

Blurred lines between advertising and editorial

If you have ever worked with large newspapers, you know there is a strong editorial stance against pay for play, meaning that no matter how much advertising a company provides the newspaper, the journalists/editors will not let that influence their reporting. This line is much more blurred in smaller, local newspapers, where sometimes, a good editorial piece will follow advertising or vice versa.

It is important to keep the line of separation between advertising and editorial so that readers can trust the newspaper is not being bought. Imagine that if in a political campaign a certain candidate bought a lot more advertising than the other, and then the editors endorsed said candidate. Wouldn't that be questionable?

Which brings me to something I couldn't quite believe that I saw today in the Washington Post. Thomas Heath wrote his Value Added column praising Total Wine, the Potomac, MD based mega liquor store. Heath writes that one of the ways Total Wine has grown is because of how one of the company's founders studied law, so that he could use the knowledge to help change laws regarding liquor in states into which the company was trying to expand. On the opposite page to the column was a junior page ad for—you guessed it—Total Wine. Seriously. (People who read the paper electronically would never see this...but that is another discussion.)

What is going on here? Heath or his editor tells the Total Wine people he is writing a positive piece about Total Wine, and Total Wine says, in that case we want to advertise, and can you place the ad right next to the column please? And the Post says sure-not a problem? Clearly, there was communication if not straight on hand shaking across advertising and

editorial on this one, blurring the lines at the Washington Post. How do we know that Heath was not encouraged to write a positive column on the promise of Total Wine advertising? We don't.

What do you think? Did the Post act appropriately? Would it have mattered if the ad was placed anywhere else in the paper?