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A major public relations blunder in more ways than one

By Lon Walls
NATIONAL NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION

WASHINGTON – It is obvious that Eddie Bauer Inc., a popular clothing store chain, still "does not get it" when it comes to handling fallout from the harassment incident that occurred at its Prince George's County, Md., outlet store last October. Perhaps the $85 million suit recently filed against the company will provide it with the proper insight.

As an African American male, I'm angered that a young black man would be confronted at an Eddie Bauer store by off-duty police officers and forced to leave in his undershirt to go home and return with a receipt for the shirt off his back– a shirt he had bought there previously. As usual, the black youth and his friend, also black, were followed throughout the store by the police officers. As usual, the incident rose out of a suspicion that the shirt might have been stolen by the young man. And, as usual, the youths were black, the officers white. Adding fuel to this now customary racial scenario is the fact that all the managers at that particular Eddie Bauer store were white.

Had it not been for African Americans in the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area media community, this incident would have joined the ranks of the many similar situations African Americans still experience almost daily somewhere in America – ones with no attention, no action, no redress and no apology.

Extensive press coverage of the incident created a backlash Eddie Bauer did not expect. Subsequent demands for an apology catapulted the episode to the level of a full-scale communications crisis – one worthy of outside public relations counsel. So who does Eddie Bauer call? Hill & Knowlton.

"It's bad enough that African American public relations practitioners and firms seldom receive a call when corporate crises such as the Tylenol incident or the Pepsi needle scare... The very least that the Eddie Bauers of the world can do is retain a black firm when they have a crisis in the black community.

What's wrong with this picture?

As a black public relations practitioner and president of the Capital Press Club, the oldest organization of African American communications professionals in the nation, I am further outraged that Eddie Bauer would hire a predominately white PR firm to handle a problem it created within the black community.

Nothing against Hill & Knowlton. Undeniably, they are one of the best firms in Washington. But like most of the other public relations and public affairs firms in the area, they don't have many African American professionals within their ranks.

However, Washington, D.C. does have a wealth of first-rate African American public relations professionals. In addition to the Capital Press Club, many of these PR practitioners belong to the Black Public Relations Society of Washington. Supplementing this large group of individual practitioners are several highly qualified African American PR firms here.

If Eddie Bauer Inc. was sincere in its efforts to atone for the company's affront to the black community, the company should have done some research and sought out African American public relations counsel.

Most black public relations professionals would have strongly advised against Eddie Bauer giving some of its merchandise to Prince George's County, Md. shelters. They would have easily told the company that such a move was not an appropriate response. A black PR firm would have told the company such a move would insult the black community. A black PR firm would have advised Eddie Bauer that not all African Americans are controlled by a welfare-oriented mentality and free hand-outs won't make a consumer racism policy disappear.

