

 **CASE 7-6****Campus Journalists
and the Tobacco Wars**

The results of the student referendum were unmistakable. The antismoking crusaders had prevailed in their initiative to improve the quality of life at Southwestern University.

The idea of a smoke-free environment at Southwestern was first floated by the university's vice president for academic affairs, Dr. Patricia Jenkins, but the Student Government Association (SGA) had asked her to submit the proposal to a student vote rather than to implement it through administrative fiat. The SGA cited a recently completed survey revealing that 34.1 percent of the student body at Southwestern were smokers. And most of these opposed any further attempts to restrict what they believed was their right to smoke. Although this was certainly not a majority, the SGA president told Jenkins, it was significant enough to allow the smokers some input into the decision-making process. "They should at least have an opportunity to convert student opinion to their point of view," she noted in her appeal to the academic vice president.

As presented to the students on the referendum ballot, the new policy would ban the use of all tobacco products in all campus buildings. Students who wished to "light up" could do so outside, and for this purpose the university would provide ash cans at strategic locations around campus. The "tobacco war," as the university's campus newspaper, the *Watchdog*, dubbed the campaign, sometimes stretched the bounds of decorum and civility, but in the end the antismoking forces carried the day. Nevertheless, the results of the campuswide vote were somewhat surprising to faculty and students alike. Although slightly more than a third of the respondents in the SGA survey had identified themselves as smokers, 46 percent of the student voters had cast their ballots in opposition to the administration's proposal, the reflection perhaps of a tolerant generation who opposed any institutional incursions into their individual rights.

Tawana Deitch was proud of the *Watchdog's* role in providing a forum for student opinion during the campaign leading up to the referendum. As editor of the campus newspaper, she had served as the primary gatekeeper in ensuring that the paper's op-ed page reflected a diversity of student and faculty opinion. This was no mean task considering that the debate on this issue seemed to have been hijacked by extremists on both sides of the issue. At times, Deitch labored to discover a voice of reason among the myriad letters and opinions submitted in support of or in opposition to the new smoking policy. The *Watchdog*, however, had not served as a mere conduit for the sentiments of others. Two years before the student vote on smoke-free campus buildings, the editors had joined the crusade against the besieged tobacco industry and had been unremitting in their efforts to remind their peers of the health risks associated with the use of cigarettes and other tobacco products. The paper's editorial involvement in the tobacco war had not been a painless decision. Although there was only one smoker among the editorial staff, some viewed the right to smoke as a civil liberty comparable to suffrage and free speech. They resisted the notion of passing judgment on their contemporaries or of the newspaper's editorially browbeating them into a nicotine-free existence.

Nevertheless, Deitch's elevation to the position of editor had brought with it a determination to place the *Watchdog* at the vanguard of the anti-smoking crusade on campus. Armed with the latest news on the effects of secondhand smoke, she had convinced the newspaper's staff that banning tobacco products from all university buildings, if not from the campus itself, was a reasonable accommodation between the tobacco users and those who demanded a smoke-free environment. These editorials complemented her own columns which consistently savaged the tobacco industry for targeting teenagers in their ads and for misleading the public about the narcotizing effects of nicotine. Her public posture had brought its own rewards in the form of an award from a local environmental organization and a complimentary letter from the state's attorney general, who was involved

in litigation against the tobacco industry to recoup the costs of Medicaid payments for smoking-related illnesses. But above all, Deitch was properly gratified by the results of the student referendum and her newspaper's role in the factious campaign.

However, her euphoria was short-lived. She and Samuel Lewis, the campus paper's advertising manager, were not kindred spirits. Whereas Deitch regarded the *Watchdog's* public service role as a sacred trust, Lewis viewed the paper's news and op-ed pages as merchandising vehicles for national and local advertisers who wished to pitch their wares to the college crowd. Deitch attributed Lewis's lack of journalistic altruism to the fact that the paper's commercial gatekeeper was an advertising major and that, contrary to the curriculum model at many universities, advertising was taught in the School of Business, not Mass Communication. At Southwestern University, journalism and advertising were like two ships passing in the night, academically speaking.

