In the post-Harvey Weinstein era, the adage “sex sells” may have become a little complicated for those of us in advertising and marketing. Since the Mad Men days, beautiful people – both male and female – have been used to sell. But for every Marlboro man, Bounty guy and Old Spice horseman there are a thousand GoDaddy pitchwomen, Doublemint twins and Brooke Shields with her Calvins.
The “#MeToo” movement presents the ad industry with some tough questions. Agencies and marketing teams are increasingly challenged to “disrupt,” “breakthrough” and “go viral.” It’s understandable that some of the ideas that arise in brainstorm sessions are risqué. And some make it into the market.

With a heightened awareness of the insidious danger of objectification, not to mention the desire to ensure a harassment-free workplace, do creatives need to rethink how they act? Do we as an industry need to reconsider how we use sex to sell products, causes and ideas?

In search of answers, I turned to Hilary Philips, a former global chief talent officer at one of the largest ad agencies in the world.

**Is it possible for marketing to be disruptive yet not cross the line?**

**Hilary:** Absolutely! Great advertising should disrupt and catch our attention. The key is drawing the line between disruptive and disturbing. Today’s heightened awareness of just how prevalent disturbing behavior is, presents an opportunity to be more considered and more considerate – of just how prevalent disturbing behavior is, presents an opportunity to be more considered and more considerate –

**Scott:** (former corporate marketer who relaunched her career a decade ago as a Licensed Professional Counselor and Certified Sex Therapist, and Scott Murphy, HR professional and former global chief talent officer at one of the largest ad agencies in the world.)

**How should agency and marketing leaders address sex when it comes up, for instance, in a freewheeling brainstorm session?**

**Hilary:** Sex is an important part of the human experience. That’s why it is such an effective tool of advertising. When it comes to talking about sex in the workplace, two important things must be considered: consent and power imbalances.

No one should ever feel coerced to share personal aspects of their life, or to listen to the things others are sharing. Creative sessions should have clear rules of engagement – if even one person is uncomfortable, it’s time to redirect. Power imbalances can make this tough to navigate. A junior associate may feel hesitant to express discomfort for fear they will be judged, won’t be invited to future meetings, or have their professional opportunities diminished.

This can be avoided by having openly stated guidelines that it’s okay for someone to speak up and say they are uncomfortable without judgment, eye rolls or minimizing someone’s point of view. If someone speaks up it should be immediately respected. This needs to come from the top of the organization and be consistently observed.

**Scot:** (former corporate marketer who relaunched her career a decade ago as a Licensed Professional Counselor and Certified Sex Therapist, and Scott Murphy, HR professional and former global chief talent officer at one of the largest ad agencies in the world.)

**Can talking about sex in the workplace inadvertently create an environment that is less sensitive to sexual harassment?**

**Scott:** Possibly. But “sexual harassment” need not rule out discussing sex – sexual harassment involves “quid pro quo” behavior or what is called a hostile work environment. In other words, if sex is talked about in the spirit of business or the creative process, it’s OK, provided the talk does not become focused on a specific individual or a minority in the room.

However, there is a risk that workplace conversations about sex might desensitize employees, making them more apt to make inappropriate comments directed at a person or a minority.

In today’s environment, where sexual harassment is making daily news, business leaders should avoid being overly sensitive or over-correcting. Good judgement still prevails.

**Hilary:** The key is to have a defined and well-communicated policy on sexual harassment. It goes a long way for employees to know the organization prioritizes everyone feeling comfortable and respected.

It sounds a little corny, but organizations can also have a good-humored “safe word” or phrase that anyone can say any time they feel the discussion has gone too far. If the corporate culture embraces this in a light-hearted fashion, it can break any tension in the room and get the discussion back on track. Again, it must be clear and well-communicated that if someone uses this phrase it will be respected, and their discomfort will not be minimized later as being overly sensitive. It also helps if the most senior person in the room sets an appropriate tone and remains attuned to the feelings of all participants.

**How can creative teams put in place rules, norms or guidelines that permit pushing the limits while ensures a safe place?**

**Hilary:** The key is to make clear and well-communicated policy on sexual harassment. It goes a long way for employees to know the organization prioritizes everyone feeling comfortable and respected.
Assuming the group is balanced and diverse—a desirable aim in itself—then considering all the different reactions what is being discussed presents an opportunity to better understand the consumer. If someone in the room is offended or feels put-off by what is being considered, consider that valid feedback to be incorporated into the creative process.

**Should advertising evolve beyond “sex sells”? Is it time, is it possible, is it practical?**

**Hilary:** Sex is such an important a part of the human experience that I’m not sure this is practical, or even desirable. Rather, the current public debate creates an opportunity for marketers to approach sex in a more responsible, but also more creative way.

Perhaps we can move beyond the objectified person (female or male) and focus on what is consensual, empowering and fun! We already see some brands already do this, and I believe others will follow their lead. Sex sells, yes, but romance, intrigue and desire are more subtle and more sustainable.

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Understanding what buyers care about, how they make their decisions, and how they want to receive information, makes marketing about them, not about us.

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