

Abercrombie & Fitch: Size Matters

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Abercrombie & Fitch has had their fair share of controversy over the years so it should not come as a surprise to read about another goof up on behalf of their CEO. The internet is a permanent parking space, even for those “I wish I didn’t just post that” musings. But when it comes to a company’s brand and image, it is serious business. Companies nowadays are paying close attention to consumers, they are engaging them on social media and encouraging feedback, both positive and negative.

Abercrombie & Fitch has recently become the latest internet brand bashing when a story mentioning the sizing limitations in their clothing line. The story quoted an unidentified retail analyst who said A&F does not sell pants to women larger than a size 10 and that they only wanted thin and beautiful people shopping in its store. (McGregor, 2013) How the quotes made by an unnamed retail analyst had the ability to spread so far is beyond me. It reached celebrity talk shows, plus-sized people dressed up to poke fun at A&F sizing limitations, and made several videos go viral on various social media outlets.

In addition to the quotes made by this unidentified analyst, readers were pointed to an article where, in 2006, CEO Mike Jeffries made comments further solidifying how their sex-crazed brand targeting young pretty people, was here to stay. In the article, Jeffries was asked to comment on the reasons he felt companies were in trouble and losing market share. He responded by saying he felt it was due to the fact that their target audiences were everyone: young, old, fat, and skinny. (McGregor, 2013) Whether or not his comments were taken out of context or if he meant every word, the fact remains that many felt Jeffries did not take full responsibility for his sexist remarks nor handle the situation professionally. Instead, he chose to

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post a response on the company's Facebook page expressing dismay for being misquoted and was only regretful that his choice of words caused offense.

So what did happen in the aftermath of this media nightmare?

The company took twelve days to respond and nearly three weeks to address critics concerns. It was only after meeting with critics that an announcement was brought to the media about A&F being "in talks" to partner with the National Eating Disorder Association and members of America the Beautiful Teen Empowerment Series.

What steps can Abercrombie & Fitch take to handle future situations should one arise?

Have a backup plan – A&F should have known the article would garner negative publicity, especially since it was the CEO being interviewed. Any comments or statements made on or off the record by an executive should be disclosed, reviewed and authorized by the Corporate Communications department, PR Director or the Corporate Legal team. Not being prepared for a crisis during a crisis leads to one disaster after the next. According to Diana Soltmann, the action plan should, at a minimum, take into consideration all possible scenarios and implement one based on worst case. (Welstead, 2013) Going through different scenarios will help build a plan to avoid the unpleasant aftermath that comes with waiting too long. This also fosters communication within various teams who can use this forum to share ideas.

Do research - I did not see any mention of who the retail analyst was or if they had an affiliation with a credible news source. It could have been a disgruntled employee for all we know. Sadly, people gravitate to the sensational and pass judgment before checking the facts. Most reporters and editors are open to discussing the article so when initiating such a conversation, focus on

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trying to clear up misunderstandings. (Meranus, 2013) If someone is not being identified, making it difficult to verify their statements and/or facts, it is very likely they may not telling the whole story. Save the company a lot of time and embarrassment and make sure someone is designated to conduct research before going in guns blazing.

Be real – By the company issuing a news release stating they were in talks with associations whose mission is to educate young people on eating disorders and empower teens was probably not the best idea. By choosing these specific organizations, it is seen as a blatant contradiction for the business model their CEO outlined in the article. On one hand they are saying look everyone, we support these organizations and really want to help young people. But on the other hand, it is demonstrating A&F's inability to see the situation as deeply serious since their target audiences are the ones these organizations are there to help.

References

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