

Consumers stripped of consent

By Ruth Ostrow

IT'S all gone too far. In a bid to create a thirst for milk, ads that gave off the scent of freshly baked biscuits were recently installed in several San Francisco bus shelters.

Scented adhesives placed throughout the interior of the bus shelters, including under the benches, released a chemical fragrance into the air – meaning that anyone with sensitivities could not sit in the shelter, come rain or shine.

Bad luck if you happened to suffer from allergies, were infirm and in need of a seat; bad luck if you were dieting or diabetic and didn't need the temptation of sweetness; and worse luck if you were an asthmatic on a rainy day. Being allergy-prone myself, I know that certain perfumed scents irritate my mucous membranes and can leave me struggling for breath.

Thankfully, San Francisco's Municipal Transportation Agency intervened and had the ads removed. But smell-advertising is still being trialled in supermarkets and, like many, I feel my senses increasingly assaulted by advertisers who are targeting us in places from which we can't escape.

On a recent Virgin flight, there was a screen screwed to the seat in front which didn't have an off-button. So even if you didn't choose to watch/listen to the show on offer, you were still forced to have images of cars and other products flashed in your face the entire flight, which gave me a nasty headache. Worse, my daughter was mesmerised. In the end, I put a vomit bag over both screens.

On one domestic airline, passengers were hit with an introduction speech that included an ad for a store that was giving away "free" prizes, in a blatant marketing ploy. Another had pizza/fast-food ads hung on seat covers inches from children's faces – all this despite a raging obesity epidemic.

Sydneysiders have long been targeted by noisy, low-flying aircraft dragging ad slogans behind them over the beaches. And multinationals have talked about putting a neon-ad "star" into space to bombard the entire planet. Talk about a captive audience.

It's all very depressing. But advertisers beware – forcing ads down our throats will cause a backlash.

Making people feel powerless is not motivating. It makes us mad and sad to be stripped of consent. I urge readers to blackball any product marketed in an intrusive way, and those institutions that support these disrespectful methods.

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