

# **Ensnared in a gay health controversy: a comparative study in responding to issue activism**

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## **Abstract:**

This case study describes competing activist campaigns triggered by a provocative poster promoting safe gay sex, which became one of the most complained-about outdoor advertisements in Australia. Drawing on issue management theory and personal interviews, the study analyses the contrasting strategies followed by two outdoor advertising companies caught up in the controversy, where family value advocates failed to consistently present their objections, while supporters of the same-sex equality effectively mobilized traditional and social media to frame the case as advertising free speech. One company held firm against issue activism, while the other wavered in its response and suffered reputational damage.

**Keywords:** issue management, activism, outdoor advertising, framing, Christian lobby, same-sex equality, advertising free speech.

## **Introduction:**

There is a well-established link between activism and issue management. In fact an extensive literature has been developed on similarities and differences of the tools and communication techniques used by activists and organizational issue managers (Heath, 1997; Miller, 2003; Burke, 2005; Jaques, 2006; den Hond, 2007; Zietsma and Winn, 2008).

There has also been close examination of co-operation and alliances between activists and corporates, both from the positive perspective (Susskind and Field, 1996; Watson, Osborne-Brown and Longhurst, 2002; Jordan and Stevenson, 2003; Lerbinger, 2006) as well as from the negative viewpoint (Lubbers, 2002; Monbiot, 2003; Dezenhall, 2003; Beder, 2006).

Less has been written about the dynamics involving the interplay between competing activist organisations on opposite sides of a high profile issue and the situation of corporate entities who find themselves caught between opposed groups.

One such case is the Rip & Roll safe sex controversy, when two Australian outdoor advertising companies found themselves entangled between competing activist campaigns, and how each company implemented a very different response strategy. The case also highlights the speed and impact of social media when effectively mobilised to communicate about a high profile issue.

## **The rise of New Activism**

Political and community activism is not new. Jackson (1984) argued that it gained fresh momentum in the 1950s with pacifist campaigns against nuclear weapons. It certainly flourished in the 1960s, with the work of veteran community campaigner Saul Alinsky, whose seminal book *Rules for Radicals* (1971) “gave form and focus to the rise of modern activism” (Jaques, 2006, p. 408).

Alinsky’s ground-breaking book was followed by another significant publication, Theodore Levitt’s *The Third Sector* (1973), which introduced the title concept to describe activists who attempt to care for individuals and causes neglected by the other two sectors – Government and Business.

These important works have been supported over the years by a plethora of ‘how to’ manuals, handbooks and guidelines for activists and community groups, many of them available free of charge on-line. [1]

The academic study of activism emerged more slowly, and two leading American scholars argued recently that “Despite a decade of activism research . . . the role of activists in public relations scholarship and practice is still unclear and evolving” (Smith and Ferguson, 2010, p. 396)

While academic research may still be evolving, the concept of activism has been relatively stable. A seminal description by Larissa Grunig in 1992 remains a standard definition.

An activist public is a group of two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion, pressure tactics or force (p. 504).

Grunig argued that an activist group’s intent is to improve the functioning of an organization from the outside, and that too remains largely valid. But it is the *way* in which activist groups operate that is changing dramatically.

One attempt to characterise the emerging new ways in which groups operate is the term *New Activism*, which describes political actions undertaken by a broad range of individual groups and organizations which use ‘extra parliamentary methods’ to create political change at the local, national and international level, and which make extensive use of new communication technologies, especially the Internet, to organize and execute activities (Hughes and Demetrious, 2006).

This concept of new activism has been explored by a number of scholars, including Ilija (2002), Burke (2005) and John and Thomson (2009), who all focus heavily on new technology as a core element. However Smith and Ferguson (2010) have counselled moderation in this emphasis on the technological aspects.

There is no mistaking the impact of the Internet and other inexpensive forms of communication on activism – as well as on organizations of all kinds and the public relations field more broadly. It should be remembered, however, that activists have used a variety of tactics, not just the Internet to achieve their goals (p. 398).

Yet the impact of the Internet and social media is a dominant theme and has seen the emergence of new terminology such as *cyber-activism* (Ilija 2002, Thomas, 2003) and *cyberspin* (Lordan, 2001). Similarly, Blood (2000) proposed the concept of *micro-activism*.

The internet has not just catalysed the emergence of micro-activist organizations, it has also provided the means for a new type of collaborative activism which

enables individual groups to remain small, independent and minimally resourced, yet collectively have the impact of an entire movement (p. 166).

The American Kayte van Scoy went even further to assert that the Internet “may have kick-started the languishing tradition of social activism in the United States” (2000, p. 56).

