

What would Jesus do if He had your job

rawstoryQ

3/17/2005

Biting the hand that spins you

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by **Nancy Goldstein, for RawStoryQ**

"Activists drive consumer behavior on meat, alcohol, fat, sugar, tobacco and caffeine, so our strategy is to shoot the messenger...We've got to attack their credibility as spokespersons..."

-Richard Berman from a 1999 interview with the *Chain Leader*, a trade publication for restaurant chains

Rick Berman doesn't give a damn about you or AIDS research. But you'd never know that from the full-page ad his DC-based PR firm placed in the New Yorker last month (February 14th & 21st). Readers of the magazine were treated to an image of a red AIDS ribbon set aflame beneath a quotation attributed to Ingrid Newkirk, President and co-founder of [PETA](#) (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals): "Even if animal research resulted in a cure for AIDS, we'd be against it."

The text below continues: "PETA's violent opposition to medical research is well known. Not as well recognized: PETA has funneled over \$100,000 to criminals...For more about PETA and other extremists go to [ConsumerFreedom.com](#)."

The ad claims PETA cares so little about people that they put the interests of animals above humans even when the litmus test is the AIDS pandemic. By contrast, you might imagine, the Center for Consumer Freedom supports medical research, including AIDS-related research, condemns violence, and shirks from criminality.

You could imagine that. But you would be wrong.

Because the Center for Consumer Freedom is not, as it describes itself in the small print at the bottom of the ad, "a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting consumer choices." It's a front group that represents the interests of the restaurant, alcohol, and tobacco industries. It started out as the "Guest Choice Network" with \$900K in seed money from Philip Morris, which [kicked in an additional \\$2.1 million dollars](#) over the next two years.

Like PETA, it's a tax-exempt activist group — but on the other side of the political fence. Unlike PETA, however, its founder runs a lobbying firm that specializes in corporate special interest initiatives. Other Berman projects housed at the Center for Consumer Freedom's address include the so-called Employment Policies Institute, which fights to keep the minimum wage low and opposes mandatory health insurance for workers, and the American Beverage Institute, which helped kill federal legislation supported by advocacy groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) that would have lowered legal blood-alcohol levels for drivers.

And the only other time that Rick Berman appears to have concerned himself with AIDS was in a [1989 commentary](#) for Nation's Restaurant News where he opposed the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) because it "would require employers to ignore AIDS infections among cooks and servers unless a direct threat to the safety of others can be proved." Not, mind you, because he actually believed that HIV or AIDS could be contracted through casual contact, but because "the average person is still overly concerned" about that possibility.

How can you openly value the corporate bottom line over the rights of people living with AIDS and then run an ad that attempts to profit off the backs of those people? Easy. Hypocrisy — and absolutely no sense of irony about one's own double standards. After all, these are the same folks who sent picketers to Ingrid Newkirk's book signing in DC last month to chant about the need for full disclosure — while wearing masks.

And despite the hefty financial backing that Berman and his cadre enjoy from special interest groups, don't expect them to show up on ActivistCash.com — an offshoot of the Center for Consumer Freedom — any time soon. The site's stated mission is to provide "the public and media with in-depth profiles of anti-consumer activist groups, along with information about the sources of their exorbitant funding."

But these same folks who never tire of talking about unmasking "financial Goliaths" and "deep-pocketed foundations" would never dream of holding themselves to the same standards they demand of their "activist" enemies. The Center for Consumer Freedom's [tax form \(PDF\)](#) lists over \$3.25 million in "direct public support" for 2003's "educational efforts" but declines to name a single individual or corporate donor. (PR Watch helpfully posts a [memo from an internal whistleblower that names dozens of Berman's backers](#) , including Coca Cola, Tyson Foods, Outback Steakhouse, Wendy's, and Monsanto.

Still, the question of who profits from the Center for Consumer Freedom is far easier to answer than the question of who funds it. Its top expenditure in 2003 was the \$1.5 million dollars in consulting fees and employee benefits it paid to Rick Berman's firm, which it describes as its "management company."