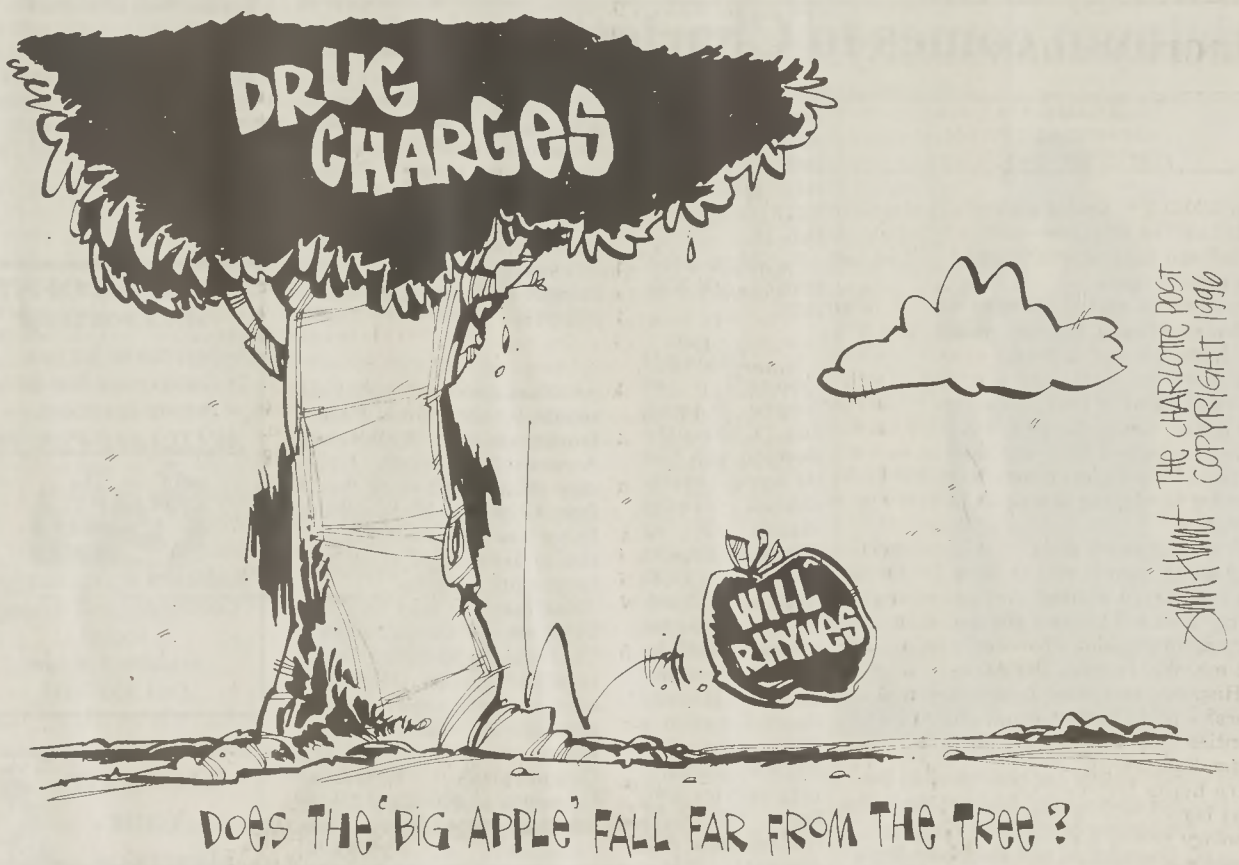
Instead, a black PR firm would have recommended Eddie Bauer actively implement an extensive management training program for African American employees and new black hires. In addition, such a firm would have recommended that all of the company's white managers at its urban stores nationwide undergo some sort of consumer-oriented diversity/sensitivity training.

Last Dec. 1, Eddie Bauer president Richard T. Fersch came to town and met with local NAACP officials. On face value, it was a commendable gesture. For some inexplicable reason, however, he did not take the time to personally meet with and apologize to the aggrieved teenagers and their parents. An African American public relations practitioner would have insisted such a meeting take place!

Finally, an African American PR firm would now advise Eddie Bauer that despite hiring Hill and Knowlton and attempting to keep news of the incident local, this story is now spreading like wildfire throughout Black America – a place where Hill & Knowlton and others have little or no influence.

It's bad enough that African American public relations practitioners and firms seldom receive a call when corporate crises such as the Tylenol incident or the Pepsi needle scare occur in the general population. The very least that the Eddie Bauers of the world can do is retain a black firm when they have a crisis in the black community.

LON WALLS is president of the Capital Press Club, the oldest organization of African American communications professionals in the United States. The Club is headquartered in Washington, D.C.



Teaching the truth about our history

By Conrad W. Worrill
SPECIAL TO THE POST

The movement to implement an appropriate African- centered curriculum is predominately African American inner city schools is growing by leaps and bounds.

This movement has now become popularly known as the African Centered Education Movement. Simply stated, it focuses on teaching the truth concerning the contributions of African people to the development of civilization in all subjects.

Throughout the country, African Americans are now becoming more sensitive to challenging the racist and white supremacist basis of the American public school curriculum.

Through the National Black United Front, and its World African Centered Education Plan, more African Americans are beginning to see the need for massive curriculum change in the public schools of this country.

There is not a day that goes by that someone does not call my office seeking information and help on how to start the process of changing the curriculum in their school.

It is clear that the public school system is the place where African American children receive a significant portion of their view of the world and the history of the world.

And, it also is a place where large numbers of African American youth are miseducated under the system of white supremacy through the ideas and interpretation of history that is presented to them.

Let's turn to Carter G. Woodson's great book, "The Miseducation of the Negro" to get some further insights into this problem.

Woodson observes "The so-called modern education, with all its defects, however, does others so much more good than it does the Negro, because it has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker people."

For example, Woodson says, "The philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation and lynching. The oppressor has the right to exploit, to handicap, and to kill the oppressed."

