

## Retail Media News

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Counterfeit irony: Four credits for deception in social networking

It used to be that colleges were a feared breeding ground for anti-corporate militants. Now, it seems, college students are turning activism into a form of socially-networked brand protection. This week there's a case where a sponsoring corporation wanted to advocate socially responsible behavior among consumers – and, in a great twist of irony, ended up using ethically questionable tactics including guerilla marketing and college credit for a sponsored course mostly created by a corporate trade organization to do so.

The story emerged at Hunter College in NYC, where last week the Faculty Senate recently met to Monday to denounce a course taught last spring. The course was funded by a \$10,000 grant from Coach (whose CEO Lew Frankfort is a Hunter alum, who claims his concurrent 1 million dollar donation was completely unrelated). But suspicious course content and a well-timed donation are not enough to warrant faculty censure, of course. What brought charges of violation of academic freedom was the course content, its purpose, and the methods students were asked to use – not to mention that the professor claimed to have been coerced and was unqualified. Add in the fact that the Hunter College faculty includes well-known critic Stuart Ewen, whose most recent book is titled PR! A Social History of Spin, and you've got a full-blown recipe for disaster.

What exactly happened to be of interest beyond the ivory walls?

It starts with Coach and other companies, who are always worried about counterfeit products, even having gone so far as to develop their own nonprofit trade group, the International Anti-Counterfeiting Coalition (IACC). They decided that rather than do all of the legwork themselves, it would be much better to compel student (who make up a fair number of those inclined to purchase counterfeit items) do it for them via social network sites. Using Facebook and MySpace, the Hunter class invented a blogging student named Heidi Cee, who posted an ongoing story about the loss of her Coach bag, a gift from a boyfriend, her subsequent search for it through posting a reward (more than the bag's original worth!!!), its return, and her discovery that the returned bag was not her original but a counterfeit. Her personal lesson, which she shares with her network friends, is to check out the IACC's website and start a campus activist organization to end counterfeiting. Only after an on-campus event pitching the IACC message did the class revealed that Heidi was fake.

I've spent about twenty years teaching 18-24 year olds, and my limited wisdom tells me the students couldn't have "known better" without some adult guidance. After

all, isn't it the college's job to teach and model ethical behavior to the future generation of business and political leaders? Of course the students behind the charade thought it was great fun: they were handed power tools without the instruction manual. The professor in charge claimed that with a pre-set curriculum and hand-holding by the IACC, he could not present the counter arguments, the limits, or even the ethical dilemmas raised by the class project (the IACC has supposedly adjusted its curriculum packet and puts the blame back on Hunter for assigning an inexperienced professor to the course). The Faculty Senate Report points to the fact that the IACC approved the students' plan to create Heidi Cee and use a deceptive Facebook account. One student's justification – "People do crazy shit on Facebook every day" – highlights the fact that the ethics of corporate-sponsored "crazy shit" were not something they were taught. The real question is: would I write a recommendation for (and would you hire) someone with no ethics training on their resumes?

Of course, even if the students and faculty are found to be at fault, it's clear that the IACC must have had at least some involvement with these highly questionable tactics. Marketers walk a self-imposed line every day, trying to sing the praises of their products without lying outright to potential customers. Sometimes they go over the line, and when that happens, it's the job of consumer advocacy groups and perhaps even a few key government bodies to step in and get them to stop (though the latter group is pretty inept, so I'd count on the former). But questionable marketing practices will continue, and they may even get more outlandish as brands struggle to find new ways to connect with consumers.

Still, maybe it would have been better for the IACC to wait until the students graduated and just start using that MRI on their brains...

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