

NEWS RELEASE

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For More Information Contact:
Gary Ruskin (202) 296-2787

Sesame Street Sells Out Children and Parents to Discovery Zone at Start of 30th Season

Ralph Nader lamented the decision by Children's Television Workshop (CTW) to allow 15-second commercials for Discovery Zone, Inc. at the beginning and end of each program of Sesame Street, beginning on November 16th. "It's sad that even Sesame Street is turning into a delivery vehicle for advertisers to pitch to our children," Nader said. "As Sesame Street turns thirty, and adds these Discovery Zone commercials, perhaps it ought to change its name to Huckster Alley."

The New York Times reported a CTW's official's assertion that "it was a 'seven-figure' deal with Discovery Zone and that the company is pursuing several other underwriters." Nader said, "We urge Children's Television Workshop not to further commercialize Sesame Street. Parents should call CTW and tell them not to run commercials on Sesame Street." CTW owns and produces Sesame Street. Their phone number is (212) 595-3456.

"It is wrong for Children's Television Workshop to use Sesame Street to deliver children to Discovery Zone," Nader said. "That is exploiting impressionable children. It is incompatible with Sesame Street's mission of educating children and providing wholesome entertainment, and PBS's mission of broadcasting noncommercial television."

"This is an unfortunate turning-point," said Gary Ruskin, Director of Commercial Alert. "When even Sesame Street will sell children to commercial sponsors, there is not a flicker of hope left for television. It's just a race to the bottom."

Commercial Alert is a new project to help parents, children, and communities defend themselves against harmful, immoral or intrusive advertising and marketing, and the excesses of commercialism. Commercial Alert will counteract commercialism directed at homes, schools, and communities across the country. It encourages people to reduce their time as TV gazers and spend more time fulfilling their talents and potential.

Discovery Zone owns and operates over 200 children's "entertainment" centers in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. According to a July, 1998 filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission, since emerging from Chapter 11 bankruptcy last year, Discovery Zone has added "themed laser tag" to some of its outlets. "Laser tag is currently themed to 'Men in Black,' a hit motion picture and an animated television series."

"Children who watch Sesame Street will soon see commercials for Discovery Zone, which provides violent entertainment like laser tag themed on violent movies like Men in Black," Ruskin said.

According to a September 30 CTW news release, "'Sesame Street' has had local

underwriting for many years though the efforts of local PBS stations, but this will be the first time corporate underwriters can reach the entire 'Sesame Street' audience with one national underwriting effort."

"After they run the Discovery Zone commercial, Sesame Street would be refreshingly honest if it said that today's show is being brought to you by the letters C-O-M-M-E-R-C-I-A-L-I-S-M." Nader said.

"Sesame Street has for years generated millions of dollars from sales of products tied to its popular shows," said Henry Labalme, Executive Director of TV-Free America. "That it is now airing national commercials only confirms the show's true colors."

Nader questioned whether Sesame Street had to become so commercialized to keep producing Sesame Street. "Sesame Street survived for thirty years without running national commercials. Why do they need to start now?"

"Sesame Street holds itself up as a trusted educational institution, but it is now becoming a vehicle for the corporate predators and the destructive mind-set of those who market products to children," Nader said.

Nader pointed to the statement of Nancy Shalek, then-president of Shalek Advertising Agency, as an example of this mind-set. "Advertising at its best is making people feel that without their product, you're a loser," Shalek told the *Los Angeles Times*. "Kids are very sensitive to that. If you tell them to buy something, they are resistant. But if you tell them they'll be a dork if they don't, you've got their attention. You open up emotional vulnerabilities and it's very easy to do with kids because they're the most emotionally vulnerable."

"Sesame Street's step toward commercialism is truly a slippery slope away from its educational status," Nader said. "Sesame Street is not Main Street," he added.

For more information about commercialism, see Commercial Alert's web page at <http://www.essential.org/alert>.