

3075 - 349 West Georgia Street
Vancouver, BC V6B 3X6

December 4, 2006

Consumer Complaints Department
Advertising Standards Canada
175 Bloor Street East
South Tower, Suite 1801
Toronto, ON M4W 3R8

Dear Madam or Sir;

**RE: Consumer complaint to Advertising Standards Canada regarding
PEERS Vancouver out-of-home advertisements**

There are currently two posters on public display in the parking lot on the west side of Richards Street just south of Robson Street in Vancouver, B.C. Another is displayed on east bound Pacific Boulevard before Richards Street.

I first discovered them on September 20, 2006. A letter complaining about them was published in the Metro newspaper on September 21, 2006. I wrote a letter of complaint on October 19, which was signed for as received by the advertiser in their office on October 23, 2006.

PEERS Vancouver is publicly advertising to increase enrolment in their program. They explicitly require that participants have experience in prostitution. However, the exact services the advertiser offers are not made clear in these two ads.

In this campaign to promote their organization, PEERS Vancouver uses out-of-home advertisements which stigmatize prostitutes and homosexuals. I believe that, by portraying prostitutes and homosexuals with numbered bar codes tattooed on their foreheads, these ads violate several provisions of the Advertising Code; and in particular Section 14.

What is the metaphor used?

The images imply an invisible mark borne by prostitutes and homosexuals which cannot be seen in the real world around the viewer. The advertiser, through the medium of the poster, reveals the mark as they perceive it: a bar code tattooed on the forehead of a female prostitute in one ad; and a bar code tattooed on the forehead of a male homosexual prostitute in the second.

The image in each one takes up approximately 85% of the poster.

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Why tattoo the forehead?

A tattoo on the shoulder, back or chest would have conveyed the message with the same clarity. The metaphor trades on another, deep-seated social prejudice against those citizens who wear facial tattoos. The advertiser clearly intends to illustrate that prostitution is an extreme social transgression.

Why is it acceptable to portray a clear human rights abuse?

A viewer could easily infer from the ad that advertiser advocates that prostitutes and homosexuals should be made to wear facial tattoos or a clearly identifiable mark that sets them apart.

In Canada this would be a violation of a prostitute's or homosexual person's human rights. These groups; one defined by profession, the other by sexuality; have faced this threat historically. Prostitutes and homosexuals were subjected to branding with numbers while interned in labour camps established by the German state during World War II. Both groups continue to fight against even the idea of the draconian measures shown in these ads.

What about the text?

The upper tag line "HAS LOTS OF EXPERIENCE IN SALES" is usually an innocuous phrase used in reference to a person's work. Here, because the work of prostitutes often involves sex, the phrase is meant to be ironic.

Why rub it in?

This message, which has these marginalized groups as its target, is not a benign and clever sarcasm, although it does mask itself as such. This advertiser clearly holds a negative opinion of this form of legal work, and promotes their opinion in the ad in a manner which disparages these workers. I would argue that most citizens who have experience in prostitution would regard this insulting depiction as a slight.

Engaging the public?

The advertiser seeks to promote their organization by eliciting an emotional reaction from the viewer.

For those who are repressed or ashamed of their experiences as prostitutes or as homosexuals, and for those who are sensitive to social stigma; they are likely to feel humiliated and ridiculed.

For those who are in the closet as a prostitute or homosexual, a reaction the posters arouse might be the fear of being discovered. The posters seem to say that coming out -- sharing your experiences as a prostitute or homosexual with others -- will make you vulnerable to being literally branded on the face and set-apart.

For other viewers, a reaction might be pity. The unhappy souls these models portray are clearly in need of support. Pity for the plight of these characters may arouse an urge to help support the organization. The ads also appear on the advertiser's website where the advertiser solicits donations which can be made online with a credit card.

For me, my reaction was fury.

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Finally, why the disclaimer?

By using the disclaimer “IMAGE REPRESENTS A FICTIONAL CHARACTER” in the ad does the advertiser seek to shield themselves from a human rights complaint? Or is it a poor attempt to shield the models from the stigma of being identified as a prostitute or a homosexual? I believe is it an attempt on the part of the advertiser to circumvent the standards outlined in Section 14 of the Advertising Code.

Furthermore, if the models did not knowingly pose for these posters with fully informed consent prior to their public display, the advertiser is in my opinion guilty of hypocrisy and exploitation.

The posters are still up, and I still have had no response from the advertiser to my letter of complaint.

These posters contravene the Canadian Code of Advertising Standards because they demean, denigrate and disparage prostitutes and homosexuals and bring them into public contempt and ridicule; they must be removed.

In solidarity,

Will Pritchard

encl.

cc. PEERS Vancouver
City of Vancouver
Elevator Strategy and Design
Pattison

SHE HAS LOTS OF EXPERIENCE IN SALES.



Provided with the support of the City of Vancouver.
Image represents a fictional character.

WE'RE GIVING SEX WORKERS JOB SKILLS TO GET OFF THE STREETS.
www.peersvancouver.org

HE HAS LOTS OF EXPERIENCE IN SALES.



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