Despite her devotion to the marketplace of ideas, Deitch was also pragmatic and gratefully acknowledged the role of advertising in supporting the *Watchdog's* journalistic enterprise. She appreciated Lewis's determination to safeguard the paper's financial infrastructure, but their relationship had hardly been one of peaceful coexistence. On two occasions the editor had challenged Lewis's decision to accept ads for term paper services and off-campus bars that promoted happy hour. Both had been the subject of *Watchdog* editorials. She had lost on the first issue but prevailed on the happy hour promotions, possibly because of the untimely death of a university freshman resulting from binge drinking.

The tobacco industry's overture, in Deitch's view, was a well-calculated attempt to influence the most vulnerable and tolerant of its potential consumers. After more than a thirty-year self-imposed moratorium, the tobacco companies had again decided to mount an aggressive campaign to capture the soul of the college consumer. Given the significant number of smokers among Southwestern University's student population, the tobacco industry's interest in the *Watchdog* as a commercial vehicle came as no surprise. However, Deitch vowed to

resist any attempt to dishonor her paper's moral chastity in the tobacco wars.

The meeting to discuss this apparent conflict between journalistic and economic values was convened by Dale Brooks, the director of student media. Although Lewis and his staff were responsible for advertising sales and scheduling, Brooks routinely reviewed all contracts for matters of taste and other violations of university policy. In this dispute between the editorial and commercial side of the *Watchdog*, he would be the moral agent. Deitch, Lewis, and Brooks were joined by Sarah Rabinowitz, the newspaper's adviser.

Brooks opened the meeting with a few pleasantries and then asked Lewis to brief the others on the proposed ad campaign. "In a nutshell, we've been approached by the Baldwin and Baldwin ad agency; they represent the R. W. Kaiser Tobacco Company," stated Lewis matter-of-factly. "They want to run a half-page ad twice—a week—each one will cost \$400. Most of the ads will alternate between their new smokeless tobacco product and their leading brand of cigarettes. For our paper, this is a big contract from a national sponsor. It'll bring in a lot of money."

"But how can we accept money from the tobacco industry when we have campaigned so aggressively against smoking and in favor of smoke-free campus facilities?" replied Deitch indignantly. "It would be hypocritical to accept money from tobacco companies while editorially disparaging the use of tobacco."

"I strongly disagree," responded Lewis without hesitation. "As you are constantly reminding me, the editorial and advertising functions of this paper are separate. Our readers understand this. They're clever enough to separate our editorial positions from the products we advertise. I don't see the ethical dilemma here. General Motors advertises on all of the major TV networks. But should their news departments refuse to cover a story critical of GM just because their journalistic and commercial messages don't agree? What's the difference?"

As newspaper adviser and university employee, Sarah Rabinowitz's perspective was usually less imperious than Deitch's, but at this point she came to her editor's defense. "The difference is that we have *editorially* trashed the tobacco industry," said

Rabinowitz. "Tobacco is a dangerous product. It's a health hazard. If we appear to be softening our position and accept these ads, we'll lose credibility with our readers."

"Which readers?" rebutted Lewis. "More than a third of our students, according to the SGA survey, smoke. That's a significant minority, and we also have a responsibility to them. Also, R. W. Kaiser currently runs ads in more than two hundred college papers. Tobacco is a legal enterprise. Any company should have the right to advertise a legal product. Students have a right to make up their own minds. If we refuse these ads, this is tantamount to economic censorship." Lewis's reference to economic censorship was obviously an attempt to challenge Deitch on her own turf.

But Deitch was not deterred. "This is not censorship," she replied with conviction. "The tobacco industry has no right of access to our readers. They can advertise elsewhere in more hospitable forums. It's a conflict of interest for us to discourage tobacco usage on our editorial pages and then accept money from a tobacco company."

"If the entire editorial philosophy of our paper related to this kind of issue—such as a magazine designed specifically to promote a more healthy and robust lifestyle among young professional women—I might agree," conceded Lewis. "But the tobacco campaign is just one among many for us. We're a general-purpose newspaper for the Southwestern campus. We're not going to be remembered by our devotion to this one issue."

