

Edward Rincon

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eMEMO

From: Angelo Falcón, President

Department Store Forced to Pull Controversial T-Shirts

Tell Me More Show

National Public Radio (NPR) (July 26, 2007)

CHERYL CORLEY, host: We turn now from old T-shirts to new T-shirts and the controversy they can cause. Remember a couple of years ago when Abercrombie & Fitch had to stop selling some of its T-shirts when a group of teenage girls said the slogans on them, like I Had a Nightmare, I Was a Brunette, and Who Needs Brains When You Have These were offensive?

Well, now comes Macy's Department Store, which has decided to pull its latest fashion statement tees with the slogan, Brown is the New White, which apparently concerned a number of Latino shoppers.

Here to speak with me about the mistakes some companies make in their marketing efforts is Dr. Ed Rincon, president of Rincon & Associates, a multicultural marketing research company. He is also an associate professor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, and he joins us from KERA in Dallas.

Mr. Rincon, welcome.

Professor ED RINCON (Southern Methodist University, Dallas; President, Rincon & Associates): Good to join you today.

CORLEY: Well, first let's talk about the Macy's T-shirt. What do you think the company was trying to do, and why was it so maddening to some?

Mr. RINCON: Well, from the Web site description of the manufacturer and their relationship with Macy's, they were very much trying to attract a young, chic Latina shopper to their stores by introducing some, I guess what they consider non-traditional clothing and shirts and other

accessories that also had some quote, unquote, "very non-traditional" types of taglines on the shirts themselves.

CORLEY: Mm-hmm. Well, I know you don't speak for Macy's, and we've trying to get in touch with the company as well, but what do you think this slogan exactly meant, or this tagline meant - Brown is the New White?

Mr. RINCON: You know, that's the mystery of marketing research, is that it can mean different things to different people. Now, the phrase Brown is the New White can mean, for example, that Hispanics are replacing whites as the demographic group in power, in numbers, in presence in the U.S. Another reading on what that meant is that Hispanics really, really aspire to be white.

CORLEY: So in one sense it's kind of an affirmative, empowering statement, and in the other sense, not so much?

Mr. RINCON: Right. The second one is the one that has a potential to be offensive, because we know from the past 30 years of research that we've been doing with Hispanics - not just here in the U.S., but in other countries, too - that they have a very strong sense of their own cultural identity, and being white is just not one of those items that's in their inventory of aspirations. So this could have the potential to offend Hispanics, particularly those in the U.S. who are very proud of their culture and cultural values and the implication or the insinuation that white is what they aspire to be is simply not correct.

CORLEY: Dr. Rincon, isn't there a history of companies trying to be edgy or hip to attract customers, and how do they try to determine if what they are doing may be insensitive?

Mr. RINCON: It's not clear that they all do their homework. I've done a number of studies with apparel manufacturers as well. And for the most part, the people that are doing it right actually bother bring in consumers that represent their target market - either through focus groups or some other mechanism - and they actually show them some of their apparel collection, some of their theme lines and their colors, because they're truly interested in selling their products to that particular demographic. I would say that..

CORLEY: Can you give us an example of that, maybe?

Mr. RINCON: I can't name a specific company, of course, but I can't talk in general that one manufacturer, for example, is designing a particular line of clothing for Hispanics, and they very much want to know the colors that Latinos want because their - the appeal of the color spectrum is very different for Latinos than compared to non-Latinos. So if they're only going to produce three or four shirts, for example, it's very important for them to hit the right one, depending on what Latinos want.

The other thing that is important is lifestyle and fashion. What a teenager wants in the way of a T-shirt, for example, is going to be quite different from what an adult wants. So if you're planning to sell to teenagers, you better make sure that you convene those types of consumers so that you - they can see the wardrobe and evaluate the pricing, evaluate the colors, the sizes, and other aspects of that wardrobe.

The bottom line is you need to get a handle on what that consumer - what appeal that apparel line is going to have with that consumer and their likelihood of buying that and...

CORLEY: Mm-hmm. Go ahead. I'm sorry.

Mr. RINCON:one of the important things is how they plan to buy it, and this is one disconnect that I think Macy's made with this collection here. We know from our research that a certain type of Hispanic shops at Macy's, and it's not likely that the shopper that they were targeting with this line of T-shirts was going to shop at Macy's, anyway. So I'm not sure that Macy's really understood who their target consumer was for this line of clothing.

CORLEY: Is this the case - in this specific case, and in other cases as well - of especially where you have companies trying to attract people of color, of needing more folks in the marketing industry or the advertising industry, or who work for the company who are also people of color?

Mr. RINCON: That's true. We do know that in many department stores the salespeople don't necessarily reflect the shoppers in that community. Banks, for example, have been criticized for that for many years. We also know that the store environments sometimes can be somewhat uncomfortable. In fact, Macy's does have a history of, for example, in New York just a couple of years ago, the attorney general cited them for the racial profiling of Latino and African- American customers in their Macy's New York stores.

So it's kind of a reflection of perhaps a lack of judgment about how to deal with ethnic consumers. It's not just understanding what they want to buy, but also when they come to shop there, it's not clear that their personnel know how to handle the new shoppers.

CORLEY: I don't want to just pick on Macy's. I mean, this is the latest incident where we've seen a company kind of withdraw some merchandise that the public has found to be offensive...

Mr. RINCON: Yes.

CORLEY: ...or had some problem with. Are there other examples that you can think of where a company has - trying to target a Latino - a Latino market has made a similar mistake?

Mr. RINCON: To be honest with you, there's very few - many of the - in the class that I've been teaching on Hispanic marketing at SMU, I have kept pace with a lot of new product innovations, particularly in the clothing area. And in large part, what you're seeing is many of these lines of clothing that are designed for Latinos, they tend to be offered through Web sites. And you don't see as many of these manufacturers distributing their clothing lines through, say, top-box retailers.

And that may a disconnect between the retailers and their expected - the expected demand. It's kind of like a catch-22. How do you know Hispanics are going to buy it? It says, well, the only way you'll know is to put it in the store to see if they buy it, because if you're not doing any research, that may be the only way to find out.

But there haven't been too many of these bloopers - as I call them in my classes - because they're really - the apparel industry is just, in the past few years, starting to introduce clothing apparel

that has a specific cultural dimension that's targeted to Hispanic shoppers, see.

So that industry has been slow in bringing new product innovations. But I think they're fumbling around, thinking that, like in the case - in this case, the company that manufactures these T-shirts is based in Mexico. So, I think there was a presumption there that because they're a Mexican-based company, they ought to know Hispanic shoppers and what they want in the U.S. But I have pointed out in the past that sometimes there's a great disconnect between Mexican-based companies and what has U.S.-Hispanics are really looking for.

CORLEY: Dr. Ed Rincon is a marketing expert and the president of Rincon & Associates in Dallas, Texas. Thanks so much for joining us.

Mr. RINCON: Thank you.

CORLEY: We called Macy's corporate offices again today for a response to the T- shirt controversy, and a spokesman for Macy's South issued these comments, quote, "We are constantly looking for unique and differentiated merchandise that will resonate with our customers as hip, current and trendy. It is never our intention to offend. We have had feedback from our customers and have responded to them by removing the one style they found objectionable." End.

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