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Whole Foods Attempts to Quell Boycott Cries

Aug 24, 2009

- Alex Palmer



NEW YORK Protesters and unhappy customers have taken to the streets and to social networking sites to express their displeasure regarding Whole Foods chief executive John Mackey's recent Wall Street Journal op-ed column. Some are threatening to boycott the store altogether.

The column, which appeared on Aug. 12, was critical of President Obama's healthcare plan. It urged the country to embrace a more free-market healthcare system. "A careful reading of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution will not reveal any intrinsic right to healthcare, food or shelter. That's because there isn't any. This 'right' has never existed in America," Mackey wrote in the piece.

Today, members of the Washington D.C.-based United Food and Commercial Workers Union demonstrated outside Whole Foods stores in two locations in Ohio and plan to continue disseminating educational materials to shoppers over the next few weeks.

The group has emphasized the incongruity between Mackey's assertions and the brand image that Whole Foods has built. "Whole Foods has attempted to wrap itself in a progressive image, but when you peel back the layers you see that it is run by an executive who repeatedly pushes extreme positions," said Scott Frotman, spokesman for the union. "Frankly, Mackey's ideology seems more in line with the radical teabaggers harassing people at town hall meetings than the men and women waiting in line to buy organic green tea in his stores."

Online, the playwright Mark Rosenthal's "Boycott Whole Foods" Facebook group now has over 26,000 members. Though Whole Foods' own Facebook page has comments from numerous supporters stating their solidarity with Mackey and commitment to their local stores.

"While Whole Foods Market has no official companywide position on the healthcare reform issue, we would not want our very successful and sustainable healthcare coverage to be jeopardized," said the company in a statement. "We have heard from individuals who both agree and disagree with John's ideas, as there are many opinions and emotions surrounding the ongoing healthcare reform issue, including lots of differing views here inside of Whole Foods Market. We appreciate those diverse perspectives, but it is unfortunate there is misinformation and confusion out there to cloud John's good intentions."

Whole Foods sent out letters to customers apologizing for any offense that may have been created and started a forum on its Web site for discussion of healthcare reform (Currently it has over 17,000 posts, compared to 249 on favorite recipe swaps.)

Still, consumers are likely to lump the CEO's personal opinion together with the brand, especially since Whole Foods has a highly engaged customer based, many of which are deeply concerned about the issues of health and food, said Amy Shea, global director of Brand Keys. "It becomes problematic for a brand when you have the emotional side firing, and that's what [Mackey] did, he tripped that wire. It's never a good idea for a CEO to do an op-ed piece on such a volatile topic. Of all the topics he could have chosen, he chose one that is very, very close to the space in which the brand participates."

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