombie's S&M Santa; the full-frontal Saint Laurent; Benetton's kissing clergy, and Jenny McCarthy doing her business on Candie's toilet.

It wasn't controversy that killed them. On the contrary, such controversy successfully put these and other brands squarely into the limelight, for better or worse.

But after shifts from the shocking and sexually suggestive to the socially conscious and lifestyle aspirational, the fashion industry has entered a new state: tame.

Blame it on the media. With so much corporate emphasis on having the right social campaign, Instagram, Twitter feeds, videos, Web sites and the goal of accumulating "likes" on Facebook, not to mention global, cross-cultural sensitivities, the edge that cuts through the advertising clutter has been dulled.

To be sure, there's no shortage of talented photographers who take beautiful pictures, but some observers argue that intensely image-conscious companies, public or otherwise, are so intent on controlling how they're perceived, advertising has simply become too safe. And safe equates with boring.

That's not to say controversy is absent from the fashion industry, but it can extract a steep price. The recent ouster of Dov Charney, chief executive officer of American Apparel, over concerns about his personal and professional conduct, continues to make headlines. And his sexually charged advertising images, often depictions of young women in suggestive, sometimes vulgar poses, may end up being the least of his troubles. While one might debate whether Charney is a marketing visionary connecting to his customer's sexuality or a peddler of soft-core porn, his brand of advertising stands out in that it's controversial, intentionally or otherwise. In this particular case, that isn't helping Charney's cause to regain his standing in the company he founded.

The granddaddy of advertising controversy, Benetton, certainly didn't have a great future following its shock advertising campaigns. The company came under harsh scrutiny for the use of shock in its campaigns, resulting in public outrage and consumer complaints. At the same time, the ads won kudos for raising public awareness of important social issues. Benetton's ads, when not tweaking mere convention, featured women's bodies with tattoos that said "HIV Positive," or a black woman breast-feeding a white infant. They also showed scenes of war as well as a man dying of AIDS surrounded by his family, an image that ad professionals widely cite as the most controversial in the history of fashion advertising.

The man behind these images, Italian photographer Oliviero Toscani, still stands behind his approach, most noted for Benetton during the years 1982 to 2000. In an interview with WWD earlier this month, he said, "If an image does not provoke, then you've thrown your money away." Toscani emphasized that provocation is a positive force, and said images that provoke or shock encourage people to think about the world and to be creative. He also cited a preponderance of boring imagery in recent years. "These images are all devised by marketing executives without intelligence or culture,"

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Clockwise from near left: A cheeky ad from Gilly Hicks, the intimate apparel division of Abercrombie & Fitch, in 2009; Daffy's straightjacket ad in 1992 outraged a mental health advocacy group; Diesel's edgy advertising showcases a woman in a denim burka in 2013; Benetton continues to provoke in 2011 with a photoshopped image of President Obama kissing Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, and Tom Ford remains the standard bearer for aggressively sexy imagery, as in 2007.

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said Toscani, still clearly unafraid of tweaking the fashion establishment.

Benetton continues to use pointed advertising in its campaigns to raise awareness of social issues, although they may not be quite as inflammatory as those in Toscani's day.

Its Unhate campaign, launched in 2011, featured images of world leaders in passionate lip-locks with some of their biggest adversaries. There were shots of President Obama kissing Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Pope Benedict XVI making out with Egypt's Grand Sheikh Ahmed el Tayeb. After the Vatican sued, Benetton pulled the ad, apologized to the Holy See and donated to a Catholic charity.

According to the company, the Unhate campaign was inspired by the notion of tolerance by contrasting faiths and cultures.

The Unhate campaign generated a bonanza of publicity for Benetton, and was among the first five topic trends that year on Twitter and Google worldwide. Over the year, it garnered five million results, 20,000 discussions and 1,500 blog posts. The campaign, which reached 500 million people, generated more than 4,000 articles in over 60 countries and 600 TV reports all over the world, according to Benetton. The company added 60 percent more Facebook fans and 60 percent more visits to benetton.com from the campaign. The sentiment toward Benetton was 80 percent positive, the company contended. And the campaign received numerous awards at international competitions, such as the Press Grand Prix at the Cannes Ad Festival and Two Gold Pencils at the One Show Awards in the integrated branding and public service — outdoors and posters category. It also won a Gold Clio Award at the International Clio Awards in the print category.

