

KMART SEEKS "REVIVAL"; REPLACES MARTHA WITH RICK WARREN

by Horace Pook, January/February 2005

Fast on the heels of their impending merger with Sears, Kmart stunned the retail industry this week by announcing their plans to dump their longtime association with Martha Stewart and replace her with Rick Warren, best-selling Christian author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*. As part of their endeavor to “revive” their damaged reputation and spur growth, Kmart stores will phase out the Martha Stewart “Everyday” Collection later this year and introduce the Rick Warren “Purpose-Driven” Collection, which will reflect the hugely-successful philosophy of the popular pastor. Featured products in the collection will include a line of men’s Hawaiian shirts with matching khaki pants and loafers, personally designed by Warren for the leisurely, suburban churchgoer. Also among the Warren-designed items: Hawaiian print bathroom towels, Hawaiian print kitchen decanters, and a Message Bible that features a fold-out Krispy Kreme donut tray and coffee cup holder.

Asked about the sudden change in direction, Kmart chairman Edward Lampert explained, “We just feel that Martha Stewart, despite her recent incarceration, projects a snooty, high-maintenance image that makes the common middle-class housewife feel inadequate. Rick, on the other hand, has a message that says, ‘Hey, God has a purpose for you shopping at Kmart.’ Plus, have you seen how much money this purpose-driven cr*p is making?”

Reaction from business experts has been mixed, with most of them concerned about the possible ramifications of bringing Warren’s seeker-sensitive Christianity into an established retail chain. One critic noted that the sudden drop in sales of men’s ties and dress socks alone would probably offset any possible profits. Still, Chairman Lambert remains confident. “When the idea was first

brought up, we thought that there was no way that a church program could be utilized in the retail sector,” Lambert explained. “But boy were we surprised with how easily it translated to the business world. Who knew?”

Nonetheless, some analysts have questioned whether this move will disenfranchise some of Kmart’s loyal customers who may not relate to evangelical Christianity. Lambert, however, shrugged it off. “Certainly the initial concern was that it might alienate consumers of other religious faiths. But once we realized that the purpose-driven philosophy didn’t rely on the Christian view of God, we were tickled to death.”

Surprisingly, this isn’t the first time that a retail chain has flirted with the idea of marketing themselves with a known Christian celebrity. In 2003, Target had briefly toyed with the idea of using Christian radio apologist Hank Hanegraaff as a spokesman. This idea was dropped, however, when preliminary market research revealed that some listeners and ex-employees of “The Bible Answer Man” might take a Target logo on Hanegraaff’s shirt too literally.