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Responsible marketing, advertising creativity and corporate reputation: extra-large crisis

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Abercrombie & Fitch is a junior clothing brand highly valued by a certain group of consumers in the United States. The company was founded at the end of the 19th century as a clothing storehouse for hunters and became a powerful international firm with offices in Milan, shops all around Europe and an income of more than 4 billion dollars per year. Abercrombie claims to be a cool company: its advertisements are featured by stars and in their launching campaigns they use semi-naked, muscular and impeccable young men. Nowadays, this attitude, taken more and more to its limits, is affecting its reputation and questioning its viability as a company.

What set off the controversy was the publication of a book (*New rules of retail* by Robin Lewis and Michael Dart) about the effect of new technologies on consumption. In part of this analysis the authors explain briefly how Abercrombie does not want fat people, either as employees or customers in its business, but slim and good-looking boys and girls. This argument is based on previous comments made by the CEO of the company, Mike Jefferies: "Our clothes are not and will never be appropriate for many people. Yes, we are exclusive."

Lewis explained in his book that the Large and Extra Large sizes of Abercrombie & Fitch are for (muscular) men, and not for (overweight) women. Several days ago, American media even questioned the commercial efficiency of this policy, as two thirds of the country's population use those sizes.

The hiring of Abercrombie employees, in line with this marketing, had already been questioned at a judicial level. "In all groups there are popular people and losers; we are interested in the popular ones", says the CEO Jefferies.

As could not be otherwise, the matter erupted in the media after the book's publication. Greg Karber, a twitter of L.A., launched on the 15th of May a repudiation campaign to get people to give their Abercrombie clothes to poor people. He edited a video with the first donation and in one week he had almost 7 million visits. In Twitter, the Abercrombie case created a furore with the hashtag #FitchTheHomeless, and the brand name taken as a joke.

Something similar happened a month before to Pepsico with a campaign for Mountain Dew, a drink which without much success in the Argentina of the 80's. The advertisement was based on Nasty Goat, a foul-mouthed goat in a police identity parade bruised woman who was trying to identify her alleged aggressor. All the suspects were black... Pepsico had to apologize and withdraw the advertisement for being racist.

On a more or less similar line, Indian publicists illustrated how comfortable the Ford Figo can be through a caricature which showed the former Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, driving the car, smiling with four voluptuous young ladies, gaged and piled up in the boot. Ford also apologized and removed the advertisement.

The more recent case here is the one of the Schneider beer: they had to withdraw from circulation a series of adverts that showed "hassling on the bus" as a friendly habit worth celebrating.

These episodes and the one of Abercrombie have an obvious catalyst in common: the tweet that is retweeted, viralized on video, shared on Facebook and which does not stop escalating until it becomes a current of thinking difficult to manage. In this sense, the social networks remind us all the time of the reputational challenge that companies have to face up to on the Internet: their audience will not only talk about them, whether they decide to be a topic of conversation or

not, but they will also judge them this way. In practice, social networks submit all organizations to such hard and relevant scrutiny examinations as the one of the traditional media, the consumer associations or the regulators themselves.

This process of greater pressure on companies can have different consequences. On the one hand, the shareholders have stopped being that principal audience in which the corporate management was specially focussed; likewise, the financial results are not the only ones which a company has to assure. In the current paradigm, there is an intangible asset —reputation— which is essential when it comes to designing a sustainable and responsible management plan.

This reputation, this business sustainability plan, is anchored to a more vast and complex line of results. A company will be sustainable if, in addition to guaranteeing more profitability it is able to behave according to transparent ethical values; respects the rules; takes care of its environment; promotes the talent of its members; and provides social value.

In this way, the brand stops being just a channel aimed at satisfying the demand or the appetite of the customers in a race to become famous. Regardless of more or less successful advertising and more or less sensitive visions, a brand is constituted today as an intangible element that has to be managed considering all the values which are involved in the reputation of a company.

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