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NEW YORK UP CLOSE

For a Salute to Neighborhoods, Some Heartfelt Bronx Cheers

By DAN LEVIN

KAREN SILVERMAN, an East Village jeweler, was walking her Chihuahua down East Houston Street the other day when a red sign on a phone booth caught her eye. “Lower East Side, You Rule,” it declared. Below, the small print thanked the “bohemian” neighborhood for its artsy roots and for “keeping it real, even in the shadow of your new, overpriced condos,” before advertising pay-as-you-go cellphone plans from Virgin Mobile.

Ms. Silverman was not amused.

“Wow, that makes me feel dirty — what a way to whore out my neighborhood,” she said before marching off in disgust toward Katz’s Deli.

Across the five boroughs (and Jersey City), passers-by are being told “you rule” on more than 350 bus stops, phone kiosks, billboards and building walls. And though city residents are accustomed to being bombarded by advertising, some of them are saying that a marketing campaign that irreverently needles New York’s neighborhoods and subcultures to lure customers goes too far.

The ads are already triggering a spirited debate on local blogs like Curbed, Brownstoner and Bed-Stuy Blog, which have crackled with accusations of corporate exploitation and racial insensitivity. For example, some critics condemn the “Bed-Stuy, You Rule” ad for highlighting the neighborhood’s rough reputation and its residents’ fears of gentrification, all in a quest to sell phones. Or, as the ad puts it: “Do or Die is more than a moniker. It speaks to the fact that you don’t take crap from anyone. Especially newcomers who want to change Bed-Stuy into some sort of yuppie strip mall.”

Executives at Virgin Mobile USA responded to calls for the ad’s removal by offering to replace it with text submitted by

residents themselves. No text deemed suitable has yet been submitted, but generally the executives say they are happy that people are paying attention to their ads.

“We’re either equal-opportunity celebrators or equal-opportunity offenders,” said Howard Handler, the company’s chief marketing officer. “The reality is that we’re stirring up a dialogue and people are talking about our services.”

The company has stumbled into other turf trouble. Initially, an ad on the Upper West Side that mocked the Upper East Side — saying, in part, “It’s not cool to be tied down and uptight. If you want to live like that, move to Greenwich, or at least across the park” — was installed on the wrong side of Central Park. It was removed later the same day, but not before the fumble was reported and ridiculed on some Web sites.

Still, for some New Yorkers the ads are comical. John Reardon, an information technology consultant who lives in Murray Hill, chuckled when he came across a phone booth ad extolling the virtues of his neighborhood.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard ‘Murray Hill’ and ‘Rule’ used in the same sentence before,” he said. “The copywriters certainly deserve some credit for this. It’s not that easy to go from bashing Sutton Place to selling prepaid phone service in less than 50 words.”

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