

Conservatives rate 'naughty and nice' Christmas retailers

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(RNS) Don't let the strains of "Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas" over the store's audio system fool you. Barnes & Noble is "against" Christmas.

So says the conservative Christian group, American Family Association, in its message to supporters in its annual "Naughty and Nice" Christmas list, which rates retailers' marketing campaigns on whether they properly recognize the holiday that celebrates Jesus' birth.

The big box bookstore chain is on the naughty list compiled by the Tupelo, Miss-based group, along with 14 retailers from Banana Republic to Victoria's Secret to Old Navy.

AFA reviews the websites, media advertising and in-store signage of national retailers to determine the list.

The litmus test is whether retailers use "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays" in their ads. The latter is considered offensive because it takes away the focus on Jesus, according to the organization, which urges supporters to send a message to retailers by shopping elsewhere.

"If a company has items associated with Christmas, but did not use the word 'Christmas,' then the company is considered as censoring 'Christmas,'" according to the organization's website.

"Most national retailers are now using 'Christmas,' but there are some that are still clinging to a losing strategy of political correctness," the group said in an October press release calling out PetSmart for erasing "Christmas" from its website.

The pet chain responded by pointing out that it mentions Christmas in its ads along with other faith-based celebrations. That apparently satisfied AFA, which put the retailer on its nice list, which was last updated Dec. 5.

Most retailers now make AFA's nice list, from Amazon.com to Wal-Mart to Ace Hardware and Target.

Starbucks is one of 10 retailers, along with Bath & Body Works and Whole Foods, that landed on the "marginal list" between naughty and nice because their ads "refer to Christmas infrequently."

AFA contends that its campaign against the "War on Christmas" has paid off because its nice list has grown, but the group's efforts may be lost on some shoppers.

Exiting a Barnes & Noble in Holland Township, Mich., Jan Meltzer said she would like to see retailers send the message of "Merry Christmas," but she wasn't ready to commit to a boycott either.

"Christ is the reason for the season," said Meltzer, a Catholic who lives in South Haven, Mich. "Christ is out of Christmas as far as most people are concerned."

Barnes & Noble, meanwhile, insists the company isn't 'against' Christmas

"We do in fact have references to Christmas in our stores," said Mary Ellen Keating, a spokeswoman for Lyndhurst, N.J.-based Barnes & Noble.

The company sends a sign package to all stores that includes signs that say Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, Happy Kwanzaa, and Happy Holidays.

"The holiday season includes more than Christmas," Keating said. "Therefore, our overall theme has always been Happy Holidays."