Zoller (2009) says activists seek to build resources of legitimacy, power and urgency that increase their likelihood of being heard by a corporation. Yet there is another obvious side to this new power relationship, namely that the Internet’s potential to alter an organization’s stakeholder networks increases an activist group’s power to influence, but at the same time the organization’s ability to resist is reduced (Coombs, 1998).

This new Internet-mediated dynamic between activists and organizations is central to the present case study.

### **The Rip & Roll Campaign**

In May 2011 the Brisbane-based Queensland Association of Healthy Communities (QAHC) – formerly the Queensland AIDS Council – launched a new \$64,000 advertising campaign promoting safe gay sex. The Federal and Queensland State Governments had been funding the organization’s sexual health campaigns for more than 20 years.

But the outcome this time was a Christian lobbying initiative which back-fired badly, and a tale of very different strategies for two advertising companies which found themselves in the cross-fire over what became one of Australia’s most complained-about outdoor advertising campaigns.

The advertisement was a black and white photograph showing a fully-clad gay couple, both men facing the camera in a chaste embrace, one holding an unopened condom packet. Text promoted the condom brand, Rip & Roll, with the advertiser’s strapline “A safe sex message from Healthy Communities” and a phone number (Norton, 2011).

However, to the local branch of the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) the poster – which appeared on outdoor hoardings and bus-shelters – was an affront to decency and family values, which inappropriately exposed children to condoms. And they claimed that the fact one of the men was wearing a crucifix was “offensive to Christianity.”

Heath (1997) says “Activism arises from moral outrage and leads to attempts to create and exploit power resources to change offending practices and policies” (p. 189). In this case the Queensland Branch of the ACL appears to certainly have been motivated by moral outrage, though the basis of their outrage is less clear.

Local ACL Director and campaign spokesperson Wendy Francis emphasised that her objection to the advertisement was the sexualisation of children through exposure to condom use.

"This has nothing to do with anything other than another condom ad in a bus shelter, where the children are catching buses to school, and billboards where their parents are stopping at lights." She emphasised that it was in support of her ongoing campaign for ‘G-rated Outdoor advertising’ and denied she was against gay people. "I've been labelled homophobic. This has absolutely nothing to do with gay couples" (Hall, 2011).

However that message seemed not to constrain some of her supporters. Many complaints lodged with the Advertising Standards Board (ASB), the outdoor advertising companies and the Brisbane City Council revealed an unmistakable anti-gay tone.

Most of the complaints used near-identical wording to argue that any condom advertising in public areas exposed to children is unacceptable and contrary to prevailing community standards (Advertising Standards Board, 2011a). But a good number went much further, adding sentiments such as

- “These posters are in fact an advertisement for gay sex”
- “The public encouragement of two men having sex is offensive to me and my family”
- “It is rather promotion of homosexual love and lust for male adolescents than allegedly promoting the use of condoms”
- “Homosexuality is a destructive practice in our society”
- “I am offended by this sexual perversion. Now I can’t even walk down the street or catch a bus without being confronted with this filth”

As complaints built up – initially reported up to 45 – the two outdoor advertising companies involved in the programme began to feel the heat.

CEO Chris Tyquin of Goa, which carried the poster on city hoardings, announced:

Goa Billboards is committed to our industry and in this instance we will wait for the decision of the ASB. I note that it is not illegal to advertise condoms or to depict two men embracing. The ACL’s claim that these men are engaging in an act of foreplay is drawing a long bow. If that’s foreplay, then clearly I’m doing it wrong. As such these factors alone are not reason to remove the advertisement. We live in a diverse community where freedom of speech is valued (Goa, 2011).

By contrast, Adshel, whose Brisbane bus-shelter advertising panels were the subject of particular criticism, caved in under the pressure, though the company denied it had been lobbied by ACL.

The decision to remove the posters was made on the basis of a large number of complaints received. All complaints were made by individual members of the public; none were identified as stemming from the Australian Christian Lobby. Adshel does not have, and never had, any dealings with the Australian Christian Lobby and has not responded to any requests from this organisation (Adshel, 2011a).

Ms Francis of the ACL was evidently delighted with her success and was quick to declare victory in a statement boldly headed “People power wins in removing offending ads” (Australian Christian Lobby, 2011). However ACL’s apparent success was short-lived. They had managed to shut down one of the two offending advertising outlets, but Adshel’s decision to yield to activist pressure provoked an extraordinary social media backlash far beyond a few advertising sites in just one city.

