

**By BRR Senior Writer, Mike Hodge – 10 May 2007**

# **FCUK, the Brand Boundaries**

**BRIAN R RICHARDS LTD** LEVEL 2, 6 LEEK STREET  
NEWMARKET, AUCKLAND 1023, NEW ZEALAND

**PHN** +64 9 520 0014 **EML** brand@brrltd.com

**FAX** +64 9 522 2709 **WEB** www.brrltd.com

# FCUK, the Brand Boundaries:

## SHOCK BRAND TACTICS AT THE TASTE EXTREMITIES

The biggest risks and rewards are often at the margins. As the fight for consumer attention reaches exhausting proportions, more brands are tempted into this potentially profitable but dangerous hunting ground. Brands like Diesel tread a fine line around the suggestive and explicit but misjudging the levels of tolerance can result in painful backlashes for global or Godzone brands.

"As a fashion designer, I'm being humorous and irreverent," was 'World' fashion designer Francis Hooper's riposte to the storm of outrage that swept in from all corners of the compass over his 'Future Porn Star' children's T shirt. Crossing the line into a zone many see as the sexing up of children or 'raunch culture' created some very vocal brand opponents who are unlikely to disappear anytime soon.

**The old adage about all publicity being good publicity is nonsense when it comes to brands.** When fashion boundary riders FCUK used two ladies passionately kissing each other to create some of their customary shock value, the resulting outcry in Britain saw their share price plummet dangerously. Presumably their advertising people would say that the longer term effect of this financial 'hickup' will be to reinforce their reputation of being edgy and contentious.

Benetton are another brand that fly close to the wind with hard-hitting visuals and subject matter. At least their viewpoint over the years has consistently reflected an underlying ethos. But consumers bit back over their 'On Death Row' campaign which strayed into taboo territory and resulted in letters of apology to the families of murder victims and a substantial lawsuit.

In the world of lesser sins, the other old adage about 'knowing your customers' sounds boring but still holds up. When Bendon, a brand with good equity, had a campaign a while back showing ladies with their knickers round their ankles, they were being different but you ask yourself who was this really designed to appeal to? Women, who make up the vast majority of buyers and who may not find the inference of sitting on the loo all that sensual or the trickle of male lingerie buyers who might fancy a keyhole connotation?

**We all know that judging the fine line in this 'You Tube' world is no easy task. Every week it seems someone, somewhere in the communications free-for-all lifts the bar on the bizarre.** It was less than a decade ago that we looked with disbelief at those weird Japanese TV shows with smiling contestants subjecting themselves to all manner of strange punishments for their fleeting moment of fame. What looked absurd then, reality TV, You Tube and mobile video clips have now rendered commonplace. Everyone from spinning politicians to 'lonely girl 15' saying "look at me, look what I can do".

**Shock value is ephemeral and almost instantly overtaken by something a little more shocking.** "Whoa, check this one out"! Wacky images rippling round the globe in micro-seconds. With this one-upmanship, it doesn't pay to think too much about what will constitute 'shocking' in a decade's time. But the power to surprise? Now that's something altogether different.

My admiration goes to brands that have mastered the art of saying something simple to great effect. Brands that continue to surprise through their sheer ability to cut through the visual veneer and connect. Brands that communicate with a deft, sure touch, stay true to their brand promise, tell stories with humour and human insight, and enable us to clearly recognise ourselves in our own landscapes, whether we're eighteen or eighty.