

When a Corporate Donation Raises Protests

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Kiichiro Sato/Associated Press

Abercrombie & Fitch, known for sexy ads, made a \$10 million donation for an emergency department at a hospital in Ohio.

WHEN the Columbus Children's Hospital agreed to name a new lobby after two retail chains to thank their corporate parent for a \$5 million donation, everyone was all smiles. The same was true when the Ohio hospital renamed itself Nationwide Children's Hospital, to acknowledge a \$50 million gift from Nationwide insurance, a large local company.

But a coalition of children's advocates contends that the hospital went too far by agreeing to name a new emergency department and trauma center after another locally based retailer, Abercrombie & Fitch, in exchange for a \$10 million donation.

The coalition, which includes the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, several pediatricians and Parents for Ethical Marketing, is asking the hospital to reconsider the decision made in June 2006 to accept the donation. The plea is being made now because ground is to be broken this year for the building to house the emergency and trauma facilities.

The 15 organizations and 80 individuals that compose the coalition contend that naming the new center after Abercrombie & Fitch — known for provocative advertising and revealing clothing — sends a grievously wrong message.

"It is troubling that a children's hospital would name its emergency room after a company that routinely relies on highly sexualized marketing to target teens and preteens," the members of the coalition wrote in a letter that was sent on Tuesday to the hospital's office in Columbus, Ohio.

"The Abercrombie & Fitch Emergency Department and Trauma Center marries the Abercrombie brand to your reputation," said the letter, addressed to five senior officers of the hospital. "A company with a long history of undermining children's well-being is now linked with healing."

The complaint is an example of negative reaction to the increasingly prevalent practice of naming public facilities after corporate sponsors, donors and supporters.

Opponents who complain about the growing commercialization of the American culture are upset that private companies are able to brand stadiums, parks, schools, school buses and hospitals.

About a dozen hospitals across the country bear corporate or sponsor names, including at least two other children's hospitals: Mattel Children's Hospital U.C.L.A. in Los Angeles and Hasbro Children's Hospital, the pediatric division of Rhode Island Hospital in Providence.

Naming a facility for Abercrombie & Fitch "is more egregious," said Susan Linn, the director of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood in Boston, because of the reputation of the retailer as "among the worst corporate predators" for "sexualizing and objectifying children."

"Selling corporate naming rights is a slippery slope, and this is way down that slope," said Ms. Linn, who is also the associate director at the media center at Judge Baker Children's Center, an affiliate of the Harvard Medical School.

The sex-drenched images of toothsome young men and women that Abercrombie & Fitch has used for years to sell its own-brand apparel in ads, posters and catalogs have made the company and its chief executive, Michael S. Jeffries, billions of dollars — and countless enemies.

The opponents of the company's campaigns, which are typically shot by the fashion photographer Bruce Weber, contend they cross the line by presenting undressed teenagers and 20-somethings in overly sexualized situations. The company describes its ads as playful and celebratory of the free spirit of today's young Americans.

Last month, the police in Virginia Beach, Va., removed two large posters — part of the chain's national campaign — from the windows of an Abercrombie store in a mall and charged the manager with an obscenity misdemeanor. One poster showed a woman with a breast mostly exposed and the other displayed three shirtless young men, one of whom was also revealing part of his backside.

The city of Virginia Beach subsequently decided against prosecuting the store manager.

Other times, however, the opponents of the Abercrombie approach have prevailed; in 2003, the company discontinued its popular magazine-style catalog, A.& F. Quarterly, because of mounting complaints from parents about its racy contents.

And a year later, the company, based in New Albany, Ohio, agreed to pay \$50 million to settle a suit that accused it of discriminating against minority employees for promotions and cultivating a white-only image.

As for the coalition's protests against the hospital naming, Tom Lennox, a spokesman at Abercrombie & Fitch, said on Tuesday, "We are proud of our longstanding relationship with the hospital and pleased to help secure its bright future."

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A call from a reporter to Nationwide Children's Hospital for a response to the letter from the coalition was returned by Jon M. Fitzgerald, the president of the Nationwide Children's Hospital Foundation.

"I like to focus on the philanthropy of it," Mr. Fitzgerald said, adding, "I don't feel comfortable addressing" any of the objections raised in the letter.

"Two years ago, Abercrombie & Fitch made a very significant philanthropic gift," Mr. Fitzgerald said. "In honor of that gift, we chose to offer recognition of their tremendous support of our organization."

Mr. Fitzgerald took issue with a contention in the letter that the hospital agreed to "sell naming rights" to Abercrombie & Fitch in exchange for the \$10 million.

"We don't sell naming rights," Mr. Fitzgerald said. "We as a nonprofit accept gifts to support our mission. We're looking for philanthropic support."

The ground-breaking for the building in which the facilities are to be housed will probably take place in late fall, he added, with completion scheduled in 2012. The new lobby, to be named after the Limited Too and Justice retail chains owned by Tween Brands, also will be in the new building.

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Abercrombie & Fitch has been a frequent target of criticism from organizations and activists like those that wrote the letter. They also include the National Institute on Media and the Family, Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment and Dr. Alvin F. Pouissant, the nationally known professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School.

One school of thought holds that complaints from parents and the establishment only elevate the brand's appeal with the target audience.

"There's always a 'forbidden fruit' aspect to what adolescents do; that's probably why they smoke," said Dr. Victor Strasburger, professor of pediatrics at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine, who also signed the letter. A main goal of the letter is "trying to influence the decision-makers at children's hospitals to act responsibly," Dr. Strasburger said. "We've reached a point in our society where it seems there's no such thing as bad publicity," he added. "We have to pull back from that."

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