Editorial

Life's Report Card

For the several years that I have been associated with **ajer**, one or two letters arrive each year from various commercial enterprises inquiring about advertising a product or service in **ajer**. Often such inquiries also include a brief summary of how advertising revenue will enable **ajer** to expand and in turn enable **ajer** itself to purchase advertisements in other publications. In every instance such inquiries have been declined politely because it is believed that the scholarly and neutral nature of **ajer** (not to mention how it is perceived by readers) might well be compromised by the inclusion of advertising. To be sure including an advertisement does not mean that the journal endorses the product or service. Is eschewing advertising in an academic journal yet another example of the stereotypical ivory-towered and aloof nature of the academy and its inherent unwillingness to embrace "the new reality"? On the other hand, is it not the case that when one accepts money for advertising one is more often than not also accepting the mercantile golden rule: "Those who have the gold make the rules"? These questions are not simply the stuff of a philosophical exercise or a trivial matter confined to an academic journal. Although there are many instances of educational institutions accepting money for endorsing products or granting the privilege of marketing a particular brand exclusively at that institution, there are also examples from the past concerning the relationship between money and autonomy.

Dunning (1998), writing about the history of radio shows of the 20th century, notes how it was common practice for the sponsor to alter the script or to suggest how particular actors should behave so as not to cast their product in a bad light. Failure to comply often led to the sponsor withdrawing financial support. Of course, few individuals would contend that **ajer** or an academic institution is quite the same as a radio program, whose sole purpose was to entertain. Nevertheless, a prevalent view in educational institutions is that they must be more "business oriented." Included in this view is that such bodies must generate revenue and/or bring in money. Motivation for adopting this view comes in part from a reduction in monies provided from government and also from administrators accepting the mantra that the so-called "business model" is the metric by which to model and measure everything else.

A number of years ago a cartoon appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine depicting a parent admonishing a child, stating that "Money is life's report card." At the time the cartoon was amusing because the parent seemed to be placing an undue emphasis on money at the expense of knowledge or learning for the sake of learning. It is foolish, of course, to ignore money and funding, as journals and institutions cannot exist without them, but is making money really what we are about? Should the focus of school, college, and university administrators be on fundraising, or should it be on more traditional matters such as what is taught, scholarly research, and the assurance of the highest quality?

I am reminded of the plight of the Penn Central Railroad Company, the 1968 merger of the Pennsylvania and New York Central railroad companies.

Both companies were large concerns, and each had a long history as a successful mover of goods and people. At the time of the merger both companies were making profits. The administrators of Penn Central, however, seemed to lose sight of what the purpose of a railroad company is: to run trains of commodities from one place to another as quickly and as efficiently as possible. Instead, by shifting their focus from running a railroad to increasing dividends for the shareholders, Penn Central embarked on all sorts of additional moneymaking ventures, including land dealing, constructing and operating shopping malls, and even running car dealerships. The inordinate attention paid to these ventures led to the mainstay of the company becoming obsolescent and unable to compete with other railroads. Penn Central went into bankruptcy in 1970 and had to be taken over for a time by the United States federal government (Drury, 1985). By shifting its focus away from what it was supposed to do, Penn Central led an extremely short and ignominious existence.

This example also serves to illustrate another point: Although many universities have survived for centuries, few businesses have. Evidently the traditional practices of universities have stood the test of time. Is it necessary, therefore, to change them because of outside pressures? Nevertheless, the business model is in the ascendancy, so what else can educational journals and institutions do but accept advertising revenue and anything else that goes with it? One answer was provided, ironically, by one of the richest businessmen in North America, John D. Rockefeller.

Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company had made vast profits in the latter half of the 19th century by means that were viewed variously as dubious to deliberately rapacious. Although Rockefeller wished to give much of his wealth away, there was considerable reluctance in many quarters to accept money directly from Standard Oil and its successor companies. Many institutions and individuals did not want to be viewed as creatures of large oil companies. To facilitate the distribution of his money, and also to provide a buffer between Standard Oil and those receiving money, Rockefeller created the Rockefeller Foundation. Thus individuals and organizations could receive money without having to advertise a particular company or product. Moreover, recipients were not interfered with by the company that ultimately provided the money to the foundation.

If it is true that businesses genuinely wish to aid education, then why are more businesses not creating endowments or foundations to provide funding to educational journals and institutions at arm's length? Also, why are administrators of schools, colleges, and universities not more vociferous in demanding such granting agencies? It is a question worth considering the next time you enter a school and cannot purchase your favorite brand of soft drink because a competitor's brand is sold exclusively. What collateral lesson are we providing our students, that money really is life's report card?

George H. Buck

References

Drury, G.H. (1985). *The historical guide to North American railroads*. Milwaukee, WI: Kalmbach Books.

Dunning, J. (1998). *On the air: The encyclopedia of old-time radio*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.