

# Ad companies reject PETA's shark attack billboards

*Making light of Jessie's attack not tasteful, ad executive says*

By **RENI WINTER**

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State and local governments regulate the size, height, placement and lighting of billboards, but public opinion is the only censor of their content, according to the Outdoor Advertising Association of America, a group that represents the billboard industry.

"The (billboard) companies try to accommodate all types of speech, including political, but they also must represent good taste and the . . . morals of the community in which they operate," said Myron Laible, OAAA vice president for regulatory affairs and operations, in Washington, D.C. "We have our voluntary code, and the companies try to be sensitive to community needs."

When the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals announced plans to erect a billboard in Pensacola that made light of 8-year-old Ocean Springs resident Jessie Arbogast's near fatal injuries in a shark attack last month, public outrage stopped the campaign cold.

At least two billboard companies refused to erect the PETA billboard that carried the message "Would You Give Your Right Arm to Know Why Sharks Attack? Could It Be Revenge? Go Vegetarian. PETA." The group wanted to erect the billboard in Pensacola, where a shark bit off Jessie's right arm and gouged out a third of his thigh.

Lamar Advertising Company refused the billboard a few weeks ago, said Randy Oxenham, vice president and general manager of the Pensacola office.

"At the time, I looked at it and I found it unacceptable," Oxenham said.

"Individual companies define what is tasteful and what isn't, and that sign was not tasteful."

Prime Outdoor, another billboard company, signed a contract with PETA for the billboard, but backed out after public outcry over its message began to build.

## Ad ethics

Billboard companies that are members of the Outdoor Advertising Association of America voluntarily follow the organization's guidelines for ethical advertising.

Acceptable billboards should:

- Promote legal products and services.
- Not advertise products illegal for minors if the sign is within 500 feet of schools, playgrounds and places of worship.
- Be subject to rejection by the billboard company if content is misleading, offensive, otherwise incompatible with individual community standards.

- OUTDOOR  
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PETA planned to show the same message via airplane banners in Galveston, Miami and Martha's Vineyard, Mass., the home of the movie "Jaws."

Once word got out about the plans, which were posted on PETA's Web site, hundreds of e-mails and phone calls to local, regional and national media and to Florida lawmakers helped influence the group's decision.

"We just feel the public climate isn't as receptive to this message as it might have been," said Dan Shannon, PETA fishing campaign coordinator. "There have been so many shark attacks, people are just prone to shoot the messenger."

The U.S. Department of Transportation, through its Federal Highway Administration, regulates outdoor advertising at the federal level. At the state level, each state's Department of Transportation administers and enforces outdoor advertising permit programs and monitors the erection and maintenance of billboards.

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