

## The classroom soft sell

By Jim McElgunn

In the latest round in marketers' long struggle to gain access to Canadian classrooms, the score is three retreats for marketers and one advance.



Yet that lone advance may matter more in the end.

One of those in retreat is Athena Educational Partners, which, facing relentless parental and governmental opposition to its Youth News Network video service, now plans to air public service announcements instead of regular spots. The other two are Kellogg, which had to cancel two child-targeted promotions that inadvertently broke Quebec laws on marketing to children; and Campbell Soup, which for the same reason had to drop the Quebec component of a program to provide educational resources in return for soup labels.

The one moving ahead is Classroom Connections, a non-profit organization that produces in-school videos, instructional materials and at-home supplements for parents. It does have sponsors, such as Royal Bank for materials on money and banking and Ralston Purina for pet care. Yet, as reported in our [July 17 issue](#), the three-year-old program is so well-accepted that this fall it will add 2,200 secondary schools and another 2,500 elementary schools to a current base of 5,000 elementary schools.

Why the lack of opposition? For starters, there's Classroom Connections' not-for-profit status, and a board of directors that includes representation from principals, home and school associations, and administrators. As well, all its materials are designed by educators and driven by schools' own needs. And, though it offers sponsors visibility through logos and promotions such as Subway Days, where half the proceeds from in-school sales of subs go to the Special Olympics, there's no hint of a hard sell.

What to conclude from this mixed picture? The retreats unmistakably show that marketing in the classroom remains controversial. Just ask YNN, which after eight years operates in a mere 14 schools across Canada, though it hopes to reach a modest 30 this fall.

Clearly, a lot of people in this country loathe the idea of treating students as a captive target market. And rightly so, because the fundamental mission of our schools is to raise citizens, not consumers. Any marketer that wishes to enter the classroom should, in fact, face some tough questions about whether doing so will pervert that mission.

Yet even those who believe marketers have no legitimate role in the schools know full well the enormous pressures to let them in. With the cutbacks to education budgets in the past few years, corporate sponsorship offers a way to make up part of the shortfall. And, even if the cuts end, sponsors can support an enhanced level of equipment and resource materials that no school can realistically expect to pay for from public funding.

So marketers are almost certain to be an increasing presence in our schools. But they won't be allowed to do whatever they want. Many parents, and at least some provincial governments, will remain on guard against this trend. Although they already seem to have lost the war to keep marketing entirely out of the classroom, their continuing hostility will keep marketers on their toes.

If we're lucky, that might just produce a classic Canadian compromise. Marketers will be allowed to play a role in the education system, but only if the programs they sponsor deliver real educational value along with the sales pitches.