

NATIONAL POST

TTC flirts with online adulterers

Published: National Post, December 11, 2009
By Kenyon Wallace

Pro-family organizations are "shocked and outraged" that the Toronto Transit Commission is considering plastering streetcars with advertisements for the Ashley Madison Agency, an online dating site that promotes adultery.

"To blatantly advertise cheating in this manner where people of all ages, including children, are open to it, means people may be incredibly offended," said Dave Quist, executive director of the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada.

"People are generally outraged by that type of a lifestyle and to advertise it in such a public fashion, in my opinion, is wrong."

The campaign, announced yesterday in a press release issued by Ashley Madison, is planned to start in January with a four-week test buy that would see a streetcar's exterior wrapped with the website's trademark phrase, "Life is short. Have an affair." The phrase would also occupy every ad slot inside the vehicle. The company says if the initial ads are successful, it would enter into a deal with the TTC to see a total of 10 streetcars outfitted in a similar manner, amounting to a \$200,000 influx to the Commission.

Brad Ross, a TTC spokesman, emphasized yesterday that no decision to run the campaign has been made and that the ads are currently before the Commission's advertising review committee, which has the final say. He said the committee was made aware of concerns raised by TTC staff after the ads were flagged by the Commission's ad agency, CBS Outdoor.

"This ad came to us and we took a look at it and we said it's not appropriate for a streetcar to be running all over the streets of Toronto advocating for people to have affairs," Mr. Ross said. "Even if the ads were to run, it only requires five public complaints for the review committee to look at it again, and they have the power to remove them from the system."

In an interview with the National Post last night, Ashley Madison CEO Noel Biderman accused the TTC of backtracking on the deal, saying CBS Outdoor had informed him that the ads had been approved.

But the TTC's Mr. Ross maintained that no such approval had been given and that the committee is to make a decision today.

Ashley Madison was launched in 2002 by Toronto entrepreneur Darren Morgenstern, and became the first website to connect would-be cheaters. In 2007, as membership climbed, Mr.

Morgenstern sold his site to Avid Life Media, a Toronto company that owns and operates several other websites devoted to sexual encounters between adults, including Erotic.com, CougarLife.com, and EstablishedMen.com.

Ashley Madison now boasts more than 4.8 million members. The controversy it has stirred up has garnered coverage on Canadian and American television shows, including Good Morning America, Larry King Live and The Ellen DeGeneres Show. After Tiger Woods's extramarital activities became public, TMZ.com reported that Ashley Madison offered Mr. Woods \$5-million for "advertisement, endorsement, sale and promotion" of the website. But so far, the site hasn't had much luck in its bids to advertise on TV and radio. Earlier this year, CTV rejected an Ashley Madison commercial that would have run during the Super Bowl.

Mr. Biderman says he came up with the idea to advertise on the TTC after reading about the coming fare hike and figured by offering to buy huge ads -- and even sponsor TTC routes -- he might help keep fares down.

"I'm convinced people would embrace the ads if it meant they wouldn't have to spend \$3 to take the bus or train," he said.

Mr. Biderman, who is married and has two small children, responded to criticisms that the proposed campaign is offensive by pointing out the proliferation of ads glorifying the use of alcohol and Viagra.

"No one is going to have an affair because they read an ad on the side of a streetcar," he said. "They're going to have an affair because there are issues with their long-term relationships."

This isn't the first time the TTC has courted controversy surrounding the kinds of ads it chooses to run. In April, the Commission was forced to pull several "suicide" ads that depicted a kitchen radio about to jump off a TTC subway platform because of an apparent poor selection of music and programs. The ads, for Virgin Radio, were accompanied by the words, "Give your radio a reason to live."

The Commission came under criticism again last spring when it ran ads bought by the Freethought Association of Canada reading, "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." Despite several public complaints, the TTC did not remove the ads from its buses.

Gwen Landolt, vice-president of REAL Women of Canada, a non-profit conservative group, says while her organization believes in free speech, the Ashley Madison ads go too far.

"The implications are so damaging if we treat marriage in such a disruptive manner," she said. "Nothing is more damaging to marriage than promiscuity. Sexual fidelity is absolutely essential in marriage."