Benetton followed up that campaign with another initiative that was less provocative, called "Unemployee of the Year," which spotlighted a pressing social problem, the nearly 100 million unemployed young people worldwide aged 15 to 29.

Calvin Klein's imagery is the stuff of ad industry legend, especially his early jeans commercial with the young Brooke Shields cooing that "nothing" came between her and her Calvins. Further pushing the edge, at a point when Klein was an established megabrand, the designer got into hot water with the U.S. Justice Department in 1995. Remember images of teenage models, some of whom were reportedly as young as 15, in overtly sexual poses in a dingy basement, shot by Steven Meisel? Despite the controversy (and a clearing by the Justice Department), denim sales soared. Most of Klein's fragrance and underwear ads featuring suggestive and sexually provocative images of Kate Moss, Christy Turlington and Mark Wahlberg helped establish the designer at the forefront of controversial advertising.

Klein declined to comment for this story but a key collaborator on many of Klein's earlier ads is Neil Kraft, ceo of Kraftworks. Kraft pointed out that "people have started over the last 10 years, starting with the recession, to play it safe and are afraid to rock the boat.…I still, 20 years later, have people coming to me and saying, 'We want to do the next CK One.' I'm like, 'OK, we can do that. Are you willing to break all the rules? Are you willing to shake things up?' They always say yes, but yes doesn't mean yes. The minute you list the things they'll have to do to shake things up, they'll say that's a good idea, but you end up being pushed up to [the] safe area."

For client Elizabeth Arden, Kraft said they would run into trouble for coming up with headlines that were puns, but didn't work outside the U.S. "The markets reject the ad because they don't understand the idiosyncrasies," he said. "Part of it is, the more global we become, the harder it is to shake things up. What's controversial in the U.S. is not necessarily controversial in Europe. Or maybe it's incredibly controversial in Asia."

In the heady days of Klein and Luciano Benetton running their own shows, and even the late Ken Zimmerman, former ceo of Kenar Enterprises Ltd., these executives were constantly pushing to see how far they could go.

"Very few brands are really run by entrepreneurs anymore," Kraft pointed out. "They're run by big conglomerates such as LVMH [Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton]. Dov Charney is an example of where it's backfired. He has done controversial ads that are offensive. Does it work or leave your stock at 63 cents? There's controversy and then there's 'ew.' Dov Charney tends to be 'ew.'"

Kraft pointed out that this past spring, Barneys New York featured 17 transgender women and men in its ad campaign, shot by Bruce Weber that a decade ago might have stirred strident reaction. "It was an interesting way to get attention, but I didn't feel a groundswell of business," he said.

Kraft also attributes a lack of provocation to the popularity of digital media.

"I think to some extent the digital thing is exacerbating the problem because it's so easy for people to create their own controversial things. Almost no matter what you do, somebody's done it better on YouTube. You see almost every week something about a brand's video. It's just a print ad moving. They're not really engaging videos. They're just people walking down the street," said Kraft. "People talk about wanting to disrupt all the time…but I don't think they mean it."

He recalled that in the old days, an advertiser could do print, TV and outdoor and they were subject to censorship. Magazines would think twice about running Moss naked, unlike what much of digital media does today.

According to Kraft, 15 to 20 years ago, outdoor advertising was the Wild West. "Today, digital is still the Wild West," he said. "Clients become kind of frozen by the number of choices. The way media is bought has changed over the past 10 years. It's all bought by big media buying companies. We can suggest media, and come up with ideas for media, the plans come back from the media companies and they're all about reach, not about shocking, takeover, cool… we end up with a bunch of static banners on 100 sites, when maybe one takeover on an important site would be better," said Kraft.

At a time when Pharrell Williams' "Happy" song is Billboard's biggest hit of the year so far, advertisers don't appear to want to stir things up too much.

"Everything is cyclical and there's a period of relative calm, and then somebody smart and entrepreneurial who really runs their business does something controversial but not offensive and really engaging — that's going to happen again," said Kraft.

David Lipman, who closed his ad agency last year, is now an independent creative director of numerous campaigns. He still likes his work to be provocative.

"What I'm trying to do more than ever is push the envelope as far as I can. I just created a commercial for Seven For All Mankind [with Miranda Kerr], which will push the envelope," said Lipman. "It's provocative. She's talking about how much she's in love with something and it turns out to be her pants. She just delivers a line that it's not meant for all mankind. It's provocative. It's really out there."

