

Pampers are not an invention of the devil

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Tom Baldwin in Washington
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THE world's biggest manufacturer of household and grooming products voiced hopes today that an urban myth linking it to Satanism was being crushed after four men were ordered to pay almost \$US20 million (\$25 million) in damages for spreading the rumour.

At the end of a 12-year legal case in Salt Lake City, Utah, a US District Court jury found against a group of distributors from a rival company who had left voicemail messages alleging that part of Procter & Gamble's profits went to devil-worshipping cults.

P&G — which owns brands such as Pampers, Gillette, Head & Shoulders and Ariel — has long been in despair over the stubborn refusal of such claims to go away.

Since the rumours first appeared in 1981, the corporation has had to battle boycotts from Christian groups, cope with more than 200,000 telephone inquiries from customers and fight the ability of word-of-mouth — and latterly the internet — to disseminate them.

The origins of this accusation are apparently based on a passage from the Book of Revelation in the Bible, stating: "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars."

P&G's logo used to consist of a bearded and twin-horned man in the moon surrounded by 13 stars. Claims that this represented a deliberate mockery of the heavenly symbol were fuelled by others suggesting that a mirror image of the "Mark of the Beast" — the numbers 666 — could be seen inside the logo.

The corporation denied this, pointing out that the stars were intended as a tribute to America's 13 original states and that the "666" pattern emerged only if an arbitrary game of connect the dots was played.

P&G eventually abandoned the old logo on everything except some of its buildings, but not before a new — and even more virulent — version of the urban myth emerged.

This alleged that the corporation's president had appeared on The Phil Donahue Show on March 1, 1994, to confirm that a large portion of his profits went to support the Church of Satan.

It went on to quote the P&G executive boasting to Mr Donahue that this would not hurt business because "there are not enough Christians in the United States to make a difference";

There have been repeated denials from P&G and TV companies that anybody from the corporation had appeared on such a show making such an extraordinary statement.

But in April 1995 Randy Haugen, a dealer for Amway Corporation, which sells similar household merchandise, placed an audio message on the company's voicemail system repeating this allegation and urged listeners to boycott 43 listed P&G products.

P&G accused three other Amway distributors of forwarding the message, including Stephen Bybee, who told the court that there was no malicious intent.

"My goal when I sent (the rumour) down was to fight the Church of Satan," he said.

Terry Loftus, a P&G spokesman, said today that the corporation had spent large sums of money defending its reputation from false allegations that had led to an unquantifiable loss of business.

"This rumour will probably never go away completely but the number of calls we get on it have fallen off significantly after we started taking legal action," he added. Amway, which has defended itself against direct legal action, promises to help its former distributors if they seek to appeal the court ruling.

Kate Makled, spokeswoman for Alticor, Amway's parent company, said that despite the four men making public apologies, "P&G has spent 12 years destroying their lives";

She added: "P&G is a \$US68 billion company. What they got out of this case was what they could earn in about 2½ hours. We think that's shameful."