One of the original complaints about the poster said: “Homosexuality is and always will be a minority. Why are we allowing them to shout so loud?” (Advertising Standards Board, 2011a). Ironically it was the critics’ campaign which now created a platform for the gay message to be heard louder and more widely than had even been envisaged, and to place even greater pressure in the two companies caught up in the issue.

In the wake of Adshel withdrawing the poster, CEO Paul Martin of the sponsoring body, the QAHC, said previous campaigns that featured a single person, wearing less clothing, caused no controversy.

Yet a fully-clothed gay male couple has caused controversy. So the only conclusion we can reach is that it’s homophobia that is driving these complaints

but is being masked by saying that they're somehow protecting children from sexualisation (Hall, 2011)

Michael O'Brien, one of the gay men in the advertisement, personally spearheaded a campaign to force Adshel to reinstate the advertisement. He appeared as a spokesperson in the news media across the country, and started a Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/RipnRollCampaign](http://www.facebook.com/RipnRollCampaign)) which attracted more than 30,000 followers in just two days, calling on them to complain to Adshel (Norton, 2011).

The story gained national and international exposure and a massive internet presence. It is reported that the campaign against Adshel briefly occupied six of the top ten trending topics in Australia on Twitter (Burrowes, 2011). Furthermore, the Queensland State Premier and Brisbane Lord Mayor at the time were among politicians who expressed support for the poster (Safe sex ads to be reinstated, 2011).

In the face of public pressure, and a protest outside its Brisbane office, Adshel back-flipped next day and agreed to reinstate the advertisements.

Adshel CEO Steve McCarthy tried to put the best face on it, claiming the company was made to believe the complaints originated from individual members of the public. McCarthy asserted that their decision followed ACL Queensland Director Wendy Francis' "acknowledgement" that the campaign had been orchestrated by the ACL. "It has now become clear that Adshel has been the target of a coordinated ACL campaign" he said. "This had led us to review our decision to remove the campaign, and we will therefore reinstate the campaign with immediate effect" (Adshel, 2011b).

Wendy Francis rejects Adshel's claimed motivation.

I believe the reasoning behind the decision to reinstate the ad was simply a demonstration of people power. Because a good number of people rang and complained they took the ads down. Because ten times that number then complained (and quite militantly) about the ads being pulled down, they reacted to this and put the ads back up. It's a demonstration of democracy and majority rules, but it would be interesting to evaluate how many of the complaints were from Australia and how many from overseas. (W. Francis, personal communication, July 19, 2011).

Despite Adshel's statement, she remains adamant that the complaints were not orchestrated by ACL and that she did not send out any email or any communication to any ACL database. She says when people contacted her about the ads she told them what she had done and encouraged them to do the same. The similar wording in the complaints came from emails that began to circulate about how to best get the offensive ads removed. "The wording evolved from me and others' emails and was mostly circulated through the Catholic network. None of the wording originated from ACL" (W. Francis, personal communication, July 19, 2011).

Meantime the outdoor advertising industry had requested an expedited decision from the Advertising Standards Board, [11] which eventually received 222 formal complaints, making Rip & Roll the most complained-about billboard advertisement in 2010 and 2011 (Advertising Standards Board, 2011b). (Complaints to ASB typically attract fewer than 50 separate objections). Dismissing the complaint on all grounds, the Board ruled that the depiction of a same sex couple in an advertisement should be treated no differently to an image of a heterosexual couple, and it also found that younger children would not understand what a condom is (Advertising Standards Board, 2011a).

The Christian lobby had suffered a heavy strategic defeat, but their position was made even worse by what followed. Goa CEO Tyquin and some of his advertising colleagues were so shocked at the level of homophobia evident through the case they launched a *pro bono* campaign entitled “Embrace Acceptance” to encourage tolerance. A Facebook page was set up ([www.facebook.com/embraceacceptance](http://www.facebook.com/embraceacceptance)) where people could post images of themselves and their partner – be they homosexual or heterosexual – in the same open-face pose as the original poster, along with their story. Selected photos from the Facebook page were then transmitted for display on Goa’s four digital billboards around Brisbane in a four-week counter-campaign (Nancarrow, 2011).

What we wanted to do was create a place where kids who are wrestling with their sexuality – or situations where a parent was wrestling with their sexuality – could go and see what other people’s stories were. The whole motivation for doing that was we, and a group of other senior management in some of the ad agencies, were just shocked at the level of homophobia coming through in the letters of complaint. It was great to be involved and to use our media in conjunction with social media to bring their stories to life, to give them an arena to air their story (C. Tyquin, personal communication, 22 November, 2011).

