

Advice ad by curious student gets no response



MEG DEDOLPH

I think I may have been eating a bagel when I saw the ad. It was small, stuck at the beginning of the *Emerald's* classified section, under a new heading — "At Your Own Risk."

"Good advice — any subject; \$2 plus SASE," it read.

Having neither a problem I needed advice on, nor \$2, but wondering who would run an ad like that, I decided to find paper and pen and scrawl a fast note to the advertiser.

Something along the lines of "Who are you and why are you doing this?"

Twenty-nine cents later, the letter was in the mail, and I returned to my bagel.

I forgot about the letter until last Monday, when, while I was digging through a recycling barrel in search of an old newspaper, John Poppin came up to the *Emerald* office and introduced himself.

This was that advice guy. I realized. The one who ran the ad.

Poppin is a senior English major at the University, and planned at first to use his advice services as a quick way to make some money.

Poppin told me he had heard a story about someone who ran an ad in the back of a supermarket tabloid that read, "Last chance to send in a dollar." That ad got 15,000 replies, Poppin said. His intention in offering \$2

advice was to "sell something, be legal and be good and help someone out."

As he thought about it, money became less of an issue, and he found himself more interested in discovering what sort of people would respond and for what kinds of problems they might want advice.

Poppin described himself as someone who's "been around the block a few times." He grew up in San Francisco, exposing himself to the "perils and delights of living in a world-renowned city," attended private schools, and has interests including competitive archery, computers and cars.

With his own experiences and the knowledge of friends, Poppin said he planned to put a fair amount of effort into coming up with good advice for people who wrote him.

Good advice involved research, he said, and if he couldn't come up with any good advice for someone he would gladly return their money.

But he said he believed he could manage some sort of advice on nearly any problem from the trivial to the more serious.

(Where to get the best-filled croissants in town is a trivial question — he says Fred Meyer is the best and stay away from the EMU apple fritters while you're at it.)

His ad ran for eight days in the *Emerald*. At the end of those eight days, he was \$20 poorer and the recipient of only one response, Mine.

"In today's search for some kind of guidance, I thought some person would just reply," he said. "If you're out at the end of your rope, sometimes you go for stuff like that. I would have

answered because it's crazy. It's just nutty. Good advice — \$2. What the hell is this? I'd probably reply, and I'd probably write a serious question."

Poppin believes people didn't respond because they're so wrapped up in their own lives they don't bother to find answers to questions anymore. They rely on the media, on rumors, or a friend-of-a-friend for information, he said.

"People rarely go out and find answers," he said. "Maybe people joked about writing in to me, or maybe they thought seriously of writing in, but they didn't."

"People are not curious anymore because they think they have too much to do, and what they're curious about isn't as important as what they're doing," Poppin said. "That's 100 percent untrue. People should be curious; people should ask about things. Absolutely never be afraid to ask."

Essentially, he's right.

Go find the answers to your questions. Go to the source, don't mess around, and ask someone who knows and get an answer. That, I think, sums up John Poppin and his advice business. His role in this process? He'll find the answer for you if you don't think you've got the time.

But Poppin believes people have the time and brains to go answer their own questions. Usually the simplest way to find things out is by a couple of phone calls. Reach out and ask someone.

I like phone calls because it avoids having to look silly in person. You don't have to give your name when you're calling someone for information. You can be an anonymous voice asking strange questions just because you happen to be curious.

And ask anything.

How do porcupines mate? How come Election Day was Nov. 9 if it's supposed to be the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November? Can llamas really spit more than 40 feet? What are those big red balls strung on power lines for? When people say they want frankness in a relationship, do they really

want to know what you're thinking about them? What do they do with factory reject glass eye-balls? Who is this guy advertising \$2 advice in the *Emerald*?

You'd be surprised at what comes out of it.

Meg DeDolph is a community reporter.

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