You heard right. Rick Berman has set up a PR machine on behalf of the restaurant, tobacco, and alcohol industry that presents itself as a consumer protection group, tries to discredit any kind of investigation or legislation that might cut into industry profits, yells and screams about the allegedly shady funding behind "activist" groups, enjoys tax-exempt status as a non-profit organization, and pays its largest yearly fees into Rick Berman's pockets.

Not that Berman isn't worth it. In addition to shifting public debate from corporate responsibility to consumer liability, he successfully plants his op-eds and talking points everywhere, from USA Today, the Philadelphia Inquirer, the San Francisco Chronicle, and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution to the ever helpful Wall Street Journal and Washington Times. (Berman did not, however, respond to numerous requests to speak on record for this article.)

Even now, when the media is full of stories about the government's planting of PR as news, publications accept Berman's ads and articles without blinking. Why is anyone's guess. The pressure on print media to accept all advertising at a time of shrinking revenue? The need for free content? Political bias? (I was certainly left guessing by the New Yorker, which did not respond to repeated requests to comment on their ad vetting process, but helpfully faxed me a 2005 rates list that revealed the \$88,845 price tag on the Center for Consumer Freedom's four-color full-page ad.)

"It's a reflection of how careless the news media has become that newspapers will run op-eds from Berman that present him as a consumer advocate instead of a corporate mouthpiece," says Sheldon Rampton, Research Director of PR Watch. "The op-ed pages are full of people like Berman. That's part of what the public relations industry does."

You have to hand it to those right-wing PR hacks: they sure do know how to get the most out of all sides of a symbol. Berman's PR firm used the imagery of an AIDS ribbon to arouse left-wing public ire against PETA in mid February. The very next week, USA Next, a 527 front group, used the image of two guys kissing to arouse right-wing public ire against the AARP.

But there are signs that we're learning to fight fire with fire.

One delicious unintended result of the USA Next ad: the couple in the photo have just [filed a \\$25 million lawsuit](#) against them and political consulting firm Mark Montini International "for using their wedding photo without permission in a high-profile gay-bashing ad designed to drum up support for social security privatization."

And even Berman's luck may be about to run out. This past November, [Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington \(CREW\) filed a complaint](#) with the Internal Revenue Service alleging that the Center for Consumer Freedom has violated its tax exempt status and engaged in activities with no charitable purpose.

"We were the first organization to go after Berman," said Melanie Sloan, CREW's executive director. "The IRS [has] begun taking a closer look at nonprofits that may be abusing their 501(c)(3) status in the past year or so. I think they're going to take one look at what Rick Berman has been doing and shut him down."

Note to self: check back with USA Next, Mark Montini International, and Rick Berman in six months to see if they still believe that all publicity is good publicity.

Nancy Goldstein earned her doctorate from Brandeis University, and has taught at Harvard, MIT, and Connecticut College. She is the co-editor of "The Gender Politics of HIV/AIDS in Women" (NYU Press, 1997), which includes her article on the invisibility of women who have sex with women in the pandemic. Last May she and her partner were one of 36 out-of-state couples to wed in Massachusetts prior to the governor's cease and desist order. She lives and writes in New York.

*Nancy's column appears every Thursday on **RawStoryQ***

Nancy Goldstein Column Archive 3/10: [Who's your daddy? Top tips for the Democratic Party](#) 02/24: [Ratings grabs and power plays: The OC meets Jeff Gannon](#)

36 Comments [»](#)

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1. PETA does excellent work helping animals who are abused in the meat industry. Anyone who eats meat should learn about what they are supporting everytime

they pay for a Big Mac or a bucket of wings. <http://www.goveg.com/> is a good place for a crash course on the meat industry.

Comment by Hannah East — 3/17/2005 @ [12:18 pm](#)

2. I shcocked! A Rightwing lobbyist is lying about his real interests. You can dress a pig up like a lobbyist...but he's still a pig.

Comment by Carol Sanser — 3/17/2005 @ [5:47 pm](#)

3. GREAT article. And shame on the New Yorker for stooping to accept this kind of defamatory propaganda. Whatever you might think of PETA, using them to front for big business is bad, and using AIDS research to front for discriminatory business practices is worse.

Comment by Joan — 3/17/2005 @ [10:24 pm](#)

4. Great article!

Kudos to RawStory for producing this kind of well-researched analysis.

