



## MARKETING MATTERS



# School Bus Marketing Raises Concerns about Ad Creep

[By Anique Gonzalez]

As marketing and advertising become more pervasive in consumers' everyday lives, ad creep becomes a growing concern. Questions about what is appropriate, what is too invasive, and what tactics are too coercive are frequently asked. And, especially when it begins to enter into schools, ad creep often results in parents protesting in defiance. Nonetheless, a recent decision by the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDOE) has resulted in a reversal of roles. Instead of corporations trying to gain entrance into schools, the department's board is openly inviting them in.

In an attempt to boost their bottom line, the department agreed to terms with contractor SAC to include an 11-inch strip of advertising on the inside of participating school buses. This is expected to generate \$2,100 per month, per bus. Interestingly, this development comes on the heels of a school-centered marketing campaign developed by McDonald's that placed their logo on Seminole County, Florida, students' report cards. After much outrage McDonald's recently announced that their logo would be removed.

This has not only raised ethical questions about whether or not marketers should specifically target children in nontraditional mediums, but it also raises the question of whether or not this type of advertising in general should be expanded or stopped altogether. Many marketers argue that as the market becomes more saturated with ads, they are forced to employ novel and sometimes risky techniques to connect with consumers — tactics, in other words, that may result in ad creep.

Recent examples of these out-of-the-box and sometimes outlandish approaches have included the recent A&E campaign that culminated in a billboard being placed in

SoHo in New York that transmitted sounds that included someone saying, "Who's there? Who's there? . . . It's not your imagination" to pedestrians. The campaign was promoting a new show on the cable network entitled *Paranormal State*.

Another disputed campaign — this one initiated by the California Milk Processing Board — culminated in the group putting up a bus shelter that smelled like cookies. The city of San Francisco soon forced them to take it down. Microsoft has also taken part in such campaigns, creating grocery carts that are mounted with consoles that play advertisements which promote selected items being sold in the given store.

Ultimately, it is a thin line that all marketers must walk. If they succeed with these tactics, they will gain the interest, attention, and (hopefully) loyalty of consumers. If they fail, though, the result could be that consumers turn against them and their brands. Despite this risk, however, such marketing campaigns are a booming business. For instance, outdoor advertising generated \$7 billion last year alone.

Still, how individuals, and parents in particular, will react to the SCDOE's actions

remains to be seen. And while the board members understand this uncertainty, and were themselves somewhat hesitant to take such a massive step into unknown territory, they are vowing to continue on with their plans.

"I never thought [advertising inside school buses] was a good idea to start with," said Donald Tudor, South Carolina's DOE School Transportation Director, "but when you run a state program and districts request this be set in motion, you do it so they can make a choice. Ultimately, I couldn't think of a good reason why they shouldn't have the option."

It should be noted that the SAC has said that all the ads it produces will be age-appropriate and promote a healthy, productive lifestyle. Moreover, before any ads are placed in the buses, they must first be approved by district personnel.

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