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A Christian Newspaper Pulled From the Racks—Why?

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Kroger, a Cincinnati-based company, is one of the nation's largest grocery chains, and, operating under other names, is also the nation's fourth-largest retailer of jewelry. Many of its supermarkets feature racks of free periodicals and newspapers located where customers enter and exit the stores. For almost a year, Louisville area stores had featured copies of *The Southeast Outlook*, a major newspaper associated with a large church in the city. The actual distribution of the papers was handled—for a fee—by Distributek, a company that stocked the publication racks in Kroger stores.

The Southeast Outlook is an uncommon newspaper published by a company owned by one of the nation's largest churches—Southeast Christian Church in Louisville. That congregation is usually ranked among the top five churches in the nation in terms of attendance. Its pastor, Bob Russell, is one of the most recognizable figures in the Louisville community, and the church is known for its passionate evangelism and family values. The newspaper is a full-size weekly periodical that reaches a population far beyond the membership of the church. The *Outlook* covers national and international news from a Christian worldview perspective, even as it also serves as a communication vehicle for the congregation. The paper has taken no-nonsense positions in defense of marriage and morality, and has editorialized against same-sex marriage and the homosexual agenda.

Officials with the paper caught a hint of trouble just a few weeks ago, when reports surfaced of a complaint against the newspaper lodged with Kroger executives. In response, editor Ninie O'Hara published an editorial column in the April 29, 2004 edition of the paper, calling upon its readers to thank Kroger for making the paper available on its free newspaper racks. "We have to make our positive roar bigger than the negative squeak they're hearing," O'Hara asserted. "We cannot let a handful of noisy protesters shout louder than the thousands of Christians in this community who have had it up to our eyebrows with secular prejudice and intolerance."

Ironically, that column was published the very day Kroger authorities decided to pull the paper. Just as the paper went to press, O'Hara received a call informing her that Kroger had instructed Distributek not to place *The Southeast Outlook* in its racks. Tim McGurk, Manager of Customer Relations for Kroger, later released a statement explaining the company's decision. "The free publication racks in many Kroger stores are managed by an outside organization that makes the distribution agreements with individual publications. That organization operates under a fairly strict contract that prohibits the inclusion of political and religious publications on the free racks. This policy has been in place many years but in this case, it was not enforced as it should have been by the third-party vendor."

The statement went on to indicate that Kroger "strives to be the grocer of choice for the entire community, regardless of religious belief, political party, or anything else." One sentence in particular established the company's position: "When one political or religious organization's representatives or publications are permitted in our stores, then Kroger is placed in the uncomfortable position where we must include them all."

The statement does display a certain logic, even if the company attempted to shift the responsibility to its third-party distributor. Nevertheless, the logic began to break down once other periodicals, allowed to remain in the racks, were reviewed for political or religious content.

In the Louisville area, the free racks in the Kroger stores had also included periodicals known as Leo and Velocity, as well as a newspaper specializing in crime reporting, known as Snitch. Leo and Velocity fall into the “alternative newspaper” category found in most American cities of any size. Of the two, Leo is most familiar, offering coverage for the counter-culture and customarily tweaking the establishment. More to the point, the paper generally reveals a leftist political slant, often features New Age content, and publishes sexually explicit personal ads. When Kroger officials explained the removal of The Southeast Outlook because of objectionable content, many wondered why Leo and Velocity remained on the racks.

In an April 30, 2004 article published in The Courier-Journal, Louisville’s major newspaper, Kroger indicated that the distribution of all free newspapers was under corporate review. John Yarmuth, executive editor of Leo, told the paper he hoped Kroger’s review would lead it to allow redistribution of the Outlook in its racks—and make the other free newspapers available as well. “We would always object to people trying to suppress any publication whether that’s a publication we agree with or not,” he stated.

Kroger’s decision to remove The Southeast Outlook did not go well with Louisville’s Christian community. The paper, still available through other distribution channels, had earned a readership in the Louisville area and Kroger’s decision to remove the paper disappointed many of its most committed customers.

The other shoe fell in early May, when Kroger decided to remove Leo, Velocity and Snitch from its racks, again asserting its policy against allowing the distribution of “religious, political or sexually suggestive” publications in its stores.

“Kroger always strives to be a store for the entire community, and that necessitates remaining neutral concerning religious and political issues,” the company explained. “We think this is the fair approach to everyone.” Thus, fairness in this case means that Kroger’s customers will have to go elsewhere for all of these publications. John Yarmuth, Leo’s editor, responded by commenting, “For every customer they’ll please with this decision, they’ll upset a thousand or more. It’s a horrible business decision.”

In a letter sent to customers who complained about the papers’ removal, customer relations officer Tim McGurk explained, “The variety of comments Kroger has received, on all sides of this emotional topic, clearly demonstrate the no-win position that offering free publications that contain political, religious or sexually suggestive topics can present.”

Interestingly, Kroger would not disclose how many complaints had prompted the incident in the first place. The answer to that question would later come from Leo in the form of an investigative report published in its May 19 edition. The paper had been contacted by a man who claimed to be the single complainant who had started the entire process. The paper checked his story and determined that it was indeed credible. While refusing to reveal his identity to the public, the man explained that he had complained to Kroger officials because he was offended by the criticism of homosexuality found in The Southeast Outlook. As Leo explained, “The caller had somehow learned about Kroger’s policy barring free publications that are religious, political or sexual in nature, and in January he began working his way up the Kroger corporate ladder to the home office in Cincinnati. Kroger quickly acknowledged its error, he said, and agreed to have the Outlook removed. That finally happened late last month.” The paper’s source provided copies of letters he had sent to Kroger demanding that the Outlook be removed from its free racks. Three individuals knowledgeable about the man and his complaint did reveal their identities to the public, supporting his criticism of the Outlook.

In the same issue of Leo, editor Yarmuth took Kroger to task for hypocrisy and moral inconsistency, pointing out that the company sells magazines such as Cosmopolitan and FHM that feature sexually explicit content on the covers—and even more explicit content within. The company also sells R-rated movies in its stores, apparently believing that sexually explicit materials should be available for sale, but not for free.

Kroger was indeed between a rock and a hard place in this situation, but the company managed to find a way to disappoint and offend customers from across a huge ideological spectrum—all the while defending its policy as a means of

avoiding offense. This is yet another depressing illustration of political correctness at its worst. Apparently, just one customer complaint put this entire soap opera into motion. On the basis of that one offended customer, the company made a decision that still reverberates around the community.

No one was forced to pick up the newspapers. Kroger did not imply an endorsement of the papers' content just by making them available. Nevertheless, one offended customer's complaint led to the removal of not one, but at least three publications from the stores. That's an over-reaction by any measure.

Other area grocers quickly announced that The Southeast Outlook was welcome in their stores. The paper will do well, and its readers will find a way to locate where it is distributed. In the meantime, the outlook at Kroger is empty newspaper racks and puzzled customers.

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