

Consumers mobilize in culture wars

by [Nicole Neroulias](#) in the [August 23, 2011](#) issue

When you buy a pair of shoes, a spicy chicken sandwich or a gym membership, does that mean you endorse everything about the company you are dealing with—including the CEO's religious beliefs?

It's a question that has long plagued socially conscious consumers. Websites like Change.org are mobilizing grassroots campaigns against companies like Curves fitness centers, whose CEO donates millions to antiabortion groups, and Chick-fil-A, a fast-food chain that supports faith-based groups opposed to same-sex relationships.

While protests haven't stopped those corporate leaders from supporting conservative Christian agendas, the head of TOMS Shoes has felt compelled to apologize for an interview with Focus on the Family president Jim Daly.

Blake Mycoskie, 34, an evangelical Christian, founded TOMS in 2006, promising that every pair of shoes would be made with fair labor and that TOMS would provide a second pair for a needy child. The for-profit California-based company, which has given away more than a million pairs of shoes, is popular on the West Coast, particularly with young adults attracted to no-frills fashions and social justice activities.

After gay rights and feminist groups criticized Mycoskie and customers threatened a boycott, the CEO apologized July 9. "Had I known the full extent of Focus on the Family's beliefs, I would not have accepted the invitation to speak at their event," he wrote on his Start Something That Matters blog.

Comments on his blog and Facebook page expressed doubt that Mycoskie was ignorant of Focus's activism against homosexuality, especially since some had warned him when the event was first advertised.

"We approached TOMS because Blake attracts a certain audience and because his story is inspirational," said Gary Schneeberger, a Focus spokesman.

Mycoskie says his faith has inspired his business, but the TOMS website proclaims that the company is nonpolitical and nonreligious.

Companies and their leaders are free to support religious or political causes, said Chris MacDonald, a business ethicist affiliated with Duke University's Kenan Institute for Ethics, but consumers should take such actions into account.

"If you have a sense that your money is somehow, even indirectly, contributing to a cause that you find morally problematic, then it seems somewhere between reasonable and obligatory for you to vote with your dollars," he said. "Your individual purchasing decision isn't doing a lot to further the cause of the company's CEO—maybe just a few pennies—but there's also symbolic value, and you're responsible for that."

In the past, consumer complaints over gay issues were more likely to come from conservative Christian groups, with organizations like the American Family Association objecting to the corporate policies of companies like Walgreens, Walmart and Proctor & Gamble.

Gay rights petitions have achieved some limited success in the past year: Apple pulled apps for conservative groups like Exodus International and the Manhattan Declaration from its iTunes store, and Chick-fil-A's president issued a statement saying that "while my family and I believe in the biblical definition of marriage, we love and respect anyone who disagrees."

At the same time, left-wing protests against Whole Foods, whose CEO came out against health-care reform two years ago, haven't had a noticeable impact on the supermarket chain. —RNS