Comment by MC — 3/18/2005 @ [1:22 am](#)

5. i had seen referrences to this guy's site and organization before, and went to take a look. you would have to be very tenacious in investigating, to find out what he's really about, as just an average person.

hey, maybe he'll get eaten by a pit bull! lol

Comment by cp — 3/18/2005 @ [9:23 am](#)

6. For more info on this evil group, see <http://www.consumerdeception.com/>

Comment by Fred — 3/18/2005 @ [11:43 am](#)

7. I'm not sure if one can criticize the New Yorker for running Berman's ad... PETA runs ads all over the country that are defamitory. You can't say that one should be allowed, but not the other.

Comment by Jim Marian — 3/18/2005 @ [12:21 pm](#)

8. It just gets uglier and uglier. Thanks to RawStoryQ and especially Nancy Goldstein for unmasking this scam. I hope the couple win their lawsuit for having their wedding picture used in such a shameful way!

Comment by AmyA — 3/18/2005 @ [12:44 pm](#)

9. Wow. You've unmasked a PR firm advocating for its clients, who states clearly on its website that it is a "coalition of restaurants, food companies, and consumers working together to promote personal responsibility and protect consumer choices." Agree or disagree, surely you're liberal enough to believe they have the same right to advocate their interests as does PETA. What you've unmasked is your own op-ed masquerading as investigative journalism. Moreover, all lobbying involves "special interests," even PETA. And whatever else might be said about PETA, the Center's advocacy focused on the fact of PETA's incestuous relationship (and \$1.3 mil. donation) to the Physician's Committee for Responsible Medicine.

Of course, the article ducks the really interesting question of, if a cure for AIDS can be found only through animal testing, is that research justified? We can all agree that animal testing for cosmetics is unethical, but how's about for AIDS, cancer, etc.?

Comment by Hamilton — 3/18/2005 @ [3:41 pm](#)

10. No, we don't all agree that animal testing for cosmetics is unethical. If we thought that, then – if we want to be rational and consistent – we'd also have to think that it's wrong to raise and kill (baby) animals to eat them. Each is equally unnecessary – since we can live happy, healthy lives without either – and done purely for pleasure, tradition and money, nothing else. See <http://factoryfarming.org/>

As for animal experimentation regarding AIDS and cancer, there are very good reasons to think that animal experimentations do not, have not, and will not help with that (even some chapters of ACT UP agree). See Americans for Medical Progress at <http://www.curedisease.com/> and <http://pcrm.org/>

Comment by [Nathan Nobis](#) — 3/18/2005 @ [4:15 pm](#)

11. FYI folks, ConsumerFreedom.com is located at:

1775 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20006
12th Floor

I think some good old fashioned picketing is in order, no?

Comment by Zed K — 3/18/2005 @ [4:54 pm](#)

12. Just getting through some of the blogs on a daily basis can't be any worse than duty in Iraq. We are being attacked on all sides-by our own kinfolk!! This is one, tired gay activist reeling under the unending assault on every quarter of my conscience, behavior, eating, and buying habits, emotional interests, political and

environmental concerns and a history of always being marginalized or blamed directly for every ill that befalls the world. We are certainly the convenient scapegoats for all the ill-willed, pseudo-pious, political and morally correct group or person that has walked the planet. Wouldn't it dent their collective egos to know that the very first story ever written on this planet was about one man loving another. Now explain that one to me.

E.

Comment by Erin Stevenson — 3/21/2005 @ [2:34 am](#)

13. [hydrocodone](#)

Comment by [Hydrocodone](#) — 4/7/2005 @ [8:04 am](#)

14. [vicodin](#)

Comment by [Vicodin](#) — 4/7/2005 @ [9:43 am](#)

15. interesting link: [phentermine](#)

Comment by [phentermine](#). — 4/14/2005 @ [7:35 am](#)

16. [viagra](#)

Comment by [viagra](#) — 4/14/2005 @ [8:51 am](#)

17. interesting link: [phentermine](#)

Comment by [phentermine](#) — 4/19/2005 @ [8:56 am](#)

18. [Paxil](#)

Comment by [Paxil](#) — 4/19/2005 @ [4:02 pm](#)

