

Metro Food Council attacked

Chatham ad campaign draws citizens' lobby fire

By JACKIE KLEIN

The Southfield-based Michigan Citizens Lobby (MCL) has attacked an advertising campaign by Chatham Supermarkets as misleading to consumers. The target of the criticism, according to Doug Ross, co-director of the lobbying group, is the supermarket chain's promotion of a Metro Detroit Consumer Food Council.

MCL Ross said, is strongly urging the food chain to immediately discontinue the council and the advertising campaign. The group also recommends shoppers consider the findings of the food council "no different than any paid advertising placed by Chatham."

Chatham's ad claims the 12-member consumer panel is "made up of people like you, who will check food quality, prices and store services on a regular basis."

"This implies the council, comprised of 12 'volunteer' housewives, will regularly provide shoppers with objective, independent survey results, comparing five major Detroit area food chains," Ross contended during

a Feb. 7 press conference in front of Chatham's Greenfield-Ten and One-Half Mile Road store.

"Results of an MCL study indicate the food council isn't an independent consumer organization, lacks legal status and has no decision-making capabilities."

ROSS CLAIMED the council is the creation of the J. Walter Thompson advertising firm that handles the Chatham account.

A Chatham spokesman, who asked not to be identified when contacted by phone, said officials of the supermarket chain and the ad agency were to meet Feb. 8 with representatives of the Better Business Bureau who have been questioning the advertising campaign.

The spokesman refuted MCL claims that volunteer members of the Consumer Food Council are housewives hired by Chatham at \$10 an hour to comparison shop.

"The council was formed by an independent firm, Research One of Southfield," according to the spokesman. "The women are reimbursed for ex-

penses such as mileage and babysitters' fees.

"They were selected by Research One, retained by our ad agency, as representative of mature, experienced shoppers from Oakland, Wayne and Macomb counties. Only two of the 12 are regular Chatham customers."

"Six members of the panel will be replaced by six others on a rotating basis every other month. We've asked the research firm to do everything humanly possible to prevent any hint of bias. The council will later include men and younger shoppers."

WHILE THE mechanics for conducting the council's surveys are allegedly controlled by Research One, Ross maintained, ultimate decisions

on what store amenities and kinds of food items to be evaluated are made by Chatham.

Ross contended there are no concrete assurances, beyond the word of those involved, that Chatham representatives don't know in advance what is being surveyed at a given time. This, Ross contended, could obviously bias survey results.

Research One, according to the Chatham spokesman, asked food council members what items they wanted to survey. Some suggested areas were too subjective, he maintained.

"Objective comparison items, it was determined, are meat and produce," according to the spokesman. "The women made two tests of qual-

ity and packaging before they knew what supermarket was sponsoring the program. Each woman shopped in five supermarkets, so there were 60 examples."

Chatham and J. Walter Thompson control the content and timing of paid ads reporting results of the council surveys, Ross said. There is no way to assure all findings are made public, he contended.

"It has been Chatham's policy to publish only how it placed in relation to other chains in the survey," Ross maintained. "If another chain places first, we aren't given its name in the ad."

consumers interested in finding the best buy. Apparently, the Consumer Food Council has no say in such matters.

The Better Business Bureau prohibits direct price comparisons in advertising and naming specific competitors, the spokesman said.

"We're not being deceitful or downgrading the competition," he maintained. "That way, nobody wins. We're meeting with the Better Business Bureau because we don't want a poor image. As long as we serve a function for the consumer, the idea is good. If nothing more, the competition will try harder and everybody benefits. We'll continue the campaign as long as we strive for credibility."

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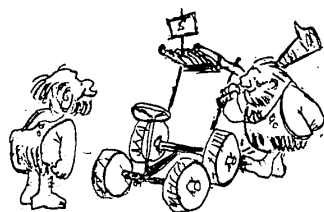
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