

# The Grand Rapids Press

## Yanking offensive mags isn't censorship

► *Wal-Mart's decision to pull Maxim, FHM from shelves just good business*

By Rev. Robert A. Sirico

If you haven't been scandalized or otherwise amazed by the cover content of magazines like *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan*, you are either very world-weary or you don't do much retail shopping. For many consumers, especially those with kids in tow, the sexual content of these covers is nothing short of alarming and embarrassing.

In response to customer complaints, as well as the protests of pro-family groups, Wal-Mart has begun obscuring the covers of these publications. Before that, it halted the sales of men's magazines like *Maxim*, *FHM*, and *Stuff*, and for similar reasons: though perhaps not technically pornography, they came close and were highly suggestive of the genre.

Wal-Mart's motives are simple: The magazines offended customers and the company responded. The result was that many families could feel at ease shopping in Wal-Mart again.

Does the company have the right to do this? Most certainly, just as so-called adult bookstores do not have to carry Bibles and Bible bookstores don't need to carry books and magazines promoting secular humanism and demon worship.

Not only do the owners of private stores enjoy the right to discriminate in their product selection, to do so makes commercial sense. And yet Wal-Mart's decision to cover or refuse to sell certain magazines prompted an outcry. In a widely syndicated column, Bill Press wrote that Wal-Mart has "set itself up as the country's new culture cop. From now on, Wal-Mart will decide what's good for us and what's not."

Of course, the company is doing nothing of the sort. It is simply deciding to let others bear the burden of marketing publications with content that its own customer base finds morally objectionable. Is there anything wrong in allowing a company to make decisions concerning the moral content of the products it profits from selling? Not only is it not wrong, one might say that every enterprise has an

obligation to assess the broader impact of its operations on the culture — at least this is what the "socially conscious investing" movement has been telling us for so long.

The assumption of all of the complainers is that Wal-Mart is using its market power (which comes, I might add, entirely from the voluntary purchases by consumers) to dictate the shape of the culture.

Can one company really do that? Certainly not in a setting of competitive free enterprise. If Wal-Mart stops carrying a particular form of magazine or music, that works as a sign to other companies that a market opportunity has opened up.

The relationship between commerce and culture is complicated, and enterprise does indeed play a large role in defining the makeup of the national culture. That is why Wal-Mart is right to take its moral responsibilities seriously.

At the same time, the reality is that business is far more likely to see itself responding to culture rather than dictating it. It was the complaints of customers that prompted Wal-Mart's decision. In the free enterprise system, the customer ultimately holds the power to form the cultural shape of the commercial sector.

This can be for good and ill. It is for this reason that there is a huge underground market for drugs, and why morally objectionable books and magazines and websites are such a success.

On the other hand, here we find a case where the strong moral instincts of customers are dictating an outcome that is highly desirable. A person who would force Wal-Mart to carry a publication it does not want to carry — or would heap ridicule on a company merely for having some moral standards — is not a civil libertarian. After all, the freedom of Wal-Mart's customers not to be assaulted by bad taste should also be a consideration.

A free economic system protects the right to sell as well as the right not to sell. The customer has the final say so over which companies they like and which they do not. It is often said of "adult" books and films that if you don't like them, don't buy them and watch them. I would say to everyone who objects to Wal-Mart's decision concerning these magazines: If you don't like what Wal-Mart has done, there is a simple solution: Don't shop there. As for me, I can think of worse places to spend my money.

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