Lipman just completed a campaign with Cara Delevingne for John Hardy that he feels is really pushing it, as well. "She gave something to the photographers that I have never seen before. When you see the pictures there, you'll say he's pushed it another step further. Is it controversy? It's provocative, for sure. People will talk. We've seen the conversation started on social media," said Lipman.

"The days of Benetton are sadly over. We live a life of fear. I think with terrorism and Sept. 11 and the economy in 2008, all those things have pushed conservatism and the way we communicate," said Lipman. "We get very safe to get the message out every which way we can. It's more of a formula now. How do we go into Instagram? What's our social strategy? And how do we get into Pinterest? We forget the power of the image in a magazine and what that still can provoke. And we forget the power of the image of a brand."

Lipman said he was recently discussing Benetton's notorious years and how brilliant they were. "Why isn't someone going there and pushing the boundaries? Kenneth Cole really pushed the boundaries in what he did as well in the very beginning days. He questioned a lot. The Benetton campaign is probably the greatest controversial campaign of all time. There was a time when Donny Deutsch was Donny Deutsch and Richard Kirshenbaum was Richard Kirshenbaum of the Eighties, when shock advertising was really there. A gay couple shopping in Ikea [by Deutsch] was unheard of. If you look at that commercial today, it's normal. At that moment of time it was purely brilliant. People were just coming out. It was a very powerful communication," said Lipman.

A 1992 Benetton ad featuring a man dying of AIDS is considered by many observers the most controversial ad in fashion history.

> "Everything is much more conservative...If you look at all the ads, they all look exactly alike. There's nothing sensual or sexual about it. Everybody is very plastic. Maybe Tom Ford is the only one that's out there pushing the buttons quite a bit."
>
> — SAM SHAHID, SHAHID & CO.

"New York is such a big media center of the world. What happened in New York 13 years ago still lingers. I think we, as a society, got very conservative. Then a book comes out, 'Fifty Shades of Grey,' and everyone wants to read it. The thoughts are still there. Anybody who takes that opportunity will win," said Lipman.

Lipman believes that brands are overly concerned about protecting their DNA, and that stifles them.

"Everybody's thinking about their brand DNA and this is the core of the brand, and forgetting about opening the roof off the house and letting it dream. Part of what I heard early in advertising is how do you break through the clutter and get heard? You still have to connect to the brand. In the social media brand, it's an organic world. It's a world of sharing; if it's not shared from your soul, people don't care and think it's megaboring," he observed.

Bruce Weber, known for his iconic ad images for Calvin Klein, Abercrombie & Fitch, Ralph Lauren and Gianni Versace, never really thought he was photographing controversial ads.

"When people used to say to me, 'Oh, that's very controversial or risqué,' I would kind of laugh. I didn't see it. I have a very normal life and it didn't seem risqué to me. When we worked on the Calvin Klein campaign, a lot of the people in it were my friends, so I didn't think of it as being risqué. What I kind of try to stay away from now is violence. There's a lot of violence in the world, and that's the last thing you need to see when you open up a magazine at the grocery store or deli."

> "It's more of a formula now. How do we go into Instagram? What's our social strategy? And how do we get into Pinterest? We forget the power of the image in a magazine and what that still can provoke."
>
> — DAVID LIPMAN

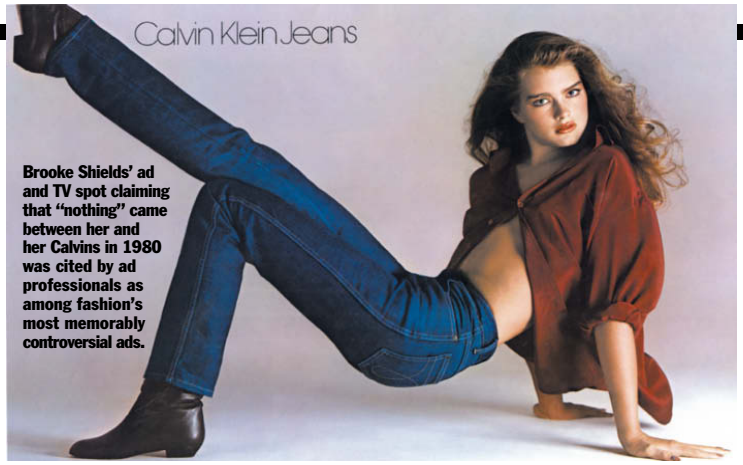
Diesel, which became known for its unconventional advertising, is still reaching for the edge.

