

A HOLIDAY GREETING NETWORKS WON'T AIR: SHOPPERS ARE PIGS

By Robert Berner
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Picture the Scene: Katie Couric and Willard Scott all bundled up and cozy on Thanksgiving morning, watching the Cat in the Hat and Spider man float above Macy's department store.

Cut to a commercial: An animated pig superimposed on a map of North America smacks its lips and says: "The average North American consumes five times more than a Mexican, 10 times more than a Chinese person, and 30 times more than a person from India . . . Give it a rest. Nov. 28 is Buy Nothing Day. Can't see it happening? Neither can the networks. That's what's driving Kalle Lasn crazy.

For five years now, the former advertising executive turned anticonsumerism activist has been waging a grassroots campaign against Christmastime commercialism. His strategy: Attack Christmas shopping one day at a time, beginning with the season kickoff on the day after Thanksgiving. Each year, Mr. Lasn calls for a 24-hour shopping moratorium on the Friday, which he has dubbed Buy Nothing Day. The commercial trashing commercialism is just his way of reaching the masses.

Not Ready for Prime-Time

But the Big Three networks aren't having any of it. "We don't want to take any advertising that's inimical to our legitimate business interests," says Richard Gitter, vice president of advertising standards at General Electric Co.'s NBC network, which refused to take the 30-second spot. Westinghouse Electric Corp.'s CBS, in a letter rejecting the commercial, went as far as to say that Buy Nothing Day is "in opposition to the current economic policy in the United States."

Nevermind that few viewers would even see the commercial if it did air: Mr. Lasn's budget for the one network commercial is about \$15,000, enough for only the worst of slots. Not surprisingly, the networks have also refused Mr. Lasn's repeated requests to run 30-second spots encouraging viewers to participate in "TV Turn-off Week."

"I came from Estonia where you were not allowed to speak up against the government," says



The major TV networks CBS, NBC, and ABC refused to run these commercials for Buy Nothing Day. The commercials were sponsored by Adbusters magazine and its activist-oriented Media Foundation.

the 55-year-old Mr. Lasn, whose family fled to the West in advance of the Russian takeover in 1944. "Here I was in North America, and suddenly I realised you can't speak up against the sponsor. There's something fundamentally undemocratic about our public airways."

A Clear-Cut Case

After working in advertising in Tokyo in the late 1960s, Mr. Lasn moved to Canada and became a

documentary filmmaker. It was in the 1980s that his activist streak got sparked while he was watching a local forestry company's commercial promoting clear-cutting as "forest management."

Outraged, he put together his own TV ad documenting the downside of clear-cutting and the need to save old-growth trees. But local TV stations "refused to sell us the air time even as they were running the other side's campaign," he says.

In 1989, Mr. Lasn founded the Media Foundation in Vancouver, British Columbia. The group — which he says had revenue of \$500,000 last year and has five full-time employees — pro-

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duces alternative advertising for student and environmental groups, including an antiautomobile commercial for Greenpeace. The foundation also publishes a quarterly magazine called *Adbusters* that sells for \$5.75 a copy and, according to Mr. Lasn, has 40,000 subscribers. The magazine lambastes advertising's effect on popular culture and includes lampoons of famous ads: One parody of Camel cigarettes features a cartoon character called "Joe Chemo"; a jab at Calvin Klein's Obsession campaign shows a slender model seductively caressing a toilet, vomiting; and a "Big Mac Attack" ad displays a man on an operating table, hooked up to a heart monitor aglow with the Golden Arches.

Mr. Lasn counts among his supporters the Foundation for Deep Ecology, a San Francisco environmental group that says it has given him four \$25,000 grants; the Centre for a New American Dream in Burlington, Vt., which espouses eliminating debt and living simply in the tradition of Henry David Thoreau; and the like-minded Northwest Earth Institute in Portland, Ore., which plans to hit the streets in Buy Nothing Day to issue "Christmas Gift Exemption" vouchers. The biggest Buy-Nothing celebration is planned for Seattle. There, organisers will cut up their credit-cards outside of downtown's West Lake Center mall. Entertainment will be provided by a group of elderly women called the Raging Grannies, who

will perform to the tune of "Down by the Riverside" their song, "I Ain't Going to Run Up Debt No More." And Vicki Robin, author of the book "Your Money or Your Life," will be dressed as a doctor, dispensing medical advice on the materialistic malady known as "affluenza."

As for the snorting-pig commercial, at least some consumers will get to see it: For the third year in a row, Cable News Network Headline News has agreed to air the ad, and Mr. Lasn as paying \$10,000 for a slot. "We should make our commercial space available to debate issues of our day," says Steven Haworth, a spokesman for the Time Warner inc. network. Mr. Lasn is also asking local and cable-access stations to take the commercial.

That other networks refuse to broadcast the swinish swipe doesn't bother most constitutional-law experts, who point out that the networks aren't under any legal obligation to do so.

"At least the networks make it clear who butters their bread," says Laurence Tribe, the Harvard Law School professor. But he adds: "The networks seem to have a short-sighted lack of wit."