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Advertising

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viewees, some whose comments seemed downright hostile to the church. Yet, the article noted, none of those interviewed had read "Ethics in Advertising."

Archbishop John P. Foley, president of the Pontifical Council on Social Communications, acknowledged that "Ethics" had not been extensively distributed to ad professionals, during a panel discussion on the letter at the Catholic Press Association's annual convention in Denver Friday, May 23. The prelate called on the Catholic press to publicize the document, and for its advertising professionals to hold conferences on the letter.

Foley added that he will speak to World Federation of Advertising Agencies in October.

Here in the Diocese of Rochester, ad professionals who spoke to the *Courier* expressed both interest and intrigue concerning the church's view when provided copies of "Ethics in Advertising."

Trude liked the document's emphasis on the harm that advertising can do in an underdeveloped country whose populace has barely enough money to feed itself, let alone buy soft drinks. However, she cautioned that the profit-seeking world of advertising and the soul-seeking world of Catholic social teaching may never meet.

"As long as you have a free enterprise system, you're going to have competition," she said. "And people are going to pull out all the stops to compete. I think it's good that we have standards, but we're never going to be all the way over to where (the church) is."

Another advertising expert said the document reinforced what he's believed all along about advertising.

"I thought it was pretty straightforward," said Ray Frey, the *Courier's* advertising director. "It wasn't overly churchy, and it just set some good guidelines."

Dawn Borgeest, president of the Rochester-based Advertising Council, which consists of 160 businesses and 250 marketing/communication firms that provide pro bono work for area not-for-profit groups, noted that many ad agencies do such work and receive little credit for it. She credited the document's authors for pointing out advertising's good points as well as its bad aspects.

Borgeest did add, however, that at times the letter had a "paternalistic tone" that underplayed the equally important roles of manufacturers who use advertising — and can pressure ad agencies to cross the ethical line — and of consumers who could do more to control ad content by contacting companies who make offensive ads.

"It's kind of like voting," she said of consumer input. "Ultimately, consumers' mores are the ones in control."

Quinn echoed Borgeest's statements. He pointed out, for example, that Calvin Klein once pulled a series of clothing ads featuring young models in poses that many critics saw as bordering on kiddie porn.

"Nobody liked it," he said of the ad campaign. "The company took it off, and paid a dear price for it in public opinion."

Quinn also argued that many more ads today use ironic humor about products in a conscious attempt to not insult the consumer.

"If you're not appealing to people as intelligent human beings, you're just going to fall flat," he said.

"Ethics In Advertising" also expresses concern that advertising can exploit such vulnerable groups as children, a concern reflected in recent debates over the impact of cigarette ads on kids. But Quinn pointed out that the content of today's advertising concerns him less than the sensual and sensationalistic content of television shows from which he must steer his children's eyes.

"Advertising is the least of my worries," he said.



An academic response

Dr. Hemant C. Sashittal, assistant professor of marketing at St. John Fisher College in Pittsford, welcomed "Ethics in Advertising" in hope that the document will invigorate discussion in the advertising

world.

"The (letter) articulates what I believe are core values and beliefs that guide the vast majority of people that participate in the marketing and business practice" he wrote in response to questions from the *Courier*. "Inordinate devotion to the truth, respect for fellow man and woman, and social responsibility can and should shape all business activities (including advertising)."

Sashittal, however, did have questions about some of the document's points. For example, the document mentions the use of subliminal advertising, but Sashittal stated, "the evidence of its use, let alone of its efficacy, is mostly anecdotal."

He also praised the document's attack on advertising that promotes materialistic values, but questioned how advertising — in and of itself — could cause people to become materialistic.

"Is it not true that among people who face the same intensity of advertising, there are some engaged in the exclusive pursuit of material goods, some others in the exclusive pursuit of spirituality, and yet others in pursuit of other goals?" Sashittal asked.

Positive pressure

Many advertising experts agreed that if consumers want an ethical advertising

world, they must do their part to promote it — a point made in "Ethics in Advertising."

"We emphasize the importance of public involvement," the letter reads. "Individuals do well to organize themselves into ... groups in order to protect their interests"

The League of Women Voters in Rochester is doing its part to promote ethical values in political advertising, according to Nancy Koch, chairwoman of Project Positive Campaign.

The project was started by the League in 1995 as an attempt to counteract negative political advertising, Koch said. She pointed out that her office asks political candidates each year to sign "Fair Campaign Pledges." In part, those who pledge to campaign fairly must not use false, misleading or distorted campaign literature, the pledge reads.

"I think public support for positive campaigning can make a difference," Koch said. She added that voters interested in her project are asked to contact politicians and let them know when an ad is appealing in its content.

"Our goal is to make positive campaigning rewarded," she said.

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This article contains reporting by Karen Franz.

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