

ADVERTISING / By LAURA BIRD

## Church of Scientology to Launch Campaign to Improve Its Image

The Church of Scientology, having just won tax-exempt status after a bitter, decades-long battle with the Internal Revenue Service, is now ready to take on media critics in a major promotional campaign to try to mend its public image.

Early this month, the Internal Revenue Service notified 30 entities within the Church of Scientology hierarchy that they would be recognized as tax-exempt organizations, whose donation income isn't subject to federal income tax. Church officials hailed the decision, saying it would allow them to concentrate on expansion.

Now, the expansion effort is about to start with a new book and combative advertising blitz. Publication of "What is Scientology?" a 590-page paperback priced at \$19.95, is set for the end of the month. The church and its publisher, Bridge Publications Inc., Los Angeles, are promising booksellers a national advertising campaign, including television and print ads and a national publicity tour by the church's spokesmen and celebrity members.

The Church of Scientology, which claims eight million members world-wide, was founded in 1954 by L. Ron Hubbard, a science-fiction author. It considers itself to be "nondenominational," in that it welcomes new members from all mainstream faiths, purporting to allow them to realize their full spiritual potential by helping them understand how the mind works. The church is opposed to the use of "mind-altering" drugs, and has waged a public campaign against Prozac, Eli Lilly & Co.'s antidepressant.

The church is promoting its new book to retailers as the "book that gives you the story behind the headlines." The church says in its promotions that it has "survived 40 years of vicious media harassment and just keeps getting bigger and stronger every day. It's an international phenomenon that isn't going away."

Several magazines have published expose-style articles about Scientology, including a recent story in Premiere magazine about the religion's popularity and power in Hollywood and a cover story two years ago in Time magazine.

Corporate-image experts say that taking such a confrontational approach to a tarnished image is risky. "The tone of the [rebuttal] ads must be serious, concerned and an appropriate representation of the facts. It can't come across as sour grapes," said Bill Southard, president of the New York public-relations unit of Earle Palmer



Brown.

But responding to public allegations is often important in retaining the confidence of members, he said. "They've received so much editorial attention, and, from their perspective, been so misrepresented, that they don't have a heck of a lot to lose."

Although the advertising isn't finished yet, the new campaign includes a half-hour "documercial" entitled "The Problem of Life." It dramatizes the story of "a couple who are looking for answers to the questions of life," a spokeswoman said, such as: What's it all about? Where are we going? Wouldn't it be good to have a job that is fulfilling? The couple unsuccessfully visits a doctor, a psychotherapist and a marriage counselor. "At the end, they find out Scientology could provide the answers," the spokeswoman said.

The documercial ends with a 10-minute direct-sales pitch from Jeff Pomerantz, the soap-opera star best known for his supporting role in the "Dynasty" series, the church says. The church added that it intends to run the half-hour ad on national cable stations.

Two-minute commercials, which the church also says it intends to run nationally, will pitch the book using the same approach as the promotions to booksellers, the spokeswoman said.

The church has responded aggressively to its portrayal by news organizations in the past. After Time ran its cover story titled "Scientology: The Cult of Greed," the church ran expensive inserts in USA Today, in an attempt to discredit the Time story. The church filed a libel suit against Time and also sued Eli Lilly; WPP Group's J. Walter Thompson, which was Prozac's ad agency at the time; and Martin Sorrell, WPP chief executive, accusing the agency and Mr. Sorrell of pressuring Time to print the story. Both suits are pending.

"There's been inaccurate reporting about the church in the past," the spokeswoman says. "Anyone who has heard about the church now can turn to a book written by the church itself."

Stephen A. Greyser, who teaches corporate communications at Harvard Business School, says running ads taking on media critics can backfire. "There's never been a company that's been attacked that didn't think it was unfair or untrue," he says. "The organization with the last word is the organization with the ink at its disposal."

MARKETING & MEDIA

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# Church of Scientology Takes on Critics

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