

Sydney's billboard battle

By LUIS M. GARCIA

Call them what you will: modern-day crusaders, or vandals. But anti-smoking and anti-alcohol graffiti writers, such as the BUGA UP group, are costing Australian outdoor advertisers at least half a million dollars a year.

And the battle over Australia's billboards is expected to become even more aggressive over the next few months.

The advertisers are at the moment lobbying the State Government to increase substantially the fines for those caught defacing billboards.

Current fines are relatively light in comparison to those imposed in other States. In Victoria, for example, the fines are indexed regularly according to the increases in production costs, and this is the kind of step the advertisers are urging the State Government to take.

The first shots in the battle were fired late last year when the Outdoor Advertising Association of Australia, in conjunction with the Lions community service organisation, launched a \$80,000 anti-

vandalism campaign (using over 100 prominent billboards throughout Sydney) under the theme of "Speak Up".

While the campaign was reportedly aimed at deterring all forms of vandalism on public and private property (including damages to public phones, train carriages and so on), the obvious targets seemed to be the "graffiti phantoms."

MARKETING

According to Mr Brian Tyquin, president of the NSW branch of the association, the campaign was a success.

"Groups like BUGA UP claim that they have public sympathy, but this is just not the case. Our surveys have found out that up to 80 per cent of people are not sympathetic at all to this type of vandalism," Mr Tyquin said.

"This type of vandalism is costly — costs which are eventually passed down to the consumer — and it now covers a very wide, and unlikely, scope of products and industries."

He said no longer were just tobacco and alcohol ads defaced, but also for towels, soft drinks, cars and banks.

"The cost of replacing a defaced poster ranges from \$100 to \$120, and it is a cost which is borne initially by the poster companies, not the advertisers. This is something the people (who do it) apparently do not realise," Mr Tyquin said.

The association regarded them as politically motivated vandals who were not just anti-tobacco, but anti-business and anti-free enterprise generally.

Mr Tyquin believes, however, that the advertisers are winning the battle.

"Things are getting very hot for them nowadays and they have resorted to using paint bombs thrown from moving cars.

"They don't just use spray cans now, because more of them are being reported to police by the public."

Mr Brian Gapes, of the Tobacco Institute of Australia, agrees that the campaign against vandalism has had some effect. People were realising that groups like BUGA UP were vandals costing the community a lot of money.

Meanwhile the graffiti people have widened their scope of activi-

ty. Besides hitting street-level billboards (mostly on railway stations), rooftop signs — some measuring up to five metres by 15 metres — have been defaced lately.

And encouragement has also come from the most unlikely places. In a recent case where two spray-can crusaders were brought before Justice Loveday of the Parramatta District Court, the judge said that, in fining the two men \$235, he had "great sympathy for anyone who is crusading against cigarette smoking", and that he admired "any person who does what he can to eradicate this problem."

Justice Loveday's comments, and the accompanying publicity, did not amuse the Outdoor Advertising Association, nor the tobacco companies.

Mr Bruce Comarck, of the Advertising Federation of Australia, criticised the remarks and warned that they could lead to an increase in billboard vandalism.

A BUGA UP spokeswoman said last week that the group had the community's support.

This, she said, was quite clear from the donations received by BUGA UP, and the lenient fines and sympathy expressed by magistrates when sentencing group members caught "on the job."



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