Nicola Formichetti, Diesel's creative director, said, "I love using advertising space or any place that we can use to express what we're feeling. I don't care too much about provocation, it's more about creating unusual or beautiful images. No one wants to see a catalogue shot with a bag and that's becoming more common in advertising.…It's my role [as creative director] to push boundaries and do something more inspiring. You want people to think, and to question things," Formichetti said.

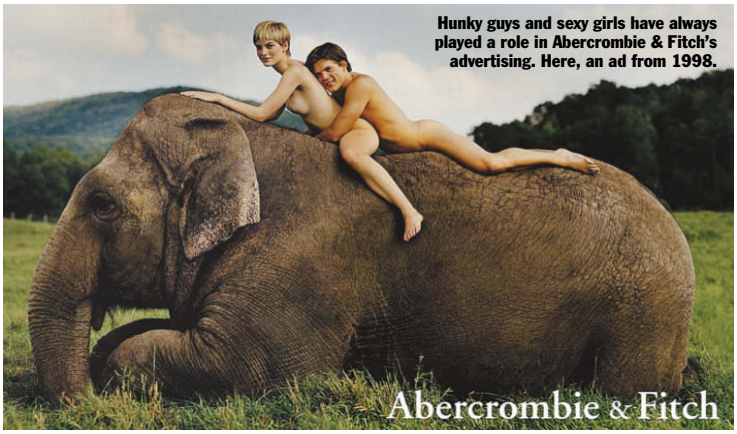
He noted that the first series of images he developed for Diesel were six visuals for Tumblr, including a shot of a young woman in a denim burka, and another in a denim papal robe and hat. The images garnered a lot of attention, and Formichetti said they were more effective for the brand than mere product shots would have been because consumers "don't just buy denim because it fits," rather, they also like to feel that they are "part of the same energy and philosophy."

Trey Laird, ceo and chief creative officer of Laird + Partners, doesn't necessarily feel like it's advertising's role to provoke or be controversial.

"I think it all depends on the nature of the brand. Yes, all advertising strives to get noticed and stand out — but it has to authentically reflect the personality of each brand," he said. He noted that some brands have been built on controversy and have a history of provocative communication such as American Apparel and Calvin Klein, so people start to expect that from them. "When brands like that come across as safe or too 'normal' they lose some of their edge because their true history is in constantly pushing that envelope. But it is who they are and true to that brand DNA. Conversely, when a more conservative brand tries to do something shocking — just for shock sake — it often blows up in their face and feels inauthentic and not right. So it's all about being true to the brand. That's the main thing," he said.



Brooke Shields' ad and TV spot claiming that "nothing" came between her and her Calvins in 1980 was cited by ad professionals as among fashion's most memorably controversial ads.



Hunky guys and sexy girls have always played a role in Abercrombie & Fitch's advertising. Here, an ad from 1998.

Linda Evangelista posed with Italian women and an empty chair representing an AIDS victim for Kenar in 1991, angering New York's Italian-American community, which claimed the ad promoted stereotypes of older Italian women.

Laird agreed that there are fewer truly provocative ads in fashion today than in former years, which he attributed to several factors.

"First, there are fewer brave and visionary leaders out there who have the confidence to stand behind an idea or an image or an attitude for a brand, instead of a just a product. Most people think it's just about a very commercial approach — showing a bag or a dress that sold well or whatever — and they think that is what builds a brand. Whether it's provocative or not — what builds a brand is having a clear and consistent image in the consumer's mind that they can connect with, and staying visible.…That was the genius of Tom Ford in his heyday at Gucci — or Calvin in his prime.…It was about sex and the power of tapping into emotional desire on a larger human level. Not about a specific shoe or coat or whatever. Most people just don't have the vision or the confidence to stand up and put that out there," he said.

> "I think to some extent the digital thing is exacerbating the problem because it's so easy for people to create their own controversial things. Almost no matter what you do, somebody's done it better on YouTube."
>
> — NEIL KRAFT, KRAFTWORKS

He pointed out that people get desensitized with so much information overload, and social media, "with all its endless forms makes it very difficult," said Laird. "But in the end those are just mediums. The message is the real issue, not the medium."

Asked whether he feels fashion advertising is as provocative as it had been, Sam Shahid, president and creative director of Shahid & Co., answered emphatically: "No way."

