

The Advertising Council:

Selling Lies...



What do you think you could do with half-a-billion dollars worth of free advertising a year, especially if you were charged with using it to serve the public interest?

Would you use more than \$15 million to “rally the country behind the President’s [anti-inflation] measures”? Would you use \$40 million to tell the nation that the man on the street starts pollution, and not the smoke-belching, poison-pouring industries? Would you use more than \$10 million to encourage factory workers to be more “productive” for their employers? And how much would you devote to advertising that marijuana leads to a “loss of desire to work, to compete, to face challenges” and to a “compulsive” drug use?

Well, someone does have half-a-billion dollars in advertising at their disposal, practically all the free ads available in America, and those are some examples of how they use it. If you watch TV (especially late night) or read magazines (other than this one) you’ve seen their work many times

always ending up with the logo of the Advertising Council.

The council is a non-profit corporation funded and directed by America’s bonafide Captains of Industry. It produces those campaigns and dozens of others like them “in the public interest” on behalf of industry and the executive branch of the federal government. The Ad Council is by far the largest advertiser in the world. Since its formation in 1941, the council has used more than \$7 billion worth of free “public service” advertising donated by television, radio, newspapers, and magazines.

Unfortunately, what the public thinks is good for it is not always the same as what the directors of the Ad Council believe. The board of directors of the Ad Council is a who’s who of big business, including the media (NBC, CBS, ABC, Metromedia, Time Inc., etc.), the advertising agencies (J. Walter Thompson, which was so helpful in shaping the mentality of the Nixon men at the White House, Young & Rubicam, etc.), and the nation’s major advertisers (Proctor and Gamble, all the Generals: Motors,

by Bruce Howard

Mills, Electric, Foods, and others). No public interest groups are represented on the Ad Council's board.

Describing itself as "free enterprise's effective communication machine," the Ad Council has managed to monopolize more than 80 percent of the scarce public service time on network television, and the lion's share of free space and time in local television, radio, newspapers, and national magazines. In the past 30 years, the Ad Council has virtually created the landscape of public service advertising in America — traffic safety and seat belts, the United Way, the Red Cross, and, of course, that masterful cartoon conscience, Smokey the Bear. But as is often the case when General Motors and its colleagues get together to help the American people, there is more than meets the eye in the Ad Council's good will.

[WHO COUNSELS THE COUNCIL]

A closer look at the council's advertisements shows they are carefully designed to preserve the status quo and promote the image and interests of big business and big government. What makes the situation worse is the sorry scarcity of free public service time and space. The powers that run the Ad Council are the same ones that glut prime time with their paid ads. The media dregs scraps — the gaps in the back pages, pre-dawn and late-night television spots — are then thrown to public service ads. But the big advertisers are not prepared to let even these scraps go to their own critics.

Says Thomas Asher, executive director of the Media Access Project, a public interest law firm in Washington, D.C., "The community forces are forced to capture attention with extraordinary protest activity because they are muscled out of the public airways and print media by the Ad Council. The council then flacks for the power brokers of business and government, who already have ready access to the media in advertising and news broadcasts."

In a sizzling expose in *[More]* magazine in March, 1972, Tom Asher, went public with his long-time war against the Ad Council tyranny, but even with continued pressure from Asher, Congressman Benjamin Rosenthal (D-NY), and a scattering of other Congressmen and public interest groups, the public service announcement (PSA) situation has only slightly improved.

The main problem, they say, is that there is so precious little public service advertising, mainly because it is not required by law. No money-making operation, including the media, goes out of its way to provide free services. Magazines and newspapers are under absolutely no legal obligation to run free ads, and many in fact donate little or none.

Broadcasters, on the other hand, are required by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to state the number of public service announcements (PSAs) they have run in a sample week, and the number they intend to run in an average week in the next three years. Although the FCC sets no minimum number for PSAs, it could deny a license renewal if the local station were deemed not to have fulfilled its obligation to serve the community. So far, though numerous community groups have submitted challenges, no station has lost its license because it ran too few PSAs. As a result, stations donate less than three percent of

total air time for PSAs. It is this fraction that the Ad Council has effectively tied up.

On network television, the Ad Council's spots account for more than 80 percent of all PSAs. (In addition to the 25 major campaigns the Ad Council produces, each month it distributes a bulletin to local stations listing the other campaigns it "endorses." Network executives acknowledge that such endorsement is a virtual prerequisite for being aired.) Using the anti-trust lawyer's rule of thumb for monopoly — control of two-thirds or more of a market — the Ad Council has clearly monopolized the public service market.

The situation on the local level is a little better, but not much. Local stations run PSAs in addition to the ones that come down from the network, and many station managers like to use locally oriented ads. But the ubiquitous Ad Council still swamps local stations with its national ads, arguing that they do have "local import." Interviews with station managers indicated that they use many of the Ad Council ads instead of local ones because a) they are more professionally executed than local ads; b) they are bland, and do not arouse viewers to complain or demand response time; c) local groups would often need to use the station's own facilities, personnel, and art departments, because they cannot afford to produce their own ads; and d) the board of directors of the council includes the networks, the advertising agencies, and the major advertisers. When Proctor and Gamble and the parent network, et al. ask for free time, well, it's hard to bite the hand.