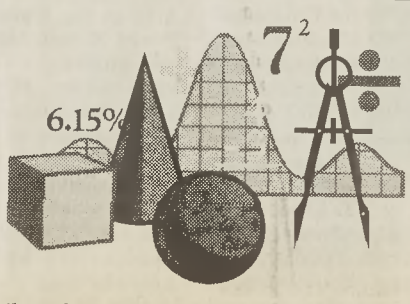
Continuing on, Woodson explains that "No systematic effort toward change has been possible for, taught the same economics, history, philosophy, literature and religion which have established the present code of morals, the Negro's mind has been brought under the control of his oppressor."

Concluding on this point Woodson states: "The problem of holding the Negro down, therefore, is easily solved. When you control a mans thinking you do not have to worry about his actions."

Therefore, it is inspiring to see so many of our people waking up all over America and seeking the truth concerning the real contributions of African people to the world.

Through study groups, conferences, black talk radio, and information network exchanges, African Americans are coming into a new African consciousness that seeks to reclaim the African mind and spirit.

Through the Portland Model Baseline Essays, the work of the Kemetic Institute, and other writings and curriculum materials, Africans are becoming much more aware of the following points that must be incorporated into the curriculum.



"The philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation and lynching. The oppressor has the right to exploit, to handicap, and to kill the oppressed."
–Carter G. Woodson

1. Africa is the home of early man.

2. Africa is the cradle of modern man.

3. Africa is the cradle of civilization.

4. Africa once held a position as world teacher including the teaching for the western world.

5. There was and there still is a continental wide cultural unity in Africa and in the African communities around the world.

6. The first time Africans left the continent was not on slave ships.

7. Africa and African people all over the world have been under siege for nearly 2000 years and only recently by European slavery and colonization.

8. There is an African diaspora all over the world today.

9. African people have resisted domination on the continent all over the world.

10. Even under slavery, colonization, segregation, apartheid, African people have made monumental contributions to arts, science and politics.

These ten points, and others, have become the basis upon which we can judge the white supremacy public school curriculums content in textbooks and other learning materials.

In other words, these points have become the basis of determining whether the truth is being taught in the public schools of this country.

The truth will set us free!

CONRAD WORRILL is chairman of the National Black United Front.

America's growth industry: building prisons

Bernice P. Jackson

Soon we'll no longer be known for our automotive industry or our Silicon Valley computer technical industry. Prisons are fast becoming the United States' growth industry. We'll be known around the world as the nation which makes a living by incarcerating its citizens.

We now incarcerate somewhere around 1.5 million Americans, about half of whom are African American or Hispanic. The number grows by leaps and bounds every year, with prisoners often being double-bunked in already overcrowded and outdated facilities. With the recent passages of the so-called three-strikes-and-you're-out bills and mandatory long sentences for crack cocaine, the prison population can only continue to grow.

In our capitalist tradition, private enterprise is looking at these numbers and the privatization of the corrections industry is now occurring in many states, particularly the South and West. While the number of private companies running prisons is still small, The Corrections Corporation of America now has about 42 percent of the private corrections market and is seeking to expand to other states, including Ohio. In 1994, CCA saw profits of $7.1 million, nearly double its 1993 earnings.

With the clamor for tax cuts, many argue that private prisons will save taxpayers dollars. But the numbers show that privately-run prisons are slightly more expensive than public ones.

Many criminal justice advocates worry about this new trend toward privatization, recalling earlier abuses, when inmates were forced to build railroads, dig mines and work in textile factories under horrible conditions which often resulted in death. They also question the accountability of private corporations and point out that it should be the government's responsibility to incarcerate.

On the other hand, private prisons tend to be new, modern facilities and in at least one survey prisoners rated them better in health care, discipline, cleanliness, educational programs and inmate food and mood. Some private facilities, however, have experienced prisoner revolts, based on complaints about spoiled food, abusive guards and beatings and shacklings.

For many communities across the country the issue around prisons, whether public or private, is jobs. As more and more blue collar jobs are eliminated, communities are turning to prisons as a source of employment for their displaced factory workers and increased state tax revenues in the case of private prisons. For instance, Youngstown, Ohio is proposing to give 100 acres of industrial brownfields (land polluted from toxic wastes) to be used for the construction of a private prison. With a 10.7 percent unemployment rate, this former steel and manufacturing town sees prisons as a source of jobs an income.

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