Don’t Talk to Me That Way – #WomenNotObjects

“Advertising is only evil, when it advertises evil things.”

-David Ogilvy

By Madonna Badger, Chief Creative Officer and Founder, Badger and Winters

I have objectified women (and men) many times during the 22 plus years that I’ve owned my ad agency, Badger and Winters, and this year, I made a promise to never objectify another human being again.

On Dec 25th, 2011 my three children, Lily, Sarah and Grace and my Mom and Dad were killed in a fire. I was in the fire, but I lived.

I went back to work full-time in 2013. My work has saved me on so many levels. I love my job, I love my clients and the wonderful people I work with everyday. Jim Winters, my business partner and I believed, as we always had, that empathy was the true gateway to understanding women and their needs, desires and motivations. We work with some of the biggest companies in the world, and our agency is very successful.
But I had also been looking for a greater purpose-something bigger that could serve as a way to honor my girls and effect change using my voice and my talents.

So on January 11, 2016, my team created #WomenNotObjects video which is a compilation of images we found online by searching objectification of women in advertising. It was launched unbranded to start the conversation and have people focus on the content and not the context. Later on January 25th, we revealed that we were behind the campaign. To date, we have over 1.6 million video views and 51 million social reach and the response has been incredible.

Objectification of women has long been the subject of many medical and academic studies with empirical and analytical evidence of the harm it causes to women, men, children and teens.

Put simply, objectification is the portrayal of human beings as things without regard for their humanity or dignity.

So in order to change as an agency we created a four-part criteria to prevent objectification in our work moving forward:

1. Props. Does this woman have a choice or a voice in what is being depicted?
2. Plastic. Has she been retouched to the point of being humanly unachievable?
3. Parts. Has this woman been reduced solely to a provocative body part?
4. What if this woman was your mother, daughter, co-worker, or wife. Would you be comfortable?

When exposed to objectifying ads, women are likely to turn the lens and self-objectify, which can lead to shame, anxiety, low self-esteem, low-self-confidence, eating disorders and depression. Self-objectification takes up cognitive space in
our brains. One study has shown that college-age women score lower on the exact same test when wearing a swimsuit vs. a sweater.*

Apply this scenario to the workplace and is it any wonder that women are less likely to speak up in meetings or to ask for a raise, an assignment or a promotion? Men are meant to see us as whole, human, strong and equal, but meanwhile most of the images they see objectify women and I believe it’s why workplace inequality is still prevalent.

But the worst harm, is what’s done to our children – and they are the future.

One study estimates that children ages 2 to 11 saw an average of about 25,600 TV ads per year, which has been dramatically increasing over the years with the added advertising methods in today's digital age, like immersive websites, advergaming, viral marketing, mobile ads, and social media marketing. Children are bombarded with advertising and content created by advertising agencies like mine. And when a child or teen sees a woman portrayed as an object, it harms them the most.

In the US, the average age that a girl goes on her first diet is 7, and 81% of 10 year old girls refer to themselves as “fat” when asked about body image.

When companies objectify women in advertising and content, they’re essentially teaching young girls-just as they’re understanding their place in the world- that looks are more important than who you are, how you feel, and what you can do. And young boys are getting the message that girls are only to be looked at – nothing more.

By researching and understanding this problem, my agency came to the decision to never objectify a woman or man again. And we have chosen to use our own resources and talents to raise awareness because we know there is a better and more creative way to tell brand stories without devaluing women.
About the Author: Madonna Badger started her career at Esquire and Madame Figaro in Paris, before launching the first issue of Allure. She joined Calvin Klein in 1990, where she created the Mark Wahlberg and Kate Moss campaigns, and launched CK One. Madonna founded Badger & Winters in 1994 and was soon working with clients such as Vera Wang, Chanel and Shiseido.