Mainstream media interest in the Rip & Roll campaign quickly faded, and at one level it was just another local skirmish in the dogged conflict between the gay community and their more vociferous critics. But the case provides a valuable study in contrasts between the issue responses of two advertising companies confronted by angry activists, and how the activist campaigns utilised (or failed to utilise) the concept of issue framing to communicate their viewpoint.

## **Discussion**

Two decades ago Badaracco (1992) examined the impact of religion on public opinion and identified that religion carries significant implications for issue management, in both the strategic and ethical context. The ensuing decades have not only reinforced this view, but the rise of the Internet and social media has provided the tools to enable religious groups of all denominations and persuasions to assume the full role of social activists.

Heath (1997) highlighted that when an activist group develops its unique view of what ought to be, these expectations can have implications for how private sector organizations operate. “Such groups form a culture that views the world and evaluates business activities in terms that may be at odds with the preferences of company executives” (p. 158). This becomes evident when religious groups attempt to impose a particular moral or ethical viewpoint on corporations, including campaigns with an unambiguous anti-gay objective.

One such high profile example was the 2005 campaign by the American Family Association (AFA) against what they believed was a “pro-homosexual agenda” by the Ford Motor Company, which was launched shortly after the end of a similar nine-year campaign against Disney (Johnson, 2005).

AFA was concerned that Ford not only provided same-sex couples with employee benefits but also created advertisements targeted specifically towards gay car buyers. In response AFA established a fighting website ([www.boycottford.com](http://www.boycottford.com)). Word rapidly spread through the Internet, and within days 54,000 people reportedly signed the online pledge. But after a week, and a meeting with Ford dealers, the proposed boycott was suspended. Most importantly Ford remained steadfastly proud of its policy of tolerance and its sponsorship and promotion to the gay market (Johnson, 2005).

As in the Rip & Roll case, this campaign too unleashed an unexpected backlash against the family value advocates. Coombs and Holloday (2007) commented that the AFA action illustrated how an array of Internet channels can be mustered in an activist issue campaign which targets a corporation. But they added: “Unfortunately for AFA, the blogs and discussion postings were mostly supportive of Ford” (p. 72).

Unlike the AFA campaign against Ford, one of the major weaknesses of the ACL campaign against the Rip & Roll promotion was a failure to effectively manage framing of the debate.

Coombs (1998) says that essential to any issue management effort is a firm foundation based on the legitimacy of the issue. “Activists must frame an issue so that other stakeholders will find it legitimate and compelling” (p. 300).

Framing of the ACL campaign was ambiguous and inconsistent, which impacted on the corporate issue response. Campaign spokesperson Wendy Francis argued that the main focus was against condom advertising in places where children would be exposed and that the effort was not anti-gay. However many of her supporters clearly had a different view, and Francis herself was forced to repeatedly state that she was not anti-gay – not helped by the news media recalling a previous controversial incident when, as an unsuccessful political candidate, she had to retract a tweet that gay marriage was tantamount to child abuse (Caldwell, 2010).

Ms Francis courageously – albeit perhaps unwisely – even agreed to an on-air interview with a Melbourne-based gay radio station (JoyFm: The James, Nath and Stacey Show) which served only to reinforce the perception that the central issue was homophobia. Indeed the ASB itself, in rejecting the complaint, specifically referred to “people’s attitudes in relation to homosexuality” as one of the main reasons for the record high number of objections received (Advertising Standards Board, 2011a).

While the purpose of this analysis is not to assess the personal motivation or moral stance of the ACL supporters, it is clear that ambiguity of framing played into the hands of their critics and detracted from the purported objective of the campaign.

Because issues seldom have only two sides, several activist organizations may get involved in a public discussion or controversy, trying to influence its outcome (Lamb and McKee, 2005).

In the Rip & Roll case, the actions of one activist group triggered a competing activist campaign. And unlike ACL, the response to the controversy by QAHC and their volunteer spokesperson was unwavering from the beginning. They framed the issue as free-speech in advertising in the face of homophobia, and this construction was widely adopted.

Typical of this perspective was the Queensland State Treasurer Andrew Fraser: “Check the calendar, its 2011. I think we should call it for what it is, and this is basic homophobia.” Similarly, Graham Quirk, Lord Mayor of the Brisbane City Council (which owns the bus shelter advertising panels) said he had no issue with the campaign. “Was the advertising provocative? Well, some might say it was, but the message is the important thing and I think that the message is very important” (Safe sex ads to be reinstated, 2011).

For the advertising companies caught between competing activist campaigns, two very different response strategies emerged.

