# Is Advertising Misusing The Power of The Asterisk?

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You know the routine. You see those screaming ad headlines that will rivet your attention from across the page. But most times what you donâ€™t realise is that there is an asterisk next to a seemingly unbelievable claim in the headline. Taking a leaf out of legal document verbage where asterisks always come in handy for elaborate footnotes, the modern day asterisk helps qualify almost anything under the sun.

You can see this in the bank ads about interest rates, airlines ads declaring amazing fares and of course, telcos crusading low, low, low prices.

I, for one, have come to the realization that Iâ€™ll never get an AirAsia ticket for RM0. I am not one of those 500,000 travellers whoâ€™ll get a free seat; it will remain as distant as running a midnight marathon in the sewers. Even if my irreverent webmaster Gary Tay deployed an army of discount-hungry students whoâ€™d swarm to their website in every micro-click second. No chance. Zilch.

Isnâ€™t it frightening how we can be hypnotised purely by the magic of the infamous asterisk? Vulnerable consumers fall for this timeless gimmick on a daily basis.

The using of asterisks, while legally justified by the fine print, however has a way of masking the bigger truth. You could always say something without actually saying it. Instead of using asterisks for reasons of brevity for readers whoâ€™s lives evolves around back-breaking details (who?), it has now become a lazy ad personâ€™s way out when he is barren of real ideas.

Plonk in the superlative headline, mind-boggle the consumer to extraordinary disbelief and escape under the dark cover of darkness with asterisk in tow.

Which is why it is encouraging to note the Advertising Standards Authority in Singapore recently issue a circular stating all airlines and travel agencies are required to list the full fares of flight and travelling packages in ads. Emirates in Malaysia adheres to this ruling.

This was incorporated into the Singapore Code of Advertising Practice (SCAP) about a month ago. The code was enforced because consumers were faced with too many hidden costs when they booked their travel packages.

Putting aside asterisks for a moment, online media is a new scary playground on how mind-benders can get subversive in areas beyond advertising. Despite its perverted logic, you can actually run the world from a panic room. I believe the notion that no man is an island is getting outdated as fast as islands are disappearing*.

While some readers may spring to the conclusion that Iâ€™m ad-bashing this week in my column, let me get more shit off my liver. This whole idea of ad making stemming from the perception that we are all about drama and flash will remain a prevalent double-edged sword in our business. These are moments of truths we must face, or our new young generation will think weâ€™ve gone senile before our time. Thatâ€™s why I must end my article with this gemâ€¦

Hereâ€™s a disarming (but relevant) observation from a true Malaysian ad icon Yasmin Ahmad who rounded off a recent press conference honouring illustrious advertising people (including herself) at a Hall of Fame luncheon hosted by the 4As.

â€œWhile I recognize that advertising lubricates the cogs of marketing, there is a dark side to our business. I cannot fathom how ads championing fair skin are getting away with it? Is being dark skinned bad? Just because rich people have money to advertise expensive products it doesnâ€™t mean they can impose their thoughts irresponsibly on the masses. If we can turn the tide on these untruths, weâ€™ll be the first country in the world to respect the consumer for who he or she is."

*Terms and Conditions apply.