

Shopping for Christmas

New Web site from Focus on the Family Action allows shoppers to rate retailers on their treatment of the holiday.



by Jennifer Mesko

Grove City, Ohio, no longer hosts a “winter” parade.

The annual event is now called the Winter Lights Christmas Celebration, thanks in part to Elizabeth Branson.

For four years, Branson has conducted a one-person campaign to bring Christmas back to her town. And she did it without a computer or cell phone.

“I just got fed up that whenever I went to stores, they would say, ‘Happy Holidays,’” she says. Her response: “If you don’t say, ‘Merry Christmas,’ I’m putting the merchandise back.”

So, Branson — who describes herself as “a very young 68-year-old” — set out to prove that one person can make a difference. And she did.

Year after year, she showed up at City Council meetings to ask members to recognize “Christmas” in the name of the parade and in the local magazine.

“I wrote my little speech out,”



“I was just so happy to get Christmas back. I knew I had made a difference in my community.”

Elizabeth Branson, Grove City, Ohio

she says. “I just had a few minutes to speak. I wasn’t going to quit because I knew I was right. There was no stopping me.”

Branson also contacted every retailer she could think of.

“I used my regular phone and typewriter,” she says. “I started in August to make sure it wasn’t too late. I got numbers of all the stores.” Her message was simple: Please use

the word “Christmas” in Christmas-time advertising.

This year, Branson didn’t need to attend any City Council meetings — because Christmas has returned to Grove City.

“Finally, last Christmas, we had a ‘Christmas’ parade,” she says. “I was asked to ride with the council in the parade. And we shouted ‘Merry Christmas’ to everyone.”



More than three-quarters of Americans say “Merry Christmas,” according to a Fox News poll released last year. And according to a December 2008 online MSNBC.com survey, a similar number believes retailers should include “Christmas” in how they mark the holiday season.

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Christmas is welcome

With Gallup reporting that more than 90 percent of Americans believe in and celebrate Christmas, Focus on the Family Action, like Branson, believes it’s time for the secularization of Christmas to end.

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Carrie Gordon Earll, senior director of issue analysis at Focus Action, said it’s clear what shoppers want.

“When you think about it, it’s rather silly for retailers to entice us to buy their products as Christmas gifts, yet eliminate the word from their marketing,” she says. “The message from customers is clear: If you want my shopping dollars, recognize Christmas in your advertising.”

In March 2009, Focus on the Family Action commissioned a leading research and consulting firm, Wilson Research Strategies (www.w-r-s.com), to determine what consumers think on the “Christmas” issue. Their clear read on public opinion was that CHRISTMAS IS WELCOME! Here are a few highlights from the nationally representative poll of 1,000 adults:

- 60 percent of Americans favor the use of “Merry Christmas” over “Happy Holidays” in retail advertising.

- Of those, 49 percent say they strongly support the use of “Christmas.”

‘Merry Tossmas’



Stuart Shepard is asking retailers to remember Christmas in their advertising. Otherwise, their catalogs meet an unfortunate end.

In 2007, Focus on the Family Action’s Stuart Shepard introduced a brand-new holiday in his Stoplight® video commentary. More than 2.2 million people around the world watched “Merry Tossmas,” in which retailers were asked to acknowledge Christmas. Otherwise, their catalogs met an unfortunate end. The sequel — “Merry Tossmas 2008” — also was a big hit.

Go to CitizenLink.com to watch the “Tossmas” videos, as well as this year’s featured video.

You can reach Stuart Shepard at citizenlink@family.org. •

- 44 percent say they would be more likely to purchase from a retailer that uses “Merry Christmas” in marketing and advertising.

Walmart and other leading retailers plan to capitalize on those numbers.

Tara Raddohl, senior manager for public relations and brand reputation at Walmart, says “Christmas” will be included in Walmart advertisements and in-store initiatives throughout the season.

In stores, consumers will find The Christmas Shop, which will house decorations. The retail giant also plans to offer seasonal merchandise labeled with “Christmas.”



“In addition, we encourage associates to use their best judgment in assessing which greeting or greetings best suit the customers in their store,” Raddohl says. “If ‘Merry Christmas’ is the preferred greeting, that is fine and appropriate.”

A new strategy

In past years, Focus Action has reviewed the seasonal advertising of leading retailers beginning in mid-November to identify which retailers were honoring Christmas. In 2008, corporate executives were notified early in the year that Focus

Action would be reviewing catalogs and Web sites for Christmas messaging.

This year, the strategy has switched a bit. Once again, corporate executives have been reminded about Christmas messages in retail marketing. In addition, Focus on the Family Action Vice President Tim Goeglein has initiated personal visits and conference calls with retail leaders to communicate more directly Focus Action's concerns and plans.

"Our supporters love the spirit of the Christmas season," he says. "They know it is the time of the year when we celebrate Jesus' birth. While we do not go into a department store looking for theology, we do shop with the expectation that the 'Reason for the season' will not be erased or downgraded. Unfortunately, that has been the case with some retailers in the past."

Goeglein says numerous industry leaders realize that using "Christmas" is not only respectful, but it makes good business sense.

This year, Focus Action is helping shoppers weigh in on the Christmas debate. An interactive "rate-a-retailer" Web site (visit CitizenLink.com) will allow consumers to score retailers on their treatment of Christmas in their catalogs, online and in stores. The Web site also will facilitate direct communication with retailers.

"Focus wants to use the Christmas campaign as a way of saying thanks to retailers that reject political correctness," Goeglein says. "This Web site is a wonderful tool to do so." ●

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit CitizenLink.com.

Jennifer Mesko is the managing editor of Citizen. You can reach her at citizeneditor@family.org.

Stand for Christmas



Go to CitizenLink.com to rate the following retailers on their treatment of Christmas. You can also find out what other shoppers are saying.

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|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| American Eagle | Kohl's |
| Banana Republic | L.L. Bean |
| Barnes & Noble | Lands' End |
| Bass Pro Shops | Lane Bryant |
| Bed, Bath & Beyond | Lowe's |
| Best Buy | Macy's |
| Borders | Nordstrom |
| Cabela's | Old Navy |
| Crate & Barrel | Pier 1 Imports |
| Dick's Sporting Goods | Sears |
| Dillard's | Target |
| Eddie Bauer | The Home Depot |
| Gap | Toys R Us |
| JCPenney | Walmart |
| Kmart | |

(If your favorite store is not on our list, please feel free to offer feedback directly to the store manager.) ●