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Ads for Movies About Lawyers Disgust, Amuse Real Attorneys

By Stefanie Knapp
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Audrey Woods promises women that, if she represents them in divorce court, they'll get everything they deserve from their "scumbag" husbands.

But the promise, in an advertisement published in the San Jose Mercury News, San Francisco Chronicle and New York Times earlier this week, is nothing more than a publicity stunt for actress Julianne (aka "Woods") Moore's new romantic comedy about two divorce lawyers in love.

New Line Cinema's "Laws of Attraction" with Moore and Pierce Brosnan opens April 30.

The ads are part of a Hollywood marketing trend of realistic-looking Web sites and notices that both delight and dupe the viewer into reading about new movies.

The campaigns are sparking protests, and some giggles, from observers who are alternately disgusted and amused.

Former Sunnyvale divorce attorney Anne P. Mitchell thinks the "Laws of Attraction" ads are in "incredibly poor taste."

"I find it very insulting, demeaning to

women and divorce lawyers," divorce attorney Robert J. Naschsin of Los Angeles' Naschsin & Weston agreed.

But author Neil Gabler said moviegoers are more likely to be charmed than chafed by the ads.

"I think that people find that, if they're duped in that fashion, ... they give people credit for having achieved that," said Gabler, author of "Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality."

New Line could not be reached by press time.

In addition to the newspaper ad, the "Laws of Attraction" campaign features a realistic-looking Web site for Woods' divorce law "firm" Katz Cohen & Phelps.

The Web site features a photograph of Moore, with the firm name labeled "The Tiffany's of New York Law Firms."

The site lists five warning signs that your husband might be fooling around. Tip No. 3: He starts "paying more attention to how he looks."

There is also a quiz to see whether he's stepping out, under the heading "Is he

See Page 5 — LAWYER

Continued from Page 1

cheating? Let's nail him."

The site lights up, "We can't lose," if the most outlandish answers to the quiz are chosen. For example, the quiz asks, "My significant other is always considerate enough to: 1) share his innermost feelings, even when upset; 2) ask what radio station I want to listen to in the car; or 3) be discreet, if nothing else." Answer 3 garners big points.

At the very bottom of the Web page is a line in small print that reads "Laws of Attraction" in Theaters April 30." A link to the New Line Web site appears, with the movie trailer and other information on the film.

The 3½ x 5-inch ad, featuring a head and shoulders shot of Moore, was placed in the business section of the Mercury News on Saturday and in the Chronicle on Sunday. The text wraps around Moore's mug with the headline "I'm Not a Shark. My name is Audrey Woods and I'm a Divorce Attorney." In the Chronicle, the ad appears above a notice for laser hair removal.

Mitchell saw the ad on Saturday and was fooled.

"I thought it was for a real attorney," Mitchell said. "I know lawyers like that."

Not until Mitchell went to the Web site, www.katzcohenphelps.com, did she realize it was a spoof.

The use of realistic Web sites got off the ground in Hollywood in 1997, when Columbia Tri-Star Studios marketed the sci-fi epic "Gattaca," about genetic engineering, with realistic ads and Web sites.

Lions Gate Films recently put up a site

called The Godsend Institute, which carefully outlines the cloning process. The site, which also has raised hackles, advertises a cloning-themed film, "Godsend," starring Greg Kinnear, Robert DeNiro and Rebecca Romijn Stamos, which opens April 30.

Gabler said the ads are a way for the movie industry to pierce viewers' increasing sophistication and cynicism about marketing.

"I think people are so skeptical about traditional ads that you try and do something that is going to puncture that skepticism," Gabler said.

Gabler said he had to look twice at the Woods ad, earlier this week in the sports section of the New York Times, before he saw it was a publicity gimmick.

There's nothing wrong with a little deception, he added.

"The irony is that reality purports to be authentic, but it may be the height of duplicity," Gabler said.

Several divorce attorneys, however, said they didn't think the deceptive ad was either funny or clever. It perpetuates stereotypes about divorce attorneys and women, they said, pointing to text such as "Let's work together and show that scumbag that you're not weak and fragile."

"There are some lousy lawyers, but there are more lousy moviemakers," Raoul Felder, famed New York matrimonial lawyer, said in an e-mailed statement.

"What is the point of undermining the public's confidence in lawyers. The next time a wife has been deserted, left without funds or is the victim of domestic violence,

is she supposed to call a movie maker?"

Mitchell, whose practice used to be devoted entirely to fathers' rights, said the ad also reinforces negative images of men, that "all men that are in divorce are louses."

"There's a huge perception out there [that] women get screwed and men walk away," Mitchell said. "That's completely not true."

But divorce lawyer Barbara Moser of San Francisco's Kaye Moser thought the ad was "pretty funny."

Moser said that "nothing in this business offends me."

Far from offended, she wondered how many hits the phony Web site would get.

"As a practical matter, it would get a lot of hits and then make people feel stupid," Moser said.

Gabler believes that, instead of being upset about the phone ads, consumers will appreciate their cleverness.

"I'm a divorce attorney, but I have a fascination about what is written and put in the media about divorce attorneys," Moser said.

Los Angeles divorce attorney Stacy Phillips, however, said those media representations are precisely the problem in her field.

"This may sell movie tickets, but it exacerbates a problem that we don't need to have," Phillips of Phillips, Lerner & Lauzon said.

Naschsin agreed and said the stereotypes in "Law of Attraction" are outdated.

"No one, not even the geezers in our field, feels the way that Audrey Woods does," Naschsin said.

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