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Why does Craigslist run kinky ads?

 [090522\\_TBM\\_legs.jpg](#) [1]

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It's been a lousy few months for sex on Craigslist. First, 40 state attorneys general banded together to demand that the world's biggest classified site take down its "erotic services" (read: prostitution) ads. *(See correction at the end of this article.)* Then, in March, right on cue, a man in New York was murdered by a teenager he met through Craigslist. Soon after, Boston cops arrested [Philip Markoff](#) [3], the med student accused of robbing, and in one case killing, escorts he found through Craigslist. Now South Carolina's attorney general is threatening to prosecute the site's employees.

"Just by being good guys, we've created a culture of trust and fairness," the site's eponymous founder, Craig Newmark, once told [Wired](#) [4]. Well, sort of—if you don't count the occasional Jack the Ripper wannabe. Nothing spells "bad PR" like a sex and murder scandal.

If Craigslist were a conventional company, it would have a crisis PR firm gunning the engines to get as far away from sex ads as possible. But Craigslist is not. Many outlets have reported that Craigslist would drop its "erotic services" ads, but this is essentially a fiction. It has only reluctantly agreed to vet ads for explicit prostitution offers (ads that euphemistically offer massage or just leave the details of about what to expect are still OK) and replaced the controversial category with the essentially identical "adult services." Meanwhile, the "casual encounters" section—ads for "no strings attached" sex that are often more lurid than the paid-sex ads in "erotic services"—remains as active and unregulated as ever. And Craigslist has even managed to fan the fires by [suing the attorney general of South Carolina](#) [5].

All of which raises an obvious question: Why do the people behind the [13th most visited site in the United States](#) [6] run ads for prostitution and kink in the first place?

Both people who've seen the sex ads and those who haven't tend to assume it's just something that Craigslist does. Or maybe people are just too polite to ask: [In a 20-minute interview](#) [7] that Newmark gave to Charlie Rose, the subject never came up. But like a lot of questions that get brushed off as too obvious to worry about, it's worth asking. You don't need to look at the sex ads, but unless you've thought about why they're there, you won't understand what Craigslist is about.

For all the stories written about Craigslist and the profiles of its founder, the company can still baffle anybody trying to make sense of it. A telling episode was the performance of Jim Buckmaster, the CEO who runs Craigslist day to day, [at an investor conference](#) [8] where he was asked to explain the company's strategy for maximizing revenue. Buckmaster answered that it didn't have one ... or want one because that wasn't the point.

But Craigslist is not, despite the .org in its address, a nonprofit or a strictly free online ads service: It charges for job ads and some rental ads. On the other hand, it is not exactly, as Buckmaster made clear to the investment folks, a for-profit enterprise, either. The site could make a lot more money by charging for more categories of ads or even running display ads on some of its pages.

And so the crazy thing about the sex ads—both the "erotic services" ads to which prosecutors have objected and the "casual encounters" section—is that they seem to be a losing proposition from either the nonprofit or for-profit point of view.

From the money-making standpoint, the sex ads create notoriety, but they sure don't build what the marketing types like to talk about as "brand equity." Buckmaster has pointed out that the ads are in some ways no different from those that appear in the back pages of many alternative weeklies. (Though in other ways, they are different: If you're too shy to see for yourself, [the Entourage episode](#) [9] with the girl in the big pink bunny costume will give you an idea of how.) But we know why those papers run their ads: They get paid for them. They don't like running them, and if the ads weren't a moneymaker, they wouldn't.

But from the do-gooder nonprofit standpoint, the sex ads are a loser as well. The explicit ads—many of them apparently fake, posted by people hoping to get dirty pictures e-mailed to them or just turned on by the idea—are not an obvious path to that "culture of trust and fairness." Yet the ads remain and multiply because there's something else at stake here.

In [a profile of Newmark in New York magazine](#) [10], there is a scene in which the writer, Philip Weiss, shows Newmark an e-mail he'd gotten from a woman who posted an ad for sex on Craigslist. "I wanted to have sex with someone who would meet my terms—that is, a nice person who wanted to have safe sex with No Strings Attached. ... It was very freeing! It's so hard for most women to go out and demand what they want in the bedroom." Newmark parses the e-mail as a reflection of how Craigslist reflects basic American values. "Freedom of choice," Newmark tells Weiss, "couldn't be any more basic."

What's interesting about the exchange is that Newmark doesn't make an effort to back away from or apologize for the sex ads. Just the opposite. To his mind, looking for "no strings attached" sex is precisely the kind of freedom that his list is supposed to reflect and encourage. This is not the dark cellar of Craigslist. It is its lifeblood.

Many social critics tend to set sail from a critique of money, believing that if only we could get rid of that, all would be well. Craigslist, by contrast, has no issue with money. The point of most classified ads, whether they involve selling your old hard drive or offering to strut around in a dominatrix outfit, is an exchange of money. But what clearly matters to Newmark is that this exchange should not be mediated by corporations or institutions. "A lesson that it was hard for [me] to learn," Newmark told Charlie Rose, "was that people are good and trustworthy and moderate." Craigslist is Newmark's vote of confidence in that lesson.

When you look at it in this way, the reason to keep all those sleazy ads on Craigslist becomes clearer. The free choice of sexual partners and practices and positions and everything else sex-related is just as much a part of the

"let individuals connect in their own way" mission of Craigslist as the other ads. In the galaxy of sex ads, the ones for "erotic services" that have had state attorneys general up in arms, and to which Phillip Markoff responded, occupy a special place. They are not a sideshow but the ultimate example of what Newmark seems to want to accomplish. The point of the ads is that anyone at all can post one, and they allow the sex-for-money transaction to happen without the "escort service" demanding a cut.

You can think of that as the perfect metaphor for the Newmark worldview. Bad things don't come from what two individuals decide to do together. They come from the institutions that stand between them. The problem, in Newmark's world, is not prostitution. The problem is only the pimp.

The fight between Craigslist and state authorities is not over kinky classifieds but over two visions of human nature. It's not a question of not being able to filter out ads. (Craigslist has always been serious and vigilant about pedophilia.) It's a question of defending Craigslist's ideological core. For Newmark, almost anything two people agree on without outside interference is OK. For the prosecutors, obviously, it's not. Leave people to their own devices, says the state of South Carolina, and you will get evil.

On some of the facts that are playing out in the press now, Craigslist may be right. Yes, there've been murders tied to Craigslist ads. But there's also been one by a man who [placed an ad for a baby sitter](#) [11], and nobody is talking about banning those. In the long run, though, put your money on the states. Craigslist stands for an anarchic vision of peer-to-peer exchange, equally free of both procurers and prosecutors. Neither has had any trouble finding its way online.

*Correction (May 28, 2009): This article originally stated 43 state attorneys general demanded a change to Craigslist's practices. In fact, the negotiations with Craigslist involved 40 states, plus the District of Columbia and the territories of Guam and the Virgin Islands.*

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