A SIGN OF OUR TIMES? A CASE STUDY ON MORAL REASONING

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Fargo, North Dakota—On July 19, 2007, Jennifer Dufner, a 37-year-old mother from Buxton, North Dakota, sent a letter to the editor of The Forum that started a chain of comments, discussion, and controversy within the community. The focus of the letter was a billboard advertising Rock 102 radio station (see figure 1). The sign appeared in various places in the Fargo-Moorhead area and showed a woman in a provocative and suggestive scene described in the article as “a tankini next to a caption that reads now turn us on.”1

Mrs. Dufner stated, “my problem with the billboards is that we don’t have control (other than taking a different route to avoid them) over who sees them. It certainly isn’t good for young girls to see the billboards and get the message that their value as human beings comes from something sexual. Nor is it good for young boys to get the message that women are valuable because they are sexual human beings.” She goes on to complain that it is not fair for us to subject young children to the message on the billboard—it is an attack on the family. In addition, she feels the city should be responsible for regulating these issues. “It is too bad the city of Fargo doesn’t have an ordinance addressing the content of outdoor advertising. I guess they maybe just expected advertisers to have enough common decency to not put inappropriate images in areas where children would see them.”2

The situation is an interesting ethical issue. It would be classified as an ethical dilemma because it is complex, it has many differing views, the various stakeholders have different objectives, and these stakeholders could not agree that there is a right or wrong answer to the issue. The situation deals with ethical issues such as respect, fairness, rights of various individuals on both sides of the issue, the consequences that could result from the action, the proliferation of similar ads on television and magazines (others do it so it must be okay), and the values and
beliefs of those decision makers (individuals, companies, government) who produced the sign or allowed it to be shown. This is certainly a media ethics issue as well as a business ethics issue, but in this case study we will be focusing on the practical problems of dealing with the issue from a business ethics perspective. The awareness and intensity of the issue is also of importance. At what point does something become offensive or unethical, and at what point does a company (i.e. Rock 102 or Newman Sign) take action and react to the issue? In addition, if an action should be taken, what should be done? Many times decision makers are in a gray area as to knowing when something becomes unethical. This case with the sign is especially interesting because it is not obvious that there is an ethical issue (the sign was legal, and the image is not particularly unusual compared to what people may see in magazines, movies, or television), until Jennifer Dufner describes it as an issue. Taking the sign down or leaving it up may seem like the obvious choices but many times in ethical situations other solutions may be appropriate.

**FIGURE 1: CASE BILLBOARD PICTURE**

![Case Billboard Picture](PHOTO OF BILLBOARD TAKEN BY AUTHOR)

**THE STAKEHOLDERS**

As mentioned above, there are several different stakeholders related to the issue. The obvious ones would be the citizens (community) who view the sign, the sign company (Newman Sign), the radio station (Rock 102) running the ad and the marketing company that produced it. The
city was suggested as being responsible for regulating this type of advertising and the courts that would influence the ability of city commissioners to pass appropriate laws. In addition, special interest groups (such as women rights advocates and freedom of speech groups), and companies who advertise on the radio station all have a stake in the outcome. Below is an in-depth focus on the major stakeholders:

The Community:

The case takes place within the regional area of Fargo, North Dakota and Moorhead, Minnesota—twin border cities in the prime Red River Valley agriculture area. According to the Chamber of Commerce statistics the population of the two county area is 196,000.

The area consistently has a strong economic base that includes low unemployment of 3.7% (national average 9.5%), a low cost of living, low crime rate, and a highly educated population. Within the two cities are three major colleges and universities: North Dakota State University, Minnesota State University Moorhead, and Concordia College (a liberal arts Lutheran college). There are approximately 25,000 students in these institutions. The area has a strong religious heritage with significant membership in Lutheran and Catholic churches associated with respective Scandinavian and German backgrounds. It has a very proactive business environment. There are several medium to large corporations in the area and several company headquarters located here. A Microsoft business unit employs close to 1,000 employees in Fargo. Those involved in the ownership and management of area businesses are many times associated with community organizations, positive corporate citizenship, and active in their local churches. There is a “small town” atmosphere, good interaction among different groups, and a general respect among members of the community.

The comments and opinion of Jennifer Dufner and her feeling that the billboard was offensive and inappropriate were reflected by many in the community. The Forum published the comments of several contributors to their web site complaining that it degrades women and is harmful to young children. One response was from a local teacher who found the billboard inappropriate: “I took about 15 of my students on a field trip yesterday. When we drove by the sign on 45th, all my students pointed it out. This kind of scene can damage a child’s thinking.” Another comment felt it was unfortunate that society has no more sense of decency.
The Rape and Abuse Center of Fargo-Moorhead wrote a letter to *The Forum* concerning the story and stated that the billboards are prime examples of the objectification of women. They quoted the American Psychological Association’s report about the negative impact of the media on girls concerning the proliferation of sexualized images of young women, and results in harming girls’ self-image and healthy development. The letter stated that Rock 102 advertisements are prime examples of objectification of women: “This is shown by the photo cropped to cut the woman’s head off her body.” The body becomes depersonalized and viewed as a sex object. “It is argued that the ads are no worse than in magazines. When we pick up a magazine, we are choosing to view the contents. When a person is driving through the community and encounters one of these billboards, this is not an active choice and is difficult to miss even if trying to avoid.” The Center started a campaign for the public to contact the advertisers of Rock 102 and request the station take down the billboard. The advertisers were listed on a special web site: takendownthebillboards@yahoo.com.

