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Monday, December 11, 2006

Consumer Complaints Department  
Advertising Standards Canada  
175 Bloor Street East  
South Tower, Suite 1801  
Toronto, ON M4W 3R8

Dear Madam or Sir;

**Re: Consumer complaint (*Advertising Code*, Section 14):  
PEERS Vancouver's out-of-home advertisements**

PEERS Vancouver is currently running an promotion campaign that consists of two billboard-size advertisements: one features the photographic image of a young woman's face; the other features the face of a young man. Both ads graphicly portray a large Universal Price Code (bar code) branded on the young person's forehead. Above each face reads: "She/He has lots of experience in sales." The caption beneath the faces states: "We're giving sex workers job skills to get off the streets."

These advertisements are a degrading and dehumanizing portrayal of sex workers. When I was first confronted by these billboards, I immediately lodged a formal complaint—in person—at the PEERS Vancouver office. I then wrote a letter to the *Metro* newspaper which was published on September 21, 2006. I also forwarded photos of these ads to an informal network of sex workers and former sex workers who I know. Several people responded with reactions similar to my own.

These advertisements for PEERS Vancouver have been on public display on billboards and bus shelters throughout Vancouver, BC since August, 2006. These ads are still on display today in at least two locations: east-bound on Pacific Boulevard before Richards Street, and in the IMPARK parking lot on the west side of Richards Street just south of Robson Street. I believe that these PEERS Vancouver advertisements are in direct violation of the *Advertising Code*, Section 14 (ss. b, c, d).

**S. 14(b): Advertisements shall not “appear in a realistic manner to exploit, condone or incite violence; ... or directly encourage bullying”**

PEERS Vancouver's advertisements realistically portray a young woman and a young man as commodities that have been repeatedly bought and sold rather than as human beings. The advertisements clearly state that the young persons portrayed represent sex workers. This graphic dehumanization

of sex workers instructs viewers to treat sex workers as objects who are less than human. Therefore the advertisements condone and directly encourage subhuman treatment of sex workers including bullying and possibly violence. In a complaint to PEERS Vancouver sent via email September 25, Tracy Quan (author of *Diary of a Manhattan Call Girl*) said:

*“... your current poster campaign is grotesque and dehumanizing. There is nothing funny, clever or helpful about implying that a sex worker is a commodity to be scanned like a dead animal at the supermarket. It is also dangerous to portray us in this way.*

*“At first glance, these images look like the output of a homicidal psychopath who roams the streets looking for ways to inflict violence on prostitutes. Dangerous predators view us not as sex partners, but as objects who are less than human, and these images reinforce that idea.”*

**S. 14(c): Advertisements shall not “demean, denigrate or disparage any identifiable person, group of persons, ... commercial activity, profession ... or service or attempt to bring it or them into public contempt or ridicule”**

For many sex workers prostitution is their occupation. It is not illegal to work as a prostitute in Canada. *The Criminal Code* only prohibits specific activities often related to sex work. No section of *The Criminal Code* prohibits the practice or profession of prostitution. By portraying sex workers as commodities that have been repeatedly bought and sold rather than as human beings who offer a service, PEERS Vancouver’s advertisements demean and disparage sex workers as a group, as well as their profession and the services they provide. Furthermore, the ads are an attempt to bring sex workers and the commercial activity they practise into public ridicule and contempt.

**S. 14(d): Advertisements shall not “undermine human dignity”**

Amnesty International’s mission is to promote and defend everyone’s human rights and freedoms as set forth in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. During their “Stop Violence Against Women” campaign in 2004 Amnesty International Norway chose Liv Jessen to receive their first Human Rights Award for her work defending the human rights of sex workers. Liv Jessen spoke at the European Conference on Sex Work, Human Rights, Labour and Migration, Brussels (2005):

*“What makes you a human being? ... Most philosophers describe a human being as a person with free will and, accordingly, one who is responsible for her choices. It is choice that makes you a human being; a subject in your own life.*

*“A Norwegian philosopher Hans Skjervheim talks about objectifying other people: ‘By objectifying the other person, you attack the other person’s freedom. One who is cunningly objectifying the other is master.’ ... What has this to do with people who sell sex? ... Radical feminist theory states that it is men who are in power; who can choose. The prostitute is a victim—an object, or less—forced to sell sex for whatever reason.*

*“... As long as they do not recognise the prostitute’s right to choose, for whatever reason, her own life, they will deprive one group of women of their human right to self-determination. This is also why they never listen to prostitutes with whom they disagree. These prostitutes ‘do not know what’s good for them;’ they have ‘false consciousness,’ because no woman can, in this analysis, choose prostitution. ... Prostitutes who disagree with them politically or otherwise are objectified and looked upon as children, not capable of making their own choices.*

*“... I have always believed that the essence of feminism was to fight for the rights of every woman to choose her own life; to be a subject in her own life; to be a hero in her own life. Whether I disagree with her choices is irrelevant: she has the right to choose. The right to choose is in fact what makes one human; what makes one a person.”*

By portraying sex workers as commodities that have been repeatedly bought and sold rather than as human beings with the right to choose, PEERS Vancouver’s advertisements undermine their human dignity.

I sincerely hope that Advertising Standards Canada will direct PEERS Vancouver to remove these offensive advertisements from public display as soon as possible.

Respectfully,

Andrew Sorfleet

encl.

cc. PEERS Vancouver  
City of Vancouver  
Elevator Strategy and Design  
Pattison

**METRO** (*Vancouver*)

Thursday, September 21, 2006

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## **Letters**

### **New campaign perpetuates stigma**

Yesterday while catching the bus I saw a new billboard campaign (see left) by PEERS Vancouver at the IMPARK parking lot on Richards and Robson streets. How are these images not degrading and dehumanizing?

Is this the image of sex workers this provincially funded agency promotes? Merchandise to be bought and sold with a Universal Pricing Code?

Prostitutes—no matter how dire their personal circumstances might be—don't sell themselves or rent their bodies, they perform a service, a sexual service.

These images are outrageously disrespectful and perpetuate harmful stigma.

— ANDREW SORFLEET, VANCOUVER  
COMMITTEE TO UNITE PROSTITUTES

**SHE HAS LOTS OF EXPERIENCE IN SALES.**



Posed with the support of the City of Vancouver.  
Image represents a fictional character.

**WE'RE GIVING SEX WORKERS JOB SKILLS TO GET OFF THE STREETS.**  
[www.peersvancouver.org](http://www.peersvancouver.org)

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