

THE MEDIA BUSINESS

Advertising Agency With a Cause

By KIM FOLTZ

Most advertising agencies are in the business of persuading consumers to buy their clients' products. But a tiny San Francisco agency specializes in telling consumers what they should not buy.

The Public Media Center is the Ralph Nader of agencies, creating advertising that promotes consumers' rights and sells social change. Instead of pitching products, the agency produces ads chiding corporations and organizations that Public Media and its clients think are deceiving consumers or doing harm.

"What some corporations do is contrary to the interests of the public," said Herbert Chao Gunther, the executive director of the not-for-profit agency. "Our job is to hold them accountable by telling the public the truth behind the corporate disinformation they put in their advertising."

Advertising Dollars

It is a difficult task, he said, adding, "Corporations have tremendous resources and that is hard to fight against."

Only about 15 percent of Public Media's clients pay the agency for its service; the agency donates its work

Public Media tells consumers what not to buy.

to most of the organizations that have retained it. About 20 percent of Public Media's \$2 million annual operating expenses comes from donations from individuals and organizations like the Zellerbach Foundation.

The agency places about \$8 million in advertising each year for its paying clients, like Planned Parenthood. In addition, the public-service advertising that the agency does for the majority of its clients is the equivalent of about \$40 million in television time and print space.

Defending the Dolphins

Unlike large corporations, the organizations that Mr. Gunther represents, like Greenpeace and the Sierra Club, usually have limited resources. But the odds even up, he said, because "we can always count on the public's love of fair play."

That theory was put to the test most recently in a fight with the H. J. Heinz Company. For its client, the Earth Island Institute, Public Media



Herbert Chao Gunther, executive director of the Public Media Center, says his job is to hold corporations accountable for their actions.

ran a series of full-page ads in The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and other newspapers urging consumers to help stop the "dolphin massacre" by boycotting Heinz's Star-Kist tuna.

The ads asserted that companies like Heinz, the largest canner of tuna, were helping to kill thousands of dolphins by buying tuna caught in nets that trap and kill dolphins as well.

Although the two-year boycott did not significantly hurt Star-Kist's sales, the \$250,000 ad campaign created by Public Media helped to raise consumer awareness of the dolphin's plight. In a consumer-tracking survey in February, Star-Kist found that the public's awareness of the dolphin issue had jumped significantly. Heinz announced on April 16 that Star-Kist would no longer use tuna caught in dolphin-endangering nets.

Public Media also wages campaigns against companies on issues that more directly affect consumers. For example, to counter claims in advertising for Bayer that called its aspirin the best, the agency ran ads saying that generic-brand aspirin is just as effective and less expensive.

'You Have to Name Names'

Public Media tells its clients that to win, they have to get tough and adopt tactics that have proved effective for politically conservative groups.

"To win, you have to name names," Mr. Gunther said. "You have to be willing to point a finger at enemies and call them what they are."

That is what the agency did in a campaign to help curb destruction of

the world's tropical rain forests. Instead of just talking about the problem, Public Media's ads attacked Burger King, asserting that much of the beef it used came from cattle grazing on land where rain forests once stood.

"This is the best way to quickly articulate an issue for a busy public," Mr. Gunther said. "The only way to break through to people is to package the message in a way that immediately lets them know what's going to be taken away from them and who's doing the grabbing."

The ads called for a consumer boycott of Burger King to help save the rain forests. Bowing to public pressure, Burger King agreed to import less beef from Latin America.

Startling Print Ads

Working for Planned Parenthood, which spends more than \$2 million a year on advertising, the agency has produced a series of ads that urge the public to support a woman's right to make her own decision about abortion. One of the most startling print ads was a picture of a disassembled coat hanger, a symbol of the dangers of illegal abortions. Other print ads featured testimonials from women whose lives had been shattered by poorly done back-alley abortions.

"The ads simplified the issue so everyone could understand it and brought women back into the abortion debate," said Doug Gould, the vice president for advertising for Planned Parenthood. After just one advertisement last year, the group received 150,000 responses, he said.