Campaign To Tune Out Channel One

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A broad coalition of companies, organizations and activists, ranging from Focus on the Family to Ralph Nader, have kicked off a campaign to stop Primedia's Channel One from exploiting school children for commercial gain. Channel One is the in-school television program with a daily captive audience of about eight million children in 12,000 schools, broadcasting 10 minutes of "news," music and filler, plus two minutes of advertising for a variety of products and services aimed at youngsters.
The coalition is asking all Channel One's advertisers to stop advertising on Channel One and asking the top 50 U.S. advertising agencies not to place ads on Channel One. The Senate and House appropriations committees are being asked to prohibit government advertising such as armed services recruitment ads.

With almost everyone today talking about education reform, this coalition urges that it be a reform priority to stop the practice of compelling impressionable children "to view commercials during their limited school time." The coalition's letter to Channel One's advertisers sets forth a long list of complaints against Channel One:

Channel One misuses compulsory school attendance laws to force children to watch ads, wasting valuable school time. The programs consume the equivalent of one instructional week of school time each school year, including one full day watching ads.

Channel One promotes violent entertainment by encouraging children to see violent movies such as "Supernova," "The Mummy," and James Bond's "The World is Not Enough."

Channel One wastes the tax dollars spent on schools. A 1998 study entitled "The Hidden Costs of Channel One" concluded that Channel One's cost to taxpayers in lost class time adds up to $1.8 billion per year.

Channel One advertises extremely vulgar films, such as "Head Over Heels," which contains sexual situations, profanity, violence, and suggestive language and gags. Another film, "Dude, Where's My Car," glorifies two marijuana users who were so stoned they couldn't remember where they parked their car and contains sexually suggestive scenes and language.

In February, Channel One advertised "Monkeybone," a crass movie about the battle between a cartoonist and his genitals, symbolized by a monkey.

Channel One teaches a curriculum of materialism. It sells children on the proposition that buying is good and will solve their problems, and that consumption and self-gratification are the goals and ends of life.

Channel One is bad for children's health. American children are suffering from an epidemic of obesity, which Channel One probably makes worse by aggressively promoting junk food and soda pop.

The American Academy of Pediatrics internet journal carried a expose of Channel One by Alabama pediatrician Dr. Carden Johnston. He criticized the ads for soft drinks and candies because they conflict with the National School Lunch Program's regulations about foods that increase the epidemic of adolescent obesity and Type II diabetes.

Dr. Johnston's commentary also pointed out another problem with Channel One: it propagates contests whereby companies can get access to a child's name and address. "Students are enticed to go to a website after school," he wrote, "where companies can acquire telephone numbers, email addresses, social security numbers, and credit card numbers if students declare they are at least 13 years old."

The coalition debunks Channel One's claim that it is a conservative, pro-family company. It's owner, Primedia, has merged with About.com, which distributes hard-core pornography on the internet.

Some coalition members also take issue with Channel One's advertising of About.com's "Teen Advice" website. Jim Metrock of Obligation Inc., a leading opponent of Channel One, described the "advice" offered to teens last December 26 in preparation for New Year's Eve.

"Whether you play it straight this New Year or decide to walk on the wild side, Teen Advice wants you to be safe," the website stated. "PC or not, here are some tips to help make the most of your evening -- no matter how you opt to spend it."

Potentially drunk or drugged teens were then told to stick to "one type" of alcohol and carry "a note with essential emergency medical information."

"What does this mean, 'walk on the wild side'?" Metrock demanded. "How many parents want this advice directed at their child?"

The Teen Advice website also addresses sexual issues, and while it emphasizes the dangers associated with teenage sex -- abstinence is even mentioned -- the central theme is that whatever kids want to do or are comfortable with is okay. The site includes "how to" directions for french kissing, using a condom and having sex.

Other organizations that oppose commercial advertising in the classroom include the National Council of Teachers of English, the National PTA, the National Association of State Boards of Education, and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.