

## Mystery ads have T.O. town a-talkin'

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Mysterious ads have been popping up on TTC bus shelters lately.

And they're getting people talking — and scratching their heads.

In one ad, a mother and daughter are smiling.

Underneath, a caption reads: "When Amy started thinking for herself, we had to nip it in the bud with Obay."

The word Obay seems to play off the word obey.

In another ad, a father and son are smiling.

The caption reads: "My son had ideas of his own. Obay put a stop to that."

Just who's behind the message?

And what's the message?

Chat rooms and Internet sites have been abuzz about the ads, leading to all sorts of speculation that it's related to Scientology or to an anti-pharmaceutical campaign, or that it is an online marketing rival to eBay.

There is even a 1-800 number that adds to the confusion.

When you phone 1-888-YOU-OBAY, you get a male voice telling you that "there's nothing worse than a child who won't do what they're told."

The voice later says, "Thankfully, there's Obay. A new remedy from the makers of Why? BecauseIsaidso."

The voice continues: "Obay works where other parental controls, like shouting, don't. Just one dose and you'll see a difference. Your truculent teenagers will be transformed into docile pussycats, open to your thoughts, your ideas and most importantly the future you've mapped out for them. So order your supply of Obay today because Your wish is Your command."

You can leave a message, which this reporter did.

No calls back yet.

The Toronto Transit Commission says it doesn't control the advertising on the bus shelters and has no idea who's behind the bizarre campaign.

Astral Media, a media company that has owned the TTC shelters since Sept. 2007, won't spill the beans either.

Alain Bergeron, a spokesman for Astral Media, would only allow that "it's an Ontario-based client" that has purchased the campaign.

He wouldn't divulge the name of the advertising agency either.

All he promised was to "stay tuned," meaning there are more ads to come.

As intrigue grows, the Toronto website Torontoist began some sleuthing and tried to corner Colleges Ontario as the mystery client.

When the *Toronto Star* contacted Colleges Ontario spokesperson Rob Savage, he would not deny that the colleges are behind the deceptive ads.

That's as far as he would go.

"We don't have information for you regarding that campaign," he said tersely in a telephone interview that had more long pauses than answers.

"We have no information or comments on that campaign at all."

Can you add anything else as a teaser?

"No," he said abruptly.

Long silence.

He did allow that something will be coming up in a couple of weeks.

In advertising circles, this marketing campaign is being called clever and progressive.

It was the buzz this morning at the offices of Smak Inc.

The guerilla advertising agency is noted for its smart, non-traditional marketing ploys to maximize consumer interest.

Last fall, it placed empty refrigerators across Toronto's downtown core to draw attention to the hungry and it helped launch the Daily Bread Food Bank's fall food drive.

Quentin Evans, general manager for Smak, said the Obay ads are "not from us. But we do appreciate the cleverness of it."

He said this strategy is a totally new form of combining traditional marketing, by using bus shelters, with viral marketing, which is user-generated advertising meant to be conveyed by word of mouth or through the Internet.

"It is fairly new and it's pretty progressive," the ad executive said.

"We believe in the strength of getting consumers to talk about something and this is exactly what this does," Evans said. "There's a real cleverness to this. We're excited to find out the answer to this too."

He cautioned, however, that there is a danger if this teasing campaign goes on too long.

"After a few days, the buzz can sometimes die down," he said.

"Unfortunately, with some of the traditional media, sometimes you could lose steam before you find out. If it was us, we would probably want to hide it just until it peaked in terms of interest and then put it out there."

<http://www.thestar.com/article/304963>