

News Release

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Journalism Profs Call for New Rules to Stop Advertisers' Threat to Press Freedom

In an effort to keep advertisers from undermining freedom of the press and editorial integrity, 61 journalism and law professors sent a letter today to the American Society of Magazine Editors, asking it to enact new rules to require disclosure of product placement in magazines, and to prohibit the disguising of ads as editorial content, or providing special favors to advertisers.

The letter was written and organized by Commercial Alert, a nonprofit organization that opposes commercialism. It was sent to Marlene Kahan, executive director of the American Society of Magazine Editors. The letter follows.

Dear Ms. Kahan:

Magazine editors in the U.S. are under increasing pressure to weave advertising into their editorial content. In the past, advertisers have sought to influence stories, often with success. Now they are going further, and seeking to turn ads into articles.

These efforts are a fundamental threat to press freedom and to the integrity of American journalism. If magazines become mere tout sheets for products and the interests of those who sell them, then every story will be suspect, and the reading public may have nowhere to turn for information that is truly independent of reigning commercial interests.

If there was ever a need for resolute action by your organization, this is it. You should strengthen the Society's editorial guidelines, to draw a clear line against aggressive advertiser intrusion into story content. This would both provide confidence to readers, and would prevent advertisers from playing one magazine against another. It would also give editors a convincing reason to turn down advertisers' requests.

In recent months, publications such as the *Wall Street Journal*, *Advertising Age*, *PR Week* and the *Christian Science Monitor* have reported on how advertisers are leaning on editors to blend advertising with editorial content. This is part of broader efforts by advertisers to increase the impact of their advertising spending. Other media – especially television, movies and video games -- have acceded to advertisers demands for more product placements.

Now advertisers are trying to gain similar concessions from magazines, too. "The only way we're going to be more successful is to get even more creative and try to find ways to address this church-and-state," meaning the high wall between advertising and editorial, Matthew Spahn, director of media planning at Sears, Roebuck, told *Advertising Age*.

Many editors are feeling the pressure. “More advertisers ask us to blur the lines between advertising and editorial,” Nina Lawrence, publisher of *Bride* and *Modern Bride*, told *Advertising Age*. “It’s accelerated in the last year.”

Brand names appear more frequently in magazine articles these days, which raises questions about the extent of product placement. For example, the *Christian Science Monitor* recently reported on an article in *Ski* magazine, which mentions the Land Rover truck brand eight times, and features seven pictures of the truck – in an article on travel in Colorado. The article praises the Rover for its “versatility,” “well-crafted lines,” and a “rugged but cosmopolitan look,” as well as its “ride [which] was smooth even in bad conditions.”

Some editors appear to be weakening in the face of advertisers’ demands. For example, Kim Olson, director of brand public relations for General Mills, told *PR Week*, “It depends on the magazine and the publisher, but I see much more openness to (product placement) now than there ever has been before. Where it used to be church and state, there is much more of a willingness to come together and at least discuss it – not always a willingness to do, but a willingness to discuss.”

The American Society of Magazine Editors should safeguard the integrity of magazines, by incorporating the following provisions into its editorial guidelines.

Product placement. If an author, editor or publication receives money, goods or other consideration from an advertiser mentioned in an article, that fact should be prominently disclosed, including the amount or fair market value of the goods or payment.

Advertorials and special sections. The words “advertising” or “advertisement” or “promotion” should be at least 1.5 times the size and weight of the publication’s normal editorial body type face, rather than just “at least equal in size.”

No special treatment for advertisers. ASME should incorporate a provision from the Society of Professional Journalists’ code of ethics to “Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.”

Enforcement. Current ASME enforcement mechanisms are inadequate to meet the new increased advertiser pressure. Any magazine that violates ASME editorial guidelines should be ineligible for National Magazine Awards for at least five years. Editors who violate the editorial guidelines three times should be permanently expelled from the ASME. All warning or sanction letters from ASME should be made public and placed on the ASME website.

Sincerely,

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Commercial Alert is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to keep the commercial culture within its proper sphere, and to prevent it from exploiting children and subverting the higher values of family, community, environmental integrity and democracy.

Commercial Alert has more than 2000 members, representing all 50 states and the District of Columbia. For more information, visit our website at <http://www.commercialalert.org>.