Girl Scouts Battle With One of Their Own

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It has been a tough year for that classic American snack, the Girl Scout cookie.

With the cost of flour, oil and cocoa rising, Thin Mints, Trefoils and Peanut Butter Sandwiches now come in smaller boxes, with two fewer cookies. Do-Si-Dos are struggling against a salmonella outbreak that has left customers wary of peanut butter. And the recession has dissuaded many from spending $3.50 on a little tray of cookies, whether chocolate, shortbread or lemon.

Add to that list of woes the name of 8-year-old Wild Freeborn.

Wild, a girl scout from Asheville, N.C., set out in January with the goal of selling 12,000 boxes of cookies, enough to win a free week of Scout camp for her entire troop. Because her father, Bryan, works in Web site development, his first impulse was to have her advertise her mission online.

She did so, and it was not long before she found herself afoul of the Scouts' national organization, Girl Scouts of the U.S.A., which forbids Internet sales of cookies. The resulting stir — innovative third grader versus Scout leadership, online entrepreneurship versus the tradition of door-to-door promotion — has drawn publicity across the country, with coverage by national news organizations and many radio stations.

“It didn’t really dawn on us that we were doing something new and innovative,” Mr. Freeborn said. “The business community in Asheville is very active on Facebook and Twitter. We were surprised that we were the first to get noticed for doing this.”

Michelle Tompkins, a spokeswoman for the Scouts, says there are good reasons for the online ban, beginning with the familiar dangers that young girls can encounter on the Web. Beyond that, Ms Tompkins says, is the issue of fairness: local councils typically award prizes to girls for reaching certain levels of sales, and since all girls are limited to selling within their local areas, a campaign like Wild's can overwhelm opportunities for other girls in town.
But the debate only begins there. The further question is what online “selling” means.

The Scouts had no problem with the YouTube video, shot by Mr. Freeborn, in which Wild bounced around on a couch and made the sales pitch: “Buy cookies! And they're yummy!”

The trouble, Ms. Tompkins says, is that Wild posted an order form online along with the promotional material.

But Mr. Freeborn says that although his daughter took orders online, she did not break the rule, since she delivered the cookies and collected payment in person.

“Wild did everything you do as a traditional cookie-selling girl scout,” Mr. Freeborn said. “But she also utilized the Internet to promote the cookies.”

And help from his students did not hurt. Mr. Freeborn, a guest lecturer at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, assigned his mass communications class to run a “grass roots” cookie campaign on his daughter’s behalf, using Facebook, Craigslist and text-messaging, that was directed at residents of the Asheville area.

In any event, after the local council received complaints from parents of other scouts about Wild’s campaign, the Freeborns removed the online order form, though they kept up a promotional video, a Facebook page and a PayPal account through which people could donate cookies to charities or the military.

Wild ultimately fell far short of her goal, selling something more than 1,000 boxes, Mr. Freeborn said, including cookies she sold door to door and at a grocery booth. Still, that is far more than the couple of hundred that the typical scout sells each year and will be enough to win a trip to camp for herself, though not for the whole troop.

Molly Keeney, chief executive of the local organization, Girl Scouts of Western North Carolina Pisgah Council, agrees that Wild’s approach violated national regulations. But she questions their correctness.

“It’s a new day now,” Ms. Keeney said. “To not develop a system for girls to sell via the Internet is probably not responding to how girls operate these days. But as long as there’s a rule, we need to support it or at least enforce it, not to defy the rule or misinterpret the rule.”

Ms. Tompkins, the national spokeswoman, says that rule may soon change. “We need to find a way to come up with a program for girls to sell cookies that is safe and fair,” she said. “Once we do, we will allow online sales.”