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Check it out! How to really please moms and dads!

A new campaign asks supermarkets to move lurid mags out of the sight of inquiring kids' eyes

BY MARY DETURRIS

You struggle to turn your impossible-to-steer shopping cart into the checkout line at the grocery store and sigh with relief as the woman in front of you takes out actual cash money to pay her bill. And your kids haven't even noticed the boxes of candy practically falling off the shelves in every direction. With a self-satisfied smile, you chalk this trip up as a success.

But wait a minute, the kids have noticed something, and it's worse than chocolate. They've found the eye candy that does exactly what it is designed to do — stop you dead in your tracks as you stare at cleavage, bare stomachs and headlines that make you think you're in Times Square before New York mayor Rudy Giuliani cleaned it up.

HOT HEADLINES

The famous Cosmo girl reveals about as much as is allowed on a "family" newsstand, beckoning shoppers to look inside to find "His Secret Sex Spots" or "How to Make Him Lust for You." And although Cosmopolitan may have the reputation as the bad girl of the bunch, her cohorts are not far behind. Glamour magazine, which is now edited by a former Cosmo chief, tempts shoppers with its offer of "What you can learn from peeking into other people's sex lives." Even less obvious but more disturbing is Seventeen magazine's headline, "Should You Tell Him You're Not a Virgin?" What teen-

If Morality in Media has its way, they'll miss them all. Its latest campaign to cover or remove offensive checkout magazine displays is in full force, with supermarket chains writing letters to profess their commitment to cleaning up their publication racks. But talk is as cheap as the magazine covers.

Morality in Media wants to see some action.

Concern over what kids are learning while their moms and dads are buying dinner in the express lane became a full-fledged Morality in Media campaign when President Robert Peters began writing letters to supermarket chains in June.

In a Sept. 17 letter to more than 350 supermarket CEOs, Peters questioned whether the "lewd material" that is promoted each month in various women's and men's magazines is appropriate for

viewing by the children and adolescents who pass through the checkout aisles.

"On behalf of every parent with minor children (as well as every other adult who prefers that sex not be vulgarized and sensationalized at supermarket checkouts), I beseech you to consider whether it is a responsible policy to openly display at checkout counters magazines that so blatantly violate common standards of decency and morality," Peters wrote in the last of a series of three letters.

Morality in Media, an interfaith organization dedicated to promoting decency standards in the media, also commissioned a poll by Wirthlin Worldwide to gauge American feelings on the checkout controversy. Seventy-three percent of those polled said that sexually provocative headlines are inappropriate; of the women polled, 81 percent voiced their disapproval of the trashy covers. The poll also showed that children do make a difference: Among those without children, only 53 percent were opposed to the magazine displays, while 79 percent of adults with children found the magazine covers offensive.

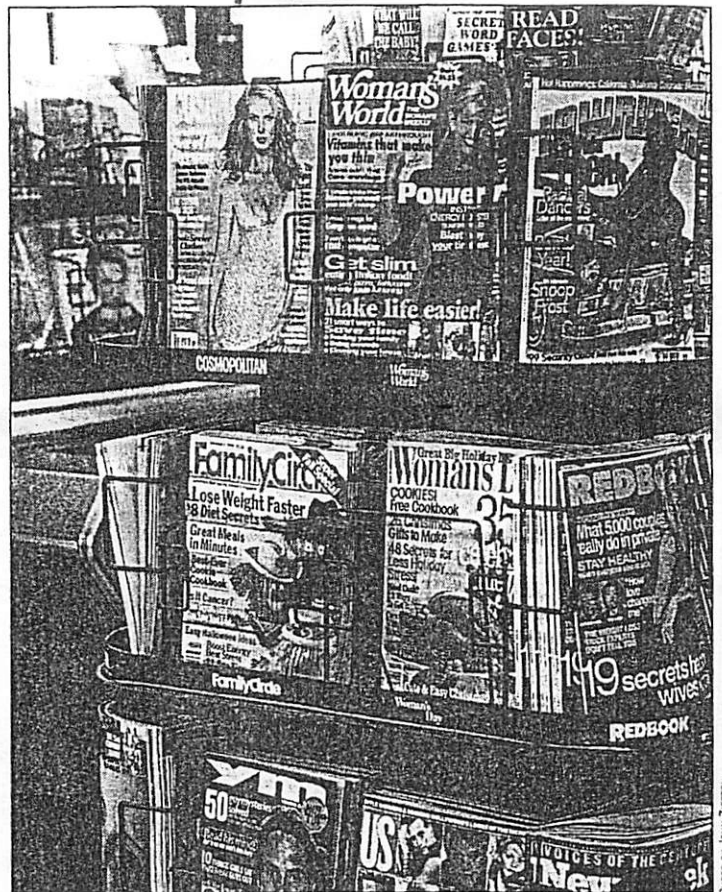
"Supermarket executives should understand that lurid headlines on the front covers of Cosmopolitan, Mademoiselle, Glamour, Redbook and similar magazines are offensive to the large majority of their customers," Peters said in response to the survey results.

Nicholas D'Agostino Jr., chairman and chief executive officer of the 24-store D'Agostino Supermarkets chain, said in a July 7 letter to Peters that he "has instructed its store-management associates to discreetly conceal the covers of Cosmopolitan magazine" in response to the Morality in Media request. In the Aug. 2 issue of Supermarket News, D'Agostino was quoted as saying that concealing magazine covers "seemed a reasonable request," and added that a magazine should "stand on the quality of its content and not on the shock value of the front-page sexually titillating statements to attract readers."

Other supermarket chains expressed their commitment to weeding out offensive magazine covers either through storewide policies or through a month-by-month monitoring of each.

"I want you to know that for quite some time, our position has been to place all issues of Cosmopolitan, Vanity Fair and Marie Claire behind blinders at our checkout counters," wrote R. Randall Onstead Jr. of Randalls Food Markets Inc.

"Lurid headlines . . . are offensive to the large majority of their customers."



SOFT CORE?: There's a lot for kids to "check out" at the checkout

"Additionally, we ask our cashiers to check the magazine stands at their registers throughout the day to ensure that these magazines have been returned to their proper slot. We also monitor the content of all magazines that we sell in our stores, and when necessary, we will cover them or pull them from the shelves."

SUPERMARKET SEX ED

On a recent trip to a large Randalls store in Austin, Texas, however, not a single blinder rack could be found, and Cosmopolitan was in clear view, especially for kids who can't avoid racks that are right at the eye level of children. As for monitoring magazines, it's apparently in the eye of the beholder. On the racks at this particular Randalls on this particular day, Seventeen's virgin question was in sight, as were all the usual suspects, among them Mademoiselle, Glamour and Redbook, with its "Shocking Sex Survey: What 5,000 couples really do in private."

"The magazines we mentioned in the letter should have blinders over them, and I did talk to the person who is in charge of that. He's getting with our magazine supplier to find out what's going on and how we can get all the blinders up," Katherine Lussier, director of public affairs for Randalls, told Our Sunday Visitor.

She attributed the situation at the company's suburban south Austin location to recent remodeling. On a subsequent visit to a second Randalls store in another part of the city, however, the same appar-

ent lapse of policy was evident, and there were no signs of any recent remodeling. At the central Austin store, not only were the magazines not in blinder racks, there were no blinders in view anywhere. In fact, the open racks were clearly labeled with the magazine names.

Randalls is not the only chain to have a different in-store reality than an on-paper claim. San Antonio-based H.E. Butt Grocery Company also wrote Morality in Media, stating that it has a "long-standing policy of reviewing magazine covers for objectionable material." But on a recent visit to their newest Austin location, all of the standard magazine fare was up at the checkouts, including the latest issue of GQ with its busty cover photo and a lead headline that read, "A few heady words about orgasm." H.E. Butt Grocery Company representatives did not return repeated calls from Our Sunday Visitor.

To hold stores accountable, Morality in Media is sending out forms to its members and asking them to report on what they see at their own supermarkets. The form is also available through the organization's Web site at www.moralityinmedia.org.

So, as policy-savvy shoppers put their local supermarkets on alert, maybe parents can dream about the day when the only lure for kids at the checkout counter are those racks full of Hershey bars and bubble gum. □

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Photo by John Zuercher