Reflecting on his earlier work for companies such as Calvin Klein and Abercrombie & Fitch, he said the campaigns had ideas, there were stories, and they were conceptual, sexual and sensual. "Everybody is being more conservative today, and they're more product-driven. They're not as conceptual as they used to be. The digital world has changed the imagery. Everything looks plastic and very computerized. It could be the designers themselves," he said.

Asked if his current clients such as Abercrombie & Fitch are requesting provocative imagery, he said, "Absolutely not. Everything is much more conservative. That's the thinking going on right now. In general, he noted, "If you look at all the ads, they all look exactly alike. There's nothing sensual or sexual about it. Everybody is very plastic. Maybe Tom Ford is the only one that's out there pushing the buttons quite a bit. He's also representing himself, which is wonderful. [In other cases,] management has taken over and maybe the creativity is not coming from the designers so much," said Shahid. "Calvin had a point of view, Ralph Lauren did, too, which was very much a lifestyle."

If Shahid were to describe the period the industry is in right now, it's "very quiet."

"It's not as liberating as it was. Maybe we're not feeling that right now. Everybody's a little nervous for some reason," said Shahid.

He also believes that people have become so jaded and have seen just about everything. "What more can you show, and what more can you do? Nothing's shocking anymore. I'm trying to think what's left for us to conquer in that area of surprise and shock. If you want pornography it's all there for you on the Web, if you want naked people, that's on the Web. What is left to surprise?

"I don't know if people are being true to how they're feeling right now," he continued. He said in the old days, Calvin Klein and Versace were passionate about their ads. "They loved sex and they loved beauty. Marc Jacobs is tame to what he was," said Shahid.

A de-emphasis on print appears to be a key factor.

"It could be because print is not what it was. It used to be you could tell a story in print. Now it's all on the Web site. It's films and showing product. The sensual part of it isn't there. It's not the same as print. You put it on the Web site, and it lasts for a fraction of a second. It's all so product-driven right now," he said. "Advertising was as entertaining as a film and a book. You don't have that anymore," he said.

Shahid recalled the days when copy was powerful and memorable, such as Clairol's tag line: "Does She or Doesn't She?" "It never left you. That was the power of print. Print is not number one anymore. When you talk to digital guys, it's all about hits. That's all they talk about. 'We got three million hits.' I say to them, 'Did you get three million hits at the cash register?'

"To be honest with you, I think, visually, we're all a little confused. What is the right medium now? How do we get people's attention? The videos of Abercrombie and American Eagle, they all look alike. Big smiles, and looking happy. It's harder to make an impact and impress somebody. With magazines, you hold that print in your hands. It stays with you for a long time. You don't forget it with print. With the written word, it's powerful. Now you look at it on your screen, in a fraction of a second, it's gone," he said.

Now, Shahid estimated, when clients are divvying up their budgets, print gets 20 percent, Web sites get 50 percent, TV gets 20 percent and collateral material and outdoor gets 10 percent. "They spread themselves out," Shahid noted, pointing out that while kids walk around with their iPhone, "the visual is so small, it doesn't leave an impact. It's small-screen."

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Peter Arnell, who is known for his groundbreaking work for such clients as Donna Karan, Chanel, Banana Republic and Hanes, lamented the repetitiveness in advertising now.

"Because of an enormous amount of shifts in creating visuals and capturing imagery, I think that things have tended to flatten out to a point where everything seems to be the same. I think people use ads and photography today, especially in fashion, with the exception of a few, to not induce, provoke or create curiosity or to provide a perspective or point of view on something, but rather to present a product."

He said the difference between presenting a product and presenting an idea "is like night and day."

"It's all of a sudden become a commodity in a funny way. It's a portrait or a close-up or a frozen moment in the studio. I think location stuff has been reduced because of budgets and studio becomes important. Everyone's using digital cameras and they want this instant look and feel. There's always been historically a battle between the designer wanting to show the product and the advertising people wanting to create imagery that stimulates and creates fantasy. Instead of people utilizing their brand opportunities and communication to express values or shock or differentiation, people seem to want to promote sameness, but not enabling creative people, creative directors, art directors, photographers to be the complement and the support in order to take a company's image somewhere.

"Provocative doesn't mean someone without clothes to me," Arnell continued. "Provocative means questioning the norm and going against the grain with a sincere authentic approach which is a mirroring of the company's culture," he said.