Goa Billboards is a small, family-owned business with close links to the Brisbane community. When the issue broke the CEO recognised that it could potentially damage his brand and was determined to make the right decision. He consulted with his management, personally met the advertiser and their spokesperson, and also sought the views of his teenage children and a local Catholic priest to help form a position on the controversial poster. “By mid-morning we

had made the decision to run with it and let the ASB make the decision” (C. Tyquin, personal communication, 22 November, 2011).

Goa made its decision known to ACL and stood firmly in support of the poster. The company’s position was subsequently reinforced by its sponsorship of the “Embrace Acceptance” counter-campaign. CEO Tyquin personally monitored Facebook and the social media and monitored every incoming email to ‘get a feel’ for the issue as custodian of the brand. But his strategy throughout was to make the company a ‘small target’ and to let the battle rage between the client and the lobby group.

By contrast, Adshel was inescapably the main focus of the story, vilified by the Christian lobby for publishing the troublesome advertisement in bus shelters, and by the gay community and many commentators for succumbing to activist pressure.

Unlike the local company Goa, Adshel Australia is a national entity with over 11,000 illuminated advertising panels across the country and headquartered almost 1,000 km away in Sydney. [iii] It is jointly owned by American multinational Clear Channel, the world’s largest outdoor advertising company, and APN News and Media, a major newspaper and radio station owner in Australia and New Zealand and the region’s largest outdoor advertising operation.

Adshel made a number of errors in handling the controversy, not the least of which was its decision not to publicly express an opinion about the poster itself, preferring to take the advertisement down in the face of a relatively small number of complaints, and then almost immediately reinstate it, ostensibly upon discovering that the complaints had been orchestrated.

Tim Burrowes, editor of the respected Australian business news-site Mumbrella, observed that Adshel found itself caught between opposing forces and deserved some sympathy. But he argued the company’s explanation that it had been “a victim of an underhand lobbying campaign” was unimpressive.

My guess is that when the complaints – which with hindsight were clearly orchestrated by a Christian lobby group – started rolling in, the organization panicked slightly. Its decision to pull the ads wasn’t so much anti-gay; it was anti-controversy. While that’s not something to feel proud of, it’s not morally repugnant either. Adshel isn’t talking, so I’ve no idea what level of seniority the decision was made at. But I’m willing to bet they didn’t spend as long thinking it through as they wished now (Burrowes, 2011).

Adshel Australia is not a socially irresponsible company. Just weeks before the case broke they donated \$225,000 worth of advertising space to support the Sydney Dogs and Cats Home. The company also donates to charities of the staff’s choice and allows them to donate work time to community and charity projects ([www.adshel.com.au](http://www.adshel.com.au))

But, as Bodensteiner (2003) has warned, doing the right thing may be fruitless if the communication battle is lost. “Effective communication can help ensure the public, activist groups and elected officials can tell the difference between a company that operates responsibility on an ongoing basis and one that doesn’t” (p. 19).

## **Conclusion**

When activists decide to challenge the appropriateness of organizational change, issue management is typically involved (Coombs, 1998). And in that process, both activists and organizations must marshal arguments and premises designed to legitimize their positions on issues, and indeed, on the legitimacy of the issue itself (Smith and Ferguson 2010).

In the Rip & Roll campaign two companies found themselves caught in the crossfire of a high profile and contentious moral issue.

The local company, Goa, maintained a high level of direct management involvement, kept very close contact with the controversy and took a principled position on the issue. By a combination of strategy and lucky circumstance they were able to largely keep their name out of the headlines.

The national company, Adshel, may have considered itself in a no-win position, but their issue response strategy appeared to misread the local situation. The company specifically declined to take a position on the controversial advertisement itself, and its stated reasons for withdrawing and then promptly reinstating the poster, were poorly thought through and poorly communicated.

It is possible that Adshel believed this was a minor issue, involving a relatively small amount of advertising revenue in a single local market. But they clearly underestimated the national and international potential of the issue, which undoubtedly damaged their reputation.

Although Adshel had been hammered in the media, they evidently committed privately to make good their error. Four months later QAHC revealed (Norton, 2011) the company agreed to extend the reinstated Rip & Roll campaign for an extra two weeks - - - at no charge.

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<sup>i</sup> For example, the UK-based e-campaigning forum catalogues more than 70 such titles (<http://southwarkorganising.wordpress.com/reading-about-activism-campaigning/>), and the European organization Community Builders (<http://www.communitybuilders.ro/library/manuals>) has an online library of more than 40 activist manuals, most of them with a downloadable pdf.

<sup>ii</sup> The Advertising Standards Board operates the complaints-handling procedure for the Advertising Standards Bureau. [www.adstandards.com.au](http://www.adstandards.com.au)

<sup>iii</sup> Adshel declined to be interviewed for this case analysis