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Cereal maker chokes on CD Bible giveaway

General Mills calls promotion a mistake

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BY DAVID CRUMM
 FREE PRESS RELIGION WRITER

Bibles and Cheerios just don't mix, General Mills announced Friday afternoon.

But the public apology from the cereal giant came too late: More than 12 million boxes of cereal containing software versions of the Bible are headed for grocery store shelves nationwide.

The apology was a shock because the unprecedented promotion, which involved giving away CDROM games, dictionaries and Bibles, was one of the most creative marketing ideas in years, said Phyllis Tickle, an editor at Publishers Weekly magazine and a leading expert on the marketing of religious publications.

"They got spooked with the idea of the Bible in their boxes," Tickle said Friday afternoon. "There would have been some controversy, but this probably would have been a very popular idea."

The irony is that, for nearly a year, General Mills' partners in the promotion worked on a strategy to soft-sell the Bibles.

That included avoiding any mention in the colorful advertisements on General Mills' new cereal boxes that a Bible was included on the CDROM featuring popular computer games. The boxes are being distributed nationwide through August.

Even after the software is started on a computer, users have to select "Home Reference" from a variety of choices to discover the Bible software.

The apology was a rebuff to Grand Rapids-based Zondervan Publishing, which had given free licenses for the 12 million to 13 million software copies of its New International Version of the Bible.

This was supposed to have been the "Largest Distribution of Bibles to Date -- Attached to Your Morning Cereal Boxes," according to the headline on a Zondervan news statement the publisher had prepared to be released Monday.

A copy of the release was obtained by the Free Press from Rhinosoft Interactive of Wisconsin, the firm that helped create the CDROMs and whose executives were left Friday wondering what they had done wrong.

The sunny news release says "What's the surprise attached to cereal boxes these days? This summer the bonus included is Bibles.... Just as taking care of your body is synonymous with eating a good breakfast -- taking care of your spirit can be a simple part of your daily routine."

Earlier in the week, Zondervan Vice President of Bible marketing John Sawyer, said, "I feel confident that any organization, including General Mills, will find a very broad-based acceptance of this Bible."

On Friday, Sawyer could not be reached to comment further.



DARREN HAUCK/Associated Press

The free CDROM inside this box of Cheerios contains a controversial item: A Bible.



DARREN HAUCK/Associated Press

Greg Swann, chief executive officer of Rhinosoft, is surrounded by boxes of the cereals carrying a CD that includes the Bible.

How it happened

Reconstructing the meltdown of this \$10-million cereal-and-software promotion from e-mail, memos and interviews with some of the executives involved, it appears that General Mills' staff balked at dealing with the sometimes stormy landscape of interfaith relations.

Nearly 9 of 10 Americans identify themselves as Christian, according to the most recent Gallup poll. In recent years, however, Americans have become increasingly aware of the nation's religious diversity.

Putting Zondervan's Protestant version of the Bible -- the New International Version -- in cereal boxes is offensive, said Rabbi James Rudin, the interreligious consultant for the American Jewish Committee in New York.

"I eat General Mills products myself, and I don't think it's right for any American to pick up a box of cereal in the morning and feel excluded," said Rudin. "This is one particular version of the Bible they're offering -- and America is multi-religious, multi-ethnic. When Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists and millions of other Americans pick up this box of cereal and look at this Bible -- they are excluded."

Ellen Johnson, president of American Atheists, based in Cranford, N.J., said, "The problem is that there's only one option here -- and it's the typical choice that evangelical Christians give us.

When it comes to equal access in this country, it's clear that evangelicals don't want it."

As of Friday, General Mills executives had not publicly announced the promotion and few of the CDROM-loaded cereal boxes had reached stores. Those that had shown up on most Detroit-area shelves contained a disc for a computer version of the TV game show "Who Wants to be a Millionaire," the one version of the CDROM that does not contain the Zondervan Bible.

Nevertheless, anticipating controversy, the General Mills' apology said: "While inclusion of the Bible may be seen as added value by some, it is the company's policy not to advance any particular set of religious beliefs. Inclusion of this material does not conform to our policy, and we apologize for this lapse."

A war of words

The portion of the statement that sparked a war of angry words among the partners in the promotion was the claim by General Mills that the Bible was slipped onto the CDROM "without our knowledge or consent."

The claim that General Mills was unaware of the Bibles was backed up by a representative of Lightdog, a Minneapolis-based Internet service provider whose promotional software was also on the General Mills CDROMs. Lightdog was one of the cereal maker's key partners in creating the discs.

"We apologize to General Mills that they were not aware that the Bible was on there," said Lightdog spokesman John Anderson.

But the idea that someone slipped the Bible software onto the discs drew an angry response from Rhinosoft's founder, Farmington Hills native Gregory Swann.

"That is a flat-out lie," he said.

General Mills' viewpoint on the Bibles does appear to have changed dramatically within the space of a week, according to an e-mail that General Mills' spokeswoman Liv Lane sent to a Rhinosoft spokeswoman on Monday.

In March, Swann experienced the first hint of controversy.

An executive from Disney Interactive, who licensed the "Millionaire" software for the CDROMs, told Swann and other partners that the Bible was too controversial. Disney demanded it be taken off the "Millionaire" CDROMs.

That left the Zondervan Bible on only the 12 million boxes featuring the CD games Clue, Carmen Sandiego Word Detective, Lego Creator and Amazon Trail. The Bible software works only on PCs.

"The Bible was on the discs from the very beginning, but the people from Disney didn't want it on their CDROMs," said Ken Patterson, a Minnesota-based software developer who worked on the discs. "It held up production, when Disney had us pull it from their discs in March."

The partners assumed that would be the last glitch, Swann and Patterson said, so General Mills' apology Friday was a stunning surprise.

Late this week, Swann set up a special e-mail address -- encouragement@rhinosoftinteractive.com -- and is asking customers who like the idea of getting Bibles with their cereal to tell him.

"For me, this is only the beginning. I'm committed to penetrating as many homes as possible with the word of God."

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