19. It's an insult to God to believe in God.... So my suspicion is that the people he really loves best now in the twentieth century are probably the atheists and agnostics, because they're the only ones who have ever really taken him seriously. by [cheap levitra online](#)

Comment by [online pharmacy](#) — 4/20/2005 @ [8:24 am](#)

20. **fioricet online**

The State is not 'abolished', it withers away. by cheap levitra online

Trackback by [fioricet online](#) — 4/20/2005 @ [8:51 am](#)

21. [Levitra](#)

Comment by [Levitra](#) — 4/20/2005 @ [10:51 am](#)

22. [buy phentermine](#)

Comment by [buy phentermine](#) — 4/20/2005 @ [4:57 pm](#)

23. [Zoloft](#)

Comment by [Zoloft](#) — 4/21/2005 @ [6:33 am](#)

24. [Propecia](#)

Comment by [Propecia](#) — 4/22/2005 @ [8:01 am](#)

25. [Celebrex](#)

Comment by [Celebrex](#) — 4/24/2005 @ [6:53 am](#)

26. [Zyban](#)

Comment by [Zyban](#) — 4/24/2005 @ [4:35 pm](#)

27. [tramadol](#) is used to relieve moderate [buy tramadol online](#) to moderately severe pain. It also may be used to treat pain caused by [tramadol cod](#) surgery and chronic conditions such as cancer or joint pain.

Comment by [370](#) — 5/2/2005 @ [7:55 am](#)

28. [tramadol](#) is used to relieve moderate [buy tramadol online](#) to moderately severe pain. It also may be used to treat pain caused by [tramadol cod](#) surgery and chronic conditions such as cancer or joint pain.

Comment by [370](#) — 5/2/2005 @ [2:50 pm](#)

29. [webcam live web cams teen webcam college girl webcams web cam girls webcam sex live web cam live webcams free web cam free webcam chat web cam sex free adult web cams webcam teens nude web cams teen web cam teen girl web cam](#)

Comment by [1174](#) — 5/3/2005 @ [2:35 am](#)

30. **online casino**

online casino The Good of man is the active exercise of his soul's faculties in conformity with excellence or virtue...Moreover this ac

Trackback by [online casino](#) — 5/3/2005 @ [2:31 pm](#)

31. **online casino** Beauty in things exists in the mind which contemplates them.

Comment by [online casino](#) — 5/3/2005 @ [5:32 pm](#)

32. **Cialis**

Comment by [Cialis](#) — 5/4/2005 @ [12:25 am](#)

33. Hi, everyone, here is a good reference

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For more information on a great search engine, try Google at <http://www.google.com/search?sourceid=navclient&ie=UTF-8&rls=GGLD,GGLD:2004-21,GGLD:en&q=phentermine>.

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Comment by [Phentermine at Activelifex.com](#) — 5/5/2005 @ 8:30 am

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Comment by [Discount Pill](#) — 5/6/2005 @ [3:34 am](#)

35. There are several men who are not able to enjoy their sexual lives happily because of their male impotency-erectile dysfunction. Erectile dysfunction is a very sensitive issue for the males and hence they want to avoid it. You should always see your physician if you are suffering from erectile dysfunction. Your physician may prescribe you [Viagra](#), the first anti-impotency medicine. If you want to buy Viagra then you should buy Viagra online since it will prove cheaper to you. We provide authentic and cheap Viagra for people suffering with erectile dysfunction. So if you really want to lead a satisfactory sexual life say good bye to your erectile dysfunction with [Viagra](#).

Comment by [viagra](#) — 5/12/2005 @ [4:36 am](#)

36. Increase in weight has been one of the greatest problems for the Americans, with over 60% being obese or overweight. Overweight or obesity has been one of the greatest reasons for the increase in the risk factors for the diseases like Diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, osteoporosis etc.

There are many appetite suppressant drugs like [Phentermine](#) which when taken helps you to suppress your appetite. Phentermine is a diet pill which can control your hunger and hence make you feel less hungry. In this way the amount of food intake is controlled and thus makes you control your weight. Get the [diet pill](#) Phentermine and control your weight.

Comment by [phentermine](#) — 5/12/2005 @ [4:55 am](#)

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