



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on August 5, 2014

## Group Challenges McDonald's for Sponsoring "Dating Naked" Show

The [Parents Television Council](#) (PTC) has once again put McDonald's in the spotlight with some publicity the fast food giant was likely hoping people would overlook. The TV and media watchdog group noted in a recent press release that McDonald's is continuing with its sponsorship of morally questionable programs by advertising on one of VH1's raunchiest efforts to date, a reality show entitled *Dating Naked*, with the program's title leaving nothing to the imagination. According to PTC, McDonald's ads were featured during the July 17 premiere episode of the show, and nearly all of the repeat airings of that episode.



"McDonald's is admittedly struggling with its brand image," said PTC president Tim Winter in a statement, "yet the Happy Meal company executives think it appropriate to sponsor naked dating on television." Winter suggested that the burger giant might want to hire "Captain Obvious" to help out with its marketing research. The title of the show by itself "should put the program on the company's do-not-buy list," said Winter. "We urge McDonald's to reconsider its sponsorship of any and all future episodes of this show."

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McDonald's has had a history of buying advertising on objectionable shows. According to a [PTC study](#) earlier this year, the restaurant chain was a sponsor of some of the most "sexually graphic and profane" shows on TV. In the pro-family group's study, McDonald's was at the top of the list of advertisers sponsoring shows heavy on sexual content, suggestive dialogue, and foul language. The only category where McDonald's wasn't mentioned as an ad contributor was for shows heavy on violence.

According to Winter, the companies among which McDonald's rated at the top "have sponsored programs that routinely deliver explicit content such as jokes about incest, rape, pedophilia; glorify adultery; barrages of bleeped and partially-bleeped F-words."

Said Winter of the study results: "Particularly jarring is the direction that McDonald's advertising has taken in recent years, given its history as a family — and child-centric — brand." He noted that his group had reached out to the fast food empire "to encourage the company to change course, as it used to be one of our 'best' advertisers."

In April, Winter [penned a letter to McDonald's](#) CEO Don Thompson, suggesting that McDonald's sponsorship of objectionable programs might be in part responsible for the chains flagging profits of late.

[Chicago Business Journal](#) reported that McDonald's recently entered an 18-month rebranding evaluation period to try to determine why its profits had flattened out.



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In the letter, Winter noted that the traditionally family-friendly restaurant chain had taken to sponsoring “some of the very worst broadcast content with its advertising dollars.” Among the examples of what McDonald’s advertising dollars have been paying for, Winter offered the following:

- An episode of *Family Guy* that joked about pedophilia.
- An episode of the CW network’s youth-targeted drama *Reign* that invited viewers to go online for a version of the episode that featured explicit sex scenes.
- Several episodes of the Fox “serial-killer” drama *The Following*, including one episode that showed a woman’s throat being slit open.

Winter wrote that the “juxtaposition of this historically family brand with such graphic and disturbing content is jarring, to say the least, but it is not an anomaly. It is consistent with a long-term trend that we have observed with great concern for the last few years.”

He recalled that in 2007, PTC had ranked McDonald’s “as one of the ten best television sponsors because of its avoidance of graphically violent, profane, or sexually explicit programming.” But since at least 2011, he said, “McDonald’s has ranked among the worst TV sponsors.”

Winter suggested a correlation between McDonald’s change in advertising policy and its lowered profits. “I think it is not a coincidence that at the same time McDonald’s abandoned its family focus, sales started to decline,” he counseled Thompson. “I think you know from McDonald’s own track record, that when you pursue family audiences and a family-friendly ad strategy, none of your competitors can touch you. Just a few years ago — before McDonald’s changed its advertising strategy and family focus — sales outstripped the next-closest competitor by \$20 billion.... Mr. Thompson, I believe McDonald’s can improve its fortunes by returning to a family focus.”

Based on the decision by McDonald’s to sponsor VH1’s *Dating Naked* show, along with other sleazy fare, Winter’s advice to Thompson apparently fell on deaf ears. According to the *Chicago Business Journal*, McDonald’s attempted to distance itself from the objectionable shows it has sponsored, with a McDonald’s “customer satisfaction representative” saying in a written statement: “It’s important to understand that McDonald’s is not directly involved with network/radio programming decisions. That decision belongs to the broadcaster, and, ultimately, the individual viewer.” The rep added that McDonald’s customers “support a diverse view of programming interests.”

Melissa Henson, PTC’s director of grassroots education and activism, told [Baptist Press News](#) that research from the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) supports PTC’s claim that advertising on objectionable shows has tarnished McDonald’s image. She noted that the ANA study “found that if a brand was in a context that seemed to be inappropriate for the brand, then that affected the consumer’s perception of that company and that brand.”

For example, she offered, “if you’re a beer company and you’re advertising on a kid’s show, that’s going to negatively affect the perception of the brand,” because, in the opinion of most viewers, the broadcast environment is inappropriate for the product being pitched.

By the same evaluation, she said, “if you’re a family friendly company and you’re advertising on a show that contains high levels of graphic sex, violence, and foul language, then that’s going to affect the way people view the brand.”

Henson pointed out that McDonald’s positive image has been built on such branding strategies as the Happy Meal, the restaurant chain’s popular playground areas, the kid-friendly clown Ronald McDonald,



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and the Ronald McDonald House, where families can stay when a child is in the hospital for an extended period of time.

She noted to *Baptist Press News* that there is a conspicuous disconnect between a chain that has such a caring image, “and yet at the same time, here they are advertising on programs like *Family Guy*, where ... they’re trivializing child sex abuse. And that is just so, so appalling that this family brand that has done so much good in their communities would be supporting this kind of content with their advertising dollars.”

She added that “I think the drop-off that they’ve had in recent months and years is because they’ve sort of muddied the waters about who it is that they’re trying to get into their restaurants.”

Winter noted that McDonald’s founder Ray Kroc once said: “The basis for our entire business is that we are ethical, truthful, and dependable. It takes time to build a reputation. We are not promoters. We are business people with a solid, permanent, constructive ethical program that will be in style ... years from now even more than it is today.”

Said Winter: “How tragic for McDonald’s that the wonderful legacy left by Mr. Kroc, the generations of good will and built with consumers over decades, has been demolished by an irresponsible marketing strategy. Unless and until McDonald’s returns to being a responsible advertiser, I advise consumers to take their business to competitors whose values more closely reflect their own.”

He noted as one example the Wendy’s restaurant chain, which he said “has consistently matched its positive brand image with responsible media-buying standards.”

He emphasized that “to be more respected, McDonald’s needs to re-establish the trust of customers — and a key strategy in re-establishing that trust must be remembering the families that have been the cornerstone of the McDonald’s brand.”



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