

Old habits at Samsung, LG embarrass them abroad

April 3 2014, by Youkyung Lee



In this May 21, 2013 file photo, South Korean models pose with LG Electronics' organic light-emitting diode (OLED) TVs during the World IT Show in Seoul, South Korea. Samsung Electronics Co., which is preparing for the global launch of the Galaxy S5 smartphone on April 11, 2014, said it is making "concentrated efforts" to ensure its communications around the world respectfully portray women. Some of its promotions and corporate events in the past year were criticized as sexist and demeaning. The advertising of LG Electronics Inc. has also been under scrutiny in South Korea and abroad for its portrayal of women. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man, File)

When Samsung unveiled a new smartphone at the storied Radio City Music Hall, the Broadway-style spectacle was memorable not for technology but for a cast of giggling female characters who fantasized about marrying a doctor, fretted about eating too much cake, and needed a man's help to understand how to work the phone.

The stereotypes were blatant even for an industry where skimpily clad booth babes are a staple of trade shows and high-level female executives are a rarity. A backlash spread online as the event, live-streamed on the Internet and broadcast in Times Square, unfolded.

How could an international company that wants to be seen as an innovator and spends more than \$11 billion a year on advertising and promotions so badly misjudge its audience? Without too much difficulty and often it turns out.

A day before the Galaxy smartphone launch in March last year, the company was criticized in South Africa for using models in bikini tops to show its newest refrigerators and washing machines.

Some months later it was derided for a video promoting a fast data storage device known as a [solid state drive](#). Two men in the ad immediately recognize the device and understand the benefits while a woman, who says she only uses her computer for simple activities such as looking at pictures, is befuddled.

Marlene Morris Town, a marketing professor at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business, said the portrayals are "troubling" and imply that men are the sole target of the sales message. If women are the target, the implication is "they are significantly less competent and not able to grasp technology."

Samsung is hardly alone in talking down to half of its potential

customers.

Joking that gadgets made by LG Electronics distract attention from models, Facebook user Lee Sang-hoon collected two dozen images of the company's products promoted by women with ample cleavage. The company's promotion for a new curved TV was a woman showing off her thighs in a reclining pose.

"Among men, we talk about how LG does breast marketing," said Lee, who noted LG seemed to have toned down its promotions this year.

Perhaps because depictions of females as adornments and submissive helpers have long been the norm in South Korean commercials and print ads, audiences have rarely questioned how homegrown technology giants such as Samsung and LG Electronics portrayed women. Even as these companies became global names, ingrained aspects of their corporate cultures hardly changed. Some of Samsung's blunders took place under female leadership. A top marketing executive in its mobile team was a woman and gave the green light to the Radio City Music Hall performance.



In this May 21, 2013 file photo, South Korean models wait for the start of reception near Samsung Electronics' 85-inch Ultra High Definition (UHD) TVs during the World IT Show in Seoul, South Korea. Samsung Electronics Co., which is preparing for the global launch of the Galaxy S5 smartphone on April 11, 2014, said it is making "concentrated efforts" to ensure its communications around the world respectfully portray women. Some of its promotions and corporate events in the past year were criticized as sexist and demeaning. The advertising of LG Electronics Inc. has also been under scrutiny in South Korea and abroad for its portrayal of women. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man, File)

Heeding criticism abroad and at home, Samsung this year tried for the first time to dispense with young women in tight clothes for a TV launch in South Korea. It was a small but somehow bold step as sexualized product launches are a fixture that provide fodder for tabloids and TV and much publicity for the companies.

"In the past, it seemed that a lot of reporters were focusing on something

else, not our TVs," said Kim Hyun-seok, head of Samsung's TV business.

But far from winning plaudits, Samsung became the victim of the cult it helped create.

Without models, news photographers and camera crews refused to shoot a new curved screen television at the Samsung launch in February. Instead, they asked female assistants hired to explain technical features to stand next to the TVs.



In this Oct. 10, 2013 file photo, a model poses with Samsung Electronics' smartphones the Galaxy Round, at Korea Electronics Show in Goyang, west of Seoul, South Korea. Samsung Electronics Co., which is preparing for the global launch of the Galaxy S5 smartphone on April 11, 2014, said it is making "concentrated efforts" to ensure its communications around the world respectfully portray women. Some of its promotions and corporate events in the past year were criticized as sexist and demeaning. The advertising of LG

Electronics Inc. has also been under scrutiny in South Korea and abroad for its portrayal of women. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man, File)

For some, the phenomenon reflects that leadership in the tech and advertising industries remains predominantly male.

"Decision makers in the ads are nearly all men," said Park Jae-hang, who worked at Cheil Worldwide, an ad and marketing unit of Samsung Group, between 1993 and 2009.

Ken Hong, a spokesman for LG, said the content of promotions boils down to what the audience wants.

"Using female models for tech product photos is popular with Korean readers so the media request them," he said.



In this undated file photo released by LG Electronics Inc., a model poses with an LG Electronics' 105-inch ultra-HD TV with a curved screen in Seoul, South Korea. Samsung Electronics Co., which is preparing for the global launch of the Galaxy S5 smartphone on April 11, 2014, said it is making "concentrated efforts" to ensure its communications around the world respectfully portray women. Some of its promotions and corporate events in the past year were criticized as sexist and demeaning. The advertising of LG Electronics Inc. has also been under scrutiny in South Korea and abroad for its portrayal of women. (AP Photo/LG Electronics Inc., File)

When he distributes pictures to international media, he usually opts for product-only ones and tries to limit the use of models to situations where the size of the product needs to be emphasized.

Even as companies say they are giving consumers what they want, not every Korean agrees. Cho Seon-young, a 29-year-old painter and gadget lover, said she skips articles with photos of women in tight clothes and heavy makeup holding tech gadgets. She'd rather they focused on the devices.

"Those tech devices are high-class and expensive but these women make those goods look cheap," she said.

Minjeong Kim, an assistant professor of Women's Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, said the imagery has real consequences for how women are perceived.



In this Feb. 20, 2014 file photo, models pose with a Samsung Electronics curved UHD TV during a press unveiling at its headquarters in Seoul, South Korea. Samsung Electronics Co., which is preparing for the global launch of the Galaxy S5 smartphone on April 11, 2014, said it is making "concentrated efforts" to ensure its communications around the world respectfully portray women. Some of its promotions and corporate events in the past year were criticized as sexist and demeaning. The advertising of LG Electronics Inc. has also been under scrutiny in South Korea and abroad for its portrayal of women. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon, File)

"They are inviting, they are smiling, and they just stand there," she said. "They reinforce the feminine ideals that women should be nice and submissive."

In the last few years, Samsung has increased its marketing and advertising to promote its Galaxy smartphones that have surpassed Nokia and Apple in global sales. But the criticism of its marketing has

been a setback in the attempt to reinvent itself as an innovator and a trend setter.

Samsung, which is preparing for the global launch of the Galaxy S5 smartphone on April 11, said it is making "concentrated efforts" to ensure its communications around the world respectfully portray women.

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