

Denise Smith Amos Of The Post-Dispatch

Corporate advertising is getting downright preachy these days.

In recent weeks, the makers of Tylenol and Advil have been daring each other in ads to fully disclose the health problems linked to their pain relievers. Cigarette makers have bought newspaper ads that gloat or feud about recent rounds in the anti-smoking boxing match. And industrial companies are waxing environmental in corporate ads promoting or defending their pollution and recycling records. Why are advertisers so touchy these days?

And why are they uncharacteristically eager to link their logo and corporate image to a controversy or lawsuit?

Advertisers feel that they have to put their marketing money where their mouth is, said Esther Headley, a research consultant and marketing instructor at Wichita State University's W. Frank Barton School of Business. If they don't take a stand, she said, some policy maker or liability lawyer will walk all over them.

"This type of advertising is 'image advertising,'" she said. "It is created to bring about long-term goodwill and raise the company's image, rather than sell a product. It is on the rise because a lot of people perceive big business as a bad word now, with corporate layoffs, executive pay, etc. They're trying to reverse the impression of being the big bad corporate animal."

Thus, AT&T Corp. runs full-page ads explaining its impending mass layoffs and imploring companies to hire its displaced workers. Johnson & Johnson runs TV spots with actress Blair Brown explaining how the new health warning on its Tylenol label makes it safer, not less safe, than other pain relievers. And Anheuser-Busch Co.'s delivery trucks fight the battles against beer taxes by detailing how much in taxes they already contribute.

Often companies just want to make their case in their own words, said Tom Gow, a group creative director at D'Arcy Masius Benton & Bowles in St. Louis.

"Advocacy advertising is trying to affect an issue that is in front of the public," he said. "You don't have to directly attack the boiler-plate issues; you can address the attitude around it."

Corporations started putting in their two cents' worth during the 1960s, when just about everybody felt the need to speak out, said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, dean of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communications. Until recently, though, only politicians and activists used advocacy ads almost exclusively.

This advertising form got a boost with Mobil Corp.'s extensive use, said Pradeep A. Rau, chairperson of George Washington University's marketing department. Mobil's "op-ed" advertisements are perhaps the longest running corporate issues campaign ever. It started in the early 1970s, at the time of the national the oil crisis. The print ads today discuss everything from electric cars to wildlife refuges.

"The practice seems to be enjoying another period of activist 'issue framing' nowadays," Rau said, "with the cigarette industry and several other sponsors using it to talk directly to the public."

Much like the Mobil ads, corporate advocacy ads aren't as pretty. Mobil uses a logo and perhaps a cartoon with its essays. Cigarette makers regularly use prints ads that contain no pictures or illustrations, just bold headlines and lots of verbiage. The ads don't have to be eye-catching to attract the right target, added Jamieson at the Annenberg School. They are geared toward the people who truly are interested in the issues. That is why opinion commercials air mostly on CNN, Headline News and the Sunday morning news shows on PBS, she said.

"News junkies tend to be the informational elite," she said. "They're most likely to write a letter or cast a vote. And they're also most likely to already have an opinion."

The now historic, "Harry & Louise" ads in 1994, are a good example of how an ad with very little consumer clout still packed quite a policy punch. The "Harry and Louise" campaign featured real people obsessing over health care. The ads ran only on CNN, Headline News and the local TV stations of key members of Congress. Jamieson's research showed that only a third of the people shown the ads recalled them later, and almost none remembered their message.

Not so, says the Health Insurers Association of America. Its polls show that up to 40 percent of viewers remembered them, a spokesman said. Marketers surely remember them, mostly for their deadly impact on President Bill Clinton's health care reform proposals. Even if advertisers control the message, it can still backfire, said Gow at D'Arcy. He said the ongoing marketing battle between Tylenol and Advil, for instance, may be harming the image of all over-the-counter pain relievers. Tylenol points out in ads that ibuprofen products like Advil can upset people's stomachs and harm ulcer patients.

Advil ads point out that Tylenol recently had to put a warning label on its bottles because acetaminophen can endanger drinkers. The newest ads have gotten particularly nasty, with Advil's maker, Whitehall-Robins Healthcare Corp., airing Tylenol's dirty laundry with consumers. Recently an appeals court upheld an \$8.8 million judgment against Tylenol's maker, the McNeil Consumer Products unit of Johnson & Johnson.

The plaintiff, Tony Benedi of Fairfax, Va., claimed he took Tylenol for the flu and wound up in a coma and underwent an emergency liver transplant. Benedi grew angry that Tylenol's recent ads about the health warning didn't say enough about the dangers, but instead included a toll-free number, said Patrick Malone, Benedi's lawyer. Benedi feared Tylenol was using the ads to pitch their product directly to consumers. Benedi bought a full-page advocacy ad in the March 16 edition of the Washington Times, scolding Tylenol and detailing his experiences. Last month, Whitehall-Robins paid for the ad to run in major national dailies, including the New York Times (where a full page costs \$61,349 to \$83,916) and USA Today (where a full page costs \$57,500 to \$102,400). But the new ads failed to mention that Whitehall-Robins makes Advil, a competing product. Since then the company has issued a press statement defending its actions.

"Everybody involved is dealing with only part of the truth," Gow said. "Everyone involved is doing a real consumer disservice." Even so, don't expect corporations to hang up their boxing mitts. Expect even more opinion ads in this election year, Jamieson predicted, as health care, cigarette, automobile and other industries seek to shape politicians' political platforms.

"Usually you see an increase in advocacy advertising when an industry is threatened," she said. There are some advertisers who stay out of the rink. Monsanto Co., for instance, did not contribute to the chemical industry's recent television campaign featuring a cartoon-like man demonstrating the industry's recycling efforts.

"We really try not to put a lot of money into a campaign like that," said Diane Herndon, a Monsanto spokeswoman. "Our philosophy all along has been that our actions should speak for themselves. As our past chairman Richard Mahoney said, 'We should be discovered doing good things.'"

"Monsanto helps that along with regular press releases to the news media, she said.