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IDEAS & TRENDS: A Chicago Brawl; Look at This Ad, but Don't Get Any Ideas

By DIRK JOHNSON

IN a section of the Rush Street nightclub district sometimes called "the Viagra triangle," a huge billboard rose up recently with photographs of a sexy, scantily clad woman on one side and a buff, bare-chested man on the other.

The text between the photos proclaimed: "Life's short. Get a divorce."

The ad, sponsored by a Chicago divorce lawyer, Corri Fetman, was meant to remind unhappy, restless or bored spouses that they have other options, some quite attractive. "The message is, if you're unhappy, do something about it," Ms. Fetman said. "It's really no different than a motivational book that says, 'Live the best life you can -- be happy.' "

She hoped it would generate a little buzz. Since then, the phones at her law firm have scarcely stopped ringing.

At last count, more than 1,000 people had called or sent an e-mail message about the ad. Some people congratulated Ms. Fetman for telling it like it is. Some accused her of doing the work of the devil.

"It's zero or 10," Ms. Fetman said. "There's no gray area."

Chicago has always been a brassy, brawling town that relishes a dust-up. That's exactly what the ad has sparked. In bars, shops and offices, people have been debating whether it's O.K. to get divorced -- just because you feel like it.

The billboard had been up scarcely a week before it was ordered removed last week by Alderman Burton Natarus. He said it was not the content of the ad -- Mr. Natarus is known for his affection for the outlandish -- but because the ad company hired by Ms. Fetman had violated a Chicago cardinal rule: It had not gone through proper channels at City Hall to get a permit.

Ms. Fetman isn't about to back down. "We're not going to stop," she said. "In fact, we're getting ready to do more racy photos."

The billboard made some divorce lawyers here wince, according to Kimberly J. Anderson, a top official with the Chicago Bar Association. "Some of my colleagues thought it was sleazy," she said. "We've got a bad enough reputation as it is, you know, without downgrading it even more."

But Ms. Anderson saw nothing unethical about it. "She has a right to advertise in the way she sees fit."

Still, the in-your-face add was enough to get Jeffrey Leving, a prominent Chicago lawyer, huffing with indignation. He said the ad surely persuaded some married people to shop around.

"It's a cheap stunt that encourages recreational sex, sport sex," said Mr. Leving, who specializes in father's rights. "Lawyers have a lot of power to decide whether a marriage ends in divorce or not. People who are thinking about getting a divorce are very vulnerable."

It wasn't by accident, he said, that Ms. Fetman picked the Rush Street district for her billboard. "I know the Viagra triangle," he said. "That's what goes on there. I've represented clients in paternity cases that started in those clubs."

It has not gone unnoticed that Ms. Fetman, 43, is a striking blonde who could play the part of temptress. A native of the Chicago area, she describes herself as "happily divorced." She said people do not need to make excuses for wanting to get divorced. She scoffs at the notion that married people will glimpse the hot bodies in her ads and suddenly ditch their spouses.

"By the time somebody calls us," she said, "they've either got somebody, or they'd like to find somebody."

David Blankenhorn, the president of the Institute for American Values, a New York-based research group that advocates on family issues, described the billboard as "clever, but a lie."

The ad campaign can try to make divorce seem more appealing, he said, but it's still a raw deal for children. He likened it to commercials for cars or beer that imply that buying a certain product will bring happiness. "The truth is, for most people, divorce means tragedy, suffering and pain," he said.

But he acknowledged that Ms. Fetman is on to something. Her message taps into a deep cultural notion that the path to renewal lies in breaking away and moving on. "It's a classic American theme, from the revolution to Huck Finn and Jack Kerouac," he said. "It's part of the reason this country has such high divorce rates."

In fact, the divorce rate in the United States has been dropping for years. Americans are now divorcing at the lowest rate since 1970. The rate, which peaked at 5.3 divorces per 1,000 people in 1981, has fallen to a rate of 3.6. Still, experts say the break-up rate is 40 to 45 percent, among the highest rate in the world.

Chicago is a largely Catholic city, a place where some neighborhoods are known simply by the name of the local parish. During the legendary reign of Mayor Richard J. Daley, plenty of vices and scandals could be overlooked. But divorce was not among them. Old Mayor Daley, as he is known here, went to Mass every day. He was known to call his underlings into his office for lectures about the sanctity of marriage and the terrible stain that divorce would bring. His son, Richard M. Daley -- himself a stickler on the family as paramount -- governs the city today. But he's not likely to stick his nose in other people's marriages.

Rush Street is crowded these days, and from the looks of it, the men and women don't need much encouragement from any billboards when it comes to prowling for babes and beefcake.

With its no-nonsense Midwestern sensibilities, Chicago is less a trend-setter than a bellwether for American culture and values, even when it comes to romance, however fleeting.

It's too early to tell whether the go-ahead-and-do-it divorce ads will change anything. But one thing seems certain. The discussion is going to make for plenty of good, old-fashioned Chicago arguments -- and some of them will probably be settled in divorce court.