BY DON E. SCHULTZ

CLEAN CITY IMPACT

A RECENT VISIT to São Paulo, Brazil, left some questions on the lingering effects of social reform. If you've not been following current Brazilian events, other than football (soccer) or Carnival, the city's new mayor, Gilberto Kassab, recently pushed through legislation designed to create dramatic environmental change. The new law bans all outdoor advertising, including bus and taxi, except for modest signs on building fascia identifying the business provided. Guidelines were established and are being enforced with healthy fines. So the greatest fear of advertising people has occurred: They lack access to consumers.

It's an interesting way to clean up what I perceived to be an advertising jungle on a visit to São Paulo a couple of years ago.

The lack of garish signage, covering most every building and wall and often projecting several meters into the air, provides quite a change. You can actually see the trees and some of the lovely old buildings and homes that make up parts of the city. But it also reveals the uninspired architecture of recent years that might better be hidden behind a Perrier poster. It also exposes the slums surrounding the city.

São Paulo looks totally different. Walking and driving through the streets, particularly Avenue Paulista, the city's primary thoroughfare, I suddenly thought: This is really a neat change, at least for the citizens. You actually get a feel for what the city is all about.

The outdoor signage people, advertisers and agencies don't think the "Clean City Law" is such a good idea. Outdoor has essentially been legislated out of business. I wasn't there at the lead-up to the ban, but I'm sure there were lots of howls about restrictions, freedom of speech, interfering with commerce, driving certain types of once-legal firms out of business and the like. When I got there, the deed was done. The signs were gone and the trees visible.

In São Paulo, so-called visual pollution has given way to "green" or "renewable" or "socially responsible" sightlines. Even though deep down I'm a free-enterpriser and free speech guy, having been employed in advertising all my working life, I confess the change raised questions.

Maybe the impact was greater on me as I had spent the previous week in a Times Square New York hotel that looked down, across, around and up at an absolute riot of flashing lights, 10-story illustrations of celebrities touting everything imaginable and giant-screen HDTVs giving me minute-by-minute updates on Wall Street declines. Even the heaviest-gauge, WWII air-raid-type hotel curtains couldn't block out the pulsating strobe lights of continuous commerce.

This social experiment in São Paulo seems to be working. There were no visible pickets with signs saying "Bring Back the Bacardi Bat" or protesters demanding the return of the rocking and rolling electronic "Enjoy Coca-Cola" posters the size of a football field, or even any people who seemed to miss the continuous reminders that "Fiat" means automobiles in Brazil.

São Paulo was visually peaceful, quiet and restrained, or as least as restrained as a metropolitan area of 20-plus million Brazilians can be.

What struck me on reflection about this sign-less "clean city" was the potential long-term impact of the ban. Experienced consumers who already know, recognize and understand the brands and corporate logos now missing are probably OK with the ban. We've been bombarded with so many slogans, pleas and promotions, the now missing signage had likely become so much wallpaper. We've seen the offers, come-ons and promotions for years. We probably just block it out, assuming it is simply part of the cost of living in a highly promotional age.

There's another group, however, who likely derived benefit from those signs: the new consumers moving to São Paulo from the countryside. They're just learning how to manage in a very complex, highly differentiated marketplace. They're the ones who need the educational guidance advertising can provide. In São Paulo, and other cities like it in the emerging economies around the world, new consumers rely on signs, posters and billboards as guides on how to become economically educated. Many are functionally illiterate, but they can still get a sense of the product, market and brand from the outdoor signage.

São Paulo is the largest city in the world with this type of citywide outdoor advertising ban. The same issues exist, however, in emerging market magnet cities such as Mumbai, India, Beijing and even Guatemala City. All are growing rapidly, fueled by people looking for work and a better life than the one they had in the electricity- and plumbing-less villages from whence they came. One of the first things they need to learn is how to be a consumer and what products to buy or use to improve their lives.

Doubtlessly, the external advertising signage of São Paulo was of benefit to them. Big graphics. Large letters. Clearly discernible logos. Illustrations of products in use or packages they might see in a store. Many of the things needed to navigate in a new environment are simply no longer there.

My thoughts evolved to: Will this social experiment have a long term effect, not just for current residents, but for newcomers as well? How will new citizens learn about products and services? Television? Maybe, although I suspect their access to color, HDTV, multi-channel sets won't come soon. Will brand recognition decline? Will private labels grow simply because of pricing? Will São Paulo be inhabited by a group of unprepared consumers with few brand reference points?

Those are the longer-term issues that should be researched. But I suspect they won't be. We'll simply and smugly say "São Paulo…the Clean City" and maybe try to enact similar restrictions in our hometowns.

Removal of visual pollution is probably good for many, but it may be bad for others. Only time will tell. **m**

Don E. Schultz is a professor (emeritus-in-service) of integrated marketing communications at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill. He can be reached at dschultz@northwestern.edu or news@ama.org