



## BRUCE HEALEY

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### DEFENDING “CLUELESS HUSBANDS”

Is it just me, or has there been a sudden surge in advertising that portrays men, particularly young husbands, to be ignorant, gullible yahoos that are easily guided through life by cunning spouses who manipulate them like puppets?

The most recent to catch my eye comes from Wal-Mart. It shows a wife arriving home with steaks. A bumbling and apparently mute husband hovers around the periphery of the scene, while the wife explains that since they don't eat steak often, he is confused and wonders if it is an anniversary, her birthday or – get this – HIS birthday, which would warrant such culinary excess. She decides to let the poor, apparently brainless husband keep trying to guess.

With breathtaking frequency, husbands are depicted as inept, incompetent and amusing to those “in the know” i.e. the female spouse. This kind of humor is quite in vogue among the makers of commercials. Exactly why they choose to depict husbands this way is a mystery. My guess is that it is easy to write an ad that demeans one character to make another (the target) look smart, because they chose the product the advertising is selling. Since demeaning a particular race, religion or indeed females is decidedly off limits (and for good reason, I might add), husbands provide a soft target that spans across social groups.

The question is, do we have to demean anyone to sell a product? Plenty of advertising works perfectly without putting anyone down except the competition. Do we need to portray a husband as

an imbecile in order to peddle cheap steaks? Do wives have to appear cunning and manipulative to sell diet yogurt? Of course not. It is just easy to get a smile that way, and with a smile perhaps a sale, which reinforces the message from the advertisement.

As an accomplished, educated professional who opted to become a stay-at-home father and house-husband 11 years ago I find these depictions of husbands as marginally mentally handicapped, incapable of changing a diaper or incompetent in the kitchen to be vaguely offensive, shallow and decidedly out of touch. Most happily married people I know are proud of the fact that they share tasks and responsibilities in the home. They are happy to be capable enough to perform each other's roles in domestic life. Indeed, for working couples, one of the cornerstones of happiness is the ability to interchange parts of the daily routine with each other, in order to ensure the smooth running of the household.

Instead of celebrating the increasing equality between spouses (and I know we have a way to go before this is universal), these advertisements hark back to time when inequality and prejudice spawned a similar kind of humor, used to sell products then as well. Sadly, the only thing that has changed in the mind of these Neanderthals of the advertising world is the fall guy: Denied access to some stereotyped minority, they have targeted the average husband. The stereotype they are creating is not true in this case, either.