["THE PUBLIC CONSCIENCE"]

Besides the industries and agencies on the board of directors, the Ad Council also has an Industries Advisory Committee and a Public Policy Committee. The latter consists of 27 people who, according to an Ad Council promotional leaflet, "represent the public sector [and] act as the council's 'public conscience.'" The committee has the same power that most citizen advisory committees have in corporations run by a board of directors composed entirely of businessmen: little or none. Its impotence is made evermore ironic by the high profile the Ad Council attempts to give it.

The Industries Advisory Committee, on the other hand, is in charge of raising money for the council, and it has the power that most revenue-producing branches have in corporations run by a board of directors composed entirely of businessmen. Thus the Ad Council has a nice Freudian triumvirate — a superego-public conscience, a single-minded id (the Industries Advisory Committee), and an ego (the decision-making board of directors) that, in this case, curiously resembles the id.

[HELPING THE WHITE HOUSE WIN]

A fourth, and not so silent partner of the Ad Council's board is the federal government, which often uses the council as a flack for its various projects. Although the White House is not represented on the Ad Council's board of directors, the businessmen's group has been patriotically receptive to White

...And Selling Truth

There are two kinds of people," says Frank Greer, director of San Francisco's Public Media Center, "those with money and those with something to say. We're trying to rectify that situation." PMC is one of the most active of over 500 groups in the United States now involved in some type of media reform work—all of them trying to increase the number of types of messages communicated by the mass media. They reflect a movement that has been growing since the mid-Sixties, a movement that has included challenges to the renewal of local TV stations' FCC licenses on the grounds of racist or sexist policies, open media committees negotiating for the right of citizens to speak on local broadcast media, and public interest advertising agencies which turn around the sophisticated techniques of modern mass communications to advance issues normally frozen out of the commercial media. And despite limited resources, and limited cooperation from much of the media, the scope and effectiveness of these efforts have steadily increased.

A landmark event for the public interest advertising movement took place back in 1966, the year Congress seemed ready to authorize a series of dams on the Colorado River that would have inundated much of the Grand Canyon. The Sierra Club paid a small San Francisco advertising agency, Freeman, Mander & Gossage, to direct a campaign against the bill. Jerry Mander, who was to become an important figure in future campaigns, designed an ad headlined "Shall We Flood the Sistine Chapel so the Tourists Can Get Closer to the Ceiling?" The ad included a coupon readers could use to inform public officials of how they felt: Interior Secretary Stewart Udall received 20,000 coupons demanding the project be dropped. The

dam project collapsed and Rep. Wayne Aspinall, chairman of the House Interior and Insular Affairs Committee, gave the ads credit for defeat of the plan.

The Grand Canyon victory gave Freeman, Mander & Gossage considerable prominence, which they followed up over the next few years. Ads produced by the agency are credited with preserving a redwood forest in California, preventing miners and dam builders from encroaching on North Cascades National Park near Seattle, stopping Texas oil millionaire Lamar Hunt from converting Alcatraz Island into a space-age Disneyland, and helping to block development of the SST.

By 1972, a number of activists in the movement for public interest advertising had come together in San Francisco to form Public Interest Communications—later to become PMC. Jerry Mander, dress manufacturer, Alvin Duskin, who had financed some of Mander's most successful ads, and Dugald Stermer, former art director of RAMPARTS, were joined by Frank Greer and Roger Hickey, who had been involved in Project Unsell, a powerful nation-wide advertising campaign directed against the Vietnam War. Armed with a \$50,000 grant from the Stern Fund, the new group aimed toward a continuing, aggressive presence in developing and distributing alternative messages through the media.

PIC's first major achievement came later that year, in response to the U.S. Christmas terror bombing of North Vietnam, which included the destruction of Hanoi's Bach Mai Hospital. Medical Aid to Indochina approached PIC and offered to pay for ads in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *New York Times*, which would assail the bombing and also solicit money for medical supplies for North Vietnam.

During the two years that followed, the ad brought in nearly \$600,000—largely because the ad was reprinted by local anti-war groups across the country.

But Public interest advertising groups are not simply ad agencies with a specialty market, delivering ad copy or 60-second TV spots for a few. They view themselves as responsive to—indeed, part of—broader movements for social and economic change. Across the country, small agencies, consumer and political organizations, and ad hoc groups are making possible grass roots responses to the economic and political premises of commercial advertising which have long dominated the field of mass communication. In Los Angeles, Public Communications, Inc. has produced messages for television on auto safety, deceptive advertising for pain remedies, water pollution, drug abuse, and voter registration. PCI has also produced ads for print media on food stamps, harassment by credit agencies, and airline overbooking. (PCI also functions as a public interest law firm.) In nearby Westwood, the Public Advertising Council—operating out of a small bungalow with a staff of two—has produced radio spots for the Discharge Upgrading Project criticizing punitive discharges of Vietnam veterans; radio spots for the Citizens Action Project on discriminatory credit and loan practices; radio and TV ads for the National Sharecropper Fund on the problems of rural farming; and a TV ad for the People's Bicentennial Commission on the atrophy of the Bill of Rights.

At San Francisco's Public Media Center—the successor to Public Inter-
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by Henry Weinstein