"It's true that we editorialize on a lot of issues," admitted Deitch. "But our readers, who are here for only four years, will judge us by what we do today. Our editorial campaign on the evils of tobacco was done with the students' and the university's interests in mind. I'm not going to concede the point that the acceptance of tobacco advertising is now a conflict of interest."

"Keep in mind that advertising keeps this paper afloat," Lewis reminded Deitch. "We receive some funds from student fees, but most of our support comes from ads. If it weren't for our advertising, there would be no editorial page. And the fact is that our sales have been flat lately. These ads will provide a welcome infusion of funds. It's okay to reflect different messages in the

editorial and commercial spaces. They serve different purposes. In my judgment, there's no conflict of interest."

Brooks felt emotionally drained by this rapid exchange among his two student antagonists and the paper's adviser. As student media practitioners, Tawana Deitch and Samuel Lewis were schooled in different intellectual traditions and were unlikely to have a meeting of the minds. Both had made persuasive arguments. As director of student media, Brooks would be the final arbiter of the *Watchdog's* next installment in the tobacco wars.

THE CASE STUDY

Because the tobacco industry has historically targeted college newspapers, the facts described here could reflect the experience of many college newspapers across the country.⁶⁹ Traditionally, there has been a clear line of demarcation between the editorial and advertising functions of newspapers, although the lines have blurred gradually in recent years. And yet, editors have been quick to point out inconsistencies between their papers' editorial postures and the acceptance of certain kinds of ads. This has been of particular concern in certain kinds of specialized publications.

The internal conflict between student editor Tawana Deitch and advertising manager Samuel Lewis raises a fairly straightforward ethical question: Is it a conflict of interest for a publication to criticize an industry on the editorial pages and then accept advertising from that industry? For Deitch, the answer is simple. Any commercial accommodation with the tobacco interests is steeped in hypocrisy. The result is an indefensible two-tier ethical posture, which can't be defended. She is also concerned about consequences—that is, the loss of the paper's credibility. She also rejects as unimportant the claim of economic censorship that would result in the denial of information about a lawful product to a significant minority of the student body. Interestingly, Deitch does not appeal to her paper's possible role in promoting a continuing high level of smoking among Southwestern students if the ads are accepted. This could be a relevant consideration, regardless of the *Watchdog's* previously stated editorial position on the issue.

Lewis doesn't share the editor's ethical qualms about running tobacco ads. He believes that the student readers have a right to information about any lawful product, regardless of how the editorial staff feels about that product. Denial of the tobacco industry's access to the *Watchdog's* advertising space is economic censorship, in his view. College students are mature enough to make up their own minds. Lewis also notes the financially lucrative contract offered by the R. W. Kaiser Tobacco Company. In this respect, his thinking is decidedly teleological (consequentialist). In essence, Lewis has coupled his mercenary instincts with an appeal to reader autonomy.

The issue has been joined and is now in the capable hands of the director of student media, Dale Brooks. Assume his role and, based on the SAD formula, make a decision on this matter.

▶ CASE 7-7

Switching Sides in Public Relations

In her more desperate moments, Monique Andrews was reminded of the biblical account of David and Goliath. Goliath was MicroGro Enterprises, a large conglomerate that specialized in industrial development. David was Citizens to Save Endangered Wetlands (CSEW), a confederation of environmental activists and concerned citizens that opposed MicroGro's latest venture into urban renewal.

Andrews's graduation from college ten years before had brought immediate employment with Boutwell and Randolph, a large public relations firm in Pittsburgh, but little job satisfaction. Her clients derived primarily from the corporate sector, and the pace, workload, and tedium required in the care and feeding of her commercial benefactors had exhausted her reserves of professional enthusiasm. With her valuable experience and wisdom gained during her decade at Boutwell, Andrews had retreated to her hometown of North Hampton, a coastal community of 250,000 located adjacent to a pristine wetlands sanctuary. North Hampton had been economically stagnant even before Andrews departed for college, but