

"Public Service" Billboards: Signs of an Ulterior Motive

"Our company has a unique opportunity to build a closer relationship with city government... The Mayor (being a politician) will recognize the value of being able to get credit for favors to various civic-minded persons."

-- Naegele Outdoor Advertising

"Know the public service and/or charity interest of the mayor, planning director, council members, ... their wives and husbands ... Direct your public service efforts toward these causes ... Make these persons aware each time you donate space to a cause and/or group for which they have an interest."

-- Outdoor Advertising Association of America conference

The Strategy

Donations of free billboard space to charity would appear to be a commendable practice by the billboard industry. However, in the vast majority of cases, these donations are part of a calculated strategy to undermine local, state, and national efforts to control billboards.

Furthermore, because billboard companies maintain more sign structures than they have advertisements, free billboards are a convenient way to fill otherwise empty billboard space. In short, free billboards aren't intended to be free at all.

The tactic of donating billboards to charities is spelled out in documents from an industry corporate seminar hosted by Naegele Outdoor Advertising in 1986. Under the "Mayor's Public Service Program" outlined in the seminar, billboard companies are urged to offer free billboard space to the favority charities of majors, city council members, and other public officials.

Signs of the Times, a sign industry publication, discussed the reasons for donating free advertising space: "It would be difficult for the mayor (or other politicians) to sponsor or support anti-billboard legislation or ordinances if he/she had been actively using outdoor advertising for their own projects." (Signs of the Times, July, 1982, pp. 71)

When billboards are donated to a local charity or organization, the billboard company often requires a letter of thanks from the recipient. These letters are then read before the city council or planning commission. In one episode, a billboard company asked an official of the Black Hawk Girl Scouts of America to denounce Scenic America in a letter to that company. She wrote the letter, although she later acknowledged that she had never heard of Scenic America. The official said she had been told that the Girl Scouts would not be offered discount billboards in the future without the letter. Her letter was dutifully reprinted in industry fliers and publications.

Often, representatives of local charities are asked to testify against billboard control at public hearings. Billboard recipients are also asked to write letters to newspapers, politicians, and Members of Congress in opposition to proposed billboard reform.

The Evidence

In case after case, the billboard industry has employed this tactic on the local and national levels to undermine genuine community concern about billboards. Below are some poignant examples.

Over the past decade, the Highway Beautification Act of 1965 has been under attack from national conservation organizations for its inability to control the spread of billboards along federal highways. The billboard industry has repeatedly tried to blunt the attacks of environmentalists by offering them free billboard space to advertise their causes. In 1990, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was offered 11,000 free billboards from the Outdoor Advertising Association of America, the Washington, DC-based lobby for the billboard industry, only a few months before the Bush Administration was to take an official stand on reform of the Highway Beautification Act. EPA refused the signs saying billboards are "another form of environmental pollution."

Earth Day 1990 also turned down an offer from the billboard industry of \$700,000 worth of free billboards and asked local Earth Day groups to do the same. The vast majority obliged, but a few local groups did accept billboards. Photos of these "environmental billboards" were subsequently printed in the fliers and publications of the billboard lobby and then distributed to Members of Congress at a time when national billboard legislation was pending.

The tactic is most often employed at the local level. For example, in 1988, the Richmond, Virginia city council was debating a proposed ordinance which would have prohibited new billboards with the exception of those adjacent to interstate highways. In response, a local billboard company donated billboards to the Richmond chapter of a national charity which in turn publicly opposed the billboard ban. Before a council hearing, an executive of that billboard company stated that the donation of free billboards was "absolutely" tied to the vote.

Public service billboards were also used to sway a Des Moines, Iowa court considering a billboard company's challenge to local regulations. In a memo to the city council, Philip Riley, counsel to the city, accused the billboard company of "impingement on the processes of government." Riley cited the placement of a billboard during the trial at a West Des Moines intersection saying, "A Shriner never stands so tall as when he stoops to help a crippled child." Wrote Riley, "Can it be said in any candor that it is accidental that the judge trying the case is both a Shriner and a resident of West Des Moines?"

Free billboards are also donated to state departments of transportation which administer federal and state billboard controls. In 1990, the Georgia Outdoor Advertising Association (GOAA) donated \$700,000 worth of billboards to the state board of

transportation to promote an anti-litter campaign. The donation came at a time when GOAA was lobbying the board to allow tree cutting on public rights-of-way in front of billboards.

Perhaps even more blatant than the usual donation of free billboard space was the 1991 strategy employed by Donrey Outdoor Advertising of Spokane, Washington. Just weeks prior to a city council vote on proposed billboard regulations, a foundation tied to Donrey issued five checks worth a total of \$5,500 to the favorite charities of Mayor Sheri Barnard and four Council members. However, rather than mailing the checks directly to the charities, Donrey's manager delivered them to the Mayor and council members and asked that they in turn personally present them to the charities. Barnard brought the scheme to the attention of the press and then sought legal advice on how to deal with the donation. In an editorial supportive of her decision, the Spokesman-Review opined, "If this check-writing spree is the best the billboard industry can muster to make an impact on the council, it may have shot itself in the foot."

What You Can Do

If you are seeking stronger billboard control, you may be seeing an increasing number of "public service" billboards in your community. Here are some suggestions to counter the use of free billboards:

Count the number of public service billboards in your community before pushing for billboard reform. This will provide a baseline with which to compare the industry's use of public service billboards once your campaign begins.

Ask community, church, and especially conservation groups not to accept billboard space. If local groups have accepted billboards, make them aware of the environmental, economic, and health issues associated with billboards and urge them not to oppose your billboard control efforts.

Expose the tactic of public service billboards to the press.