Some products everybody gets, like Manolo Blahnik shoes and Tom Ford, Arnell noted. "If you never saw another Tom Ford ad, everyone would be clear on what his perspective is," he said.

"I think that the entire industry needs to make itself important again in communications. You know that fashion communications became something that also leaked into every other field, it needs to reinvent itself as far as its responsibility or role in communication again," said Arnell.

"Fashion is all about style, creativity, all about dreaming, all about fantasy.... You see a fashion ad, you look at it and say, 'Is this me? Could this be me? Was this me?' or 'What are they trying to say to me?' It's a dialogue. And now ads have ended up preaching to people instead of creating a dialogue. In the old days, people anticipated the next great creative of Calvin Klein.

"We find ourselves in a place where somebody needs to give a swift kick in the butt to everybody. With all that money, all that beauty and all that energy, people look to the master, Ralph Lauren. In my opinion, his ads have always been provocative. He hits all the cues. He makes sure you know it's Purple Label. He can deeply provide you the Ivy League degree you never had. The Gatsby success you always desire. Success is something that comes along with a purchase with Ralph Lauren," said Arnell.

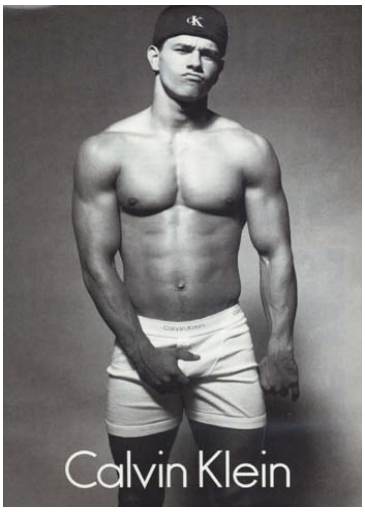
"When you look at Calvin, everybody looks like they're on the prowl. There are a lot of companies that have it, and some don't. Tommy Hilfiger has kept it going. He knows who he is and he knows what the market is and he's kept it going."

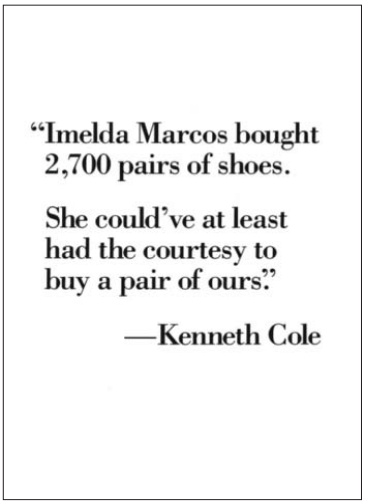
Arnell emphasized that great advertising has always narrated a story.

"It's not about the product, it's about the spirit, and the attitude, and the communications of the mission. It's Kenny Cole at its best. It's Benetton. The people who run these marketing groups have to encourage the communication. They have to narrate the story. They just can't depict, they have to narrate. They have to be true. When a truth is found in an image, it lasts forever. Why do these great images stick in our minds forever? It's not a season-by-season. Why? They stick in our minds forever because they're timeless. Timeless pictures come from a platform of truth which is universal and forever. That's what's provocative. When people communicate what the soul of their brand is," he said.

Arnell feels that people who live in a world with Instagram, Facebook, iPhones and Galaxys love communicating visually. People are spending 24/7 photographing images. "The competition is now the consumer, it's not any longer the agency or the other brands. It's the world at large looking to make great imagery. Everything is predictive. Everything is prescriptive. Everything is living as expected, instead of shocking toward the unexpected. There's no shock anymore. I think people should view their ads as entertainment, not as business. People want to be entertained with advertising. What better an industry than fashion, which spends its entire life dressing up the world."

> "If an image does not provoke, then you've thrown your money away."
>
> — OLIVIERO TOSCANI





Clockwise from top left: American Apparel's ousted chief executive officer Dov Charney has pushed the boundaries with sexy, sometimes lewd imagery. Here, a recent image; Mark Wahlberg ("Marky Mark") in Calvin Klein Underwear ads was a conversation starter in 1992; Kenneth Cole uses his ad campaigns to promote or satirize topical and social issues, and Tom Ford raised eyebrows with his Gucci ad in 2003 showing the Gucci "G" shaved into model Carmen Cass' pubic hair.

Kirshenbaum, who's now ceo of Nue Studio Group, believes controversial things are still happening, but the entire conversation has changed. He observed three things going on in the fashion world: "There are controversial brands that are more open to controversy, there are controversial things the brands do in terms of their platforms, and then there are controversial people behind the brands, people who are creative.

"I think the truth is, it's not that controversial things aren't happening. I believe the conversation is happening in different places. It may be happening in social media or an event, or in the news media," said Kirshenbaum.

He pointed out that as media have become completely fractionalized, the conversation has become fractionalized as well through advertising, social media or blogging. Kirshenbaum noted there are brands that are edgier and living in an edgier world such as Dolce & Gabbana, American Apparel and Tom Ford. "Their imagery is sexier and more provocative. It's not that people aren't doing it. But I do think there's a level of immunity to a certain extent. I don't think the Millennial generation is easily shocked at this point. A lot of Millennials in my office don't seem very shockable. The imagery is so much more forward," he said.

Charles DeCaro, partner in Laspata DeCaro, which created the controversial Kenar ads using supermodels such as Linda Evangelista, Helena Christensen and Naomi Campbell, said it's a different world today. "The nature of social media and reality TV, these escapades that happen are in your face 24/7. I think we're so used to everything at this point. Nothing is quite shocking. Truth is stranger than fiction. You see these TV reality shows, teen pregnancies and bad comics and really talentless people. Everyone seems riveted to that. I am not one of these people."

And DeCaro observed that clients aren't looking to rock the boat.

"The nature of advertising today is a play-it-safe thing. Before you were given much more creative latitude. There were not boards to answer to," he said. "You basically had a one-on-one relationship with the president of the company and you would impart your creative vision. Now it's a different thing because you're beholden to a corporation," said DeCaro.

He believes electronic, digital and social media have changed everything, and the whole conversation has changed. "Whatever we had done in the past, we had never done ads simply to provoke. There was always a narrative behind it, and a reason behind it," said DeCaro.

He cited Lauren as someone who will always be beholden to his brand. "Whenever you turn that page, you know it's a Ralph Lauren ad. With others, there's no continuity because it changes so frequently," he said.

"Think of the world we live in. You turn on the TV and there are mass murderers killing people in high schools. [In the Nineties] it was a much more innocent period. We were able to try things and if they provoked thought, great, if they didn't, fine. Now it just seems like a bunch of pictures," he said.

He said people still want to know the backstory behind an ad campaign and about the talent involved. "It's multilayered now. We do videos for every client we have. The life that lives behind the printed page and Web site is astounding. That obviously wasn't the case 20 years ago. What was on your page was your narrative and it was simply a print voice. Now you have people who are your brand ambassadors or your consumers or following you on their Web site. The message is following you through their Web site. Now you're able to learn so much behind the brand."

Does he believe edgy advertising helps sales?

"If it's done well. If it resonates and is brand appropriate and on message, sure it can spark controversy and encourage conversation and ultimately that would hopefully translate to sales. The consumer today is very savvy. They realize if something is done for shock value and they see through it. If it's simply done to shock it can have a negative effect," said DeCaro.

Ellis Verdi, owner of DeVito/Verdi, the New York ad agency that has done work for such clients as Sony, BMW, Daffy's, Kohl's, Esquire magazine, Time Out magazine, Grey Goose Vodka and Reebok has seen his share of controversy. "Controversial in and of itself is a challenge. If it's just controversial to get headlines and unrelated to the brand, you could be doing yourself a disservice." He said controversial advertising is bound to trigger negative letters even though the majority might like the idea. Sometimes a few negative letters and Facebook posts put clients in the position where they actually want to pull a campaign. "We always look to have truth in our advertising. The more truth you reveal the more you hit a nerve. Almost everything we do gets some degree of notoriety or some kind of reaction," said Verdi. He said he is most offended by advertising that doesn't say anything.

"I believe the digital arena has made clients feel they can control the results of their marketing expense. That sense of control puts clients in a position to look at accountability models and spending payback and they get lazy and they're not talking about a creative solution."

Verdi noted that a marketing meeting today seems more like a technology meeting and there's not enough talk about — marketing. "Technology makes people feel like they can determine and measure results — even though many of those efforts are smaller, they make clients feel more secure. As opposed to big ideas and concepts that might come with less assurance of results but might actually hit it out of the park," he said.

— WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM CYNTHIA MARTENS AND LAUREN MCCARTHY