

Selling breast-feeding bras and emotional support

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Bravado Designs specializes in breast-feeding bras, which feature cups that unfasten singly and stretchable fabrics that accommodate size fluctuations during pregnancy and nursing. But when it comes to marketing, the bra company emphasizes another type of support: emotional.

An information section on the Bravado Web site features dozens of suggestions from Heather Kelly, described as a certified lactation consultant, from hand positioning while nursing ("Imagine you're holding a sandwich for your baby to bite") to how long it should take (from 20 to 50 minutes, including "burping, diaper changes, waking a sleepy baby, etc.").

The company, which started in 1992, has advertised in the past, but now its primary marketing strategy is to be an online destination for new mothers.

"This is where women get their information these days," said Kathryn From, chief executive of Bravado, in a telephone interview from Toronto, where the company is based. "They're not picking up the books and magazines at 2 in the morning — it's important to engage the woman where she is, and where she is these days is online."

In November, the company formed the Bravado Breast-feeding Information Council, which has an advisory board of parenting specialists and bloggers, including Ms. Kelly. A new Web site, breastfeedinginformation.org, includes survey results from Bravado's database of more than 80,000 women and advocates for breast-feeding-friendly workplaces and stores.

"We want to promote that women can and should feel great when they're pregnant and nursing and shouldn't be forced to hide in a room until the baby is 1 or 2 years old or whatever age that a woman chooses to stop breast-feeding," Ms. From said.

Gaining such acceptance can be difficult, though, as Bravado recently learned firsthand.

Since 2007, CURVExpo, which is based in Riverside, Conn., has produced lingerie and swimwear trade shows in New York and Las Vegas. Bravado, which once focused exclusively on maternity retailers, has attended the show since 2008 as part of an effort to expand into lingerie stores.

While many exhibitors hire women to model their lines in their booths, the models hired by Bravado cut a decidedly different profile because they represent typical customers: women in their third trimester whose pre-pregnancy bras may have become uncomfortably snug and who have switched to breast-feeding bras. Likewise, at runway shows organized by CURVExpo in conjunction with trade shows, Bravado has in previous years provided pregnant models.

"When we have had a pregnant woman on the runway at Curve, she tends to get applause because we're really showing women at a time of life when women don't feel attractive," Ms. From said.

But while reaction to such models both on runways and in trade show booths is overwhelmingly positive, "there's always going to be that 5 percent who are offended or uncomfortable with seeing a woman who is pregnant," she said.

Laurence Teinturier, executive vice president of CURVExpo, said that while runway shows were held at convention centers in previous years, recent shows in Las Vegas and New York were staged at what she called "private venues," which balked at pregnant models.

"We have to bend with the locations' rules," said Ms. Teinturier, who also said that pregnant models were still permitted in Bravado's booth.

Bravado was prohibited from using a pregnant model at a CURVExpo runway show on Feb. 16 in Las Vegas at Blush Boutique Nightclub, owned by Wynn Las Vegas.

"We did not feel it appropriate to feature a very pregnant model in a nightclub, at midnight, where alcohol was being served," Jennifer Dunne, a Wynn spokeswoman, wrote in a statement responding to questions. "Our team made a judgment call which we feel was correct given the environment and circumstance."

Concerning the runway show at the Edison Ballroom in New York on Feb. 22, however, Ms. From said that she thought that Ms. Teinturier was responding not to squeamishness on the part of the site, but rather from a few disapproving exhibitors. Ms. Teinturier said she was "not aware" of any complaints from other exhibitors about pregnant models. The New York location that she said had shunned the women said it did not prohibit pregnant models.

Bill Kaelblein, general manager of the Edison Ballroom, said: "There could be nothing further from the truth. It wasn't our call." At Bravado, "we're hesitant to make a big stink about it because we have a great relationship with Curve," Ms. From said. "But frankly we're disappointed because we don't see why it should be an issue."

At the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center on Feb. 22, it seemed to be a typical garment trade show, consisting of booths with racks of clothing and folding tables with candy dishes where company representatives sat down with buyers.

Less typical were dozens of models on the showroom floor wearing skimpy lingerie. Near the booth for something called the Shibue Strapless Panty, which is essentially a G-string without the string because it is held in place with reusable silicone adhesive strips, two models in high heels wore the tiny hourglass-shaped garments with the company's pasties.

At the Bravado booth, Jessica McDonald, 26, a model from Baltimore, was bundled up by comparison, wearing the company's Allure bra with black pants and sensible shoes. She was eight months pregnant, which some buyers found unfathomable.

"People keep asking, 'Is that real?' " she said. "I say, 'Absolutely,' and that the nausea is real, and the backache is real, too."

A woman off to the side snapped photographs of her and beamed.

"That's my mom," Ms. McDonald said, explaining that her mother had also traveled from Maryland. "She fixed my hair this morning, and she loves this. She says, 'Back in my day, everyone would cover up their bodies.' "

Fonte: New York Times, New York, Mar. 2nd 2010, Advertising, online.