

## Flawless Skin and Marketing

by Ann Gerhardt, MD

August 2011

In the U.S., the Federal Trade Commission Act states that advertising must be truthful, non-deceptive and fair, and have evidence to back up claims. The act targets ads that cause harm or mislead consumers to a decision to buy when they wouldn't otherwise. Presumably this establishes a standard of truth in advertising.

Why, then, do companies get away with digitally modified advertisement photographs?

Photographers have digitally altered advertisement photos, to lengthen legs, bolster boobs, and purge pudge for years. With digital techniques to "perfect" skin, it has become an art. Use miracle cream du jour and not do only your blemishes resolve but your pores disappear, too. Legs in magazines never have razor burn, crow's feet don't exist and models can flex a joint without any skin crinkles.

Regulatory agencies, tasked with protecting consumers from false advertising claims, haven't done anything about it until now, in the United Kingdom. A British politician complained about a deceptive, photographically enhanced ad for Maybelline's anti-ageing foundation, The Eraser, and Lancome's Teint Miracle.

In response to the complaint, Britain's Advertising Standards Agency banned the two ads in the United Kingdom for airbrushing models' skin. The models happened to be Julia Roberts and Christy Turlington, who don't have much wrong with their skin in the first place. The parent company, L'Oreal, admitted that the photos were digitally manipulated and retouched, but they "accurately illustrated" the effects of their make-up. Are they suggesting the models didn't really use the product, and the retouching was done to mimic what the company hoped the product would do?

Some creams actually do appear to vanquish wrinkles, at least temporarily. They puff out the skin, thereby stretching wrinkled skin smooth. Some do this by causing an inflammatory response that fills the skin with fluid. Can that really be good for your poor skin?

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## HEALTHY CHOICES FOR MIND AND BODY

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The FTC's advertising principles apply to cosmetics, but so far enforcement of the act has focused on 1) deceptive health claims (e.g., toothpaste preventing cavities), 2) descriptions of the product (e.g., the size of a bookcase) and 3) functionality (e.g., a non-leaky water filter). They have not pursued sanctions against general appearance claims.

The FTC also focuses on words. Deceptive pictures don't count. The FTC has investigated anti-wrinkle cream marketing for false *written* claims of scientifically backed superiority. Apparently a picture is not worth a thousand words. So photographic marketing of flawless, pore-less, china-doll skin that causes a woman to waste money on a cream to eradicate her smoker's wrinkles is not egregious enough to be chastised by the FTC - unless there is a verbal claim.

In the UK, it took a politician's complaint to nudge their watchdog agency into action. Here in the U.S., in the unregulated meantime, advertisers continue to use deception to sell products, by making the buyer feel inadequate in her own, natural, probably just fine, skin.