*The Forum’s* blog also had many comments in support of the billboard. Some of those comments included that the advertising campaign was brilliant, that women wear a lot less in public than on the sign, and that we have more important problems to focus on.

**Newman Sign Company:**

A primary focus on responsibility for the sign and whether any action should be taken in regard to Dufner’s claim is related to Newman Sign Company. The Jamestown, North Dakota company is one of the nation’s top 10 largest sign companies. In regard to community involvement, the company donated $1.5 million for an outdoor athletic field at North Dakota State University located in Fargo. Newman provides unique public service signs, such as ones that simply state be grateful, smile, and be nice. These signs provide a pleasant alternative to commercial messages along the freeway. It has large contracts with regional state highway departments to provide noncommercial road signs. The company was presented the Greater North Dakotan Award in 1999 by the state chamber of commerce for their exceptional community involvement and business success in the state. Newman is one of the most successful and visible companies in the area and employs 110 people.

In regard to the billboard issue reported in *The Forum* (July 20, 2007), Newman Signs responded to the reporters that any complaints should be
directed not to Newman but to the radio station. Newman Signs
compny manager Kyle Anderson is quoted as saying “We certainly
screen or OK any art that goes up.” But, according to The Forum, they did
not have any concerns about the billboard [Rock 102].9 The head of the
company, Harold Newman, initially did not return a phone call in regard
to the issue. Several months later, after the advertising campaign was over,
he called back and explained that their company gets involved in many
controversial issues including those related to abortion and politics.

Rock 102 Radio Station:

The radio station who developed the ad (plus their marketing agent)
and placed it on the billboard, would be the primary decision-maker
responsible for the content. The article described the radio station’s
target audience as “young men.” The Forum reported the comments of the
Radio Fargo-Moorhead Inc., Operations Manager John Austin as saying:
“It’s [the sign] an eye-catcher; it’s a clever message, It’s been a very
effective campaign to our demographic. It’s creating awareness of the
radio station.” Austin goes on to say that “the image of the young woman
isn’t something people wouldn’t see in a magazine or at the beach.”
Jennifer Dufner contacted the owners of ROCK 102 directly and they
dismissed her concerns.10

Government (City Council):

As described earlier, the role of the city in regulating obscene,
offensive, and inappropriate billboards was mentioned as a possible
solution to the issue by Jennifer Dufner. The city and commissioners
received complaints on the issue. Fargo City Attorney Erik Johnson said
he was not aware of any regulations that made it illegal. City
Commissioner Mark Williams said the city commission will discuss the
issue further and see how others have handled similar situations. The
courts and laws also restrict what local government can do in relation to
freedom of speech. John Austin from Rock 102 commented that going
to the city for a solution for an answer is an overreaction.11

RESULTS OF THE BILLBOARD ISSUE

The two major decision-makers in finding a solution to the sign
issue were the radio station Rock 102 and Newman Sign Company. As
reported in The Forum (August 8, 2007), the Operations Manager at Rock
102, John Austin, said they would not take down the billboard. He reported that it was unfortunate that it created negative feelings. On the other hand, he stated that he has had no complaints from advertisers, the advertising campaign was a success, and “smart advertisers realize that this station is being talked about and listened to.” It could be argued that the radio station had less to lose in the situation as their customers were “young men” who seemed less concerned with the issue brought up by Jennifer Dufner and probably accepted the ads without problems. In addition, the advertisers on the radio station did not seem to be concerned about their reputation within the community and according to Rock 102’s spokesperson he received no complaints from the advertisers. The radio station probably benefited from the publicity from The Forum’s series of articles and did not see any long-term consequences.

Newman Sign Company did not take any action on the sign issue. They did not make any further public comments. As stated earlier, they felt the radio station was responsible for the content of the sign. Newman may have had the most to lose in the situation by not taking any action. Many of their customers are the local community organizations and businesses who advertise on their signs and would have sided with Jennifer Dufner who felt the message was offensive, inappropriate, and provocative. Newman’s customers did not make any public comments as to the sign being inappropriate or any immediate threat of discontinuing business with Newman because of the sign. Privately some of their larger customers would probably have been offended that Newman did not do anything. Will it relate to Newman’s business in the long-term? Should Newman Sign Company have taken any action?

It is interesting to note that an important part of moral reasoning is awareness or sensitivity to ethical issues. The issue above came out of a comment by one citizen and probably would not have entered the thinking of either Rock 102 or Newman Sign or many others if it had not been for the letter to the editor. Many companies who have ethical problems do not have processes in place that sensitize them to possible risk of such ethical problems.
ENDNOTES

2 Ibid.
3 An obvious ethical issue raised by the image on the sign is the problem of the objectification of women’s bodies. The fact that the woman in the image is shown not only without a face, but without a head, focuses attention on the sexual objectification of her body. Many studies attest to the harm done to both men and women as a result of this kind of representation of women. An article in the journal Sex Roles: A Journal of Research (vol. 32, issue 9-10, 1995), “Images of Women in Advertisements: Effects on Attitudes Related to Sexual Aggression,” by Kyra Lanis and Katherine Covell, states that “The data indicate that males who see print media advertisements in which women are presented as sex objects are more likely to be more accepting of interpersonal violence (primarily against women), than males exposed to other types of advertisements.” Another article, “Depicting Women as Sex Objects in Television Advertising: Effects on Body Dissatisfaction” (Howard Lavine, Donna Sweeney, Stephen H. Wagner, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, Vol. 25, No. 8, 1999, 1049-1058) claims that “our results suggest that depression and loss of self-esteem may be indirectly facilitated by exposure to sexist TV ads... through its direct influence on body dissatisfaction.”
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.

WORKS CITED