

Taste and Decency: Advertisement Withdrawn

by Fast-Track Complaint Procedure

In September 2005, a billboard advertisement for Paddy Power Bookmakers was the subject of a range of complaints from individuals and organisations. The posters on display in Dublin were based on the famous painting of “The Last Supper” by Leonardo da Vinci. It depicted Jesus at the centre of a long table with the twelve Apostles sitting on either side of him. Jesus is shown in the ad holding a stack of poker chips while the Apostles amuse themselves by playing cards and roulette. Above this scene, the caption states “There’s a place for fun and games”.

The advertiser betting agency claimed that the advertisement was based on the idea that Paddy Power was considered to be “the place for fun and games”. Paddy Power stated that their intention was to parody a well known work of art, and that such a scene as depicted never actually happened. The advertisers considered the concept to be hugely ironic and quite humorous and certainly did not intend to cause any offence to the general public.

However, the Advertising Standards Authority of Ireland (ASAI), the country’s advertising watchdog reported that it had received a range of complaints, while separate objections were made to Paddy Power directly. The tenor of the complaints was that the image exploited an image central to Christian beliefs and insulted religious sensitivities in a crass attempt to gain publicity. Moreover, it was felt that subverting the image of The Last Supper for commercial gain was entirely inappropriate and lacked public mores making it likely to cause widespread offence.

Typically, when the ASAI receive a complaint, it is evaluated by the Secretariat in order to determine whether it is within the terms of reference of the ASAI and whether the advertiser has a *prima facie* case to answer. If the advertiser is called to account, he or she is informed of the complaint and invited to comment or defend their actions. Thereafter, the Secretariat prepares a recommendation for the Complaints Committee and adjudication or a final decision is reached.

However, the ASAI reserve the right to fast-track this procedure: if the circumstances warrant immediate remedial action and if a case is particularly grave, the Authority may request interim action pending completion of their own investigation. In this case, the posters appeared in Dublin during the weekend of 23-25 September 2005.

In response to numerous complaints made to the ASAI by the general public, the ASAI used its fast-track procedure to get the advertisement withdrawn from the billboards. This decision was taken a week later on 29 September. Paddy Power began to withdraw the posters over the weekend of 30 September – 2 October 2005

The reason for the prompt action taken by the ASAI was that the poster had breached a combination of taste and decency guidelines as well as offending religious sensitivities.

The Code of Advertising Standards requires that an advertisement should contain nothing likely to cause grave or widespread offence. Advertisements should not ridicule or exploit religious imagery, symbols or rites. In particular, advertisers should take account of public sensitivities in the preparation and publication of advertisements and avoid such exploitation. The Complaints Committee approved the pre-emptive action taken by its Secretariat to